

# Religion and Culture by Paul Tillich: Lecture XVII

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

Transcribed by JJ Warren and Michaela Durst

2025

(version: 21. April 2026)

[195]

Thurs., Dec. 1, 1955

Tuesday I started the discussion of religion and philosophy and gave as the basic solution that the philosopher, as human being, has an ultimate concern which expresses itself in his philosophy; and that the theologian, as dealing with the *logos*, uses the categories and structures of being as they are developed by the philosopher.

Now let me do something rather difficult, namely to go into the discussion of a few basic attitudes in philosophy in order to show where and in which way, behind the philosophical discussion, ultimate concern is manifest—or in other terms, in which sense the philosophers are consciously or unconsciously theologians, by their very being philosophers. Only if this can be shown concretely, in relation to special philosophical attitudes, is the argument carried through. But I warn you: this is not easy, and it demands *some* kind of philosophical knowledge.

Let's first take the classical discussion between nominalism and realism as it was going on in the Middle Ages at the end and the beginning of the medieval philosophy, while in the middle development, on the high point of the Middle Ages, there was a kind of compromise valid in medieval thinking. But then, at the end of the Middle Ages, nominalism, which had been tamed, so to speak, by strong realistic elements, broke out again and destroyed the whole mediating system of medieval thought. Today, especially in the Anglo-Saxon countries, the nominalistic tradition is the determining one. It was somehow so already in the Middle Ages. Duns Scotus (which means Duns, the man from Scotland) and William of Ockham, taught in England. Following them, in some way, English empiricism and English nominalism became powerful in the 18th century and were very willing to receive those elements of nominalism which came from the Continent in our century, especially the school of Vienna, which produced the large movement of symbolic logic, and logical positivism generally. [196]

Now this situation has consequences for the whole philosophical discussion in the Western world today. Let me first tell you what the main point is. The question is whether there are only individual trees or whether treehood, the quality of *being* a tree, has an ontological standing, a "*besides*" the individual tree. *Realism* in the Middle Ages means that the universals have some kind of reality. Certainly, they do not have the kind of reality which the individual things have; they are not a second world beside the given world. But they have the reality of determining the growth of every tree into the *eidōs*, the image, of a tree. This was called realism. To make the understanding easier for you,

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what was called realism in the Middle Ages is usually called idealism today. The meaning of the words has turned around almost 180°. The reason for this is an interesting problem of the history of philosophical thought, but I cannot go into it now. In any case, the question remains very much alive. And today the discussion is going on between logical positivism and ontology.

Now it's obvious that in this discussion, a lot of philosophical arguments can be used. They have been used as early as in the later period of the Platonic school, of Plato's life himself, when Aristotle argued against Plato's ontological realism and brought out most of the later arguments for nominalism, although he himself was not a nominalist at all. Since that time, the problem never came to rest, and today, when some people defend ontological questions and others deny that these questions are meaningful—as for instance Carnap in Chicago does, when he criticized Heidegger because of his use of the concept of being—then we are exactly in the discussions with another name, and other ways, of Plato or Aristotle, or of the Augustinians of the old school (Bonaventura) and the Augustinians of the later school (Ockham). [197]

Now this discussion is not a play of concepts and is not only a matter of arguments in the realm of philosophical analysis, but behind it is also an ultimate concern, and from the point of view of this lecture, where I am not supposed to go into this discussion as my real subject, I have to do at least *one* thing: one must try to show that in this discussion, philosophical arguments and expressions of ultimate concern are always mixed with each other, and that it is important for every discussion (and especially every discussion about the relationship of religion to these problems) to distinguish the philosophical arguments from the expression of ultimate concern.

Now take the philosophical argument against extreme positivism. Extreme positivism is finally pushed into that corner which was daringly expressed in the second part of this century by a movement called, in German, "dadaism"—the word *da-da* means "there, there"—"there-there-ism," if you want an exact translation, a philosophy which cannot do anything else any more but raise the finger and say "there-there," because everything *beyond* this would be the application of a universal and would mean the truth of something which is *not* only there-there, but it's here-here, and on many other places, i.e., has something in common. Actually, the Dadaists, in all their absurdity, did a great service: they were the *reductio ad absurdum* of extreme nominalism. They showed that if you radically give up universals, you necessarily have to give up language, because language moves in universals. And if you read one of the Dadaistic poems, you will find that there are indeed no universals, but there's no sense either! [*some laughter*] And this was the necessary implication. [198]

Now against this kind of nominalistic radicalism, the philosophical argument taken from the meaning of universals is valid as a philosophical argument and has always been defended by rationalist idealists or, in the Neothomistic school, realists in the medieval sense. This definition, I would say, is valid. Even those who attack this definition use universals in a way which they *cannot* defend from their own presuppositions.

