

Religion and Culture by Paul Tillich: Lecture XLI

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You remember the three levels in which I tried to describe the relationship of religion and ethics from the point of view of content. In the first lecture we had described it from the point of view of form, namely from the unconditional character of the moral demand, whichever the contents may be. Then the last lecture we started to discuss the problem of content. In doing so, I tried to show that the ethical relativism which is rooted in the fact that the contents of ethics are derived from culture and its changing historical reality, that we need a principle which has *both* the character of unconditional imperative and, on the other hand, the character of concreteness which changes in the realities of the cultural life.

Then I said that this principle is the principle of love predominantly, according to its *agapē* quality, but including also its *eros* quality, and to be defined as the urge for the reunion of the separated, whereby the emotional element is a companion, so to speak, but not the reality itself.

From this I distinguished a third level, to which I jump immediately, namely the *kairos* element, the element of the concrete moment and the concrete situation, the here-and-now. And this here-and-now element in every moral act is in correlation to the principle of love. What does this moment mean? It means that there are no two moments in reality, in every human relation, in social life, in the history of mankind, in the development of the individual soul, which are identical. And since there is always a variation, even if it is a small variation, no abstract law of morals ever would fit. Every abstract law misses the concreteness of the here and now. Now you understand why I said the ultimate principle is not a law, but the ultimate principle is love, because love has just this character: to be unconditional itself, as moral imperative; and at the same time, to be concrete in the concrete situation and able to adapt itself to the *demand* of the situation. A friend of mine, a famous psychologist, always used to say: "Things cry"—they have a *demand* on us. And I take this up and say: situations cry, and we must listen to them. The concrete situation has a silent voice, but a voice which we can hear, if we listen. And this listening is the first work of love, the listening to the absolutely concrete, to the unique which cannot be repeated. The law is *unable* to listen, because it must, by its very nature, remain abstract. But love is not only able to listen, but it is the very *nature* of love to listen, because it unites itself *as* a concrete *with* concrete, as this unique bearer of love with this unique object of love. [536]

From this point of view the freedom of love follows, the freedom of love from the law. The law puts into servitude. Love makes free because it listens to the demand of the situation. And this demand of the situation is not something strange but is the fulfillment of the striving of every being to be reunited with that to which it belongs and from which it is separated—the other one, and the world-as-a-whole with everything concrete which we encounter. So we now have the third level. But I want to say here something about the possibility of this, or this listening and this uniting on the *basis* of listening. I want to use here a Christian theological concept, namely the concept of the Spirit (with a capital “S”), the Divine or Holy Spirit. This word, which needs much explanation, in theological terms, must be used here in a much more universal way. The word Spirit has the same function as what I just called love. And in the greatest chapter about the Spirit, we also have the greatest chapter about love, namely I Corinthians 13, which is started by Paul’s saying that “I will show you higher way of love, of the Spirit, more than any knowledge and ecstasies and prophecies, namely the way of love.” In other words, only where there is a power which overcomes the separation of the separated, there love can be active. Therefore we must ask a question, to which I will come instantly: Out of what does the power to *fulfill* the moral imperative follow, if the moral imperative is not determined by law but by love?

But I stop here for a moment and come now to the second level. Between the first level, the level of love, and the third level, the level of the *kairos*, the moment here and now, there is the level of wisdom, as I called it. This level of wisdom has the character of law, but if we call it |the level of *wisdom*, then its law as a preliminary answer to the experiences of mankind. But it is *not*law in the form of something unconditional. I told you already last time that Prof. Bennett in Union Seminary has called this the realm of the “middle axioms.” The ultimate axiom is love, and love refers to the concrete situation here and now. But between the ultimate principle and the concrete situation, there are the laws which are not unconditional demands, or commands, but which are the result of human experience with the application of love *to* the concrete situation, and which are formulated on this basis. [537]

These middle axioms are those about which most moral theory is going, but if they are not understood as the middle between the ultimate principle of love, and the concrete application of it, then they become the principles of all legalism—and then they become wrong.

Now let’s look at this in terms of concrete principles which have been brought forth in order to describe and define this middle sphere which I call the sphere of wisdom. Take the principles, the principle of equality and of freedom. What about these principles? How can they be understood? Autonomous ethics would tell us they are the principles of justice, and if you have love without justice, then you have not even love, and you have violated the fundamental character of the moral imperative. So you must have a second principle: justice; the principle of love alone doesn’t do.

