

Religion and Culture by Paul Tillich: Lecture XXXVIII

A digital edition of Paul Tillich's Lecture "Religion and Culture"
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March 20, 1956 [*A very snowy day!*]

I am very glad that as many as there are of you could come! I am surprised and full of praise for you! Of course not everybody could come, probably, and so I would like to ask whether you have questions about this very actual problem we discussed last time about religion, university, theological faculty, etc. It was of course not complete, the discussion, but I hope it brought out the main problems. So if someone has talked about it or thought about it, [and] has a question, please let me know.

Questions from students:

Question: About religious education: you said that the important thing for a young person was to understand or be aware of the difference between the literal and the symbolic significance of the Bible, and other religious symbols. You said it was important for teachers to try to suggest aht.that. [sic.] Can you give *any* concrete means at all by which this could be done for a person of about nine or ten years of age?

Answer (Paul Tillich): Yes, now the person of 9 or 10 years is individuality already. Don't forget that it is already after birth, perhaps before birth, very individual, if you have ever seen a baby. In any case it is very difficult to make a general rule here. But there are moments in which, for instance, children ask: "Is this true?" You know that question! Now this is one of the wisest and most difficult of all *possible* questions, because each of these words—"this" and "true," both these words—are extremely difficult. What does a child mean with "this"? It means a miracle story, or [a supernatural, mythological story. [494] And in the moment in which the "*this*" is *asked* by the child, you have to ask first what does it really mean with it? It takes it literally, probably. So this is the literal meaning in terms of the categorical quality of time, space, causality, substance—"God has sent His Son"—I always give this example—which is taken literally—a story of something which has happened under the rule of the four main categories: time, space, substance and causality. *This is meant*, probably, if this question is asked. The other word, "True," is equally difficult because in which sense is the word used? The child probably uses it in the word "Is it true that it really has snowed tonight?" He just awakens and hasn't noticed anything. Now the mother tells him it has snowed tonight, and he is very happy, but since he likes it, he doesn't believe it as we always do—"Something is too good to

be true”—this simply means it is an expression of the facts. If it is meant in this sense, then again you must ask, is it meant in this sense? Is that the concept of truth? So in both cases—“this” and “true”—both are very symbolic words. But if the child asks this, then something has happened to him, namely the child *doubts!* Now on the basis of what does he doubt, when he asks this, on the basis that it doesn’t fit his ordinary worldview, the categorical structure of reality in which such things ordinarily do not happen—now if this is the case, then of course the first indication is given that the next step has to be made by the teacher or the parents, and to show the different “this” and the different “truth,” which are possible in this way, and perhaps you have to quote a poem and to see that there are levels of truth which are different from the truth whether there was snow last night. |

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Question: My question is this: In your last lecture you distinguished three types of truths, or truths on three different levels, such as truth in the realm of subject-object experience, and truth in the realm of good and beautiful, and also existentialist truth. Now you said that these three types or levels of truths are interpenetrated, but they shouldn’t interfere in each other’s realm because then eternal conflict results—

Answer (Paul Tillich): Yes. Yes.

Question: But I think that if the third type of truth which is existentialist truth and claims to be the ultimate truth, I think that it should take into consideration the other type of truths and should bring under judgment, if it is, the *ultimate* truth, as a criterion for the other type of truths. So I think that the third type of truth should interfere in the other realms.

Answer (Paul Tillich): Yes, now, “correlate” and “interfere” are two very different things. If you say “interfere,” you mean that the so-called *ultimate* truth—I would say “truth about the ultimate,” which is a little bit different in meaning—if the existential truth or the truth about our ultimate concern interferes with the first two levels, the experimental and the experiential truth, then you make, in the [name?] of your existential relationship to the ultimate meaning of your life, or to the ground of being, or to God (however you want to express it, in this moment), a judgment about the fact whether there was snow in the night or not! Now this cannot be done!—this simply cannot be done! No “photographic” facts can be determined in the name of *ultimate* truth. If this were the case, then the levels were not only mixed, and there [was] mutual interference, but then the ultimate wouldn’t really be ultimate, because then you could say it is an information about facts—of having snowed or not having snowed, or about the relationship of H₂O, the chemical elements in the ocean, which are a matter of experiment and nothing else. And if, in the name of the third level of truth, you make a judgment about the first level (let us stick to the first, for the moment), then you do something |which would also