Now this is the inner philosophical struggle. Here the theologian, or the religious observer, can sit in the ranks and look down into the arena where the philosophers fight with each other—he is not concerned about this, or at least not necessarily except if he is a philosopher himself.

But then the nominalists answer, and although they cannot defend the attack against their dadaistic implications, they can attack realism with the same fundamental argument which Aristotle used against Plato, namely that if you give to the universals an

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ontological standing of their own, *besides* the individual things, that you then reduplicate reality. Aristotle called this argument the *tritōs anthropos*, which means that here is the individual Paul and there is the individual John, they have something in common: both of them are men. Now man himself becomes |a kind of new reality, a third reality *beside* [199] the two of them, and that means the “third man,” the *tritōs anthropos*. This argument is very valid and is the real danger of realistic thinking, and theology is *full* of such wrong realistic thinking. But there is an argument of which we have become aware since the Middle Ages and again in our modern period, namely the collectivistic danger of realism. Realism, if it is carried through radically, as it was in some periods of the Middle Ages, devalues the individual and would declare, in our example, that the common humanity of Paul and John is important, but not they as individuals. And this was a *real* danger of the Middle Ages. If this danger had not been recognized and attacked *by* nominalism, the Middle Ages would have become a relapse into a kind of magic realism without the acknowledgment of the importance of the individual personality. A relapse to primitive collectivism was the danger which was overcome by the nominalistic criticism of realism.

Now here you see that this is not a matter of mere magic, but it is a matter here also of ethics and a philosophical argument against the extinction of the individual.

As far as that, philosophy goes—although already the theological implication indicated itself in my last example.

Now we come to the theological problem implied in this discussion between positivism and ontology. In ontology there is not only the acceptance of the universals as powers of being, which always determine that a tree becomes a tree, but there is *more* involved, namely that experience *of* power-of-being itself. And *that* experience is a matter of ultimate concern. I have often been criticized from nominalistic theologians who of course wouldn't call themselves nominalistic—they call themselves |“biblicistic,” although they [200] are nothing but the heirs of Medieval nominalism, in their arguments—I have been accused of using the term being in a way which contradicts the personalistic character of religion, and especially of biblical religion. Now to this I want to answer—and I think *all* ontologists in theology, from the earliest periods up to present theology, and give the same answer in essence—namely that being is not a hypostasized universal which is, so to speak put beside reality as *another* reality, but is the experience of a quality in all realities and through all reality, namely of the power of being over against nonbeing. And this is a matter of ultimate concern because every human being is in every moment threatened by innumerable forms of nonbeing, of destruction of the structure of being. Therefore ontology is on the *one* hand a philosophical decision, to be defended with philosophical arguments on the basis of the meaning of universals; it is on the *other* hand an expression of ultimate concern about one's participation in the power of being itself.

And then the opposition. The opposition comes from a special power of being which in some way transcends all others, namely the power of being which we call “personal.” Here the nominalist argument receives its religious dimension, namely that the bearer of ultimate concern can only be he in whom the ultimate itself becomes conscious—and this is the person. Therefore a philosophy in which the person is swallowed by being, is a philosophy which is not only a matter of philosophical arguments but which is a matter of ultimate concern about the dignity and ultimate significance of personal existence. | [201]

Now I hope that the distinction—which is the real emphasis in this discussion—has been as clear as it can become, in these very difficult heights of abstraction. But I will repeat it again: the philosophical arguments between nominalism and realism—or today, between logical positivism and ontology—go around the meaning of universals. And there,

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they have their place, where the theologian has no right whatsoever to interfere and to tell them where to go. And this is decisive— and here I feel very much on the side of Protestantism against Roman Catholic tendencies which were more than ever before supported by the present pope, to give judgments about philosophical arguments. This is not the business of the theologian and should never be and never could be, because it would demand the breaking of the honesty and freedom of the *philos-sophia*, of the radical asking [of] the questions of being and *that cannot be done*. Philosophy *cannot* follow any lead in this.

