

Religion and Culture by Paul Tillich: Lecture XLIII

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)

April 24, 1956

[562]

[Incorrect position of the lecture or missing part]

The last lecture discussed the problem of the idea and the ideal of personality, in their relation to each other. I came to the conclusion that the ideal of personality and the separation of the personal center from the unconscious elements of our personality, and from the community with other beings, has consequences of a devastating character for Western civilization, that it is one of the causes for the further disintegration of the personality just because it has lost its foundation in the unconscious and communal elements. I don't want to go further into this; we still have three hours—today, Thursday, and a week from today—and I want to discuss the social, economic and political problems of the relationship of religion and culture.

The first is a sociological remark with which I want to start because it has much to do with the discussion of the idea and the ideal of personality. We can say that more genuine than the development of personality is something which one could call genuine collectivism, or original we-consciousness. We-consciousness precedes, historically and ontologically, the I-consciousness. Beings don't feel separated, in the beginning of cultural development, from each other as centered beings. Of course this was always given potentially, but in order to transform this potentiality into actuality, very fundamental events had to happen, and I gave you two of them. The one is the experience of personal guilt, which takes the guilt away from the "we" and therefore the expiation of the guilt away from the chances, from the contingent search for a victim who carries the expiation, although he himself is subjectively not guilty. You find this still in the Old Testament. |

[563]

In contrast to this, the idea became predominant that the individual who did something against the laws of his own being and the being of the group, is responsible for it and therefore must expiate his own guilt. And you remember the other development to which I referred was the development of questioning. Asking the question means separating oneself from the unity with the universe. The universal we-consciousness is dissolved by the human act of asking a question about that with which one felt identical before. Now this identity is cut off.

We have considered, then, the consequences of this development in terms of the ideal [idea?] of personality. Now we go back to the state out of which this came, which one

can call primitive collectivism, or original we-consciousness preceding the ego-consciousness.

Collectivism is in the beginning, and there is a tendency towards returning to collectivism as long as the human race has a historical memory. It is just as in Freud's analysis of living beings of a higher degree who have a tendency to return to the lower degrees out of which they come, because in these lower degrees the problems of the higher degrees do not yet exist. Freud's doctrine of death-instinct in man is nothing but an expression of this tendency to go down again to the non-responsible situation of animal existence, or even to the non-conscious existence of vegetative or inorganic existence.

In the same way, Kierkegaard describes the desire of man to get rid of himself as the phenomenon of despair, because the problem of man, his being a combination of finitude and infinity, is unsolvable for him, and he tries to get rid of it by returning to something which is less than human. [564]

In the same way, all highly individualized cultures have a tendency to return to primitive collectivism. And this is so important because it was a characteristic of our *own* period, where at the end of the 19th century, individualism (in the one sense which I gave you) was developed to such a degree that the individual subject, the completely separated personality, was unable to exist any longer; and especially in the younger generation of the early 20th century, in the different youth movements, the tendency to return to the group prevailed. This was the fertile soil for the other neo-collectivistic movements which appeared both as Communism and as Fascism and Nazism.

Now in order to discuss this situation, I suggest some distinctions. All this has not happened in England, while it happened in Continental Europe. It has not happened in this country either. Why not? Because in England we have another form of existence over against Continental individualism, namely conformism. Let's look at this word for a moment. Conformism can be understood in a merely negative sense, namely as subjecting oneself to the laws of convention, to avoid being outstanding, standing on oneself, or as I formulated it in the *Courage to Be*, the courage to be oneself. Where this is lacking, there, conformism can develop. But conformism is, like all "isms", something which is verbally critical, is negative. Whenever we look at British life, we wouldn't call it conformism in this negative sense, although it has conformistic elements in it; but we would call it a system of conformity. And perhaps it is wise to distinguish these two things and give to the essential description the term "conformity" and the distorted description the term "conformism." Now if this is the case, then we have in England, against the tremendous development of liberal individuality in France and Germany and the smaller countries around, we have in Great Britain a development of traditions which do not necessarily produce conformism in terms of intentional subjection to conventional rules, but in terms of growth which is automatic and has not necessarily the character of an external subjection. This seems to me a very important distinction. This, for instance, accounts for the following little story I experienced a few years ago in England. [565]

I had to give to a group of students and professors a lecture on existentialism, and I developed the main ideas about the human predicament, which we find in philosophers like Heidegger and theologians like Kierkegaard and artists and painters like Picasso, and novelists like Kafka. Now then, I wanted a discussion. There was first a great silence, and then I was asked, "Do you think that this fits the English life at all?" Now I could of course answer in terms of pointing to people like Eliot and Greene and Auden and others, who are supposed to be British by birth or choice, and a few other things like this, and then I asked: Isn't there in the younger generation, in the *youngest* generation, even on places like Oxford and Cambridge, where the logical positivistic tradition is now prevailing,

a new tendency toward asking relevant questions, namely questions relevant to human existence, even in philosophy? And there was hesitation, but there was the feeling that perhaps a change is going on. The same experience, ten years earlier, was [had by my very highly valued friend Karl Mannheim, who came as a refugee to England in 1934 and '35, and introduced “sociology of knowledge”—which was his very special interest—namely trying to find out which sociological group is responsible for a special ideology. This of course means *undercutting* the certainty of these ideologies. So the English people, the educated groups and the professors, to a great extent, resisted his influence tremendously. And only in the catastrophes of the Second World War and a little bit after it—actually only in the years [after] his death, he became generally acknowledged as an important man even for the English situation. [566]

Now this was the resistance of conformity against analysis of the roots of this conformity. And you can find this always, that very self-certain groups are extremely sensitive if they are sociologically analyzed, because they feel that this undercuts the unbroken self-identity of their existence, it undercuts their natural conformity. Of course such resistance *already* transforms conformity into conformism, and the situation in England is very much in the balance now.

