Religion and Culture by Paul Tillich

A digital edition of Paul Tillich's Lecture "Religion and Culture"
Harvard University, 1955-56

Transcribed by JJ Warren and Michaela Durst

2025

(version: December 28, 2025)

[225]

Lecture XIX, Dec. 8, 1955

Question: Is the character of the ultimate concern which is immanent in all philosophical inquiry conditioned, changed, or at all affected by the particular subject under consideration, [or the] content of the philosophical statement?

Answer (Paul Tillich): This question needs a little commentary [from you]. I am not absolutely sure whether I grasp it. Now the unconditional concern is something which grows out of the totality of the life experience of a human being, and insofar as the direction of his philosophical inquiry *also* is dependent on his interest, his passion, his total eros (in the Platonic sense) toward a special side of reality, this certainly is an element which comes out of an ultimate concern and may influence – and certainly has often influenced – the special way in which this ultimate concern expresses itself. On the other hand, these expressions have effect on the concern itself, as always an expression of something which is in us also *changes* us – it is not only an expression which could be and could not be, but it is also an expression which is a reaction *on* that which *is* expressed. So in this sense one can say that in the course of philosophical inquiry, things may happen in the person of the philosopher which will give to his ultimate concern another direction, insofar as it is a concrete expression with concern. I don't know whether this completely answers the question.==

Let us sum up what we have discussed about the relationship of religion and philosophy. The first and main thing was that there is no interference from religion in the philosophical arena, or, as one calls it today, "universe of discourse." And there is no interference of the *philosophical*|world of discourse in the religious arena and its expressions. [226]
This is the first and fundamental statement, and it corresponds to the statements we made about history, about sciences, and will make about the doctrine of man generally.

But after this has been said and emphasized, the other side also must be seen and was described, namely that there is no pure philosopher and that his existential concern directs what he is asking and what his eyes are able to see, and also what he is not asking and what his eyes are unable to see. In this sense there is no direct interference of religion or ultimate concern in the processes of philosophical discussion, but there is the unity of the human personality *through whom* elements of ultimate concern direct questions and answers – not from outside but from the inner development of the philosopher himself.

On the other hand, the theologian, if he uses the logos, however he tries to avoid philosophical concepts, he can do even this only by using them. All the attacks by

theologians against philosophy are made with the help of philosophical concepts which then are used against philosophy. These inner contradictions show that the theologian, since he uses human language and since human language is formed by all kinds of man's self-expression – amongst them by philosophy – he cannot escape philosophy at all. And he shouldn't even want to because, as theologian, he has to do with the logos of that in which theos reveals Himself.

This was the general attitude which liberates us from the problem of direct conflicts |but which shows at the same time the interwovenness of all life processes, of all creative [227] processes in man, and the impossibility of separating the one from the other.

Let me make this clear by an application to something which happens between some of you very often, and often within each of you, namely you as philosopher have a discussion with you as theologian, or you as philosopher discuss with somebody else who is theologian and speaks as theologian, and vice versa.

Now what happens in such discussions? Every theologian at a university, if he doesn't close his eyes but has contact with the university as a whole, must be drawn into these discussions. And if he tries to escape them, he shows that he is not worth to be at a university.

But now what is going on in these discussions? There are two elements going on in them. One is argument – and this is the philosophical element in these discussions, and whoever enters such a discussion uses, and must use, arguments. But there is another element also in it, namely the desire to convert, the desire to communicate one's ultimate concern to the other one. And these two concerns can be together in one and the same person; the dialogue can be a dialogue within ourselves. But it is perhaps more ordinarily a dialogue between two persons.

So we have these two elements. What I try to show, in the lecture especially, about the immanence of ultimate concern in philosophical attitudes and in philosophers, is based just on this insight. The naturalist tries to convince the theologian by arguments – whereby I mean not an ecstatic naturalist (which I would confess myself to be), but the naturalist who denies the |reality of everything, except some biological or physical facts. [228] If you discuss with him, then you can easily notice (if you once have started to notice such things) the two levels: the level of argument and the level of conversion. If he is fanatically convinced of his reductionism, he wants to convert you to it. And you, if you are passionately convinced about the Christian truth, you will convert him. But since you meet in the arena of philosophy, you discuss in terms of arguments. And the great difficulty of many such discussions – of small and large groups – is the non-distinction of argument and will-to-conversion. You very often can find out exactly in which moment – even psychological, in the kind of voice, in the kind of inner movement – which is the *real* meaning of the statements of this man with whom I talk, or of myself when I talk with myself: is it really argument, or is it desire of one side of my being to convert the other side of my being? And that, we must be able to understand.