But if you discuss with philosophers, or one or the other group, you can show to them that there is a dimension in their thought which is not simply a matter of philosophical arguments, but which is a matter of encounter with reality as such in the *totality* of one's being, and not only in the realm of logical arguments. If you show *this*, then you have not only a business but [also] a duty and a possibility not to interfere in the arguments but to show that here an ultimate concern determines the picture beyond any argument—for instance, in some cases, which I often have found, a lack of an experience of that dimension which I describe as the experience of the power of being— a lack of feeling for the threat of nonbeing. You can often find that, and then of course you cannot [convince] [202] a nominalist or a logical positivist that something is lacking here. But we must be very cautious if we *do* such a thing. Sometimes you will find that the same logical positivists have a corner in their minds or in their lives where they *have* this experience of the power of being and express it either in writing poetry, or in *loving* poetry—and in *all* great poetry, the ontological dimension is present. So they tell you, “I don't *deny* this encounter with reality, but it is poetry!”

Now this is the question to which this whole thing finally boils down, namely the question whether in the realm of philosophical thought it is possible—and if possible, certainly necessary—to point to the same dimension which also is expressed in religious symbols or in poetic symbols. And to *this* question, I certainly would say “Yes!”

Or take the other side. If you have a philosopher who is a strict ontologist, then there is a point where you can show him that his concept of being is non-dynamic and non-personal, is sub-personal, but that since he himself *has* being, he neglects the dimension *which he himself is*, and that this is not a matter of philosophical argument alone, but that it is also a matter of ultimate concern. And here then we would come to the great differences between East and West: the valuation of the person, which was *maintained* by the nominalistic development in the Middle Ages, and the loss of this as we find it in many Asiatic religions and cultures.

Now what I wanted to give to you was tools for discussions with philosophers or, if you are philosophers, tools of understanding the theological dimension, of which I am speaking. I told you this is a *difficult* thing and it must be applied in every special moment in a [different way, with skill and with love, i.e., the desire to understand *why* a human] [203] being is an extreme nominalist or an extreme realist, why he sticks to the limits of logical symbolism, or why he tries to transcend this limited realm. And the answer is: Did he experience the dimension of the power of being or not? Did he experience the dimension of the ultimate value of personal existence or not? In the moment in which these dimensions are reached, then the arguments fall down on a secondary level, where they are justified, and where no theologian should ever interfere. On the other hand, I would warn those of you who come from the *philosophical* tradition more than from the theological, not to put the theologians in one of these different groups, [and] make them, as is usually [done], [into] idealists or mystics, and then refute them philosophically. The situation is not as

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easy as that.

Another example, to which I just referred: the discussion between naturalism and what we *today* call idealism. Here again are a lot of philosophical arguments which are very valid. There are epistemological arguments for both of them—naturalism as well as idealism. The question of knowledge *always* has driven people to idealistic consequences, because the problem of the real, outside of our mind, is an eternal problem, and a problem where idealism has *immediately* speaking, a better answer. Of course idealism does not mean, in this use of the word here, subjectivism, that the world consists only of stream-of-consciousness, but it means that things in themselves are, for us, nothing we can approach, but that the reality as we have it, as we encounter it, is formed |by the categories which [204] also are the categories of our mind, [such] as causality and time and space and substance and quantity and quality. Everything we encounter, we encounter in these categories. This is the justified argument of idealism in the realm of epistemology—this is merely philosophical.

And naturalism can answer in terms of the *resistance* of reality to be dissolved in processes which are dependent on our mind, and the necessity of subjecting oneself to that which is positively given.

In the discussion, there is another point, namely the discussion about the doctrine of man. Naturalism has a strong point here—while its point in epistemology is not so strong—namely that everything which happens in man’s mind has a biological basis and cannot be separated from biology and psychology—or, better, from the bodily and psychic reality. On the other hand every act of knowledge—every spiritual act—every act of decision in the moral realm, or in the social realm—(I call all this “spiritual” with a small “s”)—every spiritual act of man is not only dependent on the biological basis, but is also a break with it, which transcends it infinitely and subjects itself to norms and structures of logical or moral principles. This means the content or man’s spiritual life can neither be understood in terms of reducing it to biological functions or in terms of keeping it aside in dualistic terms as another reality than the reality of our biological basis. Neither a reductionist monism of the biological nor a separating dualism of the spiritual are answers. These are inner-philosophical discussions. | [205]

