

Religion and Culture by Paul Tillich

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

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2025

(version: December 20, 2025)

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Lecture XX, Dec. 13, 1955

We decided last Thursday to discuss, in these remaining three lecture hours, problems of the doctrine of man, including psychoanalytic psychology and the problem of healing, the relationship of the religious and medical element in the process of healing.

Discussion with students:

Question (Paul Lee): Your use of ontological language seems to me to be a poetic revision of traditional supernaturalism and metaphysics. [*Paul Tillich*: Now – [laughter] – that's good!] How do you escape this charge [*Paul Tillich*: It's really a charge!] if you attempt to give a rational case for the relation between possibles and the actual states of affairs, intending to give knowledge of those general principles which undergird this major breach? You seem to say that the possibles and the reals are embraced by "Being" itself. Although there is identity in the order of possibility, it is not sufficient warrant for an attempt to account for this identity by recourse to an underlying ontological structure. The practice of epistemological modesty would rather lead one to say that one knows only that the possibles are thus thinkable. The rules that give an account of this phenomenon are found within another body of discourse called logic. All that one needs to relate possibles significantly one to another is a logical theory that makes clear the patterns by which one can think and discourse about them.*

Answer (Paul Tillich): Now there are a lot of problems [laughter], and I don't know where to start. Let me see. The one is the word "possibles." It is very interesting that the question does not use the classical term "potentials," which I always have used. "Possibles" indeed are thinkable; "potentials" are *more* than – logically speaking – thinkable: they are logically sufficient [?], in order to talk about them. But they have a standing, and I would call it an ontological standing, beside that———*Question of Paul Lee, later Prof. Tillich's assistant, who has taught philosophy at M.I.T. and the Univ. of California, Santa Cruz. After class, Dr. Lee expressed regret about mistaking "possibles" for "potentials," especially after hearing Tillich and Hartshorne on the subject for two hours! [which is actual. Not everything is ontological-possible which is logical-possible. This fundamental distinction, which one can learn from Aristotle, makes it necessary to use two different terms: the logical-possible and the ontological-potential. That's my first and, I think, the decisive answer to this.] [238]

Now the word "ontological" is here used only as a name-calling word. Now that can be done. You can say ontology is black, and the Devil, and the fundamental confusion of

poetry and thought, etc. But at least two or three thousand years of human beings, of high standing (as I would call them), were not of the opinion that ontology is *only* poetry. But I would agree with the question that in ontology, there are elements of intuitive anticipation of the totality of reality, as in all philosophical thought; also in those thoughts which speak of restriction to epistemological questions and to pure logic. It is a self-deception if one believes that epistemology is non-ontological. Now we already discussed that, and I might repeat it. It sounds very modest that one always asks “What can I know?” or “How do I know?” Now if this is only a rhetoric-question in order to confuse somebody who believes that he knows something – but if it is a *real* question, a *serious* question, then it demands answer. And then I answer: “How can we answer the question ‘How do I know?’ without knowing?” And that is the question asked against the purely epistemological restriction of philosophy to pure epistemology. The answer can only be itself ontological, otherwise we come into the vicious circle of “How do I know that I know that I know that I know?” And this is very often the way in which epistemology has become emptier and emptier, and has *not* answered its *own* question, “How do I know?” [239]

I think the way is always the other way around. First we encounter reality, then we know something about it – this something is put under scrutiny and verification; and then we abstract from these processes the methods of scrutiny and verification. But if we go then to the way around and first discuss the question “How it is possible to know” *before* we have started to know, then we remain in a vicious circle. And I would like to [apply] the same criticism to a logic which is non-ontological, because a logic which ... [?] inquires [about] the meanings of words, etc. is justified – here too [?] we have an object [?] which is given and can be discussed. But when logic goes beyond this and asks the question “What is the relationship of the logical forms which we *use*, and the new ones which we *invent*, to the reality to which they are applied?,” then we are in an epistemological question and implicitly in an ontological one. You cannot escape it. And I would like to have the time, once upon a time – but I am afraid I never will have – to show the metaphysical (if you want this word, instead of “ontology”) implications and presuppositions which are silently present in a seemingly formal epistemology and logic. Now that would be my basic answer to this. And of course I cannot go into this. Now I should have the answer of the answer, and we could [continue]. Of course it is one of the shortcomings of these lectures that we do not have more time for discussion.

