

# Religion and Culture by Paul Tillich: Lecture XXXIX

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

Transcribed by JJ Warren and Michaela Durst

2025

(version: 7. März 2026)

[510]

March 22, 1956

*Question:* Since a child's feelings are more important than actions or abstractions in his personality development, should we not be extremely careful in replacing meaningful symbols with something which are *only* signs, such as attempting to distinguish between literalism and mythology? Would not the first step to ... the child, in accepting and appreciating his feelings of doubt?

*Answer (Paul Tillich):* Can you explain the last word, "feelings of doubt"?

*Question:* Whether he expresses the doubt or asks the question, actually whether it is an intellectual abstraction, includes *feelings* of doubt rather than an intellectual doubt—feeling of doubt in authority, or what he has been instructed in, or his sense of security.

*Answer (Paul Tillich):* The word "feelings of doubt"—doubt in itself is an intellectual act. But you meant it now in terms of doubt about the trustworthiness of the parents, or something like that?

*Question:* The symbol of God in Christ—whether doubts are always to be accepted as intellectual (*Paul Tillich:* Oh, no.) abstractions, or whether it may be expressions of feelings, insecurity, or—

*Answer (Paul Tillich):* Yes, but the content is always a *content*, and that means logical content, which means expressing itself in *some* way conceptually. You can feel doubt about a theological—or let us say about the bodily resurrection of Christ (let us make it as clear as possible). What does that mean? You are not certain that this fact has ever happened in the way in which it is reported. That's doubt. Now this can be connected with great anxieties, and usually is, if somebody is educated in an orthodox tradition. You accept that also as a description. Well, then, if this is the case, what is the question?

*Question:* The question is: could not we aid him in accepting and appreciating feelings of doubt instead of immediately starting in to tear apart or do away with literal interpretation?

*Answer (Paul Tillich):* First of all, the word "cautious" comes from me, and you repeat it, so that is not the question, and you agree with me anyhow. And the other question is "immediately"; nothing shall be done *immediately*, [in education. A good educator, a good parent, feels what is really in it: is it a *moment's* impression? or is it something which is lasting? Does it produce anxiety?—And all these things. But I

[511]

---

presuppose them. I presuppose that if we speak about these things, we don't take bad teachers and bad parents, but good ones, and *then* the problems become serious. They never are serious with bad ones. Then we can simply say: make them better. That is a problem of education of the educators. This problem we did not discuss. The real problem is: if there are reasonable people, of high standing and high educational possibilities, then what should they do? There I would say: if the period of doubt has arrived, then we have to transfer the mythological contents into interpreted contents. That is all I said. And this of course is a difficult process and may perhaps have negative consequences, but without it the negative consequences are absolutely sure and unavoidable.

Now I think we better go ahead now. Here are questions which I better make personally later on.

*Lecture (continued):*

Now the realm of problems to which we have to go now is announced in the outline I gave you as "Religion and Ethics." This is a very large realm and has to be discussed from different points of view. The first statement I want to make is a linguistic one, as mostly, because all words are distorted and confused. Ethics and morals: how are they to be distinguished? Actually the following thing has happened. The original Latin word, which was used and expressed in English, German, and other Western languages, is *morale*, morals, *moralia*, derived from *mores*, the conventions [and behaviors of a society. [512] This word, however, has received a negative context [i.e. connotation]. Today, if one speaks of morals, then in Germany—as I experienced in my lectures in Hamburg two years ago, and here also, to a great extent—perhaps least in France, the word *morale*, *moralia*, morals, etc., has received the connotation of moralism. So if you use that word, you have a negative feeling against it, as you have for instance against the word virtue, which has become completely unusable in serious and practically relevant discussions. In theoretical discussions, it still has—you are right—but it has not in the ordinary kind of talking. If you say of someone "He is virtuous," you do it with a smile—that is always the characteristic, that a word has lost its original and full meaning. Now the same is the case very much so in Germany, less in the Anglo-Saxon countries, and least in France, because in France, *moralisme* means actually the humanities, the doctrine of man, including ethics, but also the general interpretation of man's essential and existential structure. Therefore the language has tried to escape this word by using a nobler and less abused word, namely the Greek word "ethics," *ethikos*, which is also derived from *ethos*, the behavior, but which has still preserved the possibility of being used. And so today the two words, "ethical" and "moral," are used interchangeably. This is not good! And I make the suggestion that when we (and you, later on) speak about these two words, reestablish the old word "morals," which in English is still possible, in German is not possible any more, I am afraid, and which is easy in France—namely as the reality itself, the moral behavior, the moral act, the moral imperative, the moral contents; and that you use the word "ethics" for the *science* of morals, [for that which we have to do here now in class. [513] That's different from the moral behavior which is demanding in every moment of our lives in some way, while ethics is the study of their sources, of their structure, of their contents, of their validity. Now I at least intend the words in this sense: morals as the reality itself, ethics as the science of morals. In any case, if these words cannot be used, we must invent others, but we must distinguish the two things: the ethical act, and the science of the ethical act. These are not the same, and there should be different words for it. That is the first semantic remark.

