

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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Lecture XXXI, March 1, 1956

QN: Please differentiate between great art and art that is religious in style.

PT: This is a question returning to the former period of our lecture[s] on religion and art. Now the question was: How would one differentiate between great art and art which is religious art? The word "*great* art" should be used only for "highly qualified" art. What makes a work of art a good work of art, or even a great work of art, belongs to the aesthetic analysis and to the principles which are developed there. It is of course a union of artistic expressive power, of form, of content, which has one moment of indescribable character, but where we at least can approach, in a kind of immediacy, works of art. It is an interesting thing that if, under the sands of the Near East, or in the caves of China or of India, we find very old parts of very old creations, those who have an artistic ability at all would immediately say "This is quality," and they find something else and would say "This is not quality, this is average, or even lower than that." Now the mystery of this belongs to another realm than that which we have to discuss. Religious art with respect to style was characterized as an expressionistic art. Expressionistic art can be poor, average, good, and great. Here we have exactly the same thing. There was a moment, perhaps ten or fifteen years ago, when modern art came first into the field of attention of larger groups of people; before that, it was rather kept in smaller circles of esoteric character. In this moment in which it became open and exoteric, the danger developed that everything which has a modern style (is either abstract or expressionistic or surrealistic) was admired. And the criteria of poor, average, good, and great were not applied any more. And this is always hard, there is always a large margin of error, |but [390] it's not impossible. And this is something quite different from a special style. There is great art in naturalistic styles as much as in expressionistic styles, in pictures of religious content and of non-religious contents. So the problem of greatness lies on a quite different level, namely that of aesthetic valuation, from the level of the style and its expressive power.

Lecture:

I discussed the situation in which we have to discuss religion and culture, because we found that art has a tremendously expressive ability. It so to speak reveals, more than any other expression, including philosophy, the situation in which a period finds itself. We described this period, its character, and we must now continue and discuss two points which are still left in this analysis of our period.

The first is: what happened to religion in this period? The second: which kind of resistance against this situation arose and formed a part of the whole situation?

Let's take the first question: religion in this situation. The situation was described as man in danger of becoming an object in the world of objects created by himself – this was the general characteristic. We considered this from different points of view. We called it, with some critics, dehumanization, because man loses that which makes him man, his finite freedom, his existence as a deciding person, as an incomparable individual of infinite value; he becomes a means himself, instead of an end of all that he creates as means.

This situation was the general character. We also found that this situation creates something I like to call patternization, namely being subjected to a pattern. Not conformism|as such, is bad; conformism *can* be good, if it is historically founded and alive, [391] as it still was in England in the first half of this century. Conformism is bad if it extinguishes (as mass society tends to do) the individual reactions, creativity of the individual person. Therefore perhaps if this would be possible linguistically, one should distinguish patternization and conformism. The danger certainly is patternization.

Now this was the result of our analysis. What does religion do in this situation? Why has the relation of culture and religion become such a problem in our period, for the Western world, for our generation? The answer is that religion is that dimension of experience which transcends subjectivity and objectivity and cuts through the realm of subject and object, and that if religion is brought down to the dimension in which subjects manage the objective world, religion loses its meaning. This is a very simplified formula for an infinitely complex process. But in this formula we can grasp the whole situation in a nutshell. Religion brought down to the level of objectivation and then lost, whether attacked or defended. Both the defenders of religion on this level, and the critics of religion on this level, have *lost* the meaning of religion!

We can show this in the theoretical realms as well as in the practical realms. I showed it to you in the most expressive of all realms, that of the arts. You remember that level which I call the third level: religious symbols used in a naturalistic style. First in a man like Giotto, still the greatness of a religious substance expressed in naturalistic forms. Then step by step the loss of this substance: it is wasted. And what is left is the objective world as we |encounter it in our average dealing with it as subjects with objects. [392] In this way the religious symbols became objects in the world of subject-objectivity. And they became something which lost its religious power. Instead of the Mother of God with a Child, which represents the Pantokrator, the Ruler of all – a beautiful human mother-child relationship, etc. – and finally what is lost in religious depth is replaced in a sentimentalnaturalism which we have seen (I hope all of you have seen) – with a kind of horror.

