

# Religion and Culture by Paul Tillich

A digital edition of Paul Tillich's Lecture "Religion and Culture"  
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[319]

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Some technical difficulties have arisen and I am afraid we must postpone the slides until Thursday. Instead of interrupting the showing of the pictures by theoretical interpretations, then I will show them one after the other and will give the theoretical introduction now ...

Now I gave you last Tuesday a survey on the meaning of artistic symbols in all the different arts. I want today to relate the artistic to the religious symbols because out of this relation our final organization of the relation of religion and art will come. I said that in all arts, artistic symbols discover a realm of reality which othersise [sic.] is shut, and open up a level of the soul, of our personal existence, which otherwise is covered and not open; and that this cannot be done in any other way than just by artistic symbols. This was the main thesis, and in order to prove that thesis I went with you through many arts, where it was always obvious that only the artistic form is able to open up that which art can open up by its symbols.

What then is the difference between these kind of symbols and the religious symbols? First, their points of identity – I only need to repeat them: symbols are not signs; symbols grow and die; symbols point beyond themselves; symbols open up levels of reality and of the soul; symbols participate in the reality of that to which they point. This is true of artistic symbols, this is true of religious symbols. But the difference is the level. The religious dimension is first of all not beside others. If you call it "level," then we must [say] it is the ultimate level, but we had better call it a dimension and then say it is the dimension of ultimate concern. When [we have artistic symbols, there is always the possibility that we say "This is one concern beside others. We *may* be interested in art; we may not be." And there may be situations in which the artistic realm cannot work upon this at all. We may be deprived of it completely. And there are certainly many social groups which are almost completely deprived of it. Let us think for instance of the extreme moment, the moment of having to die, where ultimate concern shows its ultimacy more than in any other moment. If we see this, then we see that *religious* symbols are present even in these moments, *as religious* symbols. Even in the ultimate moments – or as it has been called, "the extreme situations" – the religious symbol is present, in many extreme situations – [e.g.] the symbol of the Cross – in other religions, and in any case the experience of ultimate concern about the ultimate experience which is made in the situation of death. [320]

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Now this is the one side. This is the difference. The one is total, concerning our whole being, with all its functions, including the artistic function besides others. The other, the artistic, is partial, *one* of the possibilities of human existence [sic.]. Or: the religious function is unconditional, it is not dependent on any external conditions, it can be present whenever there is present life at all, even in extremis.

But now an interesting phenomenon must be observed, namely the phenomenon that since religion, in the sense of ultimate concern, is present everywhere, it can be symbolized by *all* symbols taken from *all* forms of life. And so with respect to arts, the phenomenon of double symbolization appears, and without this we don't understand religious art at all. |

[321]

The phenomenon of double symbolization: – You have the holy legend, the story of [the] Passion, of Jesus as the Christ. It is a ritual legend with, [like] all legend, a strong historical foundation, but with characteristics in which the religious symbols are always present – the symbol of the Christ, of the Son of Man itself, the symbols of death and resurrection, the symbols of representative suffering, etc. This is one realm of symbols. Now in the Passion of Matthew by Bach, you have all this used, but it is used by another sphere of symbols, namely by musical symbols: sounds, rhythms, melodies. So when you go to a concert, in a church, where the Passion of Matthew is performed, then you are in a rather dialectical situation – whether you know it or not, and whether you would call it so or not. On the one hand, you have the central Christian symbols; on the other, you have great music of the Baroque, i.e., a special style of mystical [sic.] symbolization. Two things can happen to you, in this situation. The one thing is that you listen to the performance and are grasped by the power of Bach's music and that you judge whether the performance is good or bad, i.e., adequate to the musical demands or not. This is the aesthetic experience many people have who go to religious music. But when the churches started to ask people to come into the churches, when Bach's Passion or others were performed, then another idea was behind them: they wanted at the same time to mediate the religious power of the *religious* symbols, which appear doubly symbolized in the *musical* symbols. And the question in every visitor is always: do you listen in terms of your ultimate concern and *disregard* the aesthetic form? – or do you listen in terms of an aesthetic judge who perhaps has |to write about the merits of these singers [322a] or of this music? These are two different attitudes which are based on the fact of double symbolization. This expresses itself for instance in the fact that often works of music can be great works of music with a religious subject matter, but they cannot be used for the cult, for ritual activity, because of the predominance of the aesthetic side. And often, for instance in our hymns, there are hymns which are aesthetically poor – and I am sorry to say that probably four-fifths, or nine-tenths, of all [the hymns] in our hymnbooks are so! But nevertheless they can have religious connotations which are strong enough to overcome, if the congregation is singing, the limits of aesthetic perfection. Ideal, of course, is the unity, but this ideal presupposes the having-appeared of the Kingdom of God, or the Heavenly Jerusalem, in which there is no religion nor art as something special, but because God is everything in everything, all functions of man are filled with His presence! On earth, you are in a dialectical situation whenever you encounter religious art; you have these two sides, these two sets of symbols, and you have the phenomenon of double symbolization.

