

Religion and Culture by Paul Tillich

A digital edition of Paul Tillich's Lecture "Religion and Culture"
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Lecture XXI, Dec. 15, 1955[Exam announcements: Lectures were on 6 different subjects; there will be two questions on each:

Faith

Religion and language

Religion and the technical realm

Religion and science

Religion and philosophy

Religion and psychology.

H. R. NiebuhrChrist and Culture

F. SchleiermacherSpeeches on Religion . . .

W.M. UrbanLanguage and Reality

R. NiebuhrFaith and History

J.H.Randall, Jr. ... The Making of the Modern Mind]

Lecture:

I spoke last Thursday about the estrangement of man as asking the question of himself and his world, *from* himself, putting himself into his world, dividing himself into the levels which he, by abstraction, distinguishes in his world, and becoming unable to reunite these levels in the unity of his own being. I called this the Iliad of the human mind, in which it goes out to discover the world and himself and loses himself in his world in the struggles about his world.

Now the opposite to this is the Odyssey, the return, which is not something which happens in one story, but it happens, like the original Odyssey of Homer, in many stories, many attempts, it is accompanied by many dangers, and, like in the old great epic stories, it is tried again and again. And we certainly are in the middle of the Odyssey and not at its end.

One of the earlier attempts in the Western world, and in the modern period, was what we call romanticism. Romanticism, in the genuine sense in which it appears in the European and British literature of the Romantics, is an attempt to overcome the subject-object structure of reality, to go behind it and beyond it, and to find again the creative man who has created the world of abstractions. For this reason, the romantic philosophers were very critical of the Enlightenment, with its attempt to analyze the world and the beginning industrial society with *its* attempt to reunite the elements of reality for the sake of control. But romanticism went ahead with a speed which was not yet justified. And so the reaction of the subject-object structure of reality in the 19th century was very drastic, was so drastic that the romantic philosophy, including the romantic doctrine of man, became a matter of more name-calling than scientific refutation. [254]

The result was that in the second half of the 19th century, there was a complete victory of the subject-object structure of dealing with, of encountering, reality, and of a complete self-loss as man who has created these abstractions into which he was divided. It was one of the greatest catastrophes of the Odyssey which happened in the middle of the 19th century and determined that in this century, certainly, man would not find [his way] back to himself as the creative ground of his creations – of course, that was the problem and the attempt.

Since the beginning of the 20th century, developments took place in which, so to speak, Odysseus put on his sails again to return home. And we are in the midst of these attempts. We participate in them and we also see their dangers. We criticize them, but we cannot simply negate them. [I will now speak about some of these attempts of man to find himself again as the ground of the world which he has created in terms of abstractions, and into which he has lost himself. [255]

What I first want to mention (and to a certain extent go into) is the inner-philosophical struggle of the naturalists against their own reductionist forms. Reductionism means that every reality is reduced to one level of reality, namely to that level of reality in which the subject-object structure is most predominant and most successful: the reality of mathematical physics. The reduction of reality, in *all* its forms, to the movement of atoms, or to the fields of power, is something which is now looked at by the naturalists themselves as a questionable thing. And the attempt to interpret the human *biological* structure and man's *psychological* structure and man's *creative* possibilities – which I would call his spiritual character (with a small “s”) – all these to reduce to the most simple form of mathematical physics – is not attempted any more by the naturalistic philosophers. They have learned that this dogma is untenable – for a very simple reason, which was overlooked only in the first enthusiasm for the reduction of everything to a calculable movement of atoms – namely for the reason that in order to explain anything of the *other* levels of reality out of this basic level, as it was called, you must presuppose the potentiality of these higher levels already in the lower level, i.e. with a magic stroke you put into the atom Goethe's Faust and Shakespeare's plays. Now if you do *this*, then of course you can get it out again, [just] as magicians of today put into their hat everything they get out [later on, in terms of seemingly miraculous ways, but actually in terms of tricks. [256]

The reductionist philosophers became aware that *in reality* they did this trick and that it is not dignified to stick to it, after they had seen the tricky character of the reductionist method. So they accepted a concept of nature (“naturalism” is derived from “nature”) which could keep their claim to be naturalists. But we can now call this not reductionism, but integrated naturalism, which means that one calls everything “nature,” including the

creation of Shakespeare's plays, or the Bible – no one can prevent anyone from calling this “nature,” or calling it an expression of human nature. But then the concept of nature loses its contrary, and this kind of naturalism could perhaps be criticized by William James's fallacy of the lacking contrast: if you call everything “nature,” then the name loses its real meaning.

