

Religion and Culture by Paul Tillich

A digital edition of Paul Tillich's Lecture "Religion and Culture"
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Lecture XXVIII, Feb. 21, 1956

You remember that in the last hour I spoke to you about the nature of still life, about the nature of still life, the nature of pictures in which the organic elements are taken away, are not shown, and the inorganic elements out of which reality is constructed are visible. This is the foundation for the understanding of much of modern art, of that which is called abstract art.

1) *Man with a Guitar*, Braque – Here what you see is not the dissolution – yes, the dissolution of the surface reality of the human body into fundamental mathematical and physical structures. If you ask why is this a man with a guitar, I cannot give an answer, but it shouldn't be the problem; the problem should be that in such pictures, which have appeared in large numbers especially by Picasso and Braque and many of their followers, that in such pictures new forms of reality are discovered below the surface of reality, and this discovery is the decisive thing. The way in which it is composed doesn't indicate very much of the naturalistic basis out of which it has been abstracted, and it shall not – you shouldn't ask this question. If you ask it, then the meaning of the whole thing is lost. But if you don't ask it, then you see that here is something which you don't find in any other art, [it] comes so to speak out of the underground of reality into the surface. And then something happens which I showed you in connection with the still lives, that these non-organic forms of reality are filled with a kind of mystical or metaphysical or cosmic power, and that is most visible in them if you look at them and let the power of their symbolic character have effect on you. |

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2) Kandinsky: *Composition* – I can tell you of myself that long ago, in Western Germany where Kandinsky often was, I was sitting in a house which has an original by Kandinsky, and first I had a feeling, "Now what can I do with this?" (– this should be in colors, by the way –) but slowly something happened to me when I was sitting there, again and again, and looking at it, the same which I said before, namely that out of the possibilities of nature, human mind discovers elements which as such do not appear, but which give you a new feeling for cosmic reality, for the reality of the universe in terms of lines and colors.

3) *Breakfast* – Leger – Leger has a very interesting character and has become more and more known and important in modern art. What he actually has done is that he takes the cubes and other instruments of modern industrial machine production and uses them as the fundamental elements in order to indicate not only inorganic nature but

also human beings and other organic nature. In this way a kind of uncanny feeling of man constructed out of elements of the machine comes into the picture, and I will come back to this when, from Thursday on, I will use this modern art to introduce you to my analysis of our genuine situation with respect to religion and culture, without dealing then with a very special subject, just because art, on the basis of its expressive power, can show us more, perhaps, than external, sociological or historical description are able to do.

4) Picasso, *Guernica* – Here we come to a picture which from the beginning was extremely controversial and which has now become almost a classic. It is Picasso's *Guernica*, this little village in northern Spain which was bombed by the Fascist countries before the beginning of the Second World War, as an exercise for their military airplanes! The horrors were incredible, the whole little town was destroyed, and the expression of this horror is given in the disruptedness [sic.] of all the elements of the reality which are shown here—inorganic elements, human forces in horror, animals, etc. In one of my utterances, or sometimes in lectures, I have said this is the most Protestant picture – which does not mean that exhausts Protestantism—but when I said that, I meant that the Protestant attitude, which *always* sees the disruptedness [sic.] and estrangement of reality, is most powerfully expressed in this, and that if there *will* be, from now on, *positive* Protestant expressions, they should not [be] beautiful reality any more but should show where they—and I will show you that later on, for instance, in Christ pictures, that the disruptedness [sic.] *is reality*, but is overcome in itself not by a beautifying naturalism, but by an understanding of the depth of the problems. And in this sense this picture has a very profound meaning for the understanding of man's situation in the world – it is in the Museum of Modern Art in New York and is acknowledged now as one of the most important expressions of our world in the modern period. [347]

5) Rouault, *Circus Trio* – You remember what I said in the very beginning last hour, when we came to the first harlequins in the French opera by Watteau, that the unity of joy and tragedy was expressed in them, and that the preference of modern art for Pierrots, harlequins and figures like this, is in itself an expression of the tragic feeling especially in those figures which are supposed to express the *joie de vivre*, the joy of living. | [348]

6) Chirico: *Melancholy and Mystery of a Street* – This is surrealism. Surrealism has the character that the elements of it are almost photographic, as for instance this building, but that the composition of these elements is an expression of the unconscious elements in ourselves which are in us and in which we receive the world. A way quite different from our conscious encounter. And these unconscious elements show an abyss below the world of conscious encounter, which is revealed in this kind of surrealistic pictures.

