

# Religion and Culture by Paul Tillich

A digital edition of Paul Tillich's Lecture "Religion and Culture"  
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*Lecture XXII*, Dec. 20, 1955

Since this is the last lecture, let me remind you of the idea of the whole lecture [course] as we had it, and look forward to the lecture starting the beginning of February.

Religion and culture has been treated in such a way that we first discussed the meaning of religion, especially the meaning of faith as ultimate concern. Then we spoke about the symbolic character of religious expression in practice and theory. Then we tried to find the religious element and the relation of religion to the different cultural functions, on the basic presupposition that religion in the sense of ultimate concern is the substance of culture, and that wherever religion expresses itself, the form of its expression is culture. Or, in short: religion is the substance of culture, and culture is the form of religion.

With this principle, then, we first approached language as the immediate characteristic of man as man; then we came to man as creating a world above the given world – the technical forms; then we came to the different forms of science – pure science, including the biological realm, leaving out the psychological, for special reasons, but going then to history and to philosophy. Then I intended originally to deal with religion and art, but according to my suggestion, and your agreement, we postponed this to next semester because of the difficulties of this place to show slides and to have the material necessary to discuss such a problem.

Instead of that, we turned to a problem which is anyhow a center, and therefore is rightly at the end of the first semester and gives the bridge to the second. It unites [the] [268] theoretical and the practical realm, namely the doctrine of man. We have dedicated two lectures already to this doctrine of man, whereby I spoke metaphorically of the Iliad and the Odyssey of the human mind – man asking the question of himself and his world, being estranged from himself, dissolving himself in the different levels of reality which he meets, finding that he cannot find himself on this basis. In the last hour, I gave you some points in which the Odyssey can be seen, points which have happened [in the past] – in terms of romanticism, of elements of existentialism, in the past – and then points which are especially characteristic of the 20th century. Here I came to that movement which has become so important for the climate of man's self-interpretation of himself, namely the rediscovery of the unconscious.

The discovery of the unconscious is one of the things to which we should dedicate this last hour because it is, in all the ways in which this rediscovery has been done, most important for man's self-interpretation of himself, in the present situation. First

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of all I speak of the *rediscovery* of the unconscious. That means it was not unknown to former periods of history. Wherever voluntaristic elements became important in philosophy, especially in the doctrine of being, there, in the past, the reality of drives and strivings which are not yet conscious was seen clearly. But with the modern time – with Protestantism, especially in its Calvinistic and Zwinglian forms, and with the emphasis on consciousness in Descartes and his school, and English empiricism – the insight into the power of the unconscious got lost. It was rediscovered the first time in romanticism, but romanticism had special characteristics which made it useless, to a certain extent, [for its *own* period, because at that time the great progress of natural science pushed [269] aside any attempt of ideas like gestalt, ideas like unconscious strivings.

It was at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century that not only metaphysical but also exact-scientific rediscovery of the unconscious took place, namely in something which I dislike to call “psychoanalysis,” because that limits the great event to special schools and special methods, but which I very much prefer to call with a word which is not so good English but very characteristic for the reality: “depth psychology.” The depth-psychological movement of which Freud was the beginner, but not the only representative – nor was the Freudian school the only school – and if you look back now at the last 55 years already, then you will find that the decisive thing about it is not a special scientific insight – they have changed, like all special scientific insights *always* must change – but it was a transformation of the intellectual climate with respect to man’s understanding of himself. Perhaps this is less obvious for you who grew up in this new climate than for those of my age who still remember the 19th century in the larger sense of the word, which ended only in the year 1914, with the beginning of the First World War. For us it is not only a *book* knowledge that the climate of man’s self-interpretation of himself has fundamentally changed, but it is a personal experience, from year to year; and out of *this* experience, I am valuating this event [in connection with the doctrine of [270] man.

I spoke about the word “doctrine of man” when I referred to the impossibility of using the word “anthropology,” because it itself is a victim of that development which I called the estrangement of man from himself, in his self-interpretation. So we must speak of the doctrine of man.

I prefer this word to “psychology.” My friend Kurt Goldstein, to whom I have referred several times in these lectures, says there is no such a thing as “psychology” because if you speak of “psychology,” you assume that that which is the object of psychology is something which in *no* way can be separated from the totality of man’s biological and physical reality, and that, he believes, cannot be done. I think he is right in this. Of course there are always abstract relations which *can* be separated, but if they are, they are not only true but also wrong *just because* they are separated. Remember when I spoke about gestalt, that this was the decisive point, that the *anti*-gestalt thinking is always based on separating functions or parts from the whole and then subjecting itself to partial analysis in terms of stimulus and response, of *course* coming to results which *seem* to reduce man, in the Cartesian sense, to a machine. If you realize, however, that this is an abstract procedure which must be re-integrated into the whole of the living gestalt, then you immediately see that here a methodological prejudice ruins the real understanding of what man is.