From this follows another question, namely if in every philosophy there is an ultimate concern, and this ultimate concern has been expressed in the symbols of classical religions (for instance Christianity), then the question can arise, and has arisen and is much discussed: can there be a Christian philosophy? Some people say we *should* have a Christian philosophy; others say – and I belong to the second group – there should *not* be Christian philosophy. Now what does this word mean? "Christian philosophy" is a term which can have two meanings: philosophy arising on the cultural soil which is cultivated for thousands of years by the Christian |tradition – language, life forms, [229]

everything. If Christian philosophy means this, then there are no philosophers any more in the Western world, after the victory of Christianity, who are not Christian philosophers – and I would mention him who perhaps most passionately attacked Christianity, namely Friedrich Nietzsche: he is a Christian philosopher in the sense that his attempt to be pagan doesn't make him pagan at all, but makes him a philosopher of resentment against Christianity. And this is "Christian philosopher" with a negative sign before his name (" – Christian"). But whether anti-Christian or Christian in one's intention – and certainly Nietzsche was anti-Christian in his intention; one of his important books has the title Anti-Christ – whether this way or that way, he cannot escape the foundation of Christianity. The renewed Greek attitude which he pronounces in the name of Zoroaster would never have been expressed by any Greek philosopher or any Greek tragedist or any Greek prophet. It is Greek in terms of anti-Christian polemics, and that means it is dependent on Christianity. And that we can follow through, in the whole modern world, and it is especially easy in the most successful system of anti-Christian atheism – Communism – which, as Archbishop [William] Temple once said, is a Christian heresy. Nazism is a relapse, an apostasy, to paganism, but the paganism of Nazism is equally not genuine at all, as Nietzsche's anti-Christianity is not genuine Greek thinking at all. Communism, however, is based on the Jewish-Christian prophetic tradition of the coming of the kingdom of God in history. And the distortion of it is what Temple called "Christian heresy." The immanentistic distortion of it cannot hide the fact that even |Communism – or let us better say Marxism, as a philosophy – is a *christian* philosophy, [230] but a *christian* – which could never have occurred and been produced on any other soil but the soil prepared by the Prophets.

So to sum up I would say: if Christian philosophy is understood in the simply descriptive fact that since the victory of Christianity in the Western culture, all philosophy is Christian in the sense that it cannot escape Christian substance, even if it is anti-Christian – then this is alright and simply a fact and doesn't stand under any value-judgment. It is important to realize this because we have exactly the same thing in Greece: Greek philosophy is determined by two gods, Apollo and Dionysius. The inner tension between them is always the driving force in Greek philosophy. Therefore the attempt of the Renaissance to restate Greek philosophy was equally impossible: it was turned around in a sense which was dependent on the Christian tradition in the Western world. In a lecture [course] on the Renaissance I very often gave in former years, I showed, point by point, philosophy by philosophy, how the *greek* attitude was turned around by the Renaissance philosophers who called themselves Platonists or Aristotelians or Neo-Stoics in a way which was determined by the fundamental Christian idea of creation – which made the fundamental difference between the feeling toward the world on Greek soil, on the soil formed by Apollo and Dionysius – and on the Christian soil. The presupposition for this is that I take Apollo and Dionysius seriously, that I believe they are gods, and they are *still* gods – they are, as the Bible describes it, in mythological symbolism, *subject to christ*. But they are not *non*-being; they *are*; |they are powers which *form* us – and the [231] power of Apollo is great on this place on which we are standing.

Now this means that the religious substance cannot be escaped in any cultural expression. In this sense, Greek philosophy is Apollonian, with Dionysian interruptions and invasions. And philosophy in the Western world is Christian, whether it tries to return to Apollo and Dionysius or not.