7) Tanguy: *Heredity of Acquired Characteristics* – Here you have the same thing, but perhaps something else added to it. If you ask me, I cannot answer, and I will not answer, but I will answer with something else, what this picture means for me: it means possibilities of things in time and space which do not appear there, but are results of the continuing creativity of man. We will come back to [sic.] this in one of our great sculptures, in one of the next pictures.

8) Chirico, *The Consoler* – Now here the problem, why I used this, was the disappearance of the human face. There we have a great problem in modern art. I spoke very intensively about the question of portrait, the last time. And I said that the portrait expresses the incomparable uniqueness of the individual person in the eternal dimension. Now here this face is gone, and the difficulty of *allexpressionistic* art is that the portrait is supposed to be similar – i.e., naturalism – and that at the same time, as a work of

art, it is supposed to express, whereby the naturalistic surface is disrupted or, as here, completely disappears. These of you who have read a little about it know that there is a controversy – some Catholic authorities take the point that the human face is divinely [349] given and therefore should not be a matter of expressionistic art at all but should always be preserved in terms of its natural form which is given by God. Now I would say: this is not a real argument, because it is given by God but it *expresses* something – that is its greatness, not its always-similar natural forms. And this expression can be intensive to such a degree that the similarity with the individual almost disappears. But I leave this open as a problem to your thinking about it. 9) Henry Moore: *Family Group* – He has done with the human body what I showed you in the picture before: he has taken away for sculptural expression all the naturalistic elements which characterize the surface of the human body, as we see it, and has so to speak banished the bodily existence of man for the sake of structure in which the empty spaces (e.g. Moore's *Reclining Figure*) produce a special feeling of disruptedness [sic.] on the one side, but of fundamental structures of being on the other side. And the fact that Henry Moore is considered, even in conservative England, as one of the greatest, or practically the greatest, sculptor of today shows that people feel that simply a copy of the human body in terms of scriptural means, is not the answer to the questions of our time – we must penetrate in[to] deeper structure elements.

III: *Naturalistic Style & Religious Subject Matter:*

10) Giotto, *Saint Francis and the Birds* – This is certainly not yet naturalistic style. Here I want to say something about transitions. Sometimes the transitory moments in history are the most important ones. Here the expressionistic power of being is seen in everything, [for instance in this great tree, which is the Platonic “treehood” again, [350] but here in a much more abstract way than we had it in the Dutch paintings. Here is the movement of St. Francis preaching to the fish, and the whole scene is full of the power of subjective piety. But the interesting thing which I now want to show you is the development from here to something which we come to in the end of this third level.

11) Piero della Francesca: *Resurrection* – Here you see how the approximation to nature has made a progress. This Christ is still speaking out of another world to us, but He is also in time and space as a definite separated body. I must hurry to the next, I'm sorry.

12) Masaccio, *Tribute Money* – Masaccio's pictures show the development of the human figure. Here the human figure becomes grandiose, powerful. Man as microcosmos, as the center and mirror of the universe, is discovered. The figures, not only that of the Christ, represent this central character of humanity in this period of the Renaissance.

13) Bellini, *Madonna and Child* – Here I would say it shows how, in the finite, without necessary distortion, without disruption of the surface, the infinite is present. And this is the principle of the Renaissance, the immanence of the infinite in the finite. In this sense the religious background is still visible here, but it is brought completely into a human relationship between Mother and Child, and into subjective piety as expressed in the eyes of the mother.

14) Raphael, *Madonna Colonna* – Here you have the fulfilment of this development. Here you don't [feel very much any more of the divinity of the Madonna, but [351] you have a picture of Mother and Child, and almost nothing else than this. The prayer book which she has in her hand is a little bit removed from her eyes, and lovingly she looks at the nice Baby, but the babies in the Byzantine period were already, as babies, if you look at their faces, Pantokrator, world-governing powers, even as ba-

bies. Of this, nothing is seen here any more.

