

Religion and Culture by Paul Tillich

A digital edition of Paul Tillich's Lecture "Religion and Culture"
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Transcribed by JJ Warren and Michaela Durst

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[361]

Lecture XXIX, Feb. 23, 1956

QN [Paul A. Lee, Jr.]: Valéry, when asked if he could give a definition of beauty, answered easily, "It is that which makes us despair." Please comment on this in reference to your formulation regarding the revelation character of art.

PT: Now I want to refer to another great poet, Rilke, who in the *Duino Elegies* says: every angel is terrible, and the beautiful is just the beginning of the horrible which we still can stand. – In both of these statements there is a feeling for the unity of the beautiful-creative and the horrible-destructive. To this I could simply refer to the fact of the ambiguity of life in which the creative always implies the destructive, and the destructive is the first in the process which leads to the creative. But this is a general statement which refers to all life. With respect to art, I could refer to what I said about the anticipatory character of art, out of which the idealistic forms of art come which are usually covered by the term beauty. You remember that I tried to avoid this term because of its many ugly connotations. In any case, beauty is an element of the artistic, and this element of the artistic produces – if we look at it and feel the difference of our being to it – the estrangement from what we ought to be and could be, to what we are, produces the feeling of despair. So I have answered, I think, this question as far as I can. Since I don't know the context in which Valéry says this, I cannot answer the question fully, but the phrase of Rilke, where I know the context, in his doctrine of angels, I can tell you for sure that he points to the hidden demonic backward of the angelic form ... | [362]

We have lost one or two hours already by the manifoldness of our discussion of religion and art, and especially by the showing of the pictures. But what I hope is that the gain was greater than the loss, because these pictures, which I hope you all remember, at least vaguely – or some of them, not only vaguely – have a great power of keeping us for the analysis of the present situation into which we have to go now. This analysis could have been given, as I said, already at the beginning of this whole course, but then it would have been a little bit abstract. Now since it is given between the two main parts – or better, in the connection with the transitory part, namely the theoretical and the practical side of culture – it is more filled with content for your mind, and especially since you have seen, in the visual arts, an expression of our time and the whole reality in which we are living.

One of the functions of art – and perhaps you remember that I said the main function of art is its revelation character and it reveals in unity two things: the human situation

as such, or generally; and the special situation in which this general situation becomes concrete. This statement has more implications than it seems to have. These sociologists, anthropologists and Marxists who analyze a concrete situation only from the point of view of its *historical* reality would not accept my statement. They would say: what we can know of man is always limited to a concrete situation, let us say to the 20th century, and here again to a special period in this century and to a special place where this period takes place. If you follow this method, then you come to the point that you cannot say anything universally about man. And that is [indeed what they want; they want to concentrate exclusively on special groups in a special situation, and leave out and deny the possibility of the question, “How could that come out of the nature of man?” I *ask* this question, and am not afraid – against all these groups, which I have met and with whom I have discussed these problems – to say there are underlying structures which make the changes possible. If there is no point of identity which makes [change?] possible, no change *either* does exist. Now this answer of course must be concretely carried through. I remember in my discussion with Marxists that there always was the point that they said: if you say anything about man, this is reactionary because that means that man cannot be changed, that presentday [sic.] society must be maintained, etc. Now there is much truth in this. Many people use [the concept] “an eternal nature of man” – especially Lutherantheologians – namely the distorted nature of man, which makes any political change impossible. Against this, certainly the Marxist criticism is justified. But when they say: to say something *more* than this about man, you must wait to the day after the perfect revolution – then this is a statement which is not only absurd but which is also self-contradictory because how do you know, about the nature of man, that, after the *revolution*, the true nature of man will come out? So I am not afraid of this. Now this belongs to an earlier period of my development; the presentday [sic.] discussion would be more with anthropologists and sociologists who in this respect are completely in the same boat with the Marxists, namely to say that man has no nature but has only different social structures, they all are different in different societies, and that is what we have to deal with. There is no basic anxiety, there is no basic courage, there is no basic freedom, there is [no basic destiny, there is no structure of mind, there is structure of body, all this changes – and it is meaningless to speak about man at all. [363]

Unfortunately they fall into the same self-contradiction by calling their disciplines “anthropology” or “sociology,” presupposing a concept of man – anthropos means man, and sociology is the science of society. So they have concepts of what man is, because they don’t speak about animals; they must have some point of difference between man and animals which makes it possible that they deal with these funny beings called “men” for which they don’t want to have any characteristics, but actually of course they have; and this is a methodological trick.