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Question: I wonder if you could expand a little on the second two functions of a theological faculty in the university. You said the first was that of the professional school, and the second represented ultimate concern, in certain concrete symbols, and the third represented something underlying the whole universe. Could you expand on the latter two?

Answer (Paul Tillich): The first, we don’t need to discuss now because that is the professional side of it, which is very similar to the medical and the law school. There, professional rules are prevailing and people who want to go into this profession have to

know these rules and their application.

Question: You said, like the medical and legal faculties, it represents ultimate concern, in certain concrete symbols and ... [?]

Answer (Paul Tillich): Let me see if I made an unclear formulation ... The first point was: the professional point remains, as in all the professional schools. Then what has a theological faculty to do in the university? There I said that there is an underlying element of ultimate concern in all human life, and therefore also in all studies of anything. That underlying element is expressed in many ways, and is, for instance—I come to this later on today, or Thursday—in the *ethics* of the different professions and their unconditional claims. It is expressed in the way in which many of the representatives of these functions give consecration to what they are doing. It is expressed in some very concrete symbols which appear in art and literature, for the relationship of man to nature, for his scientific mind—there is always a permeating ultimacy in the presuppositions of all these realms. Now this is the one side of it. |

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And then, this is not a function of the theological faculty itself, this is done in all faculties. And I am very eager to emphasize this point because if you do not emphasize this point, you easily come into a situation of theological arrogance: “We, the theologians, represent the *ultimate*; others don’t have it.” Now this is simply ecclesiastical or theological arrogance and shouldn’t be allowed. We should know that the idea of the theological faculty being the “queen of the science” in former centuries, does *not* mean that the others do not have their ultimacy: the humanities had it certainly, because man was considered to be the image of God, which means: in him, infinity is present and he is aware of it. This means that in all of these functions, the element of ultimacy is present, even if hidden. And of course, here theology has nothing to do than to *relate* itself to all these different realms, and I think these lectures which I give this year is the attempt to do this, with the relation to most realms for which we have time to discuss them.

Then there is a third thing, the most difficult one. It is perhaps best expressed in the fact that there is the chapel service in the middle of the Yard. What does that mean? This means that the ultimate concern, which is present everywhere, needs concreteness. And if it is *concretely expressed*, it needs actual as well as imaginary symbols. And that is what happens in the services. So from the point of view of the university, these services are the concretion of that which is present in all faculties. It is one concretion of course; there are others possible—the very fact that we have, on the one side, the Roman Catholic Church, the Protestant churches (which are divided in themselves very much) and the Jews, as the main groups on this campus, makes it clear that the concrete symbols *do not* belong, as in the Middle Ages, to the one all-embracing Church, but that they are themselves divided, but that it is *possible* that in spite of the fact that they are divided, they are different in denominations, they can give to members of all faculties the feeling of the presence, the experience of the presence, of the ultimate in concrete symbols. And to express this, to keep them alive, even in a limited way—for instance in our case, as Protestant faculty, as a faculty which is basically Protestant, although it has elements of Greek Orthodoxy and has strong Catholic elements—if you take “Catholic” in the sense of the Anglican Church, of the Presbyterian Church, but it has no Roman Catholic or Jewish elements directly in its teaching, although it has Jewish colleagues who teach special subjects connected with the Old Testament. So we have here a definite limited expression of concrete symbols in the theological faculty. But we have, on the other hand, the ultimate concern in all faculties, which can express itself concretely for those for whom this concrete expression is meaningful. And the meaning of these concrete symbols is elaborated by the theological

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faculty—that is its contribution to the whole of the university, besides being Business School and besides being ... related horizontally to all faculties.