This was the result of the falling-down on the level of objectivation. Now we come to the religious symbols in the cognitive realm. We have the same development. They have become objects in relationship to which we are subjects: God, a being beside other beings; the Christ, a person with miraculous qualities; the church, a social club besides others; theology, a description of events in time and space, which are either supernaturalistically breaking *into* the temporal or are simply *parts of* the temporal world. In other words, the churches followed the lead of the objectivation process which produced modern society. These who attacked such a religion were not always subjectively better than the others – often they were glad to get rid of ultimates which determine their lives and which demand unconditional seriousness. But *equally* often, they saw that something is wrong

with this kind of religion, church and theology, and criticized it. And the *defenders* were not always wrong. The churches knew that they defended something which is worthwhile being defended, namely a dimension of being which is *expressed* in the tradition of the churches – in thought as well as in act. But they were *wrong* because they tried to choose the battlefield of their defense – the realm, or better the dimension, in which religion cannot be defended at all, namely the dimension of the subject-object structure of reality. If you defend God as one existing being, you are not only intellectually but also religiously *inferior* to the atheist. And so with all the expressions of the religious dimension: when you first bring them down and then try to save them on this level, which is not their level, then you do worse than those who want to push it out of this level completely. [393]

Now about this we should be very clear, not only with respect to the religious symbols but also with respect to the life of the church. If it is another social club, protecting social conventions especially in groups of the society which are inclined to support these conventions – then the churches are better abolished or transformed completely into social clubs of a moral character, or actually conventional character. But if, on the other hand, you *see* that the church has to say No! – not only to say Yes but also and first of all to say No to everything which is in the realm of the subject-objectivity – then this world will not tolerate the church but will turn away from it and try to push it away.

Now in this situation, we are. And this is a very painful situation, and perhaps nobody feels this pain more than those who are vocationally related to the work of the church. But sometimes there are wise laymen who are not prejudiced by his job and who see the situation even clearer than ministers and priests.

Religion either has adapted itself to the situation of producing a world above the world, a world of objects, and adapting man to this world, making him himself an object; or the churches, did not adapt them but had no weapons of resistance because they resisted on the level which was prescribed by the modern mind and the situation they wanted to deny. [394]

So we are here in the necessity to make one fundamental statement – I don't want to speak about "Religion in the Present Situation of the World" *at all!* – namely that religion comes from one dimension and goes into another, from above to below, from below to above, and that *in this* dimension, it has a Yes and No to the *whole* of reality, but *is not a part* of it!

My whole theological work was directed by early realization of this situation. And the situation still prevails – and perhaps in this country a little bit more than in Europe, but in any case, in the whole Christian world. And so the attempt to liberate religion from the bondage of a level of thought and experience to which it does not belong, or only indirectly belongs, is the continuous task of every philosophy of religion.

How can we fulfill this task? It can be fulfilled only with the tools which are given to us – nobody can *produce* them. And there are tools given to us in the present-day situation, the tools produced by the resistance against the present-day situation.

Let me now talk about the movements of resistance. They are outside of the church, and partly also inside; outside of theology, and partly inside; but predominantly they come from a secular world which, so to speak, has broken through the basis on which it was built. In our language, in the last ten years, we call this breaking-through-the-carrying-and-supporting foundations, "existentialism." But since this word is a clumsy one, and everybody is afraid before he even tries to understand what it *could* mean, we might also describe it in other words. [We can simply use the [phrase] "the experience [395]

of brokenness,” we can speak of “the expressionistic situation” – all these terms mean the same thing. Or we can say “the *resisting* turn of thought and experience,” “the experience of resistance.” The interesting thing is that this resistance is as old as the situation against which it is directed. It starts with the 17th century, sometimes even the 16th; it goes on through the 18th century as “underground,” and it comes to the 19th century where it breaks out in special volcanoes of tremendous power; and it becomes overflowing everything, in the 20th century.

This resistance is also a part of our situation. It has not yet changed the foundations of this situation, but it has attacked them. Here again I can now refer to those which belong to the second and to the fourth group, which I called, with an all-embracing term, style of expression. This style of expression belongs to the total resistance against the consequences of present-day industrial society to make man into an object amongst objects within the dimension of subject- objectivity, within the dimension in which we manage reality.

Now this resistance has provided the tools which it might really be possible to liberate religion from the fundamental misunderstanding that it is a part of the subject-object structure of reality. It is not a *part* of anything; it is a *dimension in everything*! Only if we understand this, do we understand what religion is.