But I stand strongly against a Christian philosophy which is *intentionally* Christian. If I make a research into the problem of causality and have in mind the necessity to make

this analysis of causality so that it fits a special Augustinian or Calvinistic theology, then I betray my being a philosopher, then the scientific honesty is taken away – exactly as if I try to make a research and, in order to fulfill demands of a religion which has intimate relation to history – ([such] as Judaism and Christianity) – my research is prejudiced. You can say this. But you cannot say this; if this is done, then the honesty of scientific research is ruined and, in our case, the honesty of philosophical research is ruined. That is the reason why I say: *certainly*, the fact that one is Christian opens the eye for things which a follower of Apollo could not see – for instance our relationship to other human beings – and that's *all* it can do. If a philosopher sits down and says to himself, "Now l will make a Christian philosophy," then he shouldn't become even an assistant professor of philosophy, because he has betrayed, by this very intension, the philosophical eros, which is directed towards the *content* of his inquiry and towards nothing else.

So I hope this clears a little bit the very ambiguous concept of "Christian philosophy."|It is a fact, and it is not a question whether it should be or shouldn't be. Since [232]
every culture has religious substance, it simply *is*.

The other is the intention to make a Christian philosophy, and there we must say *unambiguously*: *this should not be*! But another question arises here. Cannot philosophy directly contribute to the theological truth, to the truth of religion? This problem is the very old and very important problem of natural theology. Natural theology would mean philosophical arguments which, as merely philosophical arguments, confirm the truth of faith. The endeavor of natural theology has been carried through since the Greeks, the whole Middle Ages, in Protestant Orthodoxy, and even in anti-metaphysical liberal theology of the 19th century. Nevertheless, there always was a *resistance* against it, a feeling that such an enterprise is impossible. The concrete discussion in which these two attitudes came up are the so called "arguments" for the so-called "existence" of God. Now with these two "so-called's," I have already implied my attitude toward them.

It is very interesting that in the discussion of these arguments, or a special [one] of them, not lower-degreed philosophers, but the very *highest*-quality philosophers disagreed; that there was always one group fighting for the arguments – including the ontological argument for the existence of God – and another group trying to show the impossibility of these arguments. Now I have the dogmatic presupposition that the greatest philosophers in the history of human thought – whose names are known to all of us – are not less intelligent than we are, and that the one group which works | for the arguments is not [233]
less intelligent than that group which works against the arguments. So if such a split occurs between the *greatest*, again and again, through the whole history of philosophy, one must try an explanation for this phenomenon and cannot simply continue arguing or, even less, sitting down and saying: "Now let them fight with each other; it is all nonsense anyhow." But one must try to find out what is the motive in the one or the other way.

There are three main types of arguments: the ontological,the cosmological and the teleological types. The ontological type of philosophy arguing for the existence of God speaks of the immediate certainty of something ultimate or unconditional, and derives from this immediate certainty the existence of God. The cosmological argument looks at the nature of reality as we encounter it, and its finitude and transitoriness and contingency, and derives from *that* the necessity of the existence of one God. And the teleological argument argues from the fact that there is *meaning* in reality, even in nature, that there are meaningful structures, and derives from *this* the existence of God.

Now I would say the following thing: These three arguments – which are only three *types* of arguments because they are valid in many ways – are all *true* in the *descriptive*

part, and they are all *wrong* in the *concluding* part.

Let me explain this. They are true insofar as they point to the human situation; they are wrong insofar as they make a conclusion from the human situation to the existence of God. First of all, God is beyond essence and existence – one cannot say "existence" of Him in any way. God is being itself, but not one existing being.

Beside this, the following can be said: the ontological argument is right when it says that man stands between his own finitude, of which he is aware, and the infinite from which he is excluded, although he knows that he belongs to it. This does not give us any right to make a conclusion to the existence of a highest being called God. But it gave all those who *defended* the ontological argument |a justification for their defence, namely [234] that the experience of unconditional or ultimate concern is an element of our very being and therefore has ultimate certainty. As far as that, we can go; beyond this, we cannot go. To make from this a conclusion, in terms of arguments, to the existence of a highest being, was the fantasy of the Anselmian argument.