Then the second problem is the ethical imperative. The realm of ethics is the realm

---

of *ought to be*. All that we have discussed in all these lectures was *receiving* reality—in the cognitive realms we have discussed, in the aesthetic realms we have discussed—and the communication of received reality in education, which we discussed in the last weeks, in their relation to religion. Now we come first into the realm not of *receiving* reality, but of shaping reality. And ethics are the science of shaping reality in ourselves and in our relation to our world.

The shaping of reality in ourselves and our world stands under the ethical imperative. Here the “is” is replaced by the “ought to be.” In all the other realms, we discussed the “is” and its reception, ... its aesthetic reception and interpretation. We discussed symbols, in which we discover levels of reality which are otherwise cut off from us. Now we come to the other side of our relationship to our world, of man’s cultural activity, usually called the practical side, including ethics, strictly speaking, social relations, law, and politics. In all of them there is an element of “ought to be,” in contrast to the element of “is-ness.” So we must ask: why is there such a thing as ought-to-be at all? This is the first and fundamental question: what does this ought-to-be actually mean? There are a lot of theories about it, but I want to develop my own because it is not the function here to discuss ethics as such, but in *all* these discussions we have had, we discussed the relationship of *religion* to ethics. [514]

The basis for the problem of ought-to-be, for the moral imperative, as I want to call it now, following Kant’s “categorical imperative,” is the distinction of man’s essential being and his possibility of contradicting his essential being. This seems to me the fundamental element out of which everything follows. This means: man, insofar as he is what he is essentially, or, in religious language, by creation, has no “ought” above himself. He is what he is. You remember—and those of you who know my theological lectures or books know that I sometimes speak of man’s “dreaming innocence,” of the state in which he has not yet actualized his freedom. In this state he is what he is, but only in terms of potentiality. Adam in Paradise before the Fall, or the Golden Age, in other classical myths of all nations, is not a real state which once upon a time has happened and about which we could have information, but it is man’s potentiality, his essential structure, he is what he essentially is, but he is it only potentially and not actually. His goodness is the goodness of not being awakened, of not being actualized, as the goodness of the child who is not yet awakened to special problems of life and is innocent *of them*—he is not innocent of others, but he is innocent of them—he is not yet awakened for instance to his sexual potentialities, but once upon a time he *will* be awakened to it, and then the problem arises. This problem is the problem of where the concept of ought-to-be appears. Now he stands before the moment of self-actualization: either to actualize himself or not to actualize himself. In both cases anxiety is in him—in the first case the anxiety to lose himself when he actualizes himself; in the second, the anxiety that he loses his possibilities, his actualization, if he does *not* actualize it. In both cases it is the anxiety of self-loss. [515]

Now human reality is self-actualization. All men, in degree and in different forms, actualize their own potentialities. In all of them, it has happened that out of the dreaming innocence, they have jumped into self-actualization. But in *doing* so, they are not only fulfilling what they essentially are, but also they are *estranged* from what they essentially are, and they live in the ambiguity of both fulfillment and estrangement. Therefore from the point of view of dreaming innocence, of non-actualized innocence, the child is the ideal. From the point of view of *actualization*, the child is that which has to be left behind.

We have both words in the New Testament—which is very interesting. On the one

---

hand the child as ideal of innocent confidence, as Jesus says to the Apostles, showing a child in this state. On the other hand, the strong demands of Paul to go *beyond* the childish state and to become mature by self-actualization. This is not a contradiction, but these two elements are both in childhood and in maturity. The process of maturing is also a process of losing something. But without the process of maturing, no actualization would take place. As an example, I could refer to what we have discussed in the last hours about the transition from immediate participation in the realm [of the myth, without asking questions, and the loss of this by the critical question, and then the possibility of regaining it on another level in maturity. [516]

Now the question was: where does the *ought* come, the *ought-to-be* come? It comes in the moment in which actualization appears as a possibility. I could show this in the profundities of the myth of the Fall of Adam, in Genesis 3, where all the deepest psychological insights about the transition from dreaming innocence to actualization are given. There is the double desire to actualize oneself: vitally—the fruit which is beautiful to look at; and spiritually (with a small “s”)—the possibilities of knowledge and power over nature are symbolized in the Tree. At the same time, man receives the command *not* to actualize himself! He stands between the two anxieties, as I called it: the one which tells him not to actualize himself, and in the old myth which precedes perhaps the Genesis myth, it is the real fear of the gods, that man actualizes and becomes God himself, and this sounds through the story itself, when the gods who at that point are almost described as having a council, a deliberation, where they decide finally that if man is *not* only knowing and *having power*, but is also immortal, i.e. continues eating from the fruit which gives immortality, then he really is God, and therefore they drive him out and let him to be what he naturally is: finite—and that means, returning to the soil. It is not that death is the *punishment*, but it is the natural consequence, in this old, old story of man’s finitude. The punishment is only that he is separated from the infinite, symbolized in the fruit of eternity: the Tree of Life.

