Religion and Culture by Paul Tillich: Lecture XIII

A digital edition of Paul Tillich's Lecture "Religion and Culture"
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[140]

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Questions from students:

This question is a good transition, perhaps, to the lecture I am starting now:*Question*: Does scientific thought contribute to the breaking of religious symbols and myths, *à la* Bultmann?*Answer (Paul Tillich)*: Now "scientific" can be used in two senses. One is the sense in which I have used it in the last lecture, namely natural sciences. The other sense is methodological. In German the word *Wissenschaft* combines both meanings. In English, for some historical reasons, the term *scientia* (science) has almost been reserved for natural sciences of a mathematical character. So the question here can mean two things. From the point of view of the narrower concept, mathematical sciences, I would answer: they have nothing to do with the question of historical research, to which I turn now. If "scientific" is meant in a larger sense, namely as methodological, then certainly the interpretation, the historical understanding, of the biblical sources has a *lot* to do with the breaking of the myth.

Perhaps there is another question—I don't want to run ahead too quickly. Since there is not, I run ahead!

Lecture:

The general subject is the relationship of religious truth to cognitive truth, and we wanted to proceed in three steps: scientific truth, historical truth, and philosophical truth. We discussed last week and the week before, scientific truth. The most important point perhaps was the very last one on Thursday, namely the question of ideology, the question of projection, in another terminology; the question: Can genesis, the becoming of something in the mind or in society, determine about its truth |value? My answer was, [141]
it cannot. There are many ways in which an idea can come into existence, but no way as such refutes or confirms the truth *within itself*. For this reason, I warn you, *always*, not to confuse these two questions, of genesis and validity. I may add here perhaps one thing because it is of such practical importance for our thought in our daily lives:

Let us imagine that you discuss a problem of a life decision, an ethical or vocational decision, with a friend. And after a certain time, he tells you: of course, you must think like that because you come from this suburban sociological background.—If then I were in your situation, I would answer: Yes, and you must think like that because you have

neurotic traits in your character!—This is the only answer you can give. And then what is the next step? I used to say the next step is that one of the two says to the other, "So let's stop this and have a drink!" [*laughter*] Now this is a caricature of the method which confuses genesis and validity. Probably he is right when he tells you that the fact of your coming from a special suburban surroundings enforces your ethical judgments. And probably *you* are right when you tell *him* that the neurotic elements (everybody has some) in his character structure enforce *his* theoretical—political or theological—judgments. But you only can continue asking: So what? That is the situation. That is all our situation. And you can, if it were not for grades, deal with me in the same way and say, "We don't come any more because we can deduce this from your being born in the year 1886, in the middle of the high-capitalist society of Central Europe; you are a German and nourished in German romanticism; you are a neurotic with extreme guilt feelings [*laughter*]; so everything you tell us here is nothing other than |the expression of [142]
these facts which we know anyhow. Why shall we listen to you?"

Now I think these two caricatures which I gave you show clearer than any abstract definition what I mean with the confusion of genesis and validity.

I have labored under this problem not so much by myself—I learned the difference as a student already—but in talking with people, that it is really necessary to speak of it very definitively. And perhaps one more remark should be made. There are situations in which it *is* justified to apply the genetic method. These situations can be described as situations in which the man with whom you talk shows a complete inconsistency in his thinking—not that he makes logical mistakes (that, we all do when we discuss something) but that he has a well-rounded point of view, and on some places he makes statements which are completely un-understandable in terms of his point of view. Then I would say a compulsory element has entered the consistency of his thinking. If this is the case, then the problem of validity can be complained, or supported, by the question of genesis, but only in such extreme cases, when you have in your discussion a compulsory resistance, not against something *you* say (when you call it compulsory, that may be your *own* compulsion that you call it so), but if it is inconsistent in an obvious way, in the whole of the other man's thought. Now this is something which, I also would say, you have to apply to all the great figures of the past. If you deal with them and have a picture of them which is in itself consistent, whether you accept it or not, then you have discussed with this man of the past (let us say, Martin Luther) in terms of his basic ideas. But then you come to some point in which he suddenly becomes stubborn and compulsory, |for instance about [143]
biblical literalism, taking suddenly a biblical word literally, while in the totality of his thinking literalism would be excluded—then you have to ask: now what does that mean? This cannot be understood in terms of his whole system, so it must be understood in terms of remnants of the past, or of a special historical situation in which he was forced into such a thing—e.g., the Marburg Confession. But be very cautious in this method; always be prejudiced towards each other, and toward any figure in the past, that he knows what he is talking about and that he *means* it, and that it has some place in the whole of his thinking. And refute him in terms of arguments, but not in terms of sociological or psychological analysis, except in extreme cases where it is obvious that you cannot deal with him in terms of rational discussions. Of course, nothing in the world is absolutely obvious, so there is always the possibility that you make a mistake, but in any case, this is the practical, the pragmatic criterion which I give you in all such kinds of discussions. For this reason, I suppose it is not entirely useless to listen now to the next lecture, even after everybody completely analyzed the situation sociologically and psychologically.

