

# 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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*Lecture XXIII*, February 2, 1956... The reading [pp. 281-84] is expected but will not be controlled. ...

[284]

The title is "*Religion and Culture*." What we did in the first hours of last semester was to give a definition of religion, and especially of the religious act – which I called "faith" – on the basis of which the relationship of religion and culture could be discussed. The fundamental definition was "Religion is the state of being ultimately concerned." (By the way, this must have interested most of those who took an examination because they chose, in their presentation, the question "What does religion mean? What does faith mean?" as one of their three subjects). This fundamental definition was the main subject of the first lectures, and of many discussions, going on actually through the whole semester, not only in the discussion hour but also in the lecture itself. And since I come to this, let me say that I like you, if you feel like it, to raise your finger to interpret the stream of my speech and to compel me to repeat what I said in other words, in order to make it more understandable, or putting a question which is meant as a criticism of what I said. Both is permitted, even during the lecture hour. Beyond this, my assistant Professor Leibrecht will give special discussion hours in which the content of the previous discussions here are discussed with those who want.

The basic statement about the nature of religion is something which must be presupposed also in all the following lectures because my main thesis is that religion in this sense is present in every human being, because everybody has an ultimate concern, however it is expressed, and that every cultural [activity, theoretical or practical, or aesthetic, is based on a hidden or open ultimate concern, and, in this sense, on a religious attitude, on an element of faith. On this basis we want to proceed in this semester as we did in the first.

[285]

Now on this basis I then fought against mistaken interpretations of the concept of faith as meaning belief in some hardly believable things, or as assuring things for which there is no evidence, in terms of religious authorities. All these definitions of religion and faith were rejected and, instead of that, the fundamental definition was the fundamental criterion: Religion is the state of ultimate concern in every realm of cultural creativity. I expressed that in another way by saying: Religion is the substance of culture, and culture is the form of religion – whereby "substance" means that it gives ultimate meaning, and "form" means that it gives the expression. Therefore we can analyze every cultural reality according to its power to express ultimate concern. Whether it is a political system or a

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scientific method or an artistic creation, or anything else, in every case there is behind it an ultimate concern, a concern about the meaning of our existence as a whole.

Now this is the foundation, and on this basis we proceeded to the different realms of cultural activity. I divided them into two, according to the two semesters: the theoretical and the practical ones – “theory” meaning receiving reality, and “practice” meaning transforming reality. In the first semester, all our interest was directed towards human creative activities, cultural activities, in which man *looks* at reality—theoria means looking at something, envisaging, seeing, contemplating it, i.e., receiving it in its structures and forms. We started with the foundation of *both* cultural activities, [with that which [286] makes man man, namely with the power of language. Our first discussion dealt with religion and language, with the distinction of ordinary language which grasps finite reality, and symbolic language in which ultimate concern expresses itself. We tried to show *why* language makes man man, namely because language moves in universals, and universals liberate from the given situation to which all other beings are subjected. Being in bondage of their given nature means being subject to the concrete situation, and the problem of the concrete situation with which plants as well as animals have to deal all their lives. Man is able, in the power of language, to transcend the given situation, to abstract or universalize (therefore the terms “abstractions” or “universals”) from the given situation, and in this way to overcome the bondage to it. Man’s freedom is a function of his language, and man’s language is a function of his freedom. Therefore you can never teach a *non-human* being language, because you cannot transform him, or it, into something which has the nature of freedom. This was our first consideration.

The second consideration dealt with the first way in which man transcends the given reality, as what is traditionally called homo faber, man who fabricates, man who produces tools and transforms the given reality with the help of tools into another reality, into the reality of the technical realm, the realm which is now the dominant realm of most of our daily life. Then we discussed the relationship of religion to the technical realm, what it does for us and in how far it is dangerous for the question of ultimacy, because it produces means and hides ends. The question of ultimate concern [is the question of the ultimate [287] end, the meaning of our existence.