But nevertheless the important thing is not the matter of the name, but it is that the reductionist trick was given up. That is one of the steps to the return of man to himself. He discovered that the levels of reality cannot be reduced to one. Then the question was: which is their unity?

This leads to another discovery, and a very important one, which was first made in psychology, namely the so-called Gestaltpsychology. I intend to use this German word, which has become a foreign word in English, because there is no real translation for it. The transcription of the meaning, or the description of the meaning, of this word is perhaps “a living structure,” or “an independent structure.” The word “structure” is not a good translation because every machine has a structure, and there are many structural forms in a living gestalt. Therefore we do better to accept this foreign word – as the English language was always able to accept many words from Latin, Greek and other languages, and owes its richness to this. So I suggest that at least in these lectures, as in so many others and in books I have seen, the word “gestalt” be accepted. [257]

What does this discovery of “gestalt” mean, and what is it? It came out of experimental psychology. My friend and colleague Max Wertheimer, who is mostly connected with the first steps in gestalt psychology – he was professor in Berlin and then in Frankfurt, and finally in the New School in New York – his experiments showed him that no psychological experience (e.g., the picture you have when you come into a room) has the character of a composition out of atomistic sense-impressions, but that these sense-impressions are from the very beginning ordered in a structure, in a structural whole – this room – and if you want to go to the special elements of it, you do it by abstraction. This simply means: gestalt precedes abstraction. Or better: gestalt precedes its particles which are won by a later process of abstraction. Reality does not have the character – neither in psychology, and later on this was applied to biology (here again I would like to name a great name, Kurt Goldstein, formerly of Frankfurt, partly here in Tufts University, and now in New York) – and he did a very interesting thing, of which I want to speak because it has bearing on the relationship of doctrine-of-man and religious problems in a very profound way. After the First World War, he and a team of collaborators worked with brain-injured people (he is a neurologist) who showed characteristics which gave a key to the functioning of an integrated mind. This functioning was reduced, in the brain-injured, to very special limits. These limits can be described exactly and scientifically. In these descriptions it came out that one function was reduced more than anything else, the function of abstraction, which is the great function of the human mind on which language is based. The brain-injured cannot transcend the limits of his reduced existence. He has no world any more, he has given environments. To these given environments, he can adapt himself very well, but he can do so only with the help of others who can put him into these limited surroundings; he cannot transcend the real for the possible. This, for instance, has one advantage: these people cannot lie, they cannot say a lie, and they cannot understand if someone says something that is obviously a lie. If one of these people were here and I would ask him to repeat the sentence “The sun is shining now,” he would not be able to. You *would* be (although it does not shine); you can lie, but they cannot because they are bound to the concrete situation and are not [258]

able to transcend it. And if you try to *force* them to say such a sentence, they have what Goldstein calls a catastrophic reaction; they fall into a tremendous state of anxiety and almost self-destruction.

Now this shows that man has the possibility of transcending himself. This was another element which was added to the gestalt psychology, it was the psychology of spontaneity in terms of the possibility of self-transcendence.

Out of this, another insight followed, namely the insight into the nature of the spontaneity|of life processes. And from here a tremendous reaction occurred against the stimulus-response psychology. You all know what conditioned-reflex is. You all know how important conditioned reflexes are for modern psychology and sociology. But you don't know it as well as some other people with whom you are, I hope not too, sympathetic know, namely the dictators. The stimulus- reflex psychology was and became the great tool of the dictators. Now why? Because if man can be brought into a situation in which he reacts in terms of stimulus and response, then you can make everything of him which you want to make; you only must have the power to produce the well-calculated stimuli, and then the intended responses will follow. The extreme of this was the concentration camp, where the intended effects responded, were reached by an intensive continuous attack in terms of negative stimuli which were calculated to reduce human beings completely into objects. [259]

Now this possibility had its limits even in the concentration camp. People were able to resist. And people are always able to resist the stimulus-response curve if it is imposed on them. Some people broke down, of course, and became nothing but tools. But I know a lot of them who did *not* break down, even after twelve years in prison and concentration camps, and who, immediately after they were sufficiently established bodily, worked on a high level creatively ever since.