The same is true of sociologists: the possibility of a society as they conceive it, in which there are different opinions, in which there are fights about power, and things like that, presuppose a special nature of man’s society and man generally. So don’t be afraid of the relativists. However: wherever and [however] they speak “down” to you, you only need always to find out their self-contradiction, and then you can go ahead. Whether they accept that they are in a self-contradiction or not doesn’t matter – they are neurotic defense mechanisms, sometimes – but it is necessary that you make them as clear as possible, and that after you have done it, you simply go ahead and ask the philosophical question, “What does it mean if use the term ‘anthropology’ instead of ‘zoology?’” And if you ask that question, then they *must* give an answer, and the same

is true for sociology in contrast to the analysis of plantations of plants and their living together, which *also* is a reality. | Alright. After this has been said, I think I can say: in dealing with our presentday [sic.] society, I also deal with that being which *has* created the present day society by freedom and destiny together, that being which must have characteristics which make such a society possible, so that our consideration is always dual – and here a real difficulty arises, namely how much belongs to the structure of man as man, and how much belongs to the structure of the Middle Westerner in the year 1956? To distinguish these two elements, the one most universal and the one most concrete, *is* a continuous work of intellectual analysis. But this need [?] doesn't take away the one or the other side. [365]

When we gave the analysis of visual arts, I spoke about the concept of style, and I called "style" an overall form in which a period expresses its ultimate concern. The term style was applied also to thinking, to politics, to science, philosophy, etc. But there is a difference between the arts and all the other functions of man's spiritual life: they all are directed to their subject matter while art has, by its very nature, the function of expression. Of course a scientific method *also* expresses something about man and about a special period of man, but this is not its purpose. If a picture or a poem expresses something, then this is their purpose. Therefore art is always more revealing than all the other functions of the human mind for a special style, and the style is revealing for the ultimate concern of a special period. The question there is: which is the overall style which comes out in the art of our period, and which, in this, as such a style, expresses the actual situation of our period, and at the same time potentialities of human nature generally? |If we ask this question, we come certainly to the distinction between the naturalistic and the expressionistic styles. You remember that I took them to be overall styles, through the whole history of art, and that both of them express a special relationship to reality. Here we have something which both characterizes a special period and man's situation universally. Actually the situation is such that we can say: artistic style is expressionistic style because expression is the meaning of art. But in some small moments of history, the naturalistic trend became dominant. This was so since the classical period in Greece, the 5th century, up to the first century before Christ when a new archaism started, a return to the pre-naturalistic style, into which, then, Christianity could easily enter. And the second period in Western civilization started with the early Renaissance and went through with a strong interruption in the period of Reformation and Counter-Reformation, up to the end of the 19th century. [366]

Now these are two periods in Western history as far as we know it, in which naturalistic tendencies prevail over against expressionistic tendencies. Let me repeat what I tried to show in connection with the pictures, that even in naturalistic style it is not the negation of the ultimate *as such*, which is meant, but as the philosophy of the early Renaissance clearly shows, it is the desire to find the ultimate, the infinite, in nature, society and man. And the philosophers and artists in early Florence of the Renaissance worked intimately together. The philosophers tried to express rationally, or better, conceptually, what the artists did visually, and vice versa. |In all these men there was not the tendency to deny what is always present in expressionistic styles, namely the ultimate breaking into the surface of reality. But they believed that the surface of reality in its anticipatory form – as beauty, as perfection – is able to take into itself the ultimate itself. [367]

Now I leave, for a certain time, the artistic realm and come to the sociological reality which is expressed *in* the artistic creativity. The naturalism that starts with the early Renaissance is an expression of the general attitude of industrial society. The naturalism

of modern art, starting with the Renaissance and interrupted only briefly in the Baroque period, is an expression of the ultimate self-interpretation of industrial society in the Western world.

From here I want to characterize now this Western world in which we are living. First in a very general way, and then going down to many concrete elements which confirm this general statement. Now the general statement is: *man controlling nature and society, in the power of the logos*.

I avoid the word “reason,” which I could use, if that deterioration [sic.] of the word had not occurred, so that if I say “reason” today, you immediately think of the calculating businessman or the analytic philosopher. But I don’t mean either of them – although they belong to it of course, and I will show this as clearly as I can – but I mean also critical reason of the revolutionary bourgeoisie of the 18th century, and I mean constructive reason in the romantic period of victorious bourgeoisie, etc. So reason is a much larger concept than it is usually used, and therefore I speak here of logos: man controlling nature and society in the power of the logos.