I would say the same about visual arts – and on this basis my showing of pictures will go on – namely there are religious contents, subject matters, taken from the traditional symbols – of Christianity, for instance: we have the scene of Crucifixion, and the way

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to this ultimate moment; we have the scene of Resurrection, which, in the Easter story, already has a double symbolization (a mythological and a poetical). | [322b]

Now however this may be, we must see here also the phenomenon of double symbolization which expresses itself *also* in these tensions. When you come into a Roman church, with many side chapels, you see (at least in one of them, often in several of them) people kneeling and praying before pictures of the Holy Virgin, or some saint, pictures which are, aesthetically speaking, horrors, kitsch, or however you want to call it, which by some quality has become religiously powerful: they point, without artistic form, to the religious symbol and remind, instead of written letter, or stories told, by their pictorial attempt, the people *of* their religious symbols – the Holy Virgin, or the saints, or the Christ in crucifixion or resurrection, or in any other of His life stories.

So here again you have the tension. And it is interesting that the great Renaissance pictures, the Raphaels and Bellinis and Pieros, etc., never became cult pictures, in the real sense of the word: they didn't produce piety because (for reasons to which I will immediately come; I will show some of them) they couldn't go beyond their aesthetic symbolism to the religious symbolism which is their subject matter. But this subject matter was swallowed by the artistic symbolism which belongs to the great artistic symbols, but in the situation of double symbolization, the second, namely the religious, element got lost, while in the other, where we have the poorest horrors of art, the religious symbolization was preserved. Again I would say: the ideal is of course a perfect artistic symbolization which has preserved the religious power in the ritual context. | [323]

Now this gives you a first taste of the many problems connected with the relationship of religion and art. This is the first and fundamental distinction which we must keep in mind – in music, in visual arts, in poetry. Perfect poems rarely will be able to become sung in a congregation, even if they find good melody. Here again you have these dialectics. There *are* some – I would say some of Paul Gerhardt and some of the English, “O God of Ages” [i.e. Rock of Ages? O God, our help in ages past? – Ed.] – what is that? – you know of that – [from audience: “O God our help in ages past”? – Whittier?] – No – I will find him before the end of the class – I will think of him !

There is a complete poetic expression combined with a religious power, but you will not find ten percent in our hymnbooks which have this quality.

Now I come to another consideration which increases the dialectical situation between religion and art.

Art always has three elements: 1) The subject matter, even if it is only different fields of color combined, in completely abstract art – even that is subject matter, although it is not subject matter in any sense of our natural worldview. 2) Secondly, art has that which makes it art, namely the form. The form ist hedecisive [sic.] element, and what is lacking in poor melodies, in poor hymns, or in poor religious pictures, or in poor texts of hymns, is the form: they have no artistic form. Form is always that which makes a thing what it is. We have forgotten this meaning of the word “form” because we have fallen everywhere in[to] what you rightly call “formalism,” namely form without meaning. But form is that which distinguishes the work of art from a failure to produce a work of art. | [324]

3) A third element stands against formalism, namely meaning, which is sometimes called content, but the word content is ambiguous because it often stands for subject matter, so instead I use the word meaning. The meaning is neither the subject matter nor is it the form, but it is something which cannot be expressed in any other way *than* by the artistic symbols: it is that which is opened up by them and that which is present in our soul *if* it is opened up. But this meaning can be read in some way in the form,

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and if we do this we come to what is usually called style.