Now all this has very profound elements of description of our present state, and so we must use it— [not as a past story, but as something which happens to us all the time—in degrees, not in one act, but this one act embraces all the little degrees of all our daily life. [517]

In the moment in which the self-actualization is done, man is separated from what he essentially is. He is now in existence. He actualizes himself. But he is not what he essentially is any longer. And in this moment the commandment appears. The law comes in between, as Paul has called it. The law appears in the moment in which man is outside of his dreaming innocence, in which he has overstepped the warning voice and the anxiety of self-actualization and has become an actual, historical human being—because *now*, what he essentially is stands against him as commandment. Only what we *not* are, can be *asked* of us as a commandment. Insofar as we *are* what we essentially are, no commandment is needed. And here again the old famous law of all myths and of the whole Bible becomes actual, namely the vision of the correspondence of what was in the beginning and what will be in the end. There was no law in the beginning, and there will not be law in the end, in the fulfillment. Law lasts, *as law*, only as long as there is estrangement. He who is what he is essentially, is not under a law. The content of the law, of course, is, from this point of view, what man essentially is. But now, since he is not identical with it, he is *under* the law, it stands against him, it is not in him, he is not identical with it.

So we can say: All moral laws are man’s essential nature put against him because he

---

is *estranged* from his essential nature. This is the first and fundamental insight which we must have with respect to the moral imperative. |

[518]

Now this includes a lot of critical consequences. The first is: the moral imperative doesn't come from anything else than from our essential being. When I refer to the Ten Commandments, then one could say: "They come from God." But what does that mean? Does that mean that there is a Highest Being who, as all good tyrants do, gives laws according to His wilfulness, or in order to protect himself? That is certainly not an image which is worthy of God, and everybody who has this image of God should resist Him—as one resists earthly tyrants, so one should resist also Heavenly tyrants! "The will of God"—if I use that often mistaken phrase—is our essential being, put against us, in the Commandments and their interpretations by the Sermon on the Mount. None of the Ten Commandments is something which is given to us from outside, but each of them expresses the true structure of man in himself and in relation to the others. There are many consequences which we will discuss next time, with respect to the *concreteness* of the law, but I don't go into this in this moment.

They all are our essential being put against us, as commandment, as that which ought-to-be. It is not only a *god*, who has not power to command anything which is not corresponding to our nature—if He did, and had the power to destroy us, alright! He might, but He wouldn't really hurt the center of our being, namely our inner structure, what we essentially are. And in Christianity the idea that the God of the law is something *else* than the God of creation, is denied, in very hard fights in the early Church against, for instance, a man whom some of you know from Church history, Marcion, whose idea was—this man represented a whole group of people, a whole movement of his time, which put the Creator-God against the Savior-God and made the law, which |comes from the Creator-God, something arbitrary and not identical with the *good* creation itself. Now I cannot go into the history of dogma here, but we shouldn't go in an interest which sometimes appears in radical Protestantism [such] as that of the whole Barthian Neo-Orthodox school. We shouldn't, in this interest, make God a tyrant, His law heteronomous, because that only would have the consequence that we have to resist Him and to look for a God who is greater than this God, as Marcion and his friends did.

[519]

Now if this is clear, then we can go on and say: there is no *other* external authority behind the categorical—or let me preliminarily call it the moral—imperative, either. That which has replaced God, in modern positivistic thinking, is society: the moral imperative comes from society. The profoundest form, I think, in which this has been done is done by Friedrich Nietzsche who, in his description of the genesis of conscience, describes it as the internalization of the rules of a ruling class, which can maintain its rule only if the laws are not forced from outside only, but also put into the internal situation, into the internal feeling of man, made a matter of conscience of everybody, which even works if the policeman is around the next corner.