After this we went into the realm of science, and here my main interest was natural sciences, in history, later on in psychology, to try to show that there is no necessary conflict between scientific method and the symbols of ultimate concern because they lie not on one and the same level or dimension. They lie in *different* dimensions, the one in the dimension of finite relations and the other in the realm of ultimate concern. In connection with these lectures I had a very interesting evening with some representatives of the department of physics and astronomy in Harvard, and we discussed for hours and hours the relation of religion and physics, and one point came out which, according to these colleagues, I had not emphasized sufficiently in my introductory presentation, which was very similar to what I gave in the lectures here, namely the point that *indirectly*, sciences can be the bearers of symbols of ultimate concern. *Indirectly*, but not directly. “Directly” would mean that science can argue for or against the truth of religion. This I consistently denied, and in this I think, as far as I understood the situation, the colleagues of this department agreed [with]. But then they missed one point, namely that indirectly the consideration of the universe, or the interpretation of the microcosm, the subatomic reality, is able to produce religious experiences – and I have no doubt about it, I completely agreed with this. But as a theologian, this was almost self-understood for me, but the problem with which [theology has been plagued for centuries now, was something quite [288]

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different. It was the problem of mutual interference, of interference in terms of religious authorities which denied scientific hypotheses, [such] as the Copernican or Darwinistic, or the depth-psychological, or historical-research about sources of biblical religion. When these interferences happened, all sciences – natural sciences as well as sociology, psychology and history – revolted against religion. The main interest and emphasis of my whole life's work was to show that these conflicts are based on a confusion of dimensions. The dimension in which religious symbols are real is *not* the dimension in which scientific research is done. Religious authorities have no right to forbid any scientific probability, or even vague hypothesis, to be expressed if there are elements of evidence for it. They cannot interfere with it in the name of religion. No historical criticism – this was discussed later – can undercut the dimension of ultimate concern as expressed in the symbols of the Christian tradition. In the same way, no depth psychology can undercut the truth of the symbols of religion, even if psychoanalytical psychology tries to show that symbols such as “God” or “the Christ” are projections. They are projections in their content; they are not projections *in that on which they project* these images, namely the experience of ultimate concern. In this way, and in many other discussions, we came through the different realms of man's creativity, and finally we ended the last semester by discussing problems of the doctrine of man. This was one of the bridges to this semester because man of course is in both realms. We discussed the problem of the relationship of body and soul, and many other problems of this kind which are connected with the special nature of man as man. |

[289]

This prevented us from going over another bridge from the theoretical to the practical, the bridge which we now want to go [over], namely the aesthetic realm, the realm of man's artistic creation. But before saying something about the position of man's artistic creation, I will give you an outline of the whole semester in terms of hours. Unfortunately, there will be one hour missing because of another mystical holiday! – but there will remain 22 or 23 hours. Next Tuesday I will speak on the problem of the relation between artistic and religious symbols. In the third hour I will speak about the four levels of the relationship of art and religion. In the fourth, I will give examples in the visual arts for those four levels, from the slides taken from the Fogg Museum. In the fifth hour I will discuss this whole realm of problems and begin something which could have been done at the beginning of last semester, but which I postponed to the beginning of this one, namely the analysis of our present cultural situation as seen in the light of the analysis of the artistic creation in our 20th century. Then I will continue this in the 6th hour, the analysis of the present situation, but now in the light of the preceding periods of Western civilization. Then a continuation of this analysis of our *present-day* industrial society and the place of religion in it. This will be a third transition, so to speak, from the theoretical to the practical, and another way of orienting ourselves about the present situation in which we discuss the problem of religion and culture. Then I go to the different realms.

As the first one, I take religion and education – the meaning of education, *from* what one is educated and we always forget the problem “*into* what?” Then the problem of religious education, where we again [return to the meaning of symbols. Finally I want to *discuss* with you the problem of religion in the whole of the university, the question which is so much alive at Harvard today, and radiating from Harvard into the whole country – [some laughter] (that sounds very proud!) – the function of the theological faculty within the whole of the university life. (But I can [provide] evidence for my pride, from traveling very much.)