Question: You distinguished the three functions of the university—research, teaching and education. I didn't understand the distinction between the functions of teaching and the function of education.

Answer (Paul Tillich): Yes, that is very good you asked this question because that is something against which I want to fight; the identification of teaching and education. I think teaching is the smallest part of education, if teaching is defined as communicating contents of knowledge. This is a very small part of education. And I spoke in one of the lectures—I don't know in which—very malignantly about [the abuse of the word "educators," which are always people who come from the teaching profession, or at least teaching institutes, and are "educators" because they administrate teaching— ... [it] has very little to do with education; neither is administration, education, nor is teaching *in itself*, education. Now it can be. Both can be, by the way—even administration can have educational influence. But what is education? I think I made it quite clear: introducing into a reality in which a community lives, expresses itself, in rules and symbols; and the educational process is to introduce individuals into these realms, and at the same time, [it] gives them, through some special symbols expressing this, the freedom to protest against this introduction. That was my education. [499]

Now all this *can* be performed, let us say, in ten percent of the whole educational process, by teaching. But the other 90%—I think 50 at least—are being done by the home, by the surroundings, by the walls of the house, by the situation of the dining room in relation to the studio of the father—these are the realities of the life which are decisive for the balance [of one's] whole life, and innumerable other things like that. Then the friends in childhood with whom you play—and playing with other children, not always under the supervision of nurses in a nursery school, but on the street where they are free to play with each other, is again more educational than most teaching. And so I could go on. Then I told you, I think, about my own experience, that the real educators were the other students who were one or two years older than you and who were higher authorities than the most famous professors altogether!

Question (Earl Scott): Two of the other questions that have been asked today seem to raise a problem that is very difficult: 1) the categories or dimensions of truth; 2) the faculties in the university. Does the answer to that mean then that, for example, the concrete symbol of ultimate concern which [we find in the chapel Yard, *stands*, as far as the other faculties are concerned, stands in place of the [?] reality [?] to the theological faculty itself a symbol of one thing, and another to the other? [??] [500]

Answer (Paul Tillich): No, that is not what I meant, because then we come to the "Queen" situation, and that is exactly what I don't want. But I said that if for some people, the abstract hidden form in which ultimate concern is expressed—in art, literature, law, science (you can name all these things which are going on here—[e.g.] business—I am especially pleased that I was twice asked to speak in the Business School, because they wanted to find, and worked *hard* for that, the meaning of business in human existence today). And I think that is ultimate concern. But they feel that *alone*, the symbols of perhaps doing decent [?] business, or increasing the commodities of life for as many people as possible, that all this is not enough, that life implies other levels, and they wanted to hear about these levels generally, and then perhaps—but that was very [much] behind their questions, and could come out only in moments—more concrete symbols in which these ultimate problems of life were expressed. So you have here what I mean. Now ...

why do they ask me? Because I am a member of the theological faculty, *open* for their forms and experiences of ultimate concern. That's the whole thing. And that is, I think, what the theologian should do. They should be open for *their* ultimate concern, *if they deal with them*.

Question (P.H. John):— ...

Answer (Paul Tillich): Now I would be in principle—that is my European background—*against all seminaries*, although I lived 22 years in Union Theological Seminary. But I could do so *only* because, from the very beginning, there was the interrelation between Columbia University—not as intensive as it is here [in Harvard, but it did exist. And this [501] interrelation is in my opinion absolutely necessary for the education of theologians—that is the first function; for the simple *professional* education, it is absolutely necessary. Then it is necessary for the openness of the theologians—professors and students—for the other activities of so-called higher education, or high teaching, or university—however you call it. Then the third, namely the relationship of these other faculties *to* what is going on in the theological faculty. And the very fact that ... you were in Union Seminary for many years ... the other side, namely the looking of the university to what is going on in the divinity school was not as fully developed as it is here, and I think this is a great mistake. Now if you have the isolated seminaries, which are under church rule, then I would say they are very dangerous for the spiritual life of the country because they keep the ecclesiastical groups in isolation from what is going on in the totality of the educational life.