This means there is in man something which we can call "freedom," and in biological nature, "spontaneity," which is able to resist the stimulus-response reaction in terms of a calculated |necessity. It is of great interest to see how this theory comes into existence. It came into existence actually by the observation of the sick and of those who were subjected to laboratory conditions. In a laboratory you can isolate functions of living bodies, in biology (and of man, in psychology) which now run beside the center of the living being, or the personality. Then they can be subjected to conditioning experiments. Automatically this happens in states of sickness. Psychological compulsions have this character, and in bodily sickness the isolation of functions which are not integrated in the whole of the life process, can be observed, and they of course follow the law of conditioned reflexes. But no living being, insofar as it lives and is *not* subjected to these conditions, follows the stimulus-reflex curve, but has, in spite of all the elements of stimulus and reflexive reactions, an element of spontaneity which makes the living gestalt able to express itself as a whole. [260]

Here you see the relationship of these insights to the gestalt psychology and biology: man is free insofar as he reacts *as a whole*, as a totality. This is the same in the biological realm where we have "holistic" reactions, as it is also called, and they are spontaneous, while partial reactions can be conditioned by stimulus and response.

Now all this had one function, namely that gestalt psychology *showed* that man *is a whole*, and that living beings are wholes. It showed, in these psychological experiments, that the whole precedes the part, in our reception of the reality and in the reality itself. You can never produce a whole, a totality, but you can always abstract from a totality in thought and in |action and dissolve it into particles. From this followed another step, [261]

a very important step where medicine, both bodily and psychological medicine, helped Odysseus to return to himself, namely the discovery (or rediscovery, of course) of the psychosomatic unity of man in all medical treatment, be it psychological or biological.

Today the words “psychosomatic medicine” have been a kind of slogan, and if truth becomes a slogan, probably it is not truth any longer. So I am a little skeptical about its use. Nevertheless it is a step in finding back to man himself. Here I refer to the Cartesian philosophy in which the division of man into parts was most definitively expressed. Those of you who know the Cartesian philosophy know that he distinguished the thinking substance and the extended substance. The thinking substance is man’s consciousness which he called “soul” – we would call it “mind,” perhaps – and the extended substance is the body. In good reductionist fashion, he identified all biological bodies with mechanisms, in analogy to the machine – mechanisms the spontaneity of which is only *seeming*, but not real. In this way, man was a composite of a body which moves according to the laws of the machine, put into it by its creator, and he is in the same situation with all other living bodies; and on the other hand, there is the mere consciousness which can be described in terms of a psychology of association or connotation.

Now against this the romantic reactions were very strong and had a lasting effect on some schools of thought in the 20th century. But perhaps most important was the insight that this division of body and soul – I come back to it when I speak about the healing problem – |but in any case medical men from both the psychological and the bodily side [262] realized that this division makes the description of any sickness impossible. This is the discovery, a rediscovery, of the 20th century. And this rediscovery is a return of man to himself.

Here something very interesting (which will astonish you) comes to my mind, namely the fact that Christianity was, especially in its Platonic-Augustinian line of thought, partly responsible for the Cartesian division. Descartes belongs to the Augustinian tradition. What does this mean? It means that they followed the Platonic division of the world of essences and the world of mathematical bodies and their movements. Platonism is the foundation of modern mathematical science, while Aristotelianism is a reaction against it, and Aristotle is the father of the gestalt thinking, the thinking in terms of gestalt – because Aristotle comes from biology; Plato comes from Pythagorean physics and mathematics. And since Christianity had in itself this dualistic tendency of separating body and soul (as it usually was called), it was very much in favor for what I call man losing himself. Here Christianity and mathematical science went together, both coming from Plato and the Pythagoreans.

Now this is the view which sometimes should be realized, if you want to understand the history of physics and the history of such a thing as gestalt psychology in relation to the fundamental forms of thinking as they were developed in Greek thought. But this was a footnote to the history of philosophy which I gave because I hope it *astonished* you – usually “Christianity and Plato: that belongs together, both are idealist, and nonsense of course” – and so on. | [263]

Now this is historically absolutely not true. It is not true that they belong simply together – *one line* of them belongs together. And both Plato and this line – which I called the Augustinian line in the Middle Ages and the modern times – is the line of mathematical science.