6.2 Religion and Historical Truth

Historical truth has a quite different character from scientific truth. History reports unique events. Every historical event is once, unique, and never can be repeated. Every physical fact can be repeated as often as we can produce the external conditions. You can never produce the external conditions for a historical constellation. It has gone forever. Therefore you cannot test historical truth by repetition. You can test it certainly by *other* methods. Scientific processes, you can test again and again, and it is one of the great advantages of the sciences that every special scientist |can test the experiment by [144] which his predecessor came to a special result and can find out the mistakes or the truth of them. Nothing like this can be done in history, not even in biology, not even in the psychology of an individual person, because even the conditions in which an individual lives are beyond repetition: his life process has gone beyond the moment in which you have first observed him. He is not the same tomorrow that he was today. Therefore you cannot subject him to a test of repetition. Or you can do it only in some realms which can be abstracted from his life process, and all test methods are based on such abstractions. But if you want to know the total life of a person, then this total life cannot be repeated in any moment of its whole process.

And so it is with history as a whole. Historical events are not subject to experiment. But they are subject to an experience which is, to a certain degree verifiable, or verifying. Here we have an analogy to the physical experiment in historical research, namely the dealing with documents. If, concerning the same event, you have two independent documents which point to the same fact, then you have a high degree of probability that the assertion is verified. But I would say "a high degree" of probability—you never have more than this, in *any* historical research, even if it refers to the last year of your own life, and your own personal experiences. You can ask others who were with you, you can ask your memory, you can do a lot of things, but you can never trespass probability, you never can reach that amount of verifiable hypotheses which you can reach in science.

What does history do, in its work? What does the historian do? He does three things— |and if he doesn't do these three things, he is not a good historian, and I will give you [145] immediately the consequences of this ... The first and basic is that he tries to state those verifiable facts which are important for his enterprise. Now I bring in here the word "important," which I will explain much more. But the first thing is: verifiable facts, verifiable in the very narrow limits of historical probability, which can never be trespassed and which can never reach the state of scientific hypothetical probability. That's the one thing.

The second thing he does is: explaining. Explaining means to give an account about the origin of the facts, of the way they came into existence, of their relations.

The third: he must *understand* them. This is the most discussed point in historical work, and the only really worthwhile point in all historical enterprise, namely to understand the *meaning* of the explained facts.

So we have three things: describing—as it actually has been; explaining—how it came to this; and understanding—what it means.

In doing all this, the historian behaves differently from the scientist. The scientist must remain in a complete detachment from the content of his research; he never can go beyond it. The historian tries to keep the same attitude—and rightly so—with respect to the facts: "in the year so-and-so, Caesar crossed the Rubicon." That is a fact, and this fact must be assured, and it can be assured only by the detached analysis of all the

documents which point to this fact.

Then he has to explain, and there, a little bit more of participation is involved. It is |*still* as much detached as possible, but it is not completely without involvement because [146] it presupposes a participation in those who *act* historically, and in their motives. And if you *explain* Caesar's attack on Rome, then you can find, and you always find, more than one motive. And you evaluate the weight of these motives and thereby you come to an involvement in terms of an analogy which you make with yourselves. Unconsciously, every historian puts himself on the place of the great historical actors, otherwise he wouldn't be able to explain anything. For instance, he must understand what ambition means, what will-to-power means, what the feeling for justice means, what anticipation of danger means—and many other things like that. And he must be able to put these motives into the right proportion. This means involvement, and is more than mere detached analysis.