Now on this basis I want to say what I believe are the important *indirect* contributions of depth psychology to the whole of our understanding of man and world, and especially to the doctrine of man. [In the Cartesian, Kantian, and long ago Erasmian (and for [271]

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theologians, Pelagian) attitude, the belief was predominant, and still is, in this semi- or three-fourths Pelagian American Christianity, that everything is dependent on conscious decisions made in the center of our consciousness, and that everybody in every moment is able to make these decisions for good or bad, for God or against God.

Now such a belief, whenever it appeared – and I gave you the names: Pelagius, Erasmus, Descartes, Kant, and of course the English empiricists – was always, after a certain time, undercut by forms of new realism, of a new understanding of the human situation. In this country it was especially the belief in progress through the man-of-good-will who slowly will renew society by conscious decisions and conscious activities in such a way that the whole of human reality will be changed.

I already discussed the problem of progress, to the dismay of many of you, and there I said that the model of progressivistic thinking is man's technical activity, and that in this model the progress-idea is right, while if applied to man making conscious decisions, it is wrong.

The discovery of the unconscious showed this very clearly. It showed that this attitude of a psychology of consciousness, and morals of consciousness, and generally a philosophy of consciousness usually called idealism, was wrong. Something happened which, in religious terminology, was described as the "bondage of the will" – or something was *seen* again. It was not called so by the psychologists, but they discovered realities in man which confirmed the fundamental insight of man in himself of which religion has always been a witness. |

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The first point were pathological cases. Here it was obvious that there is a bondage of the will in terms of compulsory restrictions or aggressions. This pathological structure was soon discovered in *non*-pathological cases also. And it was discovered that there are structures in every human being which are analagous – not analogous but identical – to these structures. Suddenly one rediscovered that when the biblical stories about the healing of the demoniacs were analyzed not from the point of view of their so-called miraculous character but from the point of view of what actually happened in *healing* in them, and in the description of the weakness in them, that they were great examples – and very *precise* examples – of the description of cases of neurotic compulsions and schizophrenic psychosis.

Later theology – I refer especially to Luther – spoke of the concept of possession, in the sense that man doesn't possess himself but is always possessed either by structures of evil or structures of the good, by demonic structures or structures of grace, and that actually, in the human experience, this is an alternative, but it is a mixture: they are always present *together*, in every human being and in every social reality also. Therefore everything is ambiguous, and human freedom, even in cases which are not psychotic or neurotic, is mixed with bondage of the will.

Now beyond this, psychology wouldn't go, but here theology could point to realities which are not derived from special interpretations of man, in the sense of ultimate concern, but which are derived in scientific analysis of the human situation from a basically medical point of view. |

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But now I take a step beyond this. Here I take in much of the existentialist literature. The relationship of psychoanalysis, or depth psychology, and existentialism is a very rich one and a very interesting one, from many points of view. There is the fact, which you all know, that in drama and novel and visual arts the results of depth-psychological analysis are effective, are working, and are expressed, even. We had a whole series of plays in which depth-psychological elements were dramatically dealt with. On the other hand, in

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some great existentialist predecessors, such as Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche and the early Marx, and Feuerbach and Schelling and others, we find anticipations of the discoveries of depth psychology with respect to the unconscious strivings in man which are often of so astonishing character that one must say that it is a great thing that Freud has rediscovered these things scientifically, with method well defined. But they are not new in this sense; you can find most of them, even in the *pre*-Freudian existentialist literature, in the past. You can especially find them in the books of penance in Medieval literature, where the self-scrutiny of the monks, nuns, produced material which later disappeared under the domains of psychology-of-consciousness, but which anticipate much of those realities.

