Religion and Culture by Paul Tillich

A digital edition of Paul Tillich's Lecture "Religion and Culture"
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QN: During the last lecture you mentioned that we have both "traditional" and "untraditional" symbols to introduce to people. What do you mean by "untraditional symbols"?

PT: I really don't know – I certainly don't know in which context I said that, and what it could mean – since symbols always come from a collective and therefore *always* are carried somehow by traditional powers, and I wouldn't say here the phrase "introducing a symbol to people"; I would say "introducing people to symbols," which means that the symbols are given.

Same QN: [Questions submitted earlier, written.–Ed.] Though a person cannot perhaps *create* his own symbols, isn't our culture in fact 'post-Christian' enough so that other symbols than those which are strictly Christian-in-content can, and *must* be used in order to bring one's 'total being' into awareness of the mysteries of life?

PT: Now that's a question shwere [sic.] I feel very much in agreement with the tendency of the question. Certainly there are developments of symbols which had a tremendous influence for centuries and which are not Christian. And "post-Christian" would indicate that Christianity cannot take them in, and therefore something completely new in comparison with 'Christian' is developing. This is a question of the future. I cannot answer it with Yes and No. But as a Christian theologian, I believe that Christianity is able |to take into its universal principle, expressed in the classical idea that Jesus [477]
the Christ is the Logos, the *universal* principle of divine Self-manifestation, that other symbols can be taken in. For instance the truth of a symbol like evolution–which was one of the most important ones–will and can be taken in; or some symbols connected with the psychological development–depth psychology, and other things like that. But one thing must be said: the symbols *come*; you cannot say "I need new symbols, so let's sit down, I have a very comfortable chair, and let's have a drink to it and then let's invent a symbol!" [some laughter] Now that's just what I think should be denied.

QN: Where is the risk in the autonomous existental experience which you set up last time in regards to Maritain?

PT: Now I hope you all remember that discussion I reported here, where I asked, What would you do if the prophetic Spirit grasps you, you say something, of which later on the Churchauthority says that it was wrong? And he anwered [sic.], "Then I was wrong." – Now what is the point of your question really? It is a little bit hard.

QN: You spoke of the risk in religion, the involvement of the duality of Yes and No at the same time. Where is the risk when one allows the existential experience, in essence, to become all-dominant?

PT: I don't know. Can somebody interpret that? I sirply [sic.] don't know what you mean. |The risk in me or Maritain? [478]

QN: You.

PT: In me. Now I said: I would resist–as Luther did–the Bull of the Pope condemning me. Now that is the risk. Perhaps I was in error, perhaps I was not. That is my risk, while for Maritain the risk is all reduced to the one risk, namely to remain an adherent, or to become, in his case, and to remain, an adherent of the Roman Church. Does that answer your question?

QN: Yes.

PT: Good===

We have a very important subject today, but I am very grateful for these questions. You see they always clear something up a little bit, so don't hesitate to ask them, orally or written.

The final discussion about the relation between the educational realm and religion is the discussion of religion and the university. And since this is a problem which has a rather existential meaning for Harvard today, and therefore implicitly for *all* of you, I want to use this hour to discuss it with you from differents [sic.] points of view.

First a short historical reminder. The term universitas, university, had, very early, two meanings. The earliest was the universitas magistrarum et scholarum [?sp], which means the collective of teachers and students. So the first meaning of the term |was that [479] the university is a community. Universitas, universum, which always means a unity of many, [of men?] is a unity in terms of a community, namely of teachers and students who, together, establish the university as a corporation, whereby the word "corporation" originally meant what the word says, a real body, with limbs, and not what it means today, a legal place where trade is performed. But it really meant something of a being-together, of having to decide, in community of life. Then it became applied to the subject matter, and the word got the connotation of universitas litterarum, the university of everything which is taught there: *all* things worth learning and studying are given in the universitas. That is a different meaning, not from those who are the *bearers* of the university, but from the point of view of the content.