Is there perhaps another question in your mind before we go ahead? I want at least to try to show you that I *have* answers, even if they are not accepted, or acceptable. It is not *merepoetry*! [smiling – laughter]. [240]

Now I want to go to a question the significance of which is very great and which in *some* way is a transition from this semester to the next one. That is the reason why I intended originally to discuss it in the next semester, but since the spatial and technical conditions in this room make the showing of slides very difficult – after inquiry – we decided last Thursday to postpone the problem of religion and the arts to the beginning of next semester.

That leaves us now with the question of the doctrine of man, or of the self-interpretation of man. I wouldn’t call it “religion and psychology,” because psychology has already been discussed implicitly in the relationship of religion and science – there we discussed not only physics but also biology and psychology, to a certain extent. The problem of these three remaining lectures is different from this. It is man as man, and the self-interpretation of man as man. Now that is a kind of summary of *all* other problems. To show this is my first task, I call the lecture today: “Man’s search for himself and self-loss in his world.”

I want to do this in a dramatic form, and I believe that in order to *understand* history, and historical developments, one must have a vision of the developments which has a dramatic character. In a more abstract concept this has been called “dialectical character of history.” But “dramatic” and “dialectic,” if applied to history, mean exactly the same thing. When Marx, for instance, applied the dialectical method to the development of industrial society, he actually gave a *dramatic* interpretation of industrial society, its inner conflicts – which is a dramatic concept – and its possible solutions after final, or preliminary, catastrophes. All this is dramatic. [241]

In the same way, the Hegelian interpretation of history, where the word “dialectical” was first applied to history, was a dramatic one. The dramatic element in dialectical thinking is that a reality is seen in its inescapable conflicts, the conflicts are not something which come from outside. Take any drama of Shakespeare: it comes from the constellation of powers of being embodied in almost superhuman characters of good and evil. Take King Lear, or Macbeth, or Hamlet. In the same way it is possible – and it was tried by Hegel and later on by Marx – to dramatize history. In a less powerful way it has been done recently by Toynbee, who at least *tries* to show the inner conflicts of the human historical powers and the results which, by *inner* necessity, follow from this. But of course this necessity is never a complete one. It is not physical laws which are described – it is that mixture between destiny and freedom which characterizes all being and which comes out in its full power in the human situation.

Now that is the background of this. I would say we have the same thing even in the religious interpretation of history, in Parsism, Judaism, and Christianity. In all these interpretations of history, the dramatic element, as I have just defined it, is present and important, and gives the quality to these interpretations.

Take the Persian. There the dramatic conflict is based on the revision of reality in a good and an evil principle, which are created from the very beginning, which are fighting with each other in all history, which come to a turning point with the appearance of Zoroaster as prophet, and which comes to an end, a final catastrophe, in the burning of the world by the “man from above,” which is the pattern of the Son of Man in the biblical literature. [242]

Then [in] the Jewish interpretation of history, in the Old Testament, we have the same dramatic conflict, dramatized even in conscious poetic forms, in later Jewish apocalypics, where the powers of good and evil develop stronger and stronger, and the “man from above,” the Messiah, the Son of Man, will transform the given reality in a final victory over the evil powers, and the whole world will come to the Mount Zion to adore the true God.

And we have the drama in the interpretation of history in Christianity, the drama of fall and salvation, salvation in the center of history, and again going toward the final catastrophe.

Now these dramatic motifs are present in all interpretation of history and are logically transformed in the dialectical method applied to history.

