

Religion and Culture by Paul Tillich: Lecture I

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

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2025

(version: 11. Mai 2026)

-by Paul Tillich
Harvard University
Fall & Spring, 1955-56

Sept. 27, 1955

... The function of the university is ... to provide ... Only if this is the case, then the danger of a widespread popular culture can be encountered. And we are responsible for this, we are responsible for preserving the academic tradition. This is supposed to be a warning about a popular prejudice against abstract thinking, which we can find everywhere. The word "abstract" has become more or less a word with the connotation of name-calling—a depreciative word. But there is no thought which is not abstraction. And as we shall see, it is an expression of human freedom that he is able to abstract, namely to abstract from the concrete situation, from the concrete moment in which he encounters reality. Without this possibility, man would not be man, he would not be free. This is the basic definition of his freedom, that he can transcend the given situation in the power of the language, and language dwells in the realm of the abstract. Therefore I would say that complaints about abstraction in thought are like complaints in color and painting: if you complain about the fact that painters use colors, then you do exactly the same thing when you complain that thinking demands the "toil" of abstraction, and I at least cannot release you, in these lectures, from this toil and this labor!

In order to show you the organization of this course of lectures, which goes through the whole year, I need to begin with some of the most abstract concepts, namely those which constitute the title of the lectures: "Culture and Religion." And I will do so instantly. But before going into this real work with which I want to start today, I must make a few technical remarks about the procedures. First ... I want questions from you whenever the spirit drives you. But then the spirit must move your right or left hand in order to stop the flux of my words! And I will do that and will receive your questions and, as far as I can, will try to answer them. I belong to that school of academic teaching which believes that there is not *too* much difference between lecture and seminar, that in *all* academic work, the dynamo—the "yes" and "no"—are needed; that the wisdom of the professor pouring down from his unfortunately too high desk to the seats where the listeners are sitting should be counterbalanced by the radical questioning power of those who are sitting there. The one side is never good if it remains alone. |

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Then there is another point, namely the reading! You will get a reading list without any special prescription—there is no prescribed reading in these lectures, but there are recommended books which will help you—for what?—for resisting me! And that is exactly what I want. For this reason, these books are chosen, and in due time (probably not before the beginning of next week) you will get a list of such books in all the different realms of culture to which I will refer very soon.

Then the question which is unfortunately predominant in the hearts of some students, namely “What are the requirements?!” Now, I believe most or all of you take these lectures for a grade, and therefore I think I must say a few words about it. At the end of each semester there will be small term papers—“small” meaning no more than 20 pages, but there is no limit towards less than that, especially for those who, like Einstein, are able to write fundamental ideas on three pages! For others, I would recommend not to go too much below 15 pages. So take this as a very non-academic measurement, and one great desire: don’t use handwriting for these papers (I will remind you of this later), but use typing, because handwriting is a matter of guessing, and the professor might guess wrongly, and then it is your damage!

I will probably develop perhaps 10 or 20 questions from the range we will have covered in each semester, so that you must choose three or four of them in the different realms of culture we will discuss, and write four to five pages about each of these questions, *not* repeating what I said (that will never give you more than a low “B”), but criticizing what I said and developing your own ideas—that can immediately bring you into “A.” But we will deal with this much later.

Lastly, there are rules in this university that a full-swing course of lectures should have three hours. Now I can give only the two hours, on Tuesday and Thursday, and the Saturday hour will be given by my colleague and assistant, Professor Walter Leibrecht. He will discuss what has happened the week before ... , answer questions of understanding, and leading to the problems which will then appear in the list of questions for the term papers, so that it is of great advantage that all of you (at least those who want to take the lectures for a grade) attend these Saturday hours ... Now this is all about technicalities, which are a nuisance but unavoidable ...

We now go into the matter itself, namely the outline of the lectures, which is ... matter itself, because the outline is identical with the structure of our Western culture. To give you this outline, I must immediately go into the difficult task of finding out what |culture [3] is, and what are its different functions.