There was also a term sometimes used, studium generale, a study, a place and content, which is general, which is valid for everybody from every country of the Western world, at that period of history.

So it is from the very beginning a unity of different elements, and I will distinguish, when we look at the present-day university, three functions which are decisive: 1) teaching; 2) education; 3) research. The confusion of these three functions and their necessary interdependence raises many of the problems which belong to the problem of the university. So if you discuss problems of *this* university, for instance, always keep in mind that it is said to have these three functions. It's not *only* an |institution of teaching, [480] it is not *only* an institution of education, it is not *only* an institution of research, but it unites all three functions. And the way in which this is done determines largely the character of a university. In history, for instance, the educational element, in a very definite way–namely the education to a gentleman–was the main function of the British universities (especially the English, not so much the Scottish). There the education to the gentleman who is supposed to become, in an aristocratic feudal culture, the leader

of the nation, in the future, the mediator with the colonies, with the Empire sections–all this was the problem; therefore the educational element, by far, was more important than the teaching of contents and the research, which was often completely lacking in these colleges.

In France, the teaching element is predominant, and not the teaching of the gentleman but the teaching of the high bureaucracy, and in earlier periods, of the leaders of the Church, the leaders of State and Church, but not in terms of the Gentleman-ideal, as in England, but in terms of the learned man who is able to apply his learning in the administration of the ecclesiastical and political functions.

In Germany the educational element was also very weak at the universities. I used to say about myself, the higher the place of learning, the worse the teachers, from the educational point of view. This was generally true– the best educators were the teachers in the general public schools, the grammar schools, as they were called in England. By far the worse educators were we, the university professors. So the educational element was very badly developed in |Germany–the teaching elementstrongly [sic.]–but the research [481] element predominantly.

Now this gives you already a difference, a very typical difference, connected with the whole situation in these countries. Therefore the influence of the universites [sic.] on the cultural life of Germany was only indirect, but very little direct, in terms of education. It was great on the English upper class, and it was fundamental on the French bureaucracy.

Now let us look at these three functions in their historical setting, and their relationship to the problem of religion. First the teaching function of the university. From earliest times, two different emphases were at the university, namely the humanities and the professions. In the Middle Ages they were the artes liberales, the liberal arts–today called "the humanities," in this country, through which everybody had to go, in which one learned physics, astronomy, logic, mathematics, and, in which it was necessary, rhetoric (which to a great extent means philology), which gave the humanistic pre-condition for the other faculties. Then the other faculties were: the first one, the "queen," as it was called in the Middle Ages: theology. Then the law faculty, and then the medical faculty. These three were the professional faculties. Here we have, from the very beginning, a lot of problems, even besides the religious problem (to which I come instantly), namely the question of the relationship of the professional to the humanities teaching. Has the university–this was the problem–a function which is connected with the practice even in the humanities, even besides the professional training? Here we had a lot of difficulties with the humanities side of teaching. This side could be understood as mere |theory, [482] remaining in itself, without relationship to the events in the political and religious and social and economic life of the country. Humanism, especially during the 19th century in Germany, became identical with ivory-tower, and that means: only teaching, and only research for the sake of research: this alone is the function of the university. But the relationship to the life of the people, to the political realm, is something which is beneath the dignity of the university. This was the situation up to the First World War, 1914-19. After this period one thing became clear: the catastrophe of the First World War was rooted in the fact that the upper classes of Germany were not active participants of the political realm. They couldn't prevent the militaristic powers from drawing Germany into the war, and after this they couldn't prevent the split of Germany into the parties, which at that time took over largely: the Social Democrats and the other sections of the German population. The universities at that time, at the time of my study, were almost *infinitely* removed from political thought and relationship to economic realities. They did

not encourage [the] connection of philosophical, or literature, or other problems belonging to the humanities, to the actual situation in the life of the nation and the world. The result was that an empty space, a vacuum, developed in the minds of the upper classes, and that into this empty space then, as is always the case with empty spaces, the forces of a primitive nationalism entered and produced the two Wars and ruined Germany as well as Europe.