Then there is the third and most difficult thing, namely understanding. Understanding is an act of total participation. Let me give first an example of a text. How can you understand a text like a Platonic dialogue, or a biblical text? What do you do if you try to understand it? You try to use your organs of understanding of the realm described in this text—in the one case, a philosophy, politics, or aesthetics; in the other case, religion or ethics—you must participate with your organs of understanding just in what has happened, in the text. But now something very difficult occurs, namely it occurs that your organs of understanding do not leave the text unchanged, but something *new* is created: the understood text, which is not only the text as it "*stands*" there, but it is also the text as it has grasped you, or as you have grasped it. |Now this produces the [147] mystery of understanding, which is one of the most important things in all humanities. And this is not only a matter of us sitting here, 3000 or 2400 years *after Plato*, but it is also a matter of Plato himself: when he tried to understand his *own* texts, he never understood them—of course it is humanly impossible—exactly as he had written them. All of us who ever have written books or papers which they have preserved, and read them again after a certain reasonable time, in which something happens in their own development, will realize that these texts do not mean the same to them now than they did at that time; you don't know any more exactly what they meant at that time. They mean often something not absolutely different, but quite different. This is one of the most interesting experiences. And I would like that sometimes, some of you, or some other *doctorandus*, would sit down for two years, or ten years, and look at the more important philosophers who had a development, and show the self-interpretation of their own texts by these philosophers in the later stages of their development. And they will find astonishing results! They are the *first* one to create a "third" out of the text and out of their own means of understanding. Then their disciples follow—and how *disciples* understand masters, or teachers, is very well exemplified in that saying by Hegel which is probably apocryphal, but in any case is very good, as most apocryphal sayings are: "I have only one pupil who has understood me, and he has misunderstood me!" [1] Now this kind of thing is something which one should not take in terms of understanding or misunderstanding. All the pupils in the Hegelian school have understood him, |but have [148] made something "third" out of him, by their own organs of reception.

The same is true, of course, of the biblical literature. And since I have to speak anyhow about it more than in my former lectures, in these remarks on history let me say

[1] In private conversation, with myself and Horst Bürkle, then a Union Seminary colleague student, now a specialist in world religions in Germany, Prof. Tillich expressed a doubt whether even Prof. James Luther Adams had understood him rightly.—Ed. My substitution for PT's "cryptic".—Ed.

immediately the following: *There is no one who has not made something"third"out of the biblical texts and his participation of understanding in them.* Therefore the history of commentaries is a continuous history going on through all centuries, and the present-day commentaries contain the same texts—almost the same, with very few changes—and in most cases where *exactly* the same texts are used, the commentaries today say something quite different than the commentaries by Origen or Augustine or earlier commentaries. Now this means that the commentary to a text is a creation of a special type of truth: it is the truth of understanding. But don't misunderstand *me* now! I do *not* mean to say that the commentator, the interpreter of a text, simply makes something new out of it, says his *own* thought, in terms of a commentary. Then he is not a commentator—then he is a systematic theologian *[some laughter].* And I know some commentators who were systematic theologians and who used—for instance Karl Barth on Paul's *Letter to the Romans*, written *in order to express* Barth's *theology*, using the Pauline text but not even *intending* to give a real commentary, in terms of understanding of Paul. Now this is an extreme case, and we have other people who did the same thing, and sometimes a very fruitful case—I still believe that this commentary on Romans is Karl Barth's by far the best book. But you shouldn't take it if you want to understand Paul.

Now the same was done, for instance, by another very good book, which I *also* would call perhaps his best book, namely Heidegger's commentary on Kant, which is a really great book, in which he interprets Kant existentially, or existentialistically, and this interpretation is a *great work* of philosophy, a tremendous thought. But if you want to know what Kant *has said*, please don't use it and quote it in your papers about Kant. But if you want to *relate* |possibilities in Kant with present-day *existentialism*, then use [149] it—it is the best book about this.

Now here you see what the truth of interpretation is. The truth of interpretation is: you try to find out, with all your heart and strength, what the author really has said. You must be an excellent philologist in order to comment on one sentence of the Old or New Testament. You must know the languages—and here I make a great question-mark about present-day theological or also philosophical education (if it is the Greek or Latin authors in philosophy), and you must be able to see these verses in the light of the contemporary literature, ideas, use of words, etc.—all what we call philology. Then you must try to understand the meanings. And if you try to understand the meaning, you create something "third." Now this makes a fact understandable which I really indicated in terms of the interpretation of the Bible—now in more than 200 centuries, 2500 years, about, when we add the Old Testament comments and interpretations which are partly in the texts of all Bibles themselves.