But now, there is a dimension in which this whole discussion is transcended, and here the problem of ultimate concern comes into the picture. Naturalism doesn’t see that there is a dimension of the essential over against what actually is. That’s the reason why I said medieval realism is very much the same as what today is called idealism. Naturalism is monistic in its tendencies: everything is nature. But if everything is nature, the fundamental distinction between what is essential and what is a matter of existence *over against* the essential, is forgotten. And the extreme of this are some types of existentialism where consciously and directly the element [of] the essence is removed. Here we are in a realm where *theological* implications and dimensions become visible. And now naturalism and existentialism *answer* the idealistic criticism and say: “But what *you* say about *man* is *not* the reality of man. Man is surrendered to existential distortion. You blind the eye of people toward the real predicament of man. You don’t allow to see that man *has* a predicament.” Now these discussions cease to be in the inner-philosophical realm; they reach the theological dimension. And the decisive thing we must do, which is always to be done again—and what I give you here is not a medical prescription: you cannot apply it, simply, but you can use it perhaps in such discussions in order to show where the dimension of the ultimate comes into the picture *unconsciously* in both groups.

I know that in many theological groups idealism is almost identified with religion. If

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this happens, I take, almost unambiguously, the side of naturalism and |existentialist *anti-* [206]  
idealism. I believe that the questionable state of American Protestantism is largely due  
to the fact that it identified idealism with Christianity. I still very often hear, if a man  
is criticized, the answer, “But he is a great idealist,” or “He is idealistic,” or something  
like that—[said] as a religious praise. Now if idealism is taken in its real meaning, this  
is no more a praise than if you say “He is a bad naturalist”—which I heard even more  
often in Protestant groups, and which, in my mind, is a devaluation. Naturalism is nothing  
negative from the religious point of view, as idealism is nothing positive from the religious  
point of view. They are philosophical attitudes and have philosophical arguments of  
epistemological and anthropological character. The problem arises only in the moment in  
which we come to the dimension of the ultimate. And there indeed, very serious problems  
arise, where the idealists miss the reality of man’s predicament, and the naturalists do not  
recognize that it *is* a predicament, namely something in which man’s existence contradicts  
his essence. And *here* is the theological dimension in which religion has opened the eyes.  
Here, religion goes together with naturalism and especially its existentialist development  
in the 20th century, over against idealism. This fight has been done in the last decades  
and must be continued.

On the other hand, religion must fight against a kind of naturalism which forgets that  
this situation is not the *normal* situation but is the situation of distortion of that which  
is essentially good.

Now these dimensions are not a matter of philosophical arguments any more. I remem-  
ber a philosopher telling me: “Man has no predicament.” He said it from his naturalistic  
point of view, |forgetting that there is an essential nature of man which is distorted, in [207]  
our existential structure. What kind of statement was this? (It was in a philosophical  
seminar.) It was a *religious exclamation*, but not a philosophical argument. And that is  
the distinction I want you to make: where are we in the realm of ultimate concern, in  
these discussions? [and] where are we in the realm of philosophical arguments? You will  
find many philosophers who may make such statements. You may find, also, some who  
would say: the world is as it is, as existentialism has described it, a matter of more evil  
than good. And I know how many young people today feel like this; it is understandable,  
in the countries of the present world situation. But it is a matter of ultimate concern and  
not a matter of philosophical analysis and argument.

So we must now finish this second alternative, where I wanted again to show you  
*that there is an arena* of philosophical fights, where from the point of religion, we are  
spectators—epistemology, anthropology. There *is* a *dimension* in which we are *not* spec-  
tators, because the fighting philosophers have come into our realm themselves and say  
there is no such thing as man’s predicament. They say it either as naturalists: “The world  
is as it is, and there is no essential goodness in it”—or they say it as idealists: “The world  
is good, and all distortions are only preliminary and will be overcome by *us*— namely  
the men of good will”—which is the arrogance of the idealists.

Now there is another alternative, to which I cannot go in this moment, but I ask  
you, |more than after any other lecture, *not to be satisfied* with these examples, but to [208]  
get more of them and, in your work as philosophers or economists or psychologists or  
anthropologists or whatever you study, to try to find out where the dimension of the  
ultimate appears, makes itself felt, and where therefore these realms themselves have  
entered the dimension of ultimate concern.