Now here you have something of the importance of these problems *far beyond* the petty politics of a campus; it goes far beyond them. It has importance for the whole |national existence. [483]

In the twenties–I started my academic career as professor in 1919–we tried to overcome this situation. It was the idea of a new humanism–I spoke about this already briefly–it developed in this connection, namely a theory which is continuously related to the actual problems of the social and political life of the day in which these theories are developed. It meant that if you had to lecture at the University of Berlin, as I had to do, and opposite this building was the Museum of Modern Art established by the German Republic, over against the whole powers of petty bourgeois reaction, then it was felt by myself and some of my colleagues as their *duty to relate* lectures in Greek philosophy and in history of Christian thought and in philosophy of religion*to what was done and fought out* in the rooms opposite the Avenue Unter den Linden, namely the modern art and the expression it meant for the situation in which we were living.

Now this new humanism, this socially related humanism, was an attempt to build up a new university as, 100 years ago, the great men of German classical philosophy and culture generally, built up the University of Berlin as a means of rebirth, from a humanistic point of view-it was the first great humanistic university in Germany. Now we tried to build it up again in terms of a new humanism, after the old humanism had run under the social conditions of the 19th century into self-defeat, because of its ivory-tower situation, and its complete lack of relationship to the social and political situation..

If, however, you *want* to do this, you cannot avoid what in Germany is called Weltanschauung, world-view, interpretation of human existence, *in judging* our own social situation, *in judging*|modern art as an expression of this situation, *in judging* the political [484] movements and the division of the nation between labor and upper classes, and especially the situation of the lower middle classes, who were the bearers of the Nazi revolution later on. All this could be judged *only* from a point of view of what I called *ultimate* concern–I didn't have this term at that time, but that's what we meant–in relg [sic.] religious socialism, for instance, which tried to unite all these elements of a realistic humanism, or a neo-huaneo-humanism, namely the understanding of the *ultimate* foundations of every culture in the style which it develops.

Now this was an attempt. Since this attempt didn't succeed–the powers of reaction, created for such a long time in German history, were stronger; the misery of the lower middle classes was greater; and so nothing could be done to prevent Nazism, which of course ruined *all* these attempts.

Now I come to the second point: education. Here again, first the problem and then the relationship to the religious answer. Learning itself *is* education. It produces two things: objectivity and discipline. Without a continuous self-discipline, no learning is possible. To learn, is not a natural tendency, although learning as a matter of curiosity is certainly given to us by nature. As Heidegger rightly said: every human being wants to *see*–and he uses the Greek word idein, from which eidos is derived: he wants to know the eidos, the *essence*, of things. He *wants* it; but if he has to *do* it, the way is so hard

that there is a tremendous natural resistance against it in all of us. To overcome this natural resistance is discipline, and this is done, immediately and implicitly, in terms of education. | [485]

And the second is: objectivity. Sometimes, when you consider me as an existentialist theologian–or some other drawer into which you want to put me! [smiling], then don't forget that *before* you put me into this drawer, unambiguously, there are many ambiguities in my setup [?], namely a great *passion* for objectivity (you don't believe it, but it's true!) [some laughter], for objective looking at realities *with the best possible methods* which can be reached. Now I can give one proof for this, before your court [judgment], namely the proof that I am terribly attacked for this by many theologians for my radical objectivity with respect to historical research, even if it goes to the holy Legend and to the Christian myth. And I am not willing to give up this complete objectivity; *nobody* who does so is worthy of being an academic teacher anyhow!