The movement which I call “the movement of resistance” has shown the human situation in such a way that, so to speak, that which was covered by the process of creating gadgets, means [for ends which are means again, infinitely, which has broken up this situation and shown that below this situation, there is the anxiety of nothingness, the anxiety of guilt, the anxiety of meaninglessness, the anxiety of death. All this came to the foreground. And in the moment in which this happens, the door is open for reinterpretation of religion. And up to this door, only, I wanted to lead you in my analysis of the situation, because everything else belongs to the realm of either theology or church life. But *up* to this point, I had to bring you, because we want to return to it again and again when we speak about the special levels. [396]

Now this ends, in some way, the analysis of the situation. It may be that, exceptionally today, you may have some direct questions, because we all are in this situation, and it is not a matter of art or philosophy that some are nearer to it, some are not, but it is a universal situation in which *everybody* finds himself.

QN: What can we do today to stop these general trends?

PT: The question was: is there something we can *do* about these trends? Now I don’t know whether I told you about a very interesting experience I had 20 years ago when I came to this country, and after every lecture, *whatever* the content was, however far removed from reality, the question arose: “What can we do about it?” I haven’t heard that maintained for almost five years. I am very much interested that you ask this question again! Now this question is of course very much justified in a lecture in which we speak about religion and culture|because we are in both of them even, if we are in one or the other of them, with a negative sign before our being in it. [little laughter] In any case, the question “What to do about the situation?” is certainly justified. [397]

To remain very modest in answering this question, I would say what you can do in an *academic* context – and I cannot go beyond this in this moment; perhaps when we come to education, politics, etc., which will be the next consideration, I will continuously answer you *indirectly*. But if I answer it now directly, I can only say: become aware of this situation to a depth in which automatically, so to speak, or spontaneously, resistance powers grew up in you. And that is actually the only thing I can say here. And I don’t

want to say more, even if I could, because – and this is the danger in your question (and that is why I mentioned this story of myself), that before we have analyzed – i.e., experienced, not analyzed – *experienced* the depth of the situation in which we are and look for remedies, then these remedies will be as superficial as the experience itself was. If we *experience* the situation, in its full depth, then it will be very hard to find remedies, but then perhaps something happens of which the old medicine often spoke, namely the healing power which is embodied in nature itself. This is what medicine does [has?] in human nature, in biological nature. I can say, if somebody reaches the depth of understanding and of experience, also emotionally, with respect to these things, then he certainly will be able to develop remedies, forces of healing in himself which will radiate into others. So to this class, here and now, in this moment, I would answer your question by saying: *experience* the things [of which I spoke, and don't do something about them [398] too early, because your remedies then may be very shallow and lead in the long run to deeper distortions.

QN [Owen Thomas]: How do you describe that which transcends the subject-object realm?

PT: Yes. Now that is of course also a very valid question. It brings us back a little into the first lectures of the first semester. I would describe it as the dimension of ultimate concern, or of the encounter with the holy. The interesting thing in the encounter with the Holy is that if we encounter it, either within in the so-called “sacred” realm or outside of it, wherever that may be – in a man, in nature, or everything in which it can be encountered – that then this holy can never be transformed into an object which you can handle. Of course you can do even this, and often priests do just this – they can transform it into mechanized process which can be handled; especially in some theories this is the case. But the holy reacts against it. You feel, if you do this, that you abuse it. So the encounter with the holy, or with the ultimate, however you want to call it, has powers which make the objectivation scheme impossible. They are resisting powers in themselves. In a prayer – I often used that example – God is never object without being at the same time subject. Therefore the ordinary prayer, which is done so easily, is only a symptom of the religious weakness of religion being drawn down to the level of objectivation. But any *serious* prayer elevates you *beyond* the subject-object encounter into that which is *itself* beyond subject and object, namely the holy, the ground of being out of which both come. This experience can be called [mystical, but then you must have [399] a lecture of two semesters only in order to remove all the nonsense from the connotation of the word “mystical.” But what I mean here is just this, nothing else but this, nothing irrational, nothing *against* reason, but simply the experience of the holy which grasps you, and elevates you, and makes you transcend the subject-object situation.

QN: What would be the difference between what you say – “encounter with the holy” – and what Buber says: “encounter with the eternal Thou”? What you say is the subject-object world and what he calls the world of “it”

PT: What he calls “it,” I call the realm of objects. Now his ego-Thou is different from my own interpretation of the encounter with the holy insofar as I believe the more adequate this ego-Thou encounter with God is, the more the separation of ego and Thou is overcome by God acting *in* us, in His [his?] encounter with himself [Himself?], so that, so to speak, there are not two individuals separated by different bodies, or by space or anything like that, but there is a power grasping us which has both personal and supra-personal character. And if for “supra- personal” you say “mystical,” then this is another way of speaking about the mystic, but it is by no means the anti-rational.