I want to return to the more poetic-dramatic form, namely man losing himself and finding himself again, which is repeated more than once in Western history. Let me describe it fully. Man is that being which is *defined* by the possibility of asking the question of himself. Man asks “What am I? and what is the world which I encounter in relation to me?” This is the question of children, this is the question of the primitive mythologically creative mind. [This question is a *human* question – which we should never forget. It is a question in which man asks about himself, his nature, and his relation to [243]

his world – because man is never him alone; man is always man-in-his-world. Therefore the question he asks is always the question of his being-in-his- world.

To ask such a question, a presupposition must be fulfilled which is the presupposition of *all* questions, namely to have and not to have, at the same time. Even the logical positivist, when he asks the question of the logical structure of sciences, must have this logical structure – otherwise he couldn't even ask for it; and must *not* have it – otherwise he wouldn't have to ask for it. And this is the situation in which we always are, if we ask questions: having – which enables us to ask at all, because if we didn't have that for which we ask, we couldn't ask; and *not* having, because if we had it completely, we wouldn't ask either.

Now this is important, for religion for instance, where we must say: the question of God presupposes that we *have* God, or God has *us*; otherwise we couldn't ask for Him. And on the other hand, the question presupposes that we *don't* have Him, that we are separated from Him, otherwise we would be in complete unity with Him and wouldn't ask the question.

And so it is about man. It means man has himself, and has himself not. He has his world and he is separated from his world.

Now this alone is a matter of astonishment, if we look at it. And if this astonishment [is called philosophical, then it unites, of course, cognitive elements (in the ordinary sense [244] of logical description) and intuitive elements: one must experience this doubleness of having and not-having.

We find ourselves as a part of our world, but this our world, although it is *our* world, is at the same time strange to us. And the same is true with ourselves: we *have* ourselves, we are aware of ourselves in every moment of our life processes, and at the same time, we are strange to ourselves, we ask the *question about ourselves*. So the question is always a double question, the question of ourselves (we have ourselves and have not ourselves), [and] of our world (we have our world and we have not our world).

Now this double question is the reason for the possibility of losing oneself in one's world. And man's development is to a large extent a process of losing himself in the world to which he belongs and at which he looks at the same time as separated from him.

Now let us directly use poetic symbols for this. The poetic symbol is taken from Homer, the Iliad + the Odyssey. The Iliad is the process of going-out, and losing oneself; and the Odyssey is the symbol for the returning-to-oneself. Man's cognitive relationship to himself, in his world, has both characteristics, under the predominance of the one or the other. In the period in which we are living, the predominance is on the side of the Iliad – man having lost himself in his world. But there are symptoms of the end, of this cognitive self-loss in one's world, and of a return to oneself. This is the first thing I want to discuss with you in connection with the doctrine of man. [245]

If man looks at his world – and we can see this in the earliest beginnings of the scientific consciousness, namely in the pre-Socratic analysis of reality – he discovers in his world different levels of being and different categories in which he grasps being. In these different levels, and their corresponding categories, he tries to find a basic level. In the Ionian philosophy of nature, this basic level was matter, and came to its fulfillment in the atomistic analysis of the material world in Leucippus and Democritus – later on, in the Epicureans. Or he finds the fundamental level in the form, in the mathematical structure of reality. This was first done in the Pythagoreans when they said that the essence of reality is number. And it has been repeated in modern physics, where mathematical equations have replaced the concept of matter. Or there is a third possibility: one

does not start with either matter or form, but with quality, and structure, and believes that the fundamental level of reality is the qualities or essences of things – what I called potentialities (in answer to the question) which *become* actualized, with the help of matter and mathematical form. This is the Platonic answer.

There are other possible answers – the Neoplatonic, in which it is the spiritual life as we experience it in ourselves which is the essence of reality.

Now however this may be, man, in encountering his world, distinguishes these levels and their categories. He distinguishes also levels of developed beings: the inorganic level, the organic, the psychological, the spiritual, the level of history. All these levels he sees beside each other. And *within* these levels, he sees a being which he recognizes as himself, [246] if he sees himself in a mirror, namely man.