But now, is this sufficient for the educational function of the university? Isn't there something else demanded? Here hundreds of years of the history of the university gave an answer; they gave this answer by speaking of theology as the *first* faculty, and some little remnants of this can still be observed in European universities: in every academic procession, the first faculty is the theological. But this is all what's left [laughter] of this evaluation! Otherwise it is by far the last, and some of the new universities [such] as Hamburg, and Köln and Frankfurt were founded in the beginning of this century without a theological faculty completely: they had no "queen," not even a dispossessed queen. They had nothing at all! Now it is interesting that this is now remedied, and it might interest you, in |connection with the university problem, that the Social Democratic party, [486] when it was in power in Hamburg, has founded a theological faculty five years ago–a thing *unheard of* in the 19th century, and even in the first half of the 20th. But now, after the Second World War, it happened that those who were most radically anti-religious, anti-ecclesiastical, anti-theological, felt (partly under the education they got as refugees in this country) the need for a theological faculty even in the new universities. It may be of personal interest for you that this summer, for the second time, I will teach at that university in the newly founded theological faculty.

What does that mean? That means, first, that the leaders even of a formerly absolutely secular and anti-religious movement [such] as the Social Democratic party was in the 19th century in Germany, felt the need to have, not a Queen (nobody would say that), but at least something else (I will come to this instantly) which is represented by the theological faculty, namely symbols creating community again: the universitas as community. And the need for symbols explaining this community was certainly felt by the founders of this new faculty, and whatever its function may be (I will speak directly about it later on), it was something which they felt was lacking in the education. The actual education was given at the German universities not by the university, but by the fraternities, which played a much greater role there than in this country, and often a very destructive role; but in any case, a kind of educational role, if you subsume miseducation under the general concept of education, which is also the case on other places of the world. [some laughter] In any case, they had *much* more influence than |*any* professor had. I [487] remember that my *real* education was done by students who were perhaps one or two years older than I, who were, in my valuation, higher above *any* professor in educational power, wisdom, and spiritual representation.

Now this shows that the university *as such* has completely lost the community element, to which I referred in my historical statement.

Then the third, namely research. In Germany there was very little spoken of the educational side, but the problem always was [the] combining]of] teaching and research. This combination indeed is something which I consider to be absolutely necessary. This is said against the professors more than against the students. A professor–especially in everything which is near to the humanities–who is not able to teach, is not able to create. Only in very few cases– men like Schopenhauer and Nietzsche in the 19th century, and a few others – were able (after they had left the university – they started there, too) to create great things in their realm without teaching. But these great things had also their limits, which they probably wouldn't have [had] if research *had* been combined with teaching. And the main thing is that teaching means seeing oneself in a mirror. And this is the decisive thing about this combination, that giving one's own limited wisdom to others who have, in this point, perhaps even a more limited wisdom, forces you [in] to things which the private scholar would never be forced into, namely to see, in connection with community, the content of what you are teaching, and every teaching relationship should be (more than it is) a relationship of community. | [488]

This means, further, that the critical element, which partly comes from the colleagues and the public discussion about research, also comes from the immediate encounter with the students. And I wouldn't believe that I would know anything about anything without this critical reaction, this wall which must be pierced each time when you get here to the desk, [pierced] in terms of giving convictions, and very often you don't succeed, and then what is said comes back from the wall which you were not able to pierce through. Now that's the great importance of the combination of teaching and research.

In the research, the decisive principle is truth. But truth has several levels. There are three levels – and I had a case just last Tuesday, in a group of scholars, colleagues of the different Faculties, mostly of the natural sciences, to discuss the different levels of truth with them. In the introduction for this discussion, I distinguished the truth in the realm of the subject-object experience, analyzing the objects as a subject, and handling them in terms of technical dealing with them. This is the one realm, which one could call, following Max Scheler in this, "controlling knowledge," knowledge of control. Then the second, following Plato in this respect, one could speak of participation in realities which cannot be known in terms of analysis and control but in terms of participation and eros, as Plato called it, namely the other personality, the realms of the good and the beautiful, the intuition of those qualities of being which are not objects of analysis, calculation and management.

Then the third level, existential truth, namely the truth in which we commit ourselves |to something of ultimate concern, expressed in symbols. And *here* the criterion of truth [489] is the real ultimacy, expressed in the . . ? . . symbol, against the idolatrous ultimacy. These are the three levels of truth.