Style is a very interesting phenomenon. Of course style expresses itself in both, in the choice of subject matter and in the form. It is an overall form, if you want, but it is also an overall term towards [i.e. for?] special subject matter. What is style in this sense? Style is the experience of life as such, expressed as an overall form, or way of expression, in all realms of life. It is first and mostly applied to the realm of arts, but there is not only artistic style, there is also style of thought. Logical positivism is not only a method, it is also a style of thought. And it is present in politics – 19th century balance-of-power politics in Europe was a style of politics expressing an ultimate meaning in life. There are styles of social relations, in the relation of the sexes to each other, for instance, and every period has a different style, in this relationship. Now I speak here about a special realm, the artistic realm, which is dependent on the overall style but which has a most impressive function within the overall style, because of what I called last time the expressive power of a work of art. It is more expressive than any other style. |

[325]

Now here I can tell you a little story of my own inquiries in past years. I had to give lectures – I “had” to give because I *wanted* to give – lectures on the “History of the Philosophy of Religion,” as they were called, with a very clumsy name. Now I was decided not to do this without changing the name. So what did I do? I gave what I call a theonomous history of philosophy, a history of philosophy where the *special* history [i.e. philosophy – ed.] of religion was a very small section in my presentation, but there was a very large section dealing with the religious meaning of epistemology, or of Aristotelian logic, or of the metaphysical concepts or of the ethical ideals. That means: I tried to show – and to find out myself, first – the style of a period in its philosophical self-expression. But in doing so, it happened to me that I learned a little bit at that time about history of art and discovered that the history of art goes in a strict analogy with the history of philosophical thought, and that you can illustrate the one by the other. Now at the end of my showing you pictures, the last group, I will show you archaic gods and goddesses. If I can show them to you, you will see it has explained to me – together with the temples in southern Italy which I saw, from the 6th century before Christ – the whole meaning of the philosophy of Parmenides. *Without* them I wouldn’t have understood Parmenides; *with* them, it was suddenly like a lightning in which I felt able to understand not only the philosophical subject matter but also the expression of that subject matter in artistic form.

Now in this way we have styles in all periods of history, and these styles are present in all |functions of history, and these styles give you an answer to the question, “What about the ultimate concern of this period?” That was of course my task. My task was not a textbook knowledge – which I don’t have, and if I had it I wouldn’t communicate it because I think it is superfluous, and dangerous – but I wanted to give an interpretation of the religious self-understanding of the different periods as expressed in the styles of these periods. And of course my personal realm was philosophy and theology, which also includes philosophy of religion – I didn’t neglect it – but it was not the center of the interest; the center of the interest was the style and what this style does and did express.

[326]

Now this brings me to two fundamentally different styles which we find in all realms of life and which are decisive for the relationship of religion and art. The first and rarest in history is the naturalistic style. I say “the rarest” because in the history of mankind, naturalism in art, and in philosophy, is a rare event. *Non-naturalistic* expression is by far the predominant event in the history of art and in the history of all cultural expressions. But let us stick now to the history of art. If I speak of naturalism, I mean

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not the photographic reproduction of nature – this I would exclude from art, although modern photographers have ways of bringing artistic elements in the way in which they organize the photographic situation; but that’s an applied art. The genuine art is never naturalistic in the sense of photographic. Nevertheless there is naturalistic art. This naturalistic art uses the immediately encountered world in a non-disrupted way in order to use it for artistic symbols. I would count under this form of naturalistic art not only what we usually call naturalistic in the narrower sense, but I would call also everything, every idealistic art, which is based on the anticipatory function of which I spoke, where nature is idealized, but it remains nature. This is unfortunately the predominant way in which parochial newspapers still believe that Christianity should be presented to the poor people. [327]

Then I would also call impressionism naturalistic art, but it is naturalism of a special kind, of the third type, namely in contrast to the ordinary naturalism which is objective, the impressionistic naturalism is subjective. Zola, when he fought for the French impressionists, has said: a work of art is nature seen through a temperament. This means: through the subjectivity of the artist’s seeing and receiving. This certainly is an excellent description of impressionism and shows that here objective and subjective nature, man’s optical and psychological structure, work together to produce these pictures which, when they first occurred – and idealistic naturalism was still most powerful – were attacked and thrown out of the exhibitions. Today they are classics, even for the most conservative critics of art. But all of them belong to naturalism in the larger sense of the word.