What do we answer to this? My answer is that justice, as formulated in the middle area, is the *structure* of love, the backbone, that which makes love applicable to the concrete situation; or even profounder: that which makes it possible that we acknowledge the person of the other one as person—this is the principle of all justice, as we have seen when we spoke about Kant’s categorical imperative. The other one is that which we meet, which we cannot overcome, which is the limit for ourselves, against which we run if we try to make him into an object, and to the degree in which we succeed, we destroy him and ourselves. This is the principle of justice. |But this principle of justice is not something [538]

which stands *beside* love, or *against* love. Love is not something *added* to this principle of justice, but love *is*, in its *structure*, this principle of justice.

Let me give an example for this. I know people who have a great desire to sacrifice themselves, in the relationship to somebody else. They do not justice to themselves, and in not doing justice to themselves, they don't do justice to the other one either: They produce a relationship of mutual chaotic self-surrender, which Erich Fromm has called a symbiotic relationship, in which the one is actually exploiting the other by submissiveness in terms of lack of justice to himself and to the other one. But where there is not justice, there may be chaotic self-surrender, but chaotic self-surrender is not love. And so, we can repeat: this middle realm, which can also be called the realm of justice, is the realm in which love finds its structure.

But now, where will we know about these structures? And here I answer: not by natural law (we discussed that) in the sense of the Catholic authoritarian form; but we find it insofar by natural law, as it belongs to the very nature of man in his essential structure, to be a subject and object of love, and therefore of those structural elements of justice which are presupposed in every act of love. In this sense we can use, without the authoritarian element, the doctrine of the natural law. But if we don't use the authoritarian element, which the Roman Church uses, how can we know about the commands of natural law, or about the structures of justice?—which is the same. And there my answer is pragmatic, and the word wisdom is a pragmatic term. Wisdom is *conquered* by experience. Wisdom is not given by command. This experience is personal, but it is first of all a collective experience of mankind.

So we can say: The Ten Commandments, for instance, are not commandments which can be applied as laws but are the result of pragmatic experiences in which the structure of love has come to consciousness of human beings. They are matters of wisdom. And therefore they are in themselves not unconditional. None of the Ten Commandments—except the first, namely the commandment to love God with all one's heart, which simply [539] means the unconditional character of every commandment—which is unconditional. All the others are conditioned. There are always not only concrete situations in which they must be applied in a very different way, but there are always formulations which make exceptions to any of these commandments. Oh, I had a discussion yesterday with someone about the relationship of love to war, to the problem of war. Now if you use the commandment "Thou shalt not murder"—which is the right translation of the Hebrew word—and call every killing in terms of criminal, in terms of war, murder, then you have a very easy pacifist position which has no foundation in reality. But if you understand that murder and killing are not the same, and that the same Old Testament which says "Thou shalt not murder" commands, very often, "Thou shalt kill"—for instance in the Old Testament criminal law, or in the dealing with other nations—then you see the problem about the application of the law. The law always has the two limits: love on the one hand, and the concrete situation on the other. These are the criteria. Between them the law is an advice, an advice born out of human pragmatic experiences and the wisdom mankind has conquered, and if someone acts against the laws, which are matters of experience in one's own tradition, then one is due to be thrown into conflicts, into very serious conflicts. And this is especially true in periods of history in which traditions have come to an end and in which new possibilities have been opened.

Now if this is the case, then I hope we have a possibility to deal with the whole realm of the moral law from a point of view which is not the moral law itself. For instance the stoic laws, to which I already referred: The *stoic* laws are much more abstract, namely

the principle of equality and the principle of freedom. Take the principle of equality—it is one of the most difficult ones. Certainly there is no justice without equality. But equality in which sense? Egalitarianism equality is a very rare event in human history, and certainly not an absolute command. There is one absolute command of love, with respect to equality, namely to treat everyone as a person, as someone [who resists your attempt to use him as a tool, as a means. There is no other point of equality. Now from this follows, in different situations, many different forms of equality. [540]

The democratic form is one form, the liberal form is another—they are sometimes united, sometimes they contradict each other. There is the hierarchical feudal form. There is the equality before the law, which is the principle of equality in the American Constitution. But *we should be very cautious* if we judge former periods of history in the light of *our* concept of equality. And even the Stoic concepts of equality are *determined* by their historical situation much more than by a special abstract formula. There the problem was to give to as many people as possible, Roman citizenship—this was the equality—and to do this also to women and children who didn't have it before, in the ancient law, neither in the Roman nor in the Greek, and certainly not in the so-called barbarian cultures.