Then another example in a much larger sense and nearer to history as a whole. Take Greek culture. Greek culture has been interpreted, from the day of its existence on, first by itself—for instance by Aristotle, in his *Politeia*, then by the Romans, then by the Germanic-Romanic nations, then by the Middle Ages, then by the Renaissance, then by the Enlightenment, then by classicism, then by modern realism, and today by the *tragic* feeling towards the world, and the rediscovery of Greek tragedy. Now as you have this whole history of interpretation of Greek culture, you cannot say, "Some people were better acquainted with the facts than others, and the nearer to Werner Jaeger, the better one knows about the Greeks." Now he himself would deny such nonsense violently; he knew that his teachers *also* knew Greek and Greek literature. But you must say something quite different, namely that according to the different situations in our own history, the encounter with the Greek reality—after the philological problems where there is progress

and better insights, have been solved—that after all this has happened, another image of Greek reality occurs. And the *great* historians are those who give us these images. They know the facts; |otherwise they would not be historians at all. They have explanations, [150] which is a difficult job, open to many errors. Beyond this they understand, they participate in, the reality of Greek thinking and living, and out of their participation, into which they bring their own whole reality, they give us a picture of this historical phenomenon which we call Greek culture. And this picture has truth, it has the truth of creative understanding, which is a very definite form of truth. There are three levels in it: the factual understanding, which is empirical and has analogy to physical knowledge and for which experimental methods can be used in the sense of documentation. It has the hypothetical element of hypothetical derivation of one fact from the other. And here hypotheses have less probability than any physical hypothesis has, but they have *some* probability, and can be corrected all the time.

Then there is the understanding, which makes the historian great, and gives us, through his eyes, a new picture of the past which is always also our own existence, because we belong not only to our present and our future, but also to our past.

So I can say: from *scientific* knowledge, the explanation and understanding is distinguished in history by participation, but this doesn't make history, poetry or epics. Early history was told by the epic poets, by those who told the epic story, like the Homeric stories, on the marketplace to all people. Now history does not have this character. It has the detached factual inquiry. It is not mythological or legendary truth, nor is it epical or poetic truth. But it is the truth of its own right and in its own character.

Now we come from here to the great problem of the relation of religion to historical truth. If our definition is justified, that religion is the state of being ultimately concerned, if faith is ultimate concern, then we would say that faith cannot guarantee the factual element or the explanatory element, and that faith lives in the element of meaning. But to the cultural meaning of a reality of the past, it adds the dimension of ultimate concern. And it can do this to |any secular text, to any picture, and it can do it to religious texts. [151]

This gives me an occasion to make a differentiation here, not in personal terms but in terms of reality itself. Every historical situation can be interpreted in cultural forms—philosophical, political, educational, humanistic, whatever you want to call it—you can understand it, as for instance I gave you the example of Greek culture, which has been understood differently in all periods. And this is also true of all biblical literature, of all religious literature: you can understand, in this way, the literature of the Old and the New Testament. It is Jewish cultural history, and the cultural history of an early sect whom the emperor, Augustus, called *Christiani*—you can do that. But there is another dimension, the dimension of ultimacy, and *this* dimension can be applied *also* to *all* the past, not only to the religious sources and to the churches and their history, but also to the secular sources and to the nations and their histories. You can try to find what is the ultimate meaning of such a thing as Greek culture, as you can find what is the national meaning of such a thing as Old Testament culture. And if you do so, if you ask the question of the ultimate meaning, you make a theological analysis, you try to find out the religious meaning in its ultimacy. And this is substantially in all culture—you remember my basic statement that religion is the substance of culture and culture the form of religion. Therefore all religious texts are *also* culture (they have cultural form), and all cultural creations are also religious (they explain, indirectly, ultimate meaning, ultimate concern).

Now what is historical truth, if you apply the religious dimension, the dimension of

ultimate concern? It is not factual truth. In the name of faith, you cannot guarantee facts. Facts are a matter of detached experimentation with documents, and can never be reached beyond a high, and in most cases a low, degree of probability. Faith cannot guarantee explanations. *Why* Judas betrayed Jesus is not a matter of faith, but a matter of many different hypotheses, whereby even the fact of the betrayal, what *was* betrayed, is a very difficult problem. This is not |a matter of faith. This is a matter of valuation [152] of possible psychological motives in this man and in the situation, but that that event in which Judas has played a role, according to the tradition, has a dimension of ultimacy, and that this dimension may concern some people ultimately (certainly those who call themselves Christians): that is what faith can say about history.

Now I will go into this more fully, but this is the first answer, which we must keep in mind, that the factual and the explanatory levels are not a matter of faith, that the truth of faith is the truth in the dimension of ultimate concern, which can be found in historical events in spite of the insecurity of our factual knowledge about them. The consequences of this analysis are very far-reaching, and I will discuss them next time.