QN: Do you think that ours is the first period of history in which such great objectivation has taken place?

PT: This is a very justified question, whether our period is the first in which such objectivation has taken place. I have learned about the whole thing only by studying the history of Greek [thought]. You remember I showed you some archaic gods and goddesses in which the divine power, in the mystical smile which looks not as an object in time and space but an “I” which looks at “you,” encounters you, at the end of the temple; you must *go* to it, you cannot go around it. You must kneel down before these gods and goddesses, because they represent the presence of ultimate reality; and that was the reason for their religious power over the minds of the people, if they took it seriously. [400]

Then came the classical period, which is analogous to what I said about Giotto and some early Renaissance people, in which the substance was still present but was already reduced into an idealized human figure around which you can go. But still some of the divine majesty was left, in the classical period.

Then came the naturalistic period, in which wonderfully naturalistic movements were given to the human bodies, even to those of the gods. But they were in no way divine any more. Aphrodite was a beautiful woman, and Apollo a beautiful lad – that’s all. And you could enjoy their movements, their tensions, their beauty, you could study gymnastics from them [little laughter], but you couldn’t do that from the goddesses and gods of the past.

So we have a similar thing in the Greek development, and it is very interesting to see how in the religious period which starts about 100 years before Christ and goes on for about 500 years, not only in Christianity, in the paintings of the caves, but also in the pagan world, on the sculptures of the sarcophagi, [where] you find a return to the non-naturalistic archaism, archaic style, which now, since it is a repetition, could be called archaistic in contrast to archaic [it is not originally archaic any more, but it is archaistic, it is a return. And this return gives the religious power back to these figures. They become mostly two-dimensional, i.e., they are taken out of the natural space. [401]

Now then from there the new real archaic period of the Byzantine and early Middle ages began.

And it might be that our expressionistic art in the large sense of the word, which now is lasting for 50 years, will be an analogy with the return of the archaic in the archaistic art of the later ancient period.

QN: I wonder if you could say something about what these volcanoes were, more specifically.

PT: I didn’t want to name them because I have written so often about them. You can read them in *The Courage to Be*, I meant the great existentialists of the 19th century. I meant Kierkegaard in the religious realm, Marx in the social realm, Nietzsche in the realm of the vital, Schopenhauer before him. Then toward the end of the century, Cézanne and Van Gogh in painting; people like Rimbaud and Beaudelaire in poetry; people like Strindberg and, before him, Dostoevsky in drama and novel. These are volcanoes in the 19th century. And they were the father of all existentialism in the 20th century.

QN: You mentioned that the foundations of the present structure were still intact, although blooded by the existentialist attack. How do you account for the fact that they are so fully intact after such a tremendous onslaught of the first half of the century?

PT: You mean the foundations of the objectifying structure? This is a very interesting question and is really a part of my autobiography, namely in the early twenties immediately after the [First World War we believed, in Europe, that now the *kairos*, the [402]

right time, has arrived for the breaking of the eternal into the temporal – I will speak about this whole thing when we come to the social and economic realm – but it was only a break through the clouds, and the clouds became thicker and thicker, and toward the end of the twenties, before Hitler came, I often anticipated the total destruction of Germany – as it then happened, actually, on the basis of the reactionary powers which destroyed the possibility of the breaking in of the new at that time. Then it happened that the movement of the two volcanoes (to repeat my symbol) of the 19th century – which were probably most volcanic of all – namely Marx and Nietzsche, produced systems in the 20th century which were just the opposite of that for which they were fighting. Nietzsche, although not directly responsible, has *indirectly* helped to give to Nazism and Fascism ideological foundations. And Marx, although not directly responsible either, has helped, very much helped, to give rise to the dehumanizing system which we today call the Communistic East.

Now these developments are amongst the most tragic things because both of these men tried to liberate the human mind – and indirectly religion – from the bondage of objectivation and dehumanization, and mechanization. And what they created, in the dialectics of world history, was almost 100% the opposite: they produced the most dehumanizing systems *against* their will, by the tragic of world history. This is a partial answer. Today we are in the same situation, and we don't know whether the same development will take place, that that which was thought as an onslaught against the structure of industrial society, will be used finally by the leaders [of industrial society, and [403] by the masses unconsciously, as a tool to preserve it. This is a [task] for your generation. Our generation failed. Perhaps yours will not.