The cultural functions of man can be described in a general way as the creative encounter of the self with itself and with its world. I repeat this:

Culture is the creative encounter of the self with itself and with its world. It is the greatness, the dignity, and the danger and distortion of human existence that man can encounter himself and that, because he can, he has a *world* which he also can encounter. “Encounter” is a very useful word—I would like to introduce it, more than it has been used, into the philosophical and theological language, because most life processes are processes of encounter. We are used [to hearing], much too much (and I will discuss the reason for this later), that there is a world opposite to us, at which we are looking, which remains as it is up to the moment in which we recognize it or change it. But this is not a true description of man’s relation to his world. The true description is that we are in a continuous process of encounters, of meeting reality, of impressing ourselves upon it and of being impressed by it ourselves. We can describe this situation also as mutual participation of the subject of the encounter with the object of the encounter.

When we encounter an intensive culture, we then participate in it, in its power-of-being, its intensity, perhaps its beauty, perhaps its exciting character. And it participates in us, it becomes a part—that is what “participate” means: it takes a part of us into its possession, even if it is a very small part of the glimpse of the eye. In this sense, all life has the character of participation through encounter. In this participation through encounter, both sides are always changed. I am not the same which I was before I came into this room. Now I am here, you look at me, you “participate” in me, and I “participate” in you by what I say. This mutual participation changes you and changes me. This mutual change is going on in every moment of our life processes. This is the “encounter” which makes life life. Therefore I believe that it would be very [much] more precise if we describe the subject-object relationship between ourselves and our world, not so much in terms of looking at it from outside and controlling it from outside, but that we describe it as an encounter of a mutual participation. This is more precise and should be used much more than it is usually done. |

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If we speak about culture, then it is a special kind of encounter: it is creative encounter. Not every encounter is creative—most are transitory, and nothing lasting is created by them. But *some* encounters are creative. What does that word mean? “Creative” comes from mythological language and was first applied to the gods and their creative power, and to the God of the Old Testament in a special way: creating the world and everything in it. From there, it has been taken and applied to man’s activities in an analogous way. Let me make a footnote here. I am sometimes a little worried about the use of the word “creative” in connection with culture, especially when I have heard from my children that they have lectures in “creative writing.” Now here the analogy to the divine creation is very far away! [laughter] Nevertheless, one may use that word wherever something is produced which didn’t exist before and which has the power-of-being in an independent way. If this is the case, then perhaps the analogy to the divine creativity may have some sense ... But otherwise, please be a little more cautious with the journalistic use of the word “creative.”

In a creative act, both sides—the subject of creation and the object upon which the creation is exercised—are transformed, and in such a way that something qualitatively new, which has power-of-being, of resisting non-being, is created. Wherever we encounter a cultural creation—e.g., my favorite example for all this: a painting—its colors, lines, light and shadow are used by a subject (the painter), and something new comes out which, if it is a good or great painting, has the power-of-being, of lasting from century to century, and to radiate this power-of-being on those who look at it.

That is what I mean with “creative encounter.” Religiously speaking, I would say the divine creation can be called “original creativity,” which goes on in every moment of time, here and now, and which makes that something is at all. Human creativity continues this original creation and makes out of it that “new” which we call “culture.” This analogy alone shows how highly we must value man’s cultural creativity. It is a point in which he is in analogy to the divine creativity and has the power of continuing the original creativity of being-itself.

Now what does the creative subject encounter in cultural creativity? He encounters the subject himself, and the world to which he belongs and from which he is separated at the same time. Did you ever think about the marvelous fact that each of you sitting in this room is the center of a world? *Each* of us has a world at which he looks and to which, |at the same time, he belongs. This is the situation of all life, but of course in animal life it is only environment, in human life it has infinite dimension ... We all belong to our world

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and we all look at our world to which we belong. This is one of the most fundamental and miraculous characteristics of human existence, and out of this possibility culture alone can arise. It is the freedom of the self from himself and from his world. He has the power of looking at himself, an astonishing power; and he has the power of looking at his world to which he belongs and does not belong.