Now I came to this to show the consequence of the power of the unconscious in the cognitive realm. I want to refer here to a phenomenon which was known to prophets as well as philosophers, namely the phenomenon of blindness – blindness of course not in the physical sense, but in the spiritual sense. Sometimes there was almost a feeling that they are in opposition to each other. The legend that Homer was blind, and the self-blinding of Odysseus when he discovered the blindness [of his soul, the spiritual blindness of his human situation, are examples for the profound existentialist element in Greek tragedy and already in the Greek myth. [274]

Now what is this blindness? Here I come to a *very* important point in our whole academic discussion, which is going on to my great enjoyment on the campus here now, namely the discussion about the function of objective knowledge in relationship to man's self-interpretation. If blindness were identified with lack of knowledge, then those who have most knowledge are least blind. The history of philosophy and prophetism and every observation which you can make with people of today with whom you are in relationship will show you that this is completely wrong. The amount of knowledge is not in proportion to the amount of insight.

Here I use the word "insight." This is a dangerous word, like "intuition," and it means exactly the same (*intuitio* in Latin means "sight") , but both words must be used. The word "insight" is especially interesting because its understanding is *also* one of the great achievements of depth psychology, namely the distinction between knowledge and insight with respect to the psychoanalytic process itself. I don't know whether I said that already – if not, I will say it now, namely that if you ask an analyst "Who are the most difficult patients?," then he will answer "Those who know everything about analysis" – because they have the most deadly weapon of defense against insight into themselves.

Now this is the best example for the fundamental difference between theoretical knowledge and participating insight – or perhaps I should have said: detached knowledge and involved insight. | [275]

Now take these two words: then you have a criterion for many things which are the problem of our situation here today. I myself must confess that I owe the clear distinction of these two things to my practical and theoretical participation in psychoanalytic processes. It is something absolutely different, if you know by heart the whole literature of Freud (or any other analyst whom you prefer), or whether you *ever* were in the situation in which you tried to get insight into what is going on in the depths of your own personality. The first, of course, has the toil of work – you must learn and read and try to understand – the other includes the hell of suffering without which no one can win the insight into oneself because participation in those movements of the soul, in which the character and the deviations were formed, which you experience in your life today, this insight is a matter, not of curiosity, but of going through hell, as everybody says who

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ever did it seriously.

Now out of this, then, insight develops – insight by participation, in your past and in your present unconscious developments and realities.

So it is not *enlightenment*, what is done here. If it were enlightenment, it wouldn't help.

This brings me to some words about Socrates. I am afraid that some theologians *still* prove the superiority of Paul the Apostle over Socrates by the tremendous insight that you can know what is good and *don't* do it, while Socrates was so stupid [as] to believe that if one knows the good, one would do it! Now this tremendous “superiority” is the superiority of a 10-year old boy, and if professors boast, and ministers boast, that they have this superiority, and that if they believe that if they do something good to Paul the Apostle, that he knew better than Socrates – then they are simply childish. [?] What is really at stake here is *absolutely different*. Socrates didn't speak of knowledge in the [sense] of detached knowledge, but he speaks of insight in the sense of participation in one's daemon, as he called [it], i.e., the unconscious power striving in him. And only on the basis of such insight is it possible to understand his statement that knowledge produces action. And why? Because this knowledge is already an action, and one of the, perhaps the most difficult action, namely obedience to the oracle of Delphi, which called Socrates the wisest of all men, and on the door which was written *gnōthi seauton*, “Know thyself.” But knowing oneself doesn't mean “Know the measures of sensitivity to light and darkness,” as in some forms of psychology rightly is done, but it means “Know one's predicament.” And just *that* is what the psychoanalytic movement tries to do and for which it has found some new methods. [276]

A third point is the discovery of nature in man, namely the driving power of what Freud calls libido and what Nietzsche called “will to power.” These things were always known in their manifest expressions, but the existentialist and psychoanalytic rediscovery of the unconscious has shown something else: it has shown that they are present not only in their conscious state, but that there is something analogous to them in their unconscious state. Of course if one speaks of will-to-power, that is a conscious formula and therefore is a very unfortunate concept, and one must say: if one understands Nietzsche, he speaks neither of will nor of power, in the sense of social power and conscious will; he speaks of the unconscious drives toward the self-increase of life as life. And if Freud speaks of libido, this also is completely mistaken as conscious sexual desire, while in reality it is the desire for fulfillment in all realms of life, of which indeed the sexual is the strongest and most important. [277]

Out of the repression of these powers in the unconscious of the soul, realities like anxiety, guilt, hostility are produced and are always present in the conscious decisions. This again is a complete turnover of our interpretation of man, of his self-interpretation.