[290]

From the educational we come to the ethical realm. Here we have two main consider-

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ations, a general one which I would call formal ethics: where does the moral ought-to-be come from? Where do the always-changing contents of the ethical demands come from? What does its unconditional, and what does its conditional, character mean? This leads to the very pressing question, which is a very real one for the lives of all of you, namely the question of ethical relativism and how we are able to take a position to this.

Then the next would be the ethics of being and the ethics of ought-to-be: love and law in relationship to man's ethical situation.

Finally a subject matter in which ethics and psychology work together, [and] the question of religion comes in, namely the bearer of ethics, the idea and the ideal of personality – what personality means and what the religious relationship is to it.

After having dealt with personal ethics and formal ethics, we come to social ethics, the many problems of community, of collectivism, of conformism, of revolution against conformism, and especially the relation of the Protestant principle to an increasingly conformist culture. Then the question [which also is so important in a world which has lost [291] older types of authority and is looking for new types, the question of authority generally, the different types of it – here again psychology, theology and ethics work together and often against each other. Then very special problems of social ethics: family relations and sex relations.

After ethics we come to economics, the meaning of economy in, for instance, a term like economic materialism. This leads immediately to the problems of religion and the social gospel, religion and religious socialism; the basic ideas which have developed in many periods of history – their limitations and their meaning.

We then come to the political realm, but first in a more fundamental way, and I repeat the title of a book of mine, only in the opposite order: Justice, Power and Love – the question of the law-school problems in relationship to theology.

Then come the last lectures, religion and the political systems: democracy, totalitarianism, conservatism, feudalism, aristocracy, and many others. Then the great problems – which 20 years ago was almost the only problem in theology – namely religious pacifism, the question of peace, in religion.

Finally, if we are able to do it, I want to conclude the whole problem with the relation of state and church.

This is the outline, and of course I am willing to enlarge or shorten any of these realms. This depends largely on the intensity of your questioning or the interruptions of other newly-invented holidays! [some laughter] [292]

You will receive one or two books [i.e. book titles] for each of these subjects. I wanted to cover, if possible, all realms of study at a university – at least the larger realms; or [sic.] course one cannot go into every specialty.

*Discussion with students:*

*Question:* [On medicine] –

*Answer (Paul Tillich):* Yes, but I discussed it at the end of last semester in the connection of the problem of healing.

*Question:* But it was too short!

*Answer (Paul Tillich):* I accept this criticism wholeheartedly, and I will see what can be done about it. Please keep reminding me of it ... A group of medical students have invited me to discuss with them ... Any other question? Of course these things should be existential, i.e., they should concern your real academic existence.

Let me say a few words in the last two minutes. The artistic realm belongs in one sense to the realm of *receiving* reality. I had many discussions in philosophical groups how

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much cognitive elements are in arts. And I believe there are some; reality is grasped in a dimension which is different, of course, from the other cognitive realms. But that is only the one side of art; there are two more. The one is the expressive power of art. Before being anything else, art is *expression*, expression in a form which is the special artistic form. In former centuries one called that “beautiful.” Today, “beautiful” is identified with a special type of beautifying naturalism, which is a *less* valuable style of all styles of art. Therefore we avoid the term today. |

[293]

Then art has a third function, an anticipatory one, in terms of anticipation, solutions of the problems of existence which in actual existence are not solved. Out of this function the more idealistic forms of art come. Out of the expressive function the more expressive and naturalistic forms of art come, and out of the former, the more naturalistic forms of art come. This gives you an insight into the immense significance of art, the element of grasping reality which is not the cognitive dimension, but which has cognitive elements in it indirectly.

Secondly the expressive function of art, expressing even the most disrupted state of reality, [such] as our present recent art since the beginning of the 20th century does.

Then the third, the anticipatory, function of art, in which imagination – one of the great powers of human freedom – can transcend the given reality. In these three functions we will look at the artistic realm not only in terms of the visual arts, although my main examples will come from it, because that is my hobby, but I will also refer, as far as I am able, to the other arts.