Now the psychosomatic description of man comes near again to Aristotle, to his understanding of the human body as the matter to the form which is the human soul, and the human soul as the matter to the form which is the human mind. In this way a

new unity has been reestablished by the very fact of the Aristotelian thinking in terms of potentiality and actuality, of matter and form, of entelechaia – the soul is the entelechaia, the inner form, of the body. The rediscovery of this was made in the 20th century, mostly through medical insights into the dependence of the body on the movements of the soul, healthy or sick, and vice versa.

Now I wouldn't say, again, that Odysseus has reached his home. We don't know yet really what that is, "psychosomatic medicine." We use that word often very glibly and without real understanding of what is involved. We use the category of causality – the body influences the mind and the mind influences the body – but probably this category is entirely inadequate. Perhaps we should say: there is one reality, which the Greeks called psyché – when we translate it by "soul," we immediately are in a wrong connotation. Perhaps we had better translate it by "life process" – that is what psyché in Greek means – the one life process which expresses itself at the same time bodily, in terms of time and space and individual substance – [and mind, which is also an expression of this one life process, and where it expresses itself in terms of participation in the universals, of knowing and acting according to norms and principles. [264]

Now if we have this doctrine of man, then we have a monistic doctrine of man. It is interesting that here we can easily see that the *Old* Testament – not completely the New Testament by but certainly the Old Testament picture of man – and the Aristotelian picture of man – the unity – agree. I cannot go deeper into this; it is one step in the process of going back.

The next step, where I again, as always, say: it doesn't yet bring us home. We are in the process of Odyssey: to find again what man is, is the understanding of the problem of man as an ontological problem. I know that the word "ontology" is like a red [flag] being waved at you, many of you, and you react as some animals do, when they see the red color. . . etc. . . but I hope at least some of this reaction has somewhat smoothed [i.e. simmered] down since the last lectures, and I dare to use the word "ontology" again!

What I mean is: What kind of being is man? – seen in terms of the question of being-itself. What is his ultimate structure? Body and soul – or body and mind – or life process and its expression – alright! But that's only, so to speak, the description from outside. Ontology would give a description from inside. Here we *have* already found one very important element, namely that man is that being which has universals, which can speak.

But this is an isolated element. This element is connected with other, more fundamental, elements. Here we come to the most fundamental element, namely that man is finite *while being|aware of his finitude*. Now *everything* is finite, everything in time and space is finite. But not everything is aware of its finitude. Man is aware that he *is* finite. We can, so to speak, describe man as that being which is aware of his finitude. But how *can* one be aware of one's finitude only by being *beyond* it? You cannot be aware of that with which you are identical. Awareness always presupposes some presupposition, some element of subject-object separation. You can be aware of yourselves only because you are in the process of self-consciousness, separated from yourselves, although united with yourselves. [265]

When I ask how can man be aware of his finitude, then my answer is: because he is aware of his potential infinity.

But now the next step comes. This potential infinity, which we experience, has at the same time the character of nonactualized potentiality, or, expressed even sharper, it is an infinity to which we belong and from which we are excluded.

Now let me make this clear by a word to which I always draw my attention – the word “the mortals.” It is very interesting that in [the] Homeric writings and later on in the classic tragedy, the Greek uses not the word *anthropoi*, which means “men,” but it uses the word “the mortals.” Why? What does that mean? *Every* living being is mortal. Why are *men* the mortals, and not animals or plants, which are certainly also mortal? Because for man it is something which draws the attention: there is something about his being mortal which is [worth[y]] of asking a question. And *therefore* the Greeks [266] gave this name to man. But why *is* it astonishing that man is mortal? Because man knows about *immortality* – or *the immortal* (“immortality” is a bad word). And the Greeks knew about it: they called the gods “the immortals,” i.e., their own potential immortality they put symbolically into the figures of their gods; they were aware – and this is the interesting meaning of these two names, “the mortals” and “the Immortals” – of their potential immortality from which they were excluded and which they put into the figures of their gods. They *must* have known *something* about immortality – this word must have a *meaning*, otherwise they could not have called the gods “immortal.” And man is that being which is aware of his mortality, his finitude, because he participates *potentially* in the infinite from which at the same time he is excluded.

Next time I will speak about existentialism, psychoanalysis, and the healing problems, as the last and perhaps the most important step of man’s “return” to himself.