Now this was an enlargement. The concept of the slave was reduced as somebody who is not equal in *ultimate* relations, and was finally abolished. But look here at the difficulty of the situation: neither in early Christianity nor in many periods of American history, was Christianity in the position to negate *slavery as such*. The equality in the idea of Christianity, in Paul, his famous letter about the slave Philemon—or what was his name?—Onesimus!—the discussions in *this* country about slavery show one thing clearly, that the Christian idea of equality and the Stoic in both cases was not the same. It was not Christianity but Stoicism which, ideologically speaking, worked for the emancipation of the slaves, because from the point of view of Christianity, the equality, as Paul shows very clearly, is in faith and love, in the relationship to the ultimate which is faith, and in the love relationship to the master—but not in the social standing as a slave who can be sold, who can be treated as someone who has to be obedient, etc.

Now this shows that the middle axioms remain in comparative relativity. They are of course the most universal applications of the ultimate principle, namely love. But none of them [can be identified with a law which in itself is absolute. It is even easier to apply this to the problem of freedom, where the question is always not only “freedom from what?” but also “freedom *for* what?”—and then a very large amount of possible answers are given. [541]

The middle principles are matters of wisdom. They are matters of human experience, and they are products of a pragmatic situation. Now let's say we adhere to one of these middle axioms, or to these creations of wisdom, and come to a very concrete situation—not “very,” it is not a very good word, but “absolutely” concrete situation—to the here and now. *There again* we are in the alternative: do we apply, in the relationship to another being, an abstract law, which is certainly a matter of wisdom but not necessarily the only possible expression of love? Or do we *listen* to the concrete situation and try to derive from this situation a hint to what love demands in this moment? We shouldn't do this arbitrarily—*certainly* not. But we should do it always *in consideration* of the wisdom of mankind, because this wisdom has experience that *trespassing* of the laws can mean self-destruction, and destruction of others. But there is *also* the principle of love, which in all periods of history has shown that trespassing of a given law is a way in which *love* is actualized. Jesus, in his fight with the Pharisees and their laws, continuously deals with

such problems.

Now I think this is the great realm of the *contents* of the law. Here I want to show what is the subject matter of this lecture anyhow, namely that autonomous morals need a depth-dimension, the dimension of something ultimate which gives the content and at the same time liberates from every law which identifies the unconditional demand with a special law. What we really have done here was an attempt where I leave it to your thought, and your experience even more, whether this is a way of overcoming the destructive conflict between moral absolutism which identifies the ultimate with a table of laws, on the one hand; and moral relativism which makes everything depend on the cultural contents. |

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I may perhaps add something here which shall caution us a little bit against the too great emphasis on the relativism. Now I gave you already a few examples of this. If you would say, “There is an absolute law: ‘you should not kill’,” then you should say there are many tribes and cultures where special forms of killing—for instance, blood vengeance and other things—are demanded, so that the demand not to kill is relativistic. This is empiricist-superficial. It is the superficiality in which very often empirical statements are made in this large and vast and newly discovered realm of ethics and anthropology. If the word “killing” sounds like “bringing somebody else into the state of corpse,” which is probably the definition of killing, then you think there are different cultures in which it is allowed what in others are forbidden. *It is not as easy as this!* I would call this “qualitative analysis,” in order to sound scientifically sound. But this qualitative or structural analysis of a culture would show, for instance, that as in the Old Testament commandment, it is *murder* which is forbidden (*qatala* [?sp] means “murdering”), so in many other cultures special forms of killings are considered to be murder and are therefore forbidden under the same law. Here are much more universal experiences at work, in spite of the element of relativism, so that the middle axioms, although they are never absolute, are in their variation at the same time much more structurally uniform than our modern scientific relativism believes. You have the same thing with adultery, where the modes of life, with respect to the sexual life, are infinitely different in cultures—even in the history of *christian* culture, we have *very* different ways (the Protestant is not the *only* Christian form which has appeared in the |history of Christianity—there are many others). But you can also find here that wisdom and experience, pragmatically defined, has produced forms in which fundamental issues, namely the valuation of the other person as person, *however that has been done*, with her or his special rights, is maintained in valid forms so that the relativism is balanced, if you look sharply into the situation, by a structural uniformity—which is not absolute, of course (I would never say this), but which is not so superficially to be covered, as it is in this kind of speaking about the moral laws in different cultures and forms. So, in order to be *careful* here: the main thing in such scientific serious discussions is to be careful and not to use former slogans taken from religion or absolutistic morals, and not to use modern slogans either, taken from a superficial ethnological or anthropological description of different nations and their comparison.