Now these are things which I only can point to, which are the foundations of every doctrine of man. But how can you have a doctrine of culture without having a doctrine of man? Man is that being who is able to create a culture, and he is able to do so because he is not bound to what is given, he can transcend it, he can go beyond it, he can create beyond it. We must therefore say: only a being who is free from the given moment, who can go beyond it, who can transcend it, is able to have culture. To understand what that freedom means, we must make this difficult and intricate description: Man encountering himself and his world; he himself a part of his world, and, at the same time, being opposite to it and looking at it. I call this “freedom.”

The word freedom has at least 20 different meanings, and some of them are so distorted that if you discuss them, you are thrown into this ruinous, obsolete discussion which has been performed in philosophy for centuries, about determinism and indeterminism. I want to creep behind this impossible discussion, impossible because the presuppositions of it make a solution impossible. I want to describe what is our immediate experience, and our immediate experience is exactly what I said, that we encounter ourselves and our world, and that we are free from both of them. Therefore I would say: instead of wasting time and passion with discussing the insoluble problem of determinism and indeterminism (both concepts are equally wrong!), describe what is really given to us. And what is given to us is the possibility of speaking, of having language, and that means of transcending the concrete case, abstracting from it, and going to the universal. This is the basis of all culture. Those naturalists who want to derive everything human from the animal situation are always in a real despair about the fact that even the highest ape is not able to learn language, which every human child is able to learn in the course of the first two years of his life. Why? [Because he has a self which he can encounter, which he can transcend, and the world which he can encounter and which he can transcend. [6]

Now if we speak of freedom in this way, which can be verified by the very act in which we speak about it—using words, using universals—then we must conclude: culture is the creative act of that being who is free from himself and free for himself, free from his world and free for his world—“freedom” meaning the power of transcending the given situation, the power of going beyond the here and now, the immediate sense impression, the immediate emotion, the immediate idea which comes to our mind, stopping, asking, and getting answers.

Don’t be afraid—this is very difficult, we will return to it again and again, because it is the presupposition of every philosophy of culture, and as we shall see, it is the basic possibility of religion also.

Now I want to give you an outline of the different functions of man’s creative encounter with reality—or, as we call it, his culture. I already referred to the fundamental [example] of these functions: language—the first, fundamental, and all-pervasive expression of man’s freedom from himself and from his world, and for himself and for his world, is the power of universals, in other words, *the word*, and the combination of words: language. Language, therefore, must be considered as the basic cultural function. And it is not by chance that the nation that is more responsible for Western culture than any other one, and on which we all are dependent, whether or not we know it—the Greeks—centered their philosophy

around the concept of the ΛΟΓΟΣ [*logos*], meaning "word," but meaning much more than "word," meaning the power of man to grasp reality in a meaningful, understandable (or rational) way. The Greeks were right in putting the *logos*, or "word," into the center of their thinking about the relation of man to reality, wherever culture is taking place. Language is the basic cultural function, and it is the most flexible of all of them. It is present even if it is silent, without voice. All cultural functions are accompanied by words. Even if we look at a picture, silently, words are continuously present, namely the universals which we use in looking at a picture, or at a piece of nature. Language is present in all cultural functions, in the concepts of science, in poetry, in the law, in the ethical commands, in the symbolic expressions—poetry and religion. Language is all-permeating, and therefore the first discussion we have to make after I have given you concepts of culture ... and religion and their relation generally, and in our present situation, is to deal with religion and language. [This is usually not done, but there is no possible understanding of the relation of culture and religion without an understanding of language and religion. Much unnecessary fundamentalism could have been avoided, in the history of Christianity, if the theologians and philosophers (the ones from the one side, the others from the other side) would have realized that language is present in religion as much as in any cultural human creativity, in spite of the fact that religion in its essence is not a part of man's cultural creativity, but in a similar relationship to it as man is to his world: belonging to it, and not belonging to it.] [7]

This is the first consideration. After we have finished the fundamental analysis of the concept of religion and its relation to culture, and especially a section which is very important for me, some description of the way in which our present-day, 1955, Western culture, these two realities, are related to each other. I don't want to speak "in the air." I have learned a little bit, I hope, from those groups who know that all cultural creativities have roots in the social, economic and political situation. But after we have discussed this I will come (as the first concrete discussion) to the relationship of religion and language.