This started around 1450 and went on till at least 1850 or 1900. Such periodizations [must be vague, because the next period is always conceived and developed, and finally born, in the lap of the preceding period, so that here is a tremendous amount of overlapping. If you make such divisions mechanical, they are absurd and nonsense. If you make them and understand them as a historian should, even if he uses the usual terms “Renaissance,” “Baroque,” “18th century,” or whatever, they all have the same character that never completely fit, they can never cover the whole reality of a period, but they are symbols representing the [way] in which we, the historians (or we who remember [?]), encounter a period. [368]

Now the same is true of the periodization of which I am speaking here. From the Renaissance to the end of the 19th century, we have a period which is completely determined, in all its special characteristics, by man controlling nature and society in the power of the logos. In order to make this clearer, let us compare it for a moment with other periods.

The immediately preceding periods, from 900 to about 1500, we can call the Middle Age. These Middle Ages have an entirely different principle. They have the principle of nature and society shaped on the basis of the sacramental presence of the ultimate, in the Church and its sacramental activities. This was changed slowly but broke through in the Renaissance – the opposite to it.

We can compare it also with another period, which we can call the Byzantine period. I showed you pictures of this great period in which religious art, perhaps, flourishes more than in any other of the Western periods, namely the translucency of the spiritual to the material – in philosophy, in life, in everything. Or we can compare it with the period in which Neoplatonism and Christianity fought [with each other, from 100 before to 400 after Christ, the so-called religious period of the ancient world in which the only question was the salvation of the individual soul out of a demonically controlled world. Or we can compare it with the still earlier period, from 600 to 100, especially with relation to Greece, where the question was to find the immovable in the changes of the movable. Now I would like to go into this, and I have an appointment with the History Department to speak about this in one of the next weeks. In any case, this is based on one belief I have, that philosophical and artistic expressions of the period are not arbitrary, and are not dependent on individual creativity alone, but that they are produced by an emergency, i.e. a real problem, a problem which is not an artificial logical problem only – the logic [369]

expresses it too – but which is a problem going down to the existence of human beings in a special period. When I still was more daring than I am today, I used to say: perhaps the period which starts around 1900, *our* period, might be called, in a few hundred years, the period in which the central emergency was our historical existence. Sometimes I still believe I was right. But since no one can say what the underlying problem of one's own period is, this is more an anticipation and a guess than a statement which I could make with the same conviction in which I can make (and prove, in all special things) the other statements about the other periods.

Now if I say our period is the period of man controlling nature and society in the power of reason, or the *logos*, then I can immediately make a short intermission in the process of my thought, namely that this period is not unbroken, and the pictures I gave you have shown this quality I hope very closely. In the late Renaissance, a reaction against the naturalistic self-interpretation [of man occurred. We call it, if we use terms taken from the history of art, the period of Mannerism and, in the further development, of the Baroque. If we take concepts from the history of religion, we call it the period of Counter-Reformation and Reformation, whereby Counter-Reformation in the visual arts is more important. And if we take it from the political point of view, we can call it the period of bourgeois absolutism, of the absolutistic powers of the kings, or of special groups] [370]

All this is a reaction against what first broke out in the Renaissance. If we have similar reactions, since the end of the 19th century, then we must be very humble in praising these reactions as I did when I showed you the second and the fourth levels of art, namely humble in the knowledge that this may be *also* a transitory reaction, and that finally the spirit of industrial society will remain victorious – we don't know. But one thing we know is that from the point of view of *religion* and culture, this reaction, since the end of the 19th century, has behind itself great religious motives: it is a *breakthrough*, not because of the success of revivalist preachers, but because of the expression in all great cultural activities of the 20th century of the ground breaking under our feet.