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Now I think this may end these very difficult problems, and very existential ones, for all of us, because *each* of us is always in the three levels: we are always in the very concrete situation, where we *must* make decisions and can only *hope and risk* that we make the right ones—but we may not! We are always in the second realm; we will depend on our cultural traditions and feel them confirmed or doubted in our conscience. And we all *should* relate *both* realms to the *ultimate* realm and ask ourselves whether, in a special situation, it is really a matter of *agape*.

Now I come to the third realm of problems about religion and ethics, namely the question: out of which source does the possibility come to *act* according to the ethical principles, [as just developed? This again leads us to the problem of the law. We speak about the moral imperative—imperative means commandment, and a concrete commandment formulated universally means a law. So the first question we have to discuss in this third realm of problems is the question of the meaning of the law. The law can be understood *only*—if it is rightly understood—as natural law. What does this mean? I spoke about it last time: the law which is the structure of our own being, and therefore not something commanded from outside, neither by a tyrannical law, or a society, or by a totalitarian government, or by fear, but something which is our *own* being. The law, however fragmentarily we are aware of it, is our *own* being—the structure of our being in relation to ourselves and to others. This structure is not something strange to us, but it is *we ourselves*—but in a special form. Law is only where there is estrangement. We stand under the law because we are *estranged* from ourselves and our true and essential being. [544]

Since this is the nature of the law, something very important follows from it. It follows from it that there is *no* law in man's mythological state, from which he comes—in the midst of all nations, called the Paradise—because there man is *identical* with his law. Only if he wants to *transcend* the Paradise by eating [of] the tree of knowledge and power, only then the law appears.

And there is no law in the state of fulfillment, when man again is what he essentially is. But for the time between, it is both law and conquest of law. We are under the law, but there is also a power in us which makes it possible for us to fulfill the law, fragmentarily, but anyhow [to be obedient to it, and in this way to be *beyond* the law. Here again a religious dimension comes into all ethics. If you ask the autonomous moralist or ethicist what is the strength or the power out of which a man is able to fulfill the law, then he perhaps can answer: the strength of his good will, the obedience to the law, the freedom to act as he *ought* to act—ultimately, in the Kantian formula: “You ought, therefore you can,” or “You can, for you ought.” Now this contradicts even many elements in Kant's own thinking, and it contradicts the real experience of mankind in all periods. “*You ought, but you cannot!*” is the reality. And why the “You cannot”?—because in the moment in which there is a law, we are separated from what we essentially are. If we were not *separated* from it, there *wouldn't* be a law—we would be identical with this. There is no law to those who are actually what they essentially are. Nothing is commanded to them, because they do it anyhow—they act in love because love is their reality. But we are *separated* from love, and therefore love becomes the ultimate principle of the moral imperative. [545]

Now if this is the case, then obviously the question is: how can love become united with our actual being in such a way that we are able to fulfill the law, although we are *separated* from our essential being, and that means *separated from* the principle of love? Here the religious answer comes in, and it is that answer to which I already pointed, namely the answer of the Spirit. Spirit means there is within mankind a power of reunion, of reunion of the separated, and which means a power of love which is the source of all strength to act according to the imperative. *Without* these powers—which are called grace, in another terminology [(they are not acts of obedience to commandments, but acts which come out of the totality of our being and drive us to *do* what we are *asked* to do)—as long as these powers (which I also like to call “*New being*,” to avoid the words “grace” or “Spirit,” which have so many difficult connotations today), this New Being is not *only* in those who are Christians or religious, but it is a healing power which makes [546]

reality possible generally and universally. And the decisive thing here is that the power of acting according to the moral imperative is something which *precedes* the law, and if it is actualized, overcomes the law and fulfills it by overcoming it. The law can only be fulfilled in acts which come out of love, out of the reunion with our true being, out of the reunion with ourselves and the others, and where the question “Shall I or shall I not?,” “Can I or can I not?” is not actual any more. Now there are many situations in which you all have experienced this, and if you have experienced this, it is that which the theologian calls “common grace.” This common grace makes people grace-ful, and you would *not* call somebody grace-ful (full of $\chi\acute{\alpha}\rho\iota\varsigma$, or *gratia*) who always [acts] against his own will, obeys a law which stands against him; but you would call someone grace-ful who asks out of the depths of his being and fulfills voluntarily what he ought to fulfill.

Now this is the ethics of *being*, over against the ethics of *ought-to-be*. And I believe that autonomous ethics are *not* able to point to the ethics of being over against the ethics of ought-to-be.