Or when we come to the cosmological argument, then we look at the world, at ourselves *in* the world, and we find our finitude, our having-to-die, our anxiety, our loneliness, and when we find all this, then we ask the question of something which might *overcome* contingency, which might have ultimate necessity, or which might *overcome* anxiety, which might gives us the courage, the ultimate courage, to take this anxiety into ourselves. This is alright. And one can say, with a slight exaggeration, that a large part of what existentialist analyses have done today – and in former centuries where they first appeared – are nothing else but extended cosmological analyses, analyses as they were present in the cosmological argument. But to make from there the conclusion to the existence of a highest being, somewhere *above* finitude and anxiety, is a conclusion for which there is no logical necessity or even possibility. And for this I don't need to go to Kant, who has tried to show this, convincingly; but already Duns Scotus, the great Medieval philosopher of the 13th century, showed, against Thomas Aquinas, that there is no jump in terms of arguments from conclusions, from the finite to the infinite.

Finally the teleological arguments are not arguments at all. To say there is *meaning* in the world, in history, in art, in nature, in organism – this description is certainly true, but if this description is made into the basis for a conclusion of a *creator* of all this, then this conclusion is not valid. As many philosophers have shown, it only leads to the description of the structure of reality to be ambiguous, to have meaning and meaninglessness, to have structure and destruction, but it by no means can lead us to a highest being who is the *cause* of meaning. | [235]

Now here you have in very few words the possibility of philosophy in its contribution to theology. Philosophy can formulate – as the arts do, and poetry and theater do – the question which is implied in the human situation, but it cannot give, in terms of arguments, the answer. The answer is ecstatic-revelatory and is given to us by the analysis of the human situation, is a matter of our own awareness.

So we can say: natural theology is valid insofar as it gives an analysis of the human situation. Natural theology is *not* valid insofar as it gives arguments for the existence of a highest being. This leads, and has led us, to the importance of existentialism for theology.

Many people would say "existentialism" and then think of some existentialists, the most important ones of today, like Heidegger and Sartre, and would say: Now how can they be allies of that which they deny, namely religion? The answer simply is that here also the *first* part of what they are doing is decisive, and the second part is open.

Decisive is their analysis of the human situation. In this sense they do better than most of their predecessors, the work of natural theology. Natural theology *in the negative form*: that's existentialism, to a great extent. In the moment in which it comes to positive formulations, existentialism cannot do *any*thing of its own. One has wrongly distinguished between theistic and atheistic existentialism – there is no such a thing, neither the one nor the other, but there are different traditions out of which the existentialists took their answers *to* the questions which they aroused by the analysis of the human situation. If they came from Augustine, they gave answer like Pascal; if they came from Lutheran pietism, they gave answers like Kierkegaard, if they came from French moralism, they gave answers like Sartre; if they came from Catholic mysticism, they gave answers like the late[r] Heidegger; if they came from German classical philosophy, they gave answers like Jaspers. Each of these men gave answers out of the tradition in which he lived, from which he came, which he made *meaningful* for himself and again others with the help of the existentialist|analysis of the human predicament. But there is no possibility of [236] deriving answers out of existential analyses.

So we can say: It is the greatness of existentialism that it has liberated us from the deceptive forms of an essentialism which believed it could produce a natural theology, in terms of arguing from the human situation to God. The impossibility of this has been seen by all those who *criticized* these arguments. Its impossibility has become even more manifest by the existentialist analyses.

Now I would call existentialism, wherever it appears, an expression of the *religious style* in philosophy. The style becomes religious in the moment in which the surface of reality is shaken. And that's what I wanted to show you in the visual arts, but which I can also show you in the depth psychology, for which we have decided and which will prepare you then for the next semester, when we start with art.

Philosophy*also* has style. The word "style" is not a prerogative of the arts. There are styles not only of artistic creation but also of philosophical thinking, of political and ethical action. The question which will lie very much behind our whole discussion of the arts is: what is a religious *style*? – first in the arts, but then also in all the other realms of life. Not the content, not the subject matter, but the *style*, and that is the most important thing for the understanding of religion and culture.