Now the following thing happens: man, if he sees himself within this realm, or within his world, puts himself into one of these different levels which he calls fundamental levels. Then man becomes a part of matter, or a structural harmony of numbers, or he becomes an essence, or a center of spiritual life. In any case, he becomes something equal to those realities which he finds within the totality of his world. He finds himself as an element in the processes of physical reality, of biological, of psychological, of sociological, or spiritual reality. These processes are in his objective world – he looks at them – and then he finds himself as a part of them.

For instance, he is a physical object, and he looks at himself as at stones and other inorganic realities; he looks at himself as a combination of atoms, perhaps with a central atom, but in any case, himself down to the level of those realities which he himself has abstracted of the whole of his world as the fundamental level. Or he thinks in more Aristotelian terms, i.e., biological terms. And he sees himself as a biological organism subjected to the structures and laws of organicistic development – and that's *all* what he sees about himself.

Or he sees a realm – which is usually called the psychological, the inner realm. He sees himself as the bearer of psychological processes which are going through him and the laws of association which he describes in the realm of psychological functions. Or he sees himself as a member in a sociological role determined by this whole. | [247]

Now all these considerations are man losing himself in what he has created by cognitive analysis of his world. That is what I tried to describe in terms of the Iliad, the going-out of the human mind from his home, to the struggle with his world, in which he then loses himself. This of course is [said] metaphorically, and, if you want, poetically, but it covers a reality – and a very dramatic reality – in history, because by this drama the destiny of mankind is determined in the whole Western world, from at least 1000 years before Christ to the present day.

Now what has happened now is that man is divided into these levels of abstraction which he has discovered in the encounter of his world. If you do not think in monistic terms, reducing man completely to *one* of these levels, then you think in terms of parts: man consists of parts, and each of these parts belongs to one of these levels of reality which he has discovered cognitively by the process of analysis and abstraction.

Now what is the decisive thing about it? He has forgotten that these levels are levels of cognitive abstraction which he, man, has created. Let us illuminate this by the destiny of the word “anthropology.” Anthropology means (as everybody knows who knows Greek) the doctrine, the logos, of anthropos, man. Now what has happened to this word? This word has been used for the description of some *levels* which *belong* to the reality of man – the level of the biological, the level of the sociological, and there it ends. Now man, the

object of anthropology, is divided into these two levels, and in anthropological lectures you find these two levels fully analyzed and described. |

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But is this *man*? This is the question. Is this not a self-loss of man, in his own creation? Now the question of a name is not a very important one – it is a symptomatic one. You can call everything what[ever] you want, if there is a common convention about it – and if you call the doctrine of human bones “anthropology,” it is alright; and the doctrine of man in primitive societies “Anthropology,” it is alright. But then something else must be done if a word is narrowed down to its narrow or primitive meaning. You must invent a word for its larger meaning. And it was one of my great sorrows, when I came to this country and gave, in my early lectures, a doctrine of man, I was not able to find a word for this except “doctrine of man,” and there is no adjective for “doctrine of man,” so I couldn’t use sentences in which the abbreviation of a good adjective did appear. Of course, if I used “anthropological,” one of my students would immediately raise his finger and say, “That means, in our language, the doctrine of bones!” [laughter]. Now however this may be, we need another name, namely of that being which *has created* the doctrine of bones and of sociological intercourse, etc., and which is *more* than all this, because he has created them. And that, I would call the “doctrine of man” and don’t know how perhaps some time the word “anthropology” will become imperialistic – I hope it will; I am not always for imperialism, but in this case I am for it – and swallow the doctrine of man, philosophical as well as theological, so that we can use the word “anthropological” again for real statements about man as man, and not about man as lost in his creations.

This situation demands a doctrine of man, which is *neither physics nor biology nor psychology nor sociology* but something which *precedes* all this and shows how the human mind, in his encounter with reality, has created these abstract realms and why it has created them and *had* to create them.