They all are taught at the university, and they all are objects of research at the university. The first is perhaps the largest, the basis of all the others. The second is present in all human relations, in understanding of texts, of personalities, in everything where participation is needed. And the third is expressed in symbols and would lead to the question of a place where these symbols are the object of *existential* criticism. Of course, these three levels are interdependent, they interpenetrate in every moment, but they shouldn't interfere. If you interfere, in the name of the third level, with the first, then you have the interference of religion in science. If you interfere with the first into the third, then you have interference of science in the meaning of religious symbols; then the eternal conflicts or, as Kant called it, the fight of the disciplines, goes on in the university.

And the same is true if you try to conquer the second completely in the power of the first and exclude understanding as an element, for instance of medicine, of sociology, of politics, and of course of all humanities. Then you ruin all *these* relations.

Now the relationship of these three dimensions of truth is a continuous living problem in every university. Out of this the question of the meaning of the theological faculty arises. I told you that the theological faculty was the queen up to the 18th century; then the philosophical faculty, especially its natural-scientific side, became the queen. Now the question is, as the Social |Democrats in Hamburg have asked themselves: Do we need [490] a theological faculty in the context of the life of the university? I would say Yes. I would say: it shouldn't be *two* things, but it should be a *third* thing. The theological faculty should not rule, in the university. The position of the queen is an impossible one, because from none of these three dimensions of truth can you rule the two others. This is the first and perhaps most important thing about it.

Secondly, you should not dissolve the theological into a philosophical faculty – that means, teach in it history,psychology,sociology, but not *theo*logy! This is the *opposite* mistake to the "queen," because then the queen is the philosophical faculty, or humanities – however you call it – which is *then* decisive! But it cannot be decisive. But its dimension of truth is determined mostly by the second level.

But now, which is the *positive* meaning of the theological faculty? First a very simple one: it is like medicine and law, a professional school to train ministers; and this side is never to be missed and is as justified and as necessary as the law school, where we *also* have the positive law of *this* country, which is interpreted *to* the law students, in their meaning and in their applicability so that they can become jurists. In the same way, the theological faculty trains ministers on the given professional situation – Protestants or Catholics – so that they are able, on the basis of their positive knowledge of these things, to be leaders in their respective congregations.

But then the theological faculty has an educational function, as also the medical and the legal have, namely to represent the *ultimate* concern in concrete symbols, and their discussion – |the dimension which is the *ultimate* dimension. Of course this is not *alone* [491] the function of the theological faculty; it must be done in *all* of them, according to their interpenetration. But in the theological faculty, this is *just* the intention, *just* the meaning of it, to show purified interpretations of the traditional symbols, those which come from the past, and those which are in a process of developing for the future. In exercising *this* function, the theological faculty *represents* something which underlies the *whole*university, namely the dimension of man's ultimate concern, and the truth of the symbols in this, ultimate concern. Of course, in the theological faculty, the other dimensions of truth are present – the historical and psychological and sociological and certainly philosophical work has to be done *carefully*, with respect to religion. But this is not the only function. There is the third dimension of truth. And I believe that the *highest*, and most *important*, function of the theological faculty is neither the fact that religion is dealt with there, *not* the fact that ministers are trained there, but the fact that there, is a place in which the university expresses its own foundation in an ultimate concern, in symbols, which certainly are not acknowledged, in our period, by all members of the university, neither by professors nor by students, but which *point*, by their very nature, *to* something *without* which the life of the university would finally lose a point of orientation. The symbols may change, but what the theological faculty is able to maintain is the necessity, for every human being and every group and every function, of symbols of ultimate concern. |However the concrete symbols are which are used for the training of ministers – this [492]

is not the decisive thing – they cannot be imposed on the university as a whole in *any* way. But the pointing to the symbols as such, their being under discussion and criticism, is something which points that the university also, in all its functions, is human and therefore *must* answer in symbols the question of the meaning of human existence.