15) Reni, *Magdalen* – Now you come into the realm of sentimentality, which is the object of my fight, and I want to call upon all of you to follow me in this fight against the sentimental religious art. Out of the feeling of the terrible distortion of religion, in terms of sentimentality, much of my interest in religion and the visual arts has really arisen. And this polemic still has to go on in many places of this country, although there is a break already, and I hope that in more and more of the parish papers, Sunday papers, etc., such things like this will disappear very soon. But that is a matter of a crusade, to which I call you!

16) Fritz von Uhde, *The Christ with the Peasants* – German painter, end of the 19th century. Now from the point of view of naturalistic, half-impressionistic painting, this is not a bad picture. But from the point of view of a village school teacher coming to a poor surroundings and having a meal together with them, it is a terrible expression of the deterioration of the meaning of the Christ in the period in which He was either a social reformer or a teacher of morals, or something like that, and the real metaphysical power of *Christ* was completely gone!

17) Manet, *Ecce Homo* – Here I will speak about a very interesting phenomenon. Manet is [certainly the greatest painter of the 19th century. He is greater than his Impressionistic period, in which he was the leader. But in this picture it is obvious that he is not able to manage it. It is a Christ of which you would say there is equally nothing of the divine left. Now this means – and now I say something which may horrify you a little bit, I hope – namely that from 1650 to 1900, there was a great gap in religious art, and that in these 250 years, even by one of the greatest artists like Manet, nothing of religious power could have been produced. This is the reason why I bring you this picture. If you see, instead of that, a racetrack, or his other pictures, then we are in a quite different situation.] [352]

QN: When you say “religious power,” do you mean just from the standpoint of religious symbol?

PT: No – he accepts the symbol of the Christ. But I mean the style – it is not so, that there is really religious power any more. It is a sad, almost sentimental look, in the eyes of the Christ.

QN: Would you say that in those pictures that did not use religious subjects, there was any religious power?

PT: Yes, very much so. Yes. Thank you for asking.===

IV – I come to the fourth period, which in some ways is most important. Most of the history of art is expressionistic and therefore able to produce sculptures and pictures which are expressive for the divine and can be used for religious symbols. We are now in the fourth level which combines expressionistic style with religious subject matter, and that is the style which is able [to be used] for the cult. This is an archaic Greek god, *Apollo*. Here you see how he [looks. You cannot go around him. He is not a figure which stands in time and space. In the Greek temple, you had to go *at* him, in a long way, and he was half in the dark and looked at you. He didn’t go out to you, but he remained in his divine majesty, often in terms of what one calls the archaic smile, which is not laughing, in any way, and not “keep smiling,” but which is the inner fulfilment and perfection of the divine in itself in relationship to the world.] [353]

19) *Archaic Famela Figure ...* – Here a goddess, in the same way, the same kind of being-itself, representing being-itself, so to speak, as a divine figure, looking at you and asking you to come before her, but not going around her, as if she were the figure in time

and space.

20) *Greek Sculpture* ...

21) *Mosaic, Constantinople* – Now we come to that art which I would like to call the most expressive religious art in Western culture: the Byzantine. Here are the elements of Greek and Roman naturalistic possibilities, but they have been made transparent. It is again a kind of transitory style, if you want, although it covers the whole Byzantine period, which means from about 400 or even earlier after Christ, till 900. This is a Christ Pantokrator [sic.], which always means the Christ as the Ruler of the world, the Christ as a cosmic figure. The decisive thing – which would come out much better if it were in color – is the transparency of the color, the translucency of the Spiritual through the material, of the infinite through the finite.

22) *Byzantine School* ... – This shows you in the same way the transparency of the natural, the fact that it has become translucent for the divine, and the Spiritual (capital “S”) translucent [through it]. Here you can also see what I said before: this Baby is [354] already the same world-ruler as in the picture before is, the Christ on His throne. This is the interpretation of the Eastern church, of the divine Presence in the human, the infinite in the finite, so that the finite is almost swallowed. For those who know history of Christian thought, [you] will remember that this was the monophysitic [sic.] trend, the trend to eliminate the human nature for the sake of the divine nature. But just this transparency made these pictures so religiously great and powerful.