Now this leads to a critical analysis of the social structures which are supposed to be good. Up to a certain time, [the] family was praised as an unambiguously good institution, and so was friendship and so was social groups such as communities or nations. Now one has discovered that each of these institutions is ambiguous *by its very structure*. Now I will refer especially to families because there is still in some groups, especially in the Catholic Church, an undue glorification of the family as unambiguously good. If you look at the realities of the patients of the psychoanalysts and psychotherapists and psychiatrists and all forms of people who deal with the human personality as a whole, and not only the special function of a bodily character, then you will find it is *not* a matter of the *worst* families but often a matter of the *best* families in which the diseases are acquired. And

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this was a tremendous shock for the Protestant moralism which simply said: “Have a good family and everything will be alright.” Just those [who endeavored to produce a good family relationship to their husbands or wives, to their children, were those who *often*, by this very fact, produced reactions in their children (or in the other part, in the marriage, which could not find a way out and therefore produced neurosis and psychosis). I cannot go into these things fully. The important point for the understanding of symbols of ultimate concern is that families, friend-relationships and social relations generally, in their *goodness* are ambiguous: *that’s* the decisive thing. If you make the distinction between good ones and bad ones, [e.g.], “Let us all become men of good will, then we will also have good social relations, good family relations, and everything will be alright” – then every psychoanalyst who knows the human psyche, the human soul, in its darker [side], its unconscious strivings, can only have a smile about this amount of ignorance about real human beings. The actual situation is a situation of ambiguity. And that is the first thing we must realize. [278]

Now I come to the last point, namely the awareness of this situation, and the form of this awareness, I call “anxiety.” If you want, it is a rediscovery of the most existentialist sentence in all [of] Augustine, namely: the human soul is restless till it rests in Thee – namely God. Now, for this restlessness, we have today the term “anxiety” – we didn’t have it 20 years ago when I came to this country, but words develop in connection with insights. Today this word can be used and understood.

There are analysts who speak of “basic anxiety,” but they restrict this phrase to anxiety in a special primitive culture and a special developed culture – for instance the basic anxiety of the [East European nations, as Margaret Mead has discussed; or the basic anxiety of the Red Indians, or whatever. This is not basic; this is historically determined. But there is something below this, namely the *possibility* of anxiety, and this is the *really* basic anxiety, which is given with man’s predicament and which also has been rediscovered in connection with the problems of the human situation. [279]

Let me say a few words about this anxiety. Every living being has this anxiety because every living being is continuously threatened by nonbeing, and comes from nonbeing and goes to nonbeing. Man has advantages and disadvantages in comparison with other living beings. Man has the advantage that he can transform anxiety into fear and then fight courageously with the object of fear.

Now let me explain that. Decisive for this whole analysis is the distinction between anxiety and fear, which is older than Kierkegaard and much older than Freud and modern analysis and existentialism, who *all* use this distinction. Anxiety is without a content, or as the existentialist Heidegger has said, it is without an object, it is related to nonbeing itself. Or as Goldstein says: it is the state of not being able to handle life as a whole, without a special reason. Fear is always motivated by an object, by something which we can face – a sickness, an examination, a battle, and what not. This difference between fear and anxiety is absolutely decisive for the understanding of man. You can observe this in your dealing with children: if they are in a dark room and are in anxiety, there is no special object. If you are able to ask them and bring them to an answer to the question “Now what are you afraid of?,” then they may laugh. And you can do that with yourself. [When you are in a state of anxiety – let us say about an examination – you can say “Now alright, what can happen?” ... and if you face, exactly in terms of a content, what the anxiety might be occasioned by, and can find it, then you can say, “Alright, I can stand that!” But anxiety is anxiety of not being able to resist nonbeing. And that is also a very fine analysis given by modern psychologists and neurologists: fear is the [280]

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fear *not* of something, but fear is the fear of falling into anxiety. And if we are able to develop this courage to *fight* the occasioning cause, then we are *beyond* this moment of anxiety, but we can never get rid of anxiety as such, because of our finitude.

And in man the anxiety is not only caused by his knowledge of his having to die, but also by guilt consciousness and by the question of the meaning of life. These forms of anxiety are added to the anxiety of all creature[liness].

Now if we understand this, then we understand that depth psychology, in unity with existentialism, have given us really the return of Odysseus to his homeland, to a certain extent. There are still the dangers of the Odyssey, and we don't know how far we will go, but we have at least taken one step toward the self-interpretation of man.

Now in the semester starting in February, I want to go into the problems of the *expression* of the human situation, as I just have described it, in the visual and partly in the other arts, and then go the social surroundings and implications of this human situation, and the relationship of religion to the legal, ethical, social and political problems. Now I wish you a good New Year ! [*end of semester*]