

# Religion and Culture by Paul Tillich

A digital edition of Paul Tillich's Lecture "Religion and Culture"  
Harvard University, 1955-56

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*Lecture XLII*, April 17, 1956

*QN*: Are there any immutable principles which should always govern man's action in society, or are there just artificial rules of repression created by the will of the times? Do you accept any of the concepts of natural law advanced by political powers – or something like that? You gave impressions [sic.] of the sex drive, one example of the repressions resulting from artificial divine or national laws. Please give additional examples.

*PT*: Now who has asked this question? Would you be so good to formulate it in one or two words?

*QN*: There are two questions. The first is: do you accept any of the natural-law concepts advanced by political theorists? You seem to suggest that any of these ideas of an immutable, eternal, moral order existing outside of man are mainly artificial creations of the individual times. These merely repress man's drives.

*PT*: Yes, now let's first stick to this question. You ask me something which I discussed, not last hour, but the week before, and I don't know whether you attended when I gave this scheme: love as the ultimate principle, which is universal and by natural law, because it belongs to the nature of man. Then this third level, the concrete situation, of ethical decision, here and now, in this irrepeatable unique situation, which happens in this moment. Then between this, the formulation of rules and laws which are on the one hand hanging on the ultimate principle, and on the other hand are gained by experiences on the basis of the concrete situation in the development of mankind. We called this the middle axioms, or the rules of wisdom. The first was love; the third was the *kairos*, the unique moment in time; and the middle was wisdom. And the wisdom is the unity of something immovable – which we defined as love – and on the other hand, the always changing elements of the concrete situation. So my theory of the natural law is not identical with that of the Roman Catholic Church, where special definite contents are identified with the eternal natural law – that's [something I cannot accept. On the other hand, I am not of the opinion that the concrete expressions of love are simply tyrannical products of the will-to-power because even those who have this will-to-power couldn't have *power* without accepting some valid structures. For this I must refer you for a fuller answer [sic.] to my little book, *Love, Power, and Justice*, where I define the relationship of these three concepts and try to show that power, *even as power*, is a completely abstract concept if it is [sic.] not united with form – and form means, in this case, principles of justice. [548]

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Now this is the first answer: that all this can at the same time be abused and distorted by tyrannical powers, and even by non-tyrannical but conformist powers, as we have it in this country, cannot be doubted at all – it is obvious. But the analysis of an essential structure, and the question of its distortion, must always be distinguished. Very often, in political fight, distortions are confused with essential structures, and a formulation like that which you give comes from the distortion, and my formulation comes from the essential structure. Now I am deeply convinced that the distortion is a reality, but it is a distortion of something which has a structure. Only structures can be *distorted*, and this is always so. Only because there is good money can falsified money be invented. Only because there is something positive can the negative be actual.

*QN*: In speaking of repression, in the last lecture, you gave the sexual drive as one example of it. I wanted you to give additional examples.

*PT*: Not the sexual drive, but the repression of it. [smiling – some laughter] And – oh, there are repression of the dynamic drive to go beyond one's given form. In the basic ontological structure of [dynamics and form, the form can be a repressive power with respect to the dynamics of our life, to go beyond the limits in, let us say, vocational respect, national respect, family respect, to go beyond the given place on which we are ("place" not only geographical but, even more, intellectually and socially and psychologically). Repressions are always possible. The form makes life possible. But the form at the same time is able to repress life. Now take the best example, for which I gave you the pictures as an example: academic art, where the creative dynamics are repressed in the academies of art by traditions of form. The learning of the form is good, but if this learning of the form *represses* the creative impact of the artist, we have that kind of art which we call academic and which is *repressed* art, and therefore very much loved by all those who are in principle repressors in *all* realms of life. Now I think that was the question. Now we have to go ahead. === I gave you one example of the social problems of ethics, namely the family life, and especially that element in the family life which has to do with sexual relation. [549]

The other element, which also needs full development, is the element of authority. i [sic.] would like to go into this problem from different points of view. If you want to read somebody who is outspoken and almost bitter of authority, then read *every* book of Erich Fromm, especially his book on religion and psychoanalysis. He distinguishes two types of authority, what he calls rational authority and irrational authority. This is an interesting distinction; I myself have always distinguished, on the basis of the difference of Catholicism and Protestantism, the authority in principle and the authority in fact. Let's use these two distinctions, which can both be used – the word "rational" has connotations which make it very difficult today to use it. In Williams College, two days ago, I had a discussion with the students and someone asked me about the relation of reason and faith, and I asked back with the words, "Whenever I hear somebody ask such a question, I ask back, 'What do you mean with "reason"?' " And he reacted almost immediately, he was not shocked, because he knew exactly what reason is, namely intellectual endeavor: that was his definition of reason. Now of course, if this is reason, then it doesn't cover what Fromm means at all, and it never covers what I mean with reason, and it doesn't cover what the history of philosophy meant with reason. Reason meant the structure of mind and reality. But this immediate reaction of a younger boy to my question which tried to trap him [smiling], was very revealing to me. It revealed the fact that it's almost beyond salvation to try to bring back the original meaning of the word reason: it is "intellectual endeavor," and this is what it is, and if you speak of morals or aesthetics or politics or [550]

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the universe and its structure, then you shouldn't use that word any more. I am very sorry, but I am afraid I have to resign! – this boy revealed that to me.