Now this is the main point of this theory, which tries to show that the experience of the moral imperative ("you *shall*, though *oughtest*, to do this!") is the result of an internalized policeman, the policeman in ourselves. But this policeman in ourselves is a product of a ruling group which cleverly realized that its control of society is safe *only* if *its* interests are affirmed by the conscience of the subjects. |

[520]

Now the question is: What can we say about this refined and almost demonic theory? There are several arguments which show its weakness. One of these arguments is the relation of the upper class within itself, where there are imperatives which cannot be derived in the *same* way, but which are absolutely valid for the ruling group—where

---

does the validity of these rules come in the ruling group? And the second, the validity of some rules even in the revolutionary groups—for instance the criminal groups, who fight against society and its laws, which do not accept *these* laws but accept *other* laws—where does the moral imperative of fair play in a gang, in a criminal gang, come from? Now all these questions show that the relativism of the contents, to which I come later, does not prejudice against the absolutism of the demand itself. And this distinction is decisive. The moral command comes from the unconditional character of the moral imperative itself, no matter what contents it has. The contents are changing—and the question of something ultimate is a question we have discussed too—but first we must acknowledge that the changing contents does not hurt the unconditional character of the form of the moral imperative itself.

How can it be unconditional? Why is *every* person *destroyed* if it doesn't accept the unconditional character of those norms which it accepts, even the norms of a gang? Because in the moral imperative, the person becomes person. This means: its essential being is affirmed by the acceptance of the moral imperative which, by this very fact, becomes unconditional.

Now what does unconditional mean? There is no condition by which you can escape a moral demand which you have accepted as such. If you don't accept it, then of course the situation |is different—if it is changing, as ethics are changing, as everything cultural is changing, when it is different—but in the moment in which in these changing contents you *accept* something, then it is *unconditional*. Here I want to say a word against naturalistic attempts generally, to derive the moral imperative. I have already accepted all the relativism possible—and this is not a point of discussion, with the naturalists—but the point of *discussion* with them is the unconditional character. Take a naturalist who denies the unconditional character of the ethical imperative, *whatever the content may be*. In which attitude does he deny this? In the attitude of the scholar, the philosopher or scientist, who seeks for truth and who seeks *honestly* for truth. Tell one of these naturalists that he will get a higher pay—if such a thing ever would happen!—if he *denies* his naturalism. Then the following happens: the temptation is certainly there; he would know that from the moment on in which he would change his ethical theory for the sake of a better social position, he would deny what is usually called his integrity, he would give up his honesty. That means: in maintaining his naturalistic relativism, he applies the absolute categorical imperatives of honesty and integrity. If he *doesn't*—which is quite possible—he would destroy himself because from this moment on, he would say what he says with bad conscience, and on this basis his self-affirmation as personality would go to pieces. There are of course many escape-mechanisms, compromises, rationalizations—I don't need to go into that now. But *they are only necessary* because the fundamental principle is valid, otherwise no escape-mechanism would be used at all, if we make such a decision. So the honest naturalist, who is willing to become a martyr in an extreme situation for his relativistic |naturalism, affirms what he denies and denies what he affirms. [521] And this is necessarily so. One can derive the normative structures of man as man from things which are *less* than man as man. And that's what Kant meant with the categorical imperative. Therefore he didn't deny not only a tyrannical God, but also psychological motives [such] as fear, as authority—which is not under criticism—and all those motives which can be brought into consideration. They all produce heteronomy. The person as person cannot affirm himself in its autonomous integrity and validity if he doesn't accept the unconditional character of the moral imperative. [522]

Now I hope only one thing, that after I repeated this about twenty times during

---

this hour, you do *not* confuse, from now on, the unconditional character of the moral imperative with the unconditional character of *any special content*. Please don't do this mistake and then say, "Now for the primitives of South America, or somewhere in the desert, there, murder (or something like that) is a very much praised deed." This is not the point which I make here. I *accept* that, with scientific limitations, to which I may come later, but in any case this relativism is a reality and is a reality which one feels even more, perhaps, when one comes from another culture (as I myself do), the European and the American. In spite of their relatedness, there are fundamental differences in the ethical contents, which one notices if one has the boundary line situation of having been a refugee once upon a time. So I don't need to be *taught* this, with the help of all the primitives of the world. [*laughter*] It is already given in the relationship of Americans and Europeans, who are only *partly* primitives! [*smiling—laughter*] But it is a quite different point. [And the decisive point on which everything which must be understood depends, [523] is the unconditional character of the moral imperative itself, and this means that the foundation of ethics *always* has in itself a religious dimension because the experience of the unconditional is always an experience for which we use the word "religious." I hope again, after what I said, that religious foundation does not mean commandments by a tyrannical God, or church laws, church morals, or anything like that, but it means the dimension of the unconditional, which is implicit in the moral imperative whatever the content may be.

Now I was a little bit repetitious in this hour, and intentionally so, because I know how difficult it is to mediate fundamental distinctions where there is less fundamental confusion all the time. But I hope that the sociologists and anthropologists who think they have *caught* you, when they show the relativism of the ethical contents, can be shown by their behavior with respect to *truth* that they have not caught you at all, but that you can *catch them*[*smiling*], if you see what they actually are doing.