Question: I still cannot understand how you distinguish these different ultimate concerns in these levels of the faculties. Are they the same ultimate concern, or are they different?

Answer (Paul Tillich): This is very simple. Ultimate concern *qua* ultimate concern are always the same, simply because it has this name “ultimate concern.” It is *ultimate*, and in this sense it is always identical. But the *content* is always different, the way in which it appears *through* the concrete elements. And this is different in the great religions, it is different in the daily-life work of everybody in every country and in every religion. Take the same Protestant group, take a very narrow one—I don't want to name any—*[laughter]*—in them, even the people who are shoemakers and who are businessmen [and [502] who are taxi drivers, although they all have their symbolic expression in the same way, let us say, concentrated in the creed of that church, nevertheless the way in which they *take* these concrete symbols in relationship to their jobs, is already different, i.e., the immediate experience of the ultimate concern—if they all say “Jesus is the Christ”—they all do that (let us suppose so, in a special group)—but what that means for them is colored by their personal destiny and therefore is different in each of them. And in the same way, I would say, in a community like that, where there is no such a common creed for all people, but there are different creeds and many people without a creed at all, perhaps the majority in the secular university now—there the ultimate concern is colored by very many elements: of personal character, of communal character, of a character of their functions and activities, the way in which they have encountered reality—we all have encountered it differently. Even the encounter with nature is so different. Some people really encounter the ocean only as a mass of H₂O; others encountered it as an object of poetry, others as a metaphysical symbol, as the Chaos; others as the majesty of God, others, as the *Book of Proverbs* and *Job* [describe it], as that which is put in boundary lines by the divine Wisdom [?]. You have innumerable encounters with it. And that means the concrete symbolic expression is different.—Another question.

Question: You say that in religious education you must distinguish at an early age between the symbolic and the literal, so that they won't be confused. Now many believe these symbolic facts are grounded in literal truths, e.g. literal miracle stories and literal bodily resurrection of Christ. Are you safe in not making an assumption that these are not literal truths, and if they are, isn't your whole system ready to fall apart? |

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Answer (Paul Tillich): It *always* falls apart, in the view of every fundamentalist. [*laughter*] That is the presupposition which I accept immediately. But this presupposition doesn't prevent me from giving my point of view, and you will not deny one thing which perhaps explains *why* I speak as I did about religious education, because I have experienced what it means, in myself and in many others, when, after the literalistic period in the child's mind, the question "Is that true?" starts, and then the answer of many: "It is really true, and you must believe it." Now that is what innumerable statements do. I am always again horrified how even Sunday School teachers say to children, "You must believe that." I think such a Sunday School teacher is a murderer of the soul of a child! So the question is: "What can you answer if a child *asks* that question?" Will you *really* take the responsibility of answering "You must believe that!"—which I think is, in *any* case, destructive. If he then believes it, he has suppressed his honesty. If he doesn't believe it, then he will run against everything religious more and more, and will become empty. So by such a method, you put the child into the alternative between emptiness and dishonesty. Now dishonesty, not in the conscious way, but in the very refined [?] way of unconscious repression, mostly at least. If it is conscious, then it is perhaps not so dangerous; then it is simply the answer against a dictatorial demand, which always provokes such reactions. But if it is done unconsciously, then it is very dangerous, because then, out of repression comes fanaticism, etc. Another question.—You see, these things are very ... [?] for also the university situation here: there is so much in the many little newspapers which are edited, published and discussed and buried [*much laughter*]— |

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Question (same student): You said last semester one should not disturb a person who is living in the state of the unbroken myth. Now you say you should distinguish between the literal and the symbolic. How do you reconcile [this]?