In any case, this is why I hesitate a little to use Fromm's distinction, although it points very much to the same direction.

Now let's use my own, namely authority in principle and authority in fact. The first thing is authority in fact. None of you would be in this room, in this moment, if I were not for you, in a limited realm, an authority in fact. But I *hope* nobody is in this room who considers me to be [an authority *in principle* ! And your questions and criticisms, [551] the open ones and the much more profound, hidden ones – of which I know – show me that I can be safe in this respect ! – I am not authority *in principle* for you. That is exactly what I mean. The authority in fact is a form of life which is going on any moment because we all are dependent on elements in which somebody else has more knowledge or insight than we ourselves have. Every statement about history, for instance, is based on authority in fact. All our images of the past, even about the past in which you already were living as children or adolescents, the past of the First World War, or of the period between the First and the Second World War – everything which happened at that time, you take on authority because you were not there. And today most of the news which you cannot control yourselves, you take on the authority of the newspapers. Now this kind of authority, the authority of him who has immediate knowledge of facts and of him who is an expert in a special realm, is a continuous authority which I would call an authority in fact.

There is a second degree of authority, which is more than this, which we can call the authority of trust. There are differences in this whole realm already in the authority of fact. You don't trust every newspaper equally. You don't trust every reporter about the era of Roosevelt equally. There is an element of trust connected with the factual, and you don't even consider every expert (for instance every professor of theology) as equally trustworthy. There is a whole realm in which an element comes into the picture which is not simply the element of immediate knowledge or of expert knowledge, but it is the element of a character which has proved [in several cases, in many experiences, to be [552] able to be trusted because, very often, what he said or demanded proved to be the right thing, theoretically or practically. Now this kind of authority is of course still a very living authority, and is hard to resist, but is still not an authority in principle. But it *can become* an authority in principle.

Here we come to the third level, the authority in principle which we have for instance in Protestant biblicism, which we have in most perfect, and almost incomparably perfect, form in the Roman Catholic Church, which we have in secularized form in totalitarian movements like Nazism, and which we have in the paternalistic systems of family life where the authority of the father is neither that of the older man who knows more, nor of the man whom one can trust, but of the divinely established authority about everything which happens in the family.

Now this last form of authority is the authority in principle. It can be defined in the following way: There is somewhere in reality a place which is not only the bearer of expert knowledge or immediate experience, which is not only a place trustworthy, because of his character, but which has the quality of infallibility for those who belong to the group of which he is the ultimate representative and authority. This authority in principle, as I would say, religiously speaking, has demonic character. Why? Because here one place beside all other places is singled out to have ultimacy, because authority in principle (or *infallible* authority, which is the same) is the identification of this place

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with God Himself. Therefore the real problem of authority is this ultimate authority, the place which is identical with the ultimate itself. |

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Let's go into some of these examples. Not many of you are able even to understand why a man like Hitler could become ultimate authority for a whole nation of comparatively educated people. He *could* because of an ideology in which the participation in this nation was a participation in a sacramental unity. I come back to these points later when we speak about conformism, and also politics. I had a friend,\* perhaps the most intelligent professor of theology – we studied together – and when the Nazis came I turned against them and he turned for them. This was an act which for me was hard to understand, but in his very first book, which appeared already in the year 1933, when Hitler came to power, he explained it, and his explanation was of real theological weight and made him the Nazi theologian for the whole period, namely he identified the national community with a sacramental community. For him, the blood community of the nation had sacramental character. And now he construed Hitler as the voice of God which has the same ultimate authority as the Bible for orthodox Protestants, and the Pope has for orthodox Catholics. The basis was a religious one. And in the moment in which you accept the identity of nation (from the point of view of blood, especially, as he did) and sacramental community, then it is quite possible to establish an authority in principle, namely he through whom the unconscious meaning of this nation speaks, and voice-of-God then means that this unconscious meaning has an ultimate dimension. So we have here an authority which cannot be criticized any more because it has sacramental consecration.

Now let's take the Protestants. Of course this ultimate authority broke down when it was clear that it was a demonic seduction of the German people into a self-destructive self-elevation———\*Emanuel Hirsch – Ed. |over against all other nations, in theory as well as in practice.