The opposite is *non-naturalistic*. Most of primitive art is non-naturalistic. Here the semantic problem has induced me to use that negative term “non-naturalistic.” I would call it expressionistic, but unfortunately that word has been used by the German expressionists in the first decades of the 20th century. So it must be liberated from this extreme limited use. And if you sometimes hear, instead of using the clumsy word “non-naturalistic” the quick word “expressionistic,” I mean it in the sense of non-naturalistic generally, and include all non-naturalistic art from the very primitive to the present-day abstract, under this term. But let us perhaps not complicate the matter and simply call it non-naturalistic. We have that in primitive art, we have it in the whole Byzantine period, we have it in the archaic Greek period, we have it in the Romanesque and largely still in the Gothic period. And we have a reaction of it against the natural and idealistic forms of the Renaissance in Baroque art. Then we have it again, after an increasing victory of naturalism, according to the technical-scientific world in which we live, the new and very powerful reaction against naturalism, from a non-naturalistic art in the 20th century, since 1900 almost exactly. [328]

Now this induces me also to give to all this quite another name, namely existentialistic art. The reason for this, I will show you later on.

All this shows that we have two different ways. Now what does expressionistic or non-naturalistic art do? In order to produce artistic symbols, it disrupts the naturalistic worldview. All primitive figures – take African masks, or figures, of men and women, or of animals – do not show the natural forms of things, but they show the forms of things in which the power of life, of vitality, which characterizes these primitive people, are expressed. And so you can go through. In early Greek art, we have not goddesses which are beautiful women, but who are really goddesses through which holiness shines in their ground, to which you go and which you do not observe as an object in time and space. Or in the Byzantine art, where the spiritual always shines through everything physical, as in the mosaics. Or the Romanesque art.

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Now this shows that we have to make a distinction of types of art from the point of view of religion and art, according to the two principles: the one is non-naturalistic against naturalistic; |and the other is a religious subject matter and a non-religious subject matter. This leads us to the four different levels, and I will show pictures Thursday which are ordered according to these four levels: [329]

1) First a naturalistic style with a non-religious subject matter – there I start. But nevertheless, since religion is *ultimate* concern, and the religious *object* is the *ground* of everything that is, even in this way *indirectly*, religion shines through, although completely indirectly and hidden.

2) The second group is the non-naturalistic style: the expressionistic or existentialist style in which nature is transformed, but in which there is no religious subject matter: it is still faces, trees, landscapes, animals, buildings, etc., which are represented.

3) The third level: religious subject matter – Christs and Virgins and stories of the holy legend and myths; and on the other hand a naturalistic style. This is the Renaissance; this is the late period in the ancient world; this is the 19th century naturalism.

4) Finally I will show you examples of a fourth level, in which we have non-naturalistic style and at the same time religious subject matter. These are the pictures which ideally should be used for cultic, for ritual, activities. *Only* on this fourth level are ritual activities possible.

Now this is the menu to which I invite you for next Thursday. And I repeat the four levels once more, and I will go in this sequence:

- 1) Naturalistic style and non-religious (or, if you want, secular) content.
- 2) Religious (or expressionistic) style and non-religious (secular) content.
- 3) Non-religious (secular, naturalistic) style and the religious content, subject matter.
- 4) The expressionistic or non-naturalistic style together with the religious content. | [330]

I will ask you to compare this ... with music, drama, novel, or wherever you are especially interested in, and find analogies to it, and after I have shown you the pictures and interpreted a little about them, we must have a general discussion, a week from today, in which *you* add something, because nobody can be at home, or [sic.] even at least at home in terms of a hobby, in *all* realms of the arts, and I believe some of you here are much better than I am in some other realms of art.