Answer (Paul Tillich): I say only if the child asks the question, is this really true?, then he is not any more in the state of unbroken myth. That is a very simple answer. That is what I mean. You shouldn't introduce that *artificially*, the question. But if the question is there, from whatever destiny it comes, then nothing can be done about it; you have to go.

Question: [—about the Business School and ultimate concern]—Are they just concerned about finding ultimate concern in business—or the Law School, etc.—or is there a hunger for a deeper ultimate concern, and that is why they invited someone from the theological faculty?

Answer (Paul Tillich): Yes—deeper expression—in the realm of the ultimate, there is nothing deeper and less deep. It is or is not ultimate. But the expression can be very traditional and conventional, and can be very deep. And I agree sometimes with you that such invitations are given in order to find deeper, more adequate, more powerful *expression* of that [?] in the ultimate concern. But don't confuse the ultimate concern itself with the expression of it! The holy is always holy, but the way of the encounter is always different, and the way of the encounter can be as profound as it is in *Isaiah 6*, and it can be very superficial as it is in the Pharisee who goes into the Temple in order to boast before God. I mean these are different forms of encounter, but the holy is the holy, the ultimate is the ultimate. |

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Question: Are the Christian symbols by nature superior to any other religious symbols? You seem to deal with them even though they are used only as symbols.

Answer (Paul Tillich): “Only as symbols”: I *forbid* you—don’t use that. [*laughter*]. The first question is very important. In order to answer this question, why I am grasped by the *concrete* power of the symbol of Jesus-as-the-Christ (whereby “Christ” is the symbol and “Jesus” is the event which remains a historical probability)—if I say this, then I can give you reasons for it, and these reasons are ... [??] by conversations [?] which at the same time tries to understand the other religions and to show that there is something lacking in them—for instance, in the great Asiatic religions, there is lacking the positive affirmation and valuation of personality, and in the Semitic religions (I mean Judaism and Islam), there the *law* point of view is so predominant over against the *grace* point of view that I would say, here Christianity is superior. But you don’t need to accept that—these arguments are arguments *ad hominem*, they are not arguments from a point of view above them. But they are given as arguments in the circle of Christian experience, and try to make this experience universal—we cannot go beyond this. That is what the early Church did when it said Jesus the Christ is the Logos, i.e., he has universal meaning in his concreteness. Beyond this we cannot go.

Question: How much is your point of view about an ultimate concern underlying *all* concerns, tied in with your theory of a naturalism which is self-transcended?

Answer (Paul Tillich): I don’t know whether I understood that combination of concepts.

Question: I wonder if a supernaturalist, for example, would be cut off from holding that all concerns are underlaid by an ultimate concern.

Answer (Paul Tillich): Why would he?

Question: He would have to infer God—rather than knowing God somehow directly, by being a part of God—

Answer (Paul Tillich): Don’t say such a word as “part of God”—that is very bad theology. Now I don’t know whether I really grasped the point. Let me try it and, if I don’t, let me ask again, namely the question of whether supernaturalism separates the holy so much from the ordinary form of existence, that it could not say that even in the ordinary forms of existence the divine is indirectly present (or must be always indirectly present). Now it *is*. They would say that in terms of the doctrine of creation. Only some deistic people separate God in such a way that he sits sleepingly beside the world and the world runs alone. That was the ideal position of God for the bourgeois society in the 17th and 18th, and partly 19th, century, where God was alongside the world, and there He could sit and sleep and the world runs according to His rules ... But that is not even good supernaturalism; no good supernaturalist would say that today. [506]

Question: Don’t many theists say that you must infer the existence of God, and if you have the experience of ultimate concern ...

Answer (Paul Tillich): You cannot infer anything ultimate because it makes the ultimate dependent on the preliminary, and classical theology always knew such inference is an impossible step.

Question: You said in a child you should not disturb the unbroken myth unless he asks the question. Don’t you think maybe that mother helps to create a creative mind in the child at times?