23) *Byzantine, 15th century – Resurrection* – I don’t need to say anything. Here you have the same situation – nothing naturalistic in time and space. I will say one more – the two-dimensional character of the religious picture is a very important element in it, because the 3-dimensional character, which was really invented in the Renaissance, and of course before that sometime in the ancient period, puts the divine into time and space. *This* takes it into a dimension which is in itself beyond the actuality in time and space; what I called “going-around,” even in an illusionistic naturalistic way, doesn’t exist here – there is no illusion of a depth of space. It is simply totality of symbols, which appear here [in this picture].

24) *Italian* – We are now [in] the Romanesque era, where we have such, and many less beautiful, Crucifixions. I remind you of the cover of the Life [Magazine] issue for Christmas, where the Christ pictures were given. There we have a similar Romanesque picture, but more distorted, even, than this, and less naturalistic. But this is the Romanesque period. | [355]

25) *French, 15th Century* ... – This is one of the most famous ones in the Middle Ages. And if it came today to many board-of-directors or trustees of churches, they would say this is blasphemous, the Son of God cannot appear in such an ugly position. Now the people of that time didn’t mind it because they felt that this is the depth of suffering which is expressed not in a beautified man hanging assumedly on the cross, but feeling very well [some laughter], but it is already the reality of destruction, of the region of the divine in the human, which we have here. And such pictures have more religious power than all of the later pictures I showed you in the third level together.

26) Brueghel, *Adoration* – Now the divine unites with the demonic.

27) We will go immediately to the next which is also a Breughel [sic.], *Triumph of Death* – Now this picture is the world of the demonic ruling the earth. Here you have the depth dimension towards “below” and not towards “up” but towards “down.” If you look at it, you have here not [a] realistic or beautiful picture; it is the triumph of death, which it really means, is expressed in everything, and everything in such a way that the

demonic background of the feeling of the later Renaissance is tremendously expressed in such a picture, and you can say it is the predecessor of surrealism. The special things are also very photographic sometimes, but the composition of the parts into the whole is something of a demonic imagination as it has hardly reached in any painting of the 20th century. |

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28) *Hieronymus Bosch, Temptation* – I can simply repeat the same thing about the demonic character of the world. It is astonishing that these figures have been invented at that time and have been brought to the surface. In former pictures they were kept in the Hell, as Hell demons. Now they rule the surface, which means the unconscious has come into the open, in these pictures – ... the coming of the unconscious anxiety elements. This period became increasingly a period of tremendous anxiety, anxiety both of death and of guilt – that's combined – and [in the] hope to overcome it, the Reformation came, to a great extent.

29) *El Greco, Coronation of the Virgin* – This is post-Renaissance, while the others were mostly pre-Renaissance. What has happened here? The religious spirit broke into the later Renaissance and produced what we call Mannerism [this] and Baroque – the attempt to give the mood of the natural forms again in religious ecstasy, just as the Spanish mystics tried to do it in steps going up, while Medieval mysticism, so to speak, was something lying above us, which comes down to us. Now the tremendous bodily, even, and vital naturalistic ecstasy is needed in order to reach the religious expression.

30) *Rembrandt, three crosses* – Here we come to the end of that period after which the great gap started, as I told you – this is also one of the greatest religious pictures, I would say, because it expresses, with the *means* of Rembrandt (light and lines), the reality of the human situation, in all these figures, but nevertheless in the triangular lines going up, at the same time the triumph. But not a visible triumph, so to speak, but a triumph in terms of an indication of a “beyond the situation,” |– not a visible triumph as such.

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31) *Rembrandt, Descent from the Cross* – Now here I only ask you to look at it, to compare it with this beautifying naturalism which we have seen, and the infinite superiority, religiously speaking, of such a picture.