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Now the biblical authority. The biblical authority is based on the identification of the biblical text with the presence of the Divine Spirit, in the Old and New Testament writings. In this way every word of this book is a place of infallible ultimate authority and cannot be criticized from any point of view. The history has here also judged this idea by the very fact of Protestantism being related to secularism, and taking the secular world seriously because God is not identical with the sacred realm; God is related to the secular realm as much as to the sacred realm. If this is the case, then the realm of scientific research has its own religious dignity, by its own rules, by its own honesty, by its own service to the truth. Now if this is admitted, then the historical work done with the biblical books cannot be rejected by Protestantism, and if it is accepted, it is obvious that the doctrine which is usually called verbal inspiration cannot be accepted, neither from a historical nor from a religious point of view: it is a demonization of the belief (which is a Christian belief) that the Bible *contains* the genuine documents about the event on which Christianity is based, namely the appearance of the Christ and the reception of Him by the Church.

But if this is transformed into a place where every word and every sentence has unconditional authority about everything in the world, history as well as physics, then we are in a demonization which is always identical with authority in principle. And the history of Protestantism has destroyed this demonization for most Protestants – not for all – |as the history of the German catastrophe has destroyed Hitlerism (not for all, but for most, Germans).

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Now the Roman Church. Here the situation is much more consistent. Hitler prophesied a thousand years – which is a very small stretch of time, seen in the light of the

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absolute – but he got twelve! The biblical absolutism was not able to maintain itself, even in very early times of the Protestant history, because the Bible needs interpretation. And if this interpretation is done with scientific honesty, the verbal authority of the Bible must fall down. This simple problem of interpretation undercuts the demonization of the biblicistic attitude, because interpretation can never be commanded except through a second authority, which then becomes a first authority. And this was the way of the Roman Church. The Roman Church always said – and I think with historical [justification] – that the Bible is a product of the Church – although the Church is also produced, and re-produced, by the Bible. Therefore the Church must interpret the Bible. And since the Church is identical – for Roman thinking – with the head of the Church, the Vicar of Christ, the Pope, the *pope* has the ultimate authority for interpreting the Bible, and not, as in Protestantism, every layman, and not even every theological faculty, as in early Protestantism often was the replacement of the Pope.

This is a much more consistent ultimate authority, or authority in principle. And it is much more demonic for this very reason. Now why is this so? Because here *one place, in history*, is made the place in which no error is possible; that means, in which the human existential situation is radically transcended. And the formula “Vicar of Christ” is a very good [expression of this feeling. But it also shows the demonization. Now perhaps some [556] consistent thinkers among you will ask, “Why not, if we make an exception anyhow in terms of the Christ, why not in terms also of the Vicar of Christ? If the principle of the existential situation with respect to truth is broken in the one case, why not in more cases?” This is a very valid argument, and the only answer can be that it is necessary to draw the consequence of the Protestant principle and say that even *Jesus* is not an ultimate authority, but that *as the Christ*, he is the *new reality*. It is always impossible to derive, from the words of Jesus, authoritarian statements which claim to be infallible. It is first impossible because the problem of interpretation comes and all the relativities then hide themselves in the form of interpretation. And secondly it is impossible because it is more honest to acknowledge that Jesus is not an infallible teacher but that He is the bearer of the New Reality, of the Spirit, and the Spirit is not an infallible teacher but a creative interpreter who guides into all truth.

Now if this is seen, then we can accept the consistency of the Roman Church and are at the same time radically aware of the fact that neither the Vicar of Christ, nor Jesus in His words, can be called an authority in principle.

If this is not the case, we come into the situation of the Roman Church, where a bondage occurs, even for the Pope. This bondage are the prior decisions of the Church, in Councils and decisions *ex cathedra* by the Pope. Now these prior decisions are called, in the dogmatic theology of the Roman Church, *de fide*, meaning they are matters “of faith” – and “faith” here means: [of the doctrinal authority in its infallible character. [557] If the Pope writes a theological book, he is not infallible; if he gives a decision, as for instance the Assumption of the Virgin, then he is infallible. Now this means: we are now in a situation where a large amount of former and present decisions must be accepted by everybody who wants to be a member, with *good* conscience, of this Church. What’s the result? There are only two possible results – or perhaps three:

1) The one is the primitive acceptance of these things without critical thought. This is always a possibility, and in my lectures on education, you remember I was very hesitant to break this kind of naivete or primitivism, which can be *full of spirit*, in relation to God, and which therefore one should not break wilfully.