The reaction which I called Mannerism and Baroque, or Counter-Reformation and Reformation, or absolutism in different realms, was shown to you in pictures of El Greco and Rembrandt – El Greco, an expression of the Counter-Reformation; in Rembrandt, an expression of the Reformation in its combination with humanism. About the Counter-Reformation, I can say that here – and I think I said it briefly when I showed you pictures of El Greco – the mystical reality which in [the whole Middle Ages comes from above and is *given* to man, now comes from below and is aspired [toward], and is fought for, with the distortion of the bodily existence as it was rediscovered by the Renaissance. Therefore these long figures, these winding bodies, as we have them in the Baroque. It is an ecstasy from below, in contrast to the Middle Ages where the ecstasy comes from above.] [371]

In the Protestant form of the reaction, we pointed to Rembrandt because here the individual relation of the individual to God is the decisive thing, not in terms of special acts of piety, but in terms of a biography painted in the faces of these old men and women, in which destiny and freedom in the light of the ultimate is visible, and is visible as a fight between destructive and creative elements. And in some of the late self-portraits of Rembrandt, the destructive is predominant, but it always remains religious, in the Protestant sense of the word.

With this we come to the end of this small and short period of reaction against the Renaissance. After 1650 – again as a symbolic number – we have the great gap of religious art of 250 years in which I would say *no* picture religiously worthwhile has been produced.

Those which have been produced had certainly religious content, religious subject matter, but without a style in which the ground of reality broke through. And this is natural – that couldn't be avoided – because in these 250 years we see the development of industrial society, prepared under absolutism, fighting against absolutism, victorious in the 19th century, attacked at the same time by movements which were partly victorious in the 20th century. This history is the history of our period. This was what was going on in the 250 years, and for this reason no religious picture [sic.] worth mentioning [could be painted]. [372]

What is the character of this bourgeois society? – or better, industrial society, because it transcends by far the mere bourgeois leaders of it. It is the problem of objectivation: man transformed [sic.] with his world into object, for his own activities as subject, or for himself as subject. Man a thing. In German, we use for this phenomenon the word *Verdinglichung*, making-into-a-thing – which is a very good word because there is another German word, *bedingt*, which means conditioned, and a thing is that which is altogether conditioned. But since this word cannot appear in English, other attempts have been made. “Objectivation,” as I called it – and sometimes I found the word “reification,” derived from the Latin word *res* (“object, thing”). Now however we call it – let me call it objectivation, for abbreviation – this is the presupposition for the control of nature and society. If you want to control something, you must transform it into an object. Man is supposed to control nature and to organize society and also himself in society. And he is able to do so. But if he does so, the tragic implication is that he makes first his world and then himself into a mere object.

I can exemplify this in one of the main characteristics of man which is usually called *homo faber*, man who fabricates, man as producer and user of tools.

Now what does he fabricate? He fabricates tools, which themselves are objects, determined exclusively by their use, and he produces tools which become partly independent of himself, namely the machine. From tool to machine is a long way, but in principle, in relation to man, they have the same character. Both tool and machine have a tremendously liberating power. And I would [not hesitate to say, against some of my romantic friends who are terribly afraid of automation, that even automation carried through radically has a great liberating power. The more things which can be subject to automation *are* subject to it, the less unnecessary mechanical work has to be done by man. One has metaphorically called the machines “slaves.” They are not slaves because in the slave-relationship, there is an element of person-to-person relationship, and if this is not accepted by the master, he not only destroys the slave but also himself. Machine has not such a relationship; it is merely tool, and it liberates man – in this case especially the worker – from activities which can be taken over. When we speak about the machine age, or the age of automation, or however we call it, we never forget, for a romanticizing theology, the liberating blessing produced by the machine, even in its most complicated and most radical forms. It is good to see, when you are as old as I am, how from my youth, when even the building of a railway in which I participated nine years (of course very successfully), namely putting sand into a car with your hands and then pushing it to the place where it should go – now all this was done in Eastern Germany by Polish workers at that time, and I was their intimate friend and helped them. Now, when I see what is going on today, when you build a road or railway, there was almost nothing like this done by hands, by activities of the muscle, but by somebody sitting somewhere and directing the machine – the machine grasps, the machine runs, the machine fills, the machine puts out in on its place, etc. Now this is a tremendous thing. I don't speak here [373]

about the problem of employment connected with it, the problem of leisure time – I will come to this later. But here I only want to say: don't forget [this fact. And even the assembly line can largely reduce, in the big factories, so that the mechanical things which still – when I first came to this country, I saw it in the Ford factory – were done by human beings which in this moment ceased to be human beings, now can be done by machines. Now this praise of the machine shall precede my criticism of objectivation*through* the machine. But I don't want to appear to you as a cheap romantic critic of the machine age, as it is very often to be found today in booklets, and even in larger books, which do not take into consideration the blessing, of which the curse is the other side. [374]