32) *Grünwald* – I go a little bit back now to the picture which many people, including myself, consider to be the greatest picture ever painted in Germany. It was in the beginning of the Reformation period, beginning of the 16th century, earlier than Rembrandt. And you keep this picture of the Cross in your mind because I show you at the end a modern picture which is very similar. Now here, in the extreme ugliness of it, I also would ask, would your congregations, most of them, accept this picture in the church? Or would you say this is blasphemy of the Son of God, this His body is really as it is described in Isaiah 53, full of green spots, expressions the decay of the body, and the swelling of the feet and of the other things. That is expressionism, if you want, but expressionism in terms of something which is at the same time concrete. It is again a transitory moment here, and therefore one of the greatest. He and Giotto and Rembrandt are the great transitories [sic.] in whom the spirit of what I called expressionism is united with understanding of the natural forms in a way which cannot artificially be produced and certainly not imitated.

33) *Grünwald, Resurrection* – It is on the same [Isenheim] altarpiece – and I want to say this is almost the *only* picture of resurrection which I personally can accept because it doesn't make the resurrection into a physical event of special events of a special body, but it puts the body [into the sun, which means it is a completely transcendent event,

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and not an event of a physical transformation of atoms. And according to this, perhaps we might be able again to paint the resurrection, but not in terms of those where Jesus then walks around as if nothing had happened, and there He is again, He had disappeared for a few days, which is entirely against the Christian and the religious meaning of the resurrection.

34) *Rouault, Crucifixion* – Now here you have the modern attempts – I come to them now – to show in modern forms, in the forms which have been created by the modern development, not only the secular contents, but also religious symbols coming from the tradition. I feel not able to judge, myself, about the success with full conviction. And that is [what] your generation will have to do more than we are able to do it. In any case, as an attempt to overcome that against which we have to fight, the beautifying naturalism combined with sentimentality, this is a tremendous progress.

35) *Rouault, Head of Christ* – This is also in the Life Magazine issue of Christmas. We chose it because it is a Rouault, which is most radical, while sometimes his stained-window method makes him less radical. This is not colored, but this is something in which he concentrates his vision of the metaphysical element of the suffering Christ, in the head of the Christ. And I just wrote to somebody that I would believe that such a picture could appear as a mural in a modern church, and that would be the first step, perhaps, toward a renewal of religious art which is possible for cultic activities. | [359]

36) *Nolde, The Last Supper* – Nolde is a German expressionist who tried to bring, with his means of painting (which were expressionistic) the ecstatic character of all the religious events. You must not think that he meant that this was a photograph of the *scene* of the Last Supper, but you must imagine *what spiritually happened* in this event. He tried to express in the different ecstatic and *demonic* forms of this tremendous scene. And I think he came very near to it. But again, I don't know how far he solved the problem for our situation. But this is the *direction* in which it has to lie. I must confess [to] you, when I first saw this picture in Dresden in the twenties, then I was tremendously expressed by it. Then came a period in which I became very skeptical. *Today*, when I see it, I have the feeling it keeps up, it is more than I thought it to be when I first saw it than in my later more critical period about it. But these are partly subjective developments, and they may be different in all of you.

37) *Picasso, Crucifixion* – Here he tries the same thing he tried in the Guernica picture. I would say this attempt can go as religious art, but certainly it cannot go as ritual art. I don't believe that it is possible to introduce this even as a moral, into the church, but perhaps you are more advanced than I am in my judgment about possibilities and think, perhaps, in 20 years, it could be used, and might be used, for that purpose. In any case, you see here the denaturalization of the scene, also the disrupted elements, but no triumphant indication at all. | [360]

38) *Sutherland, Crucifixion* – This is the last picture, by an American painter. You see the similarity to the Grünewald in many respects. It is with modern means an attempt to produce the same powerful impression which we have in this Grünewald picture. I only want to tell you at the end of this section, that this is not a matter of mere subjectivity, but that in this development of problems and of pictures which I have given you, the reality of our own life, namely the reality of our historical existence today, is expressed in example and counter-example. And for this reason I was glad that I could give you this very much concrete illustration for the abstract concepts I gave you in this whole lecture. Now Thursday we will then start with an analysis of a kind which *can* produce styles like that on the second level, and like this [Sutherland] on the fourth level.