2) There is the second way, namely to accept this doctrine and to interpret it. This

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is the way which liberal Catholicism always tries to go. And there is always a kind of margin within which it can do this. But this margin, in the course of history, has become narrower and narrower. The last great attempt to escape the demonic authority of an authority in principle, was the symbolism of the symbolae fideistes [?sp], in the beginning and middle of the 19th century. They were rejected by the Church; this way out was closed. Today we had conversations between Protestants and Roman Catholics. And they were going on for a certain time, and then the Pope came down with the sword of Damocles – which always soars above the head of every liberal Catholic – and these conversations were cut off. And I know Roman Catholics in Eastern Germany with whom I spoke, who are very near to my not quite orthodox theology [little laugh], and who [558] *know* that they are also always in the situation of every moment, perhaps, being cut off. Now this situation makes them in some way heroic – and I must say that I admire them *far beyond* most Protestants, including myself, because they have not the principle of freedom [sic.], which we have, but they are servants of truth, and on the other hand they *belong*, by destiny and conviction, to the Roman Church and want to find a way in this situation to combine their membership, their *living* membership, to the Church, and their honesty towards truth. This is the second and greatest possibility.

3) Then there is a third, namely the consciously orthodox mind which, in terms of rational subjection, accepts and justifies. There is very often, in these people, an element of repression which, as you know from my psychological analysis of repression, always produces a kind of aggressiveness, of fanaticism, a hostility against all critics, because there is a weak point in oneself which has to be protected.

Then of course, if these three ways do not work, then a complete breaking away is the ultimate and often very desperate way out of this situation. Now this means we have here the greatest example of authority in principle, or of what Erich Fromm calls irrational authority.

Perhaps we should, besides this, go to the family authority and the authority of society, because this is something even more actual for most of you than the other two forms. Now the family authority is normally an authority partly in terms of expert – in this case called maturity – partly in terms of trust. But it goes often beyond this: there is sometimes a religious sanctification [of the authority of father or mother] [559] which has almost papal or Hitlerite character, and where the same phenomena then develop. This sanctification, which makes the authority of the parents into an authority in principle, has all the dangers of the three great examples in the history of religion and politics which I gave you. And perhaps the dangers are even greater because this authority is implanted usually earlier than all the others by the reality of the parents, from the first day on, in the family life. Here the same consequences occur, the terrible inner struggles of the children, and often also of the parents, between their feeling that they have the duty to maintain the authority of those things which they think are true, and good for their children, and the feeling that this perhaps is not the right way – but they *don't know* which decision to give, and they feel permissiveness is not the right way either. Then in the children who not only have the element of trust, where a very personal form comes in, but also accept something of the sacred character of the family authority, if not perhaps consciously, certainly unciously, and the breaking-away from this is one of those inner struggles and conflicts which most younger human beings have to do, and it *cannot* be avoided, they *must* do it, and they are always tragic, i.e. always connected with tragic guilt on *both* sides, the side of the parents and the side of the children.

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When we look at this whole situation, then we must obviously say: the human situation is such that an authority in principle cannot be accepted, must be rejected in all its forms. But this doesn't mean that *authority* must be rejected. And these two sides of authority – authority of expert and authority of trust – must be there. *Both* of them are actual in the reality of the tradition. |

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This brings me immediately to the problem which belongs already to social ethics, namely tradition and revolt, or tradition and autonomy. Now how is this relationship? Religion is usually identified with tradition because of the long authoritarian history of the Church and the continuous relapse to authoritarian elements, even in the *anti*-authoritarian Protestants. Tradition must be understood in the following way: it must be understood as the life substance of our historical existence. And there is one irrefutable argument about this, namely language.

Whatever you reject, in the tradition which comes to you, you can reject it only in terms of language, even if you don't speak out, even if you only *think* – but we are *thinking* – in universals – and universals are real only in words, for us. Therefore language is that element of tradition from which nobody can extricate himself because in order to do so, he *needs* the traditional language itself.

The same is true of all other realms. On no place can one start completely anew. America is especially interested in this problem because the history of the United States is the history of a new beginning, or a radical way, as it has seldom happened in the history of mankind. Therefore the historical sense, which is also the sense for tradition, is often very poorly developed in this country, and historical knowledge cannot be presupposed, if you teach theology or philosophy, or any other thing, for that matter. So the question is: In how far can rebellion really make [one] independent? Now the answer cannot be given in abstract terms, but the rebel should realize at least one thing, that he always rebels in terms of elements of the past |which he puts against other elements in order to break down a fixed authoritarian system. On the other hand, the traditionalist who is willing to maintain all the traditions doesn't know that his act of maintaining them is already an act of transforming them, namely of taking them into the category of the situation out of which he wants to reestablish them. So we have here the situation that, since there cannot be authority in principle but there must be authority in fact, so there cannot be a tradition which is immovable, but there must be tradition even for those who rebel against a fixed tradition. They can rebel against it only in the power of elements which are present *in* the tradition. This, I hope, gives some answers. [561]

Now I will then come next Tuesday to the sociological-political realm more directly because Thursday is an unknown holiday [i.e. Patriot's Day – smiling – laughter], but we still have three hours, which will give us ample possibility ...