Now here I can *defend* the Greeks who left their country, in the Iliad, and went to the conquest of Asia Minor – namely the reason was that without such abstractions, you cannot grasp the elements which *can* be abstracted. This was the reason, and for this reason we must *praise* not only the Homeric Iliad and the action of the colonizing Greeks, of which they are an epic expression, but we must also praise the human mind which went out to find his world and could find it only by the method of producing abstractions and abstract realms. In this way he *could* develop physics, he *could* develop biology, he *could* develop *psychology* even – although here the limits became mostly stronger than the advantages – he *could* develop sociology. And he *has*, and we have an immense knowledge about the abstract realms in our encounter with reality. But we have lost one thing: *we have lost the unity*, because man, when he identified himself with one or all of these levels, lost what makes man, namely that being which is able to *ask* these questions, to *develop* these abstractions, to conquer the world with the *help* of these abstractions. All this was lost. And *therefore*: man had no knowledge of himself any more except the practically immediate knowledge which he always has, out of which he lives. But the fact |that when [250] he looked at himself cognitively, he had to look outside of himself into the levels of his world which he had created by abstraction, meant that he knew about himself who has *created* all this, *less than about anything else*. And I believe that this is the situation in which we find ourselves since the beginning of the modern period. It was also the case partly in Greece, but there the movements of the later ancient world (to which I would like to come in our lecture on art) have reestablished *some* understanding of man under the power of the Christian solution of the problem of man *as man*, in contrast to man in

his world.

With the modern period the process of abstraction started again and became radicalized to such a degree that in the classical philosopher who represents modern science better than anybody else – Descartes – we find the complete dualism of the two realms into which man has been split, the realm of extension and the realm of consciousness. These two realms he could not bring together except in terms of a *Deus ex machina*, a God who brings them together by continuous miraculous activity. Now this means (since no one could accept the solution in this way) the modern man remains for himself divided into at least two realms: he is asking for himself, but these questions remain unanswered.

I believe that in the 20th century, with predecessors in the 19th, we have the beginnings of the Odyssey. But I will develop this next time more fully, because it is one of the most fascinating views of our 20th century, with all its horrors and all its greatness. But before I do so, I ask the question, “Why did religion not prevent this loss man, cognitively, in his world?” – his identification with realms of abstraction, or his division *into* the different realms of abstraction. Religion was not able to resist this development – and this again is a general statement about the situation of religion in our present society (which is transition to our next semester’s considerations). In any case, religion was *not* able. And it was not able to because it did, actually, in the religious sphere, almost the same thing that man did in the sphere of the doctrine of man: *god also* was lost, in the world which man encountered and wanted to rediscover cognitively. He became a being whose *existence* was discussed. His activities became activities in the categories of physics. But since they contradicted (according to the tradition) the physical laws, a concept of miracle was established which had nothing to do with the mythological understanding of reality, but was a mis-product, a distorted product, of the estrangement of God *from* man, corresponding to an estrangement of *man* from man, in the search of man for his world. [251]

For this reason the modern mind, in his going-out, could not be kept back by the prayers of the priests to remain in the legendary symbolism. They couldn’t keep him back because their own power was already internally broken, when they put religion down to the same level to which *man* was brought down: to the realm of an abstraction in the world of objects.

So the only way left for religion was to protest. But if somebody says “No,” he becomes narrow. He sees the dangers for his own situation, he sees that actually he is lost, and so he acts with restricting himself, with becoming intolerant and narrow. And this was the actual situation of religion in the modern time: it was not able to resist man’s losing himself in the realm of the objects which were created by man himself in terms of abstraction. And religion *could* not perform this function because man did – with the symbols of religion – what he had done with himself, namely [to] make himself and these symbols into objects of a world of abstract levels the *greatness* of which are that they opened up the world for the process of cognition and control. But this was the price man had to pay for his Iliadic going-away from himself. [252]