Answer (Paul Tillich): By disturbing. There are always exceptions to every human relations, otherwise the religions of law would be right, but they are wrong just because of this. If I give here a rule and you apply it mechanically, then I am wrong and you are

wrong, because reality is different. But if you make it a general rule that the mother or teacher should *provoke* skepticism, that, I think, is simply playing with the fire, and you shouldn't do that. But if there is a special situation, it might be. |

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Question: What justification do you have for the term “ultimate concern” as a good expression for ultimate concern? Why are we not better off in saying ultimate concern is faith, rather than vice versa?

Answer (Paul Tillich): I think I explained that in the very first hours last semester. I said the most ambiguous term probably in all Christianity and all religion and all philosophy of religion, is the term “faith,” because faith is confused with belief *in* things without evidence. And in order to avoid this confusion, I have rejected using the term “faith” except in a whole book, which I have now written, and which will come out some day [i.e., *Dynamics of Faith*], where all these confusions can be rejected. But if I say faith *now*, in this moment here, then the connotations which you have learned from those teachers and parents who say “But you must believe!” are still so strong in the half-conscious of *most* of you that I simply don't dare to use that term. But otherwise you can give me any other term—for instance, in some other context I used the term “encounter with the holy,” or “encounter with the ultimate,” or something like that, in everything secular and everything which is not ultimate. All these phrases are possible. But if you use a traditional phrase, then you must first save this traditional phrase.

Question: If you were placed in a situation of people believing predominantly in an unbroken myth, as a minister how would you speak to them?

Answer (Paul Tillich): Now there you have asked me the most difficult task of the minister. My only answer, which I know a little bit out of practice, is that on the pulpit, where you have a mixture of people, you have to be extremely cautious in applying, for instance, historical criticism to the biblical legends and myths. In direct teaching, confirmation classes or in adult teaching classes, you can speak openly with them, because those who come are *supposedly* already people who ask questions, |at least, and there you can come into a really dialectical conversation with them. But that is different from the pulpit. So the minister has the hard task which he will never fulfill without producing offense here and there. The minister who never produces offense should go away himself and—[*some laughter*] But this is the most difficult form to avoid: dangerous offenses. But it must be done, and we must risk it. We must risk to be failures. I remember a successful sermon by Mr. [George] Buttrick, a few Sundays ago, about accepting failure. Now that is something we must accept, even failure in the sense of doing something which *hurts* others, which in this sense is tragic guilt, but we cannot avoid it. And more than this, I cannot say—there may be practical theologians who have much more experience and survey about it who give you a few *more* criteria, but that is the common problem of the minister.

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Question: [—about the relation to the university]: Is there a difference between the holy and business, or law, or medicine, in regard to ultimate concern?

Answer (Paul Tillich): I said that the whole hour, I think. There is nothing secular in the whole world in which the divine ground is not manifest. And since this is the case—this is the meaning of the doctrine of creation, that in everything that is, the creative ground is manifest. As Thomas Aquinas (who for some of you is perhaps a good witness) says: if we know anything, we know God. And he is absolutely right in this because in knowing anything finite, we know the creative ground out of which it comes—*although hidden*, not directly. Now if you have this, then of course your question is answered: God is certainly present in the law, He is certainly present in trading, in exchange, in producing,

|and then in all the others, the humanities, etc.

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Question: How do you define the concept of symbols: is it against concrete reality, or are you taking in the sense, e.g., the flag is the symbol of the independence of a country?

Answer (Paul Tillich): I take the concept of symbol by distinguishing it from the concept of sign. You can always say “only a sign,” because a sign has nothing to do with the reality to which it points. It can be exchanged, it can be brought under the law of expediency, while symbol is a creation of the collective unconscious in its encounter with reality: it is born, it dies, it has its life, and it expresses, in terms of power, the reality to which it points. This is something quite different from a sign. I repeat, since this sin has been committed here today: don’t say “only a symbol”!—it always means you confuse symbol and sign. You can always say “only a sign,” but never say “only a symbol” !