Now in this country, the European individualism never was very strong. The so-called American “rugged individualism” is an economic *factum* [?] and has very little to do with ideology, with ideas generally, with the idea of the individual as developed in the romantic and post-romantic traditions, and Bohemian traditions, which we can call post-romantic traditions in Europe. Very little of this existed genuinely in this country. The economic individualism did not express itself in intellectual individualism ... The most rugged individualist became the most pious members of some church and gave millions and billions of money either to these churches or other [good works. Now this is not European at all! [little laughter] In Europe, the state has to do this. [567]

Now on this basis I tried to find out—and I think I found it out just when I discovered the nature of British conformity—what is going on in this country sociologically, and I had to invent a new word (perhaps it already existed, perhaps not): patternization, derived from “pattern,” bringing every individual into a pattern. This is not the same as collectivism or conformism, or even conformity, but it is not individualism either. It is a quite different sociological form for which we need another word. And if this word is too bad English, perhaps you will give me another or one could also say modelization, but I don’t know whether that is much better English—in any case: making, forming, or shaping human beings according to a model or a pattern.

Now this is developing in very radical ways in unity with the urbanization of this country. The so-called “grass roots,” as they are mainly to be found in the middle West, still have something of genuine conformity; they do not have individualism in the European sense, but they have some elements of conformity in the British sense. But in the big cities, the mechanization of life is one of the factors for the subjecting of every individual to a special pattern of life and thought—but not on the basis of a living tradition, as in England, where the cathedrals of the 15th century are as real as the latest, very poor amendments in plumbing. The reality of the tradition distinguishes conformity from pattern.

We are now in this situation here, namely the problem of the pattern. This problem has been sharpened every day, almost, with the new inventions in the realm of public communications, [[such] as radio, movie, and television. There are, in all these things, some elements which one could call cultural goods of the past, which are brought especi- [568]

ally in music, and there is much information, and the information problem leads to these extraordinary things like the \$100,000-questions, in order to answer which, you must empty your mind of every meaningful content to take in innumerable facts, and then you might win the \$100,000 on the basis of this ideal! But this is not the worst part of it. A much worse part is the *silent production* of patterns of thought which are not enforced, as in totalitarian countries, by police power from outside, but which are mediated by the very soft form of taking from you, without any external enforcement, many hours of your day, and from children often, all the non-school hours of their day, and what is going on in school under the heading “Education for Adjustment” is often not much better—so that from early time on, this patternization is going on.

Now here we are before a problem, namely, under these circumstances, is the resistance against neo-collectivism in this country more possible than in the totalitarian countries? In the totalitarian countries, a resistance is a matter of danger of life. In this country the resistance is a matter of preserving *internally* elements which can be preserved *only* in the situation of solitude. I can tell you a discussion I had in the Business School two months ago, I think it was, about the meaning of business in our time, with very advanced students of a special group there; and the final question which I was asked was: “Now if you sum up all what you have told us”—about the confusion of means and ends, the creation of means for ends which then themselves |become ends without an ultimate end—they all agreed with this—and the advertisement situation and the selling situation, the problem of human relations only as a problem of selling. Then they said: “Now sum up what is the most important thing you would tell us.” Then I said: “What I told you about solitude is the most important thing, because only out of solitude the resistance against patternization on a level in which resistance is broken without pain—with amusing [oneself], with fun, with having a good time—but the resistance is broken—only in solitude can elements of human potentialities, of resistance against patternization, be saved.” I want to give you this answer too: I believe that the great danger in which the personality ideal (which we discussed before) and the working for a neo-collectivism in the *whole* Western civilization, has brought this country, is not so much the resistance against the external forms, enforced forms, of neo-collectivism, as we have them in the Communist countries, and had them (and may have them again) in the Fascist and Nazi countries, but is the process of patternization. [569]

Now I think this should bring to an end these problems, but in any case, I must come now to other questions, and the next question I want to discuss is the problem of religion and economics. Perhaps I should conclude this statement about patternization by saying: Solitude, in relation to an ultimate concern, is the only power of resistance. Not an empty solitude (which then becomes loneliness and, with even stronger force, drives us *back* to the patterns of life, in the gang)—but I mean a loneliness in relationship to an ultimate concern: this is the only power of real resistance. And here I see the relationship of religion and the problems of cultural sociology today. | [570]

Now I come to the economic problem. You have not experienced, perhaps, as much as the Europeans, especially the older ones who come from the 19th century, as I do, the central importance which, in European civilization, was attributed to the economic problem. Don’t push this away by identifying it with the most hated name of the last few hundred years, namely Karl Marx—that alone is not a sufficient explanation for the movements which have happened in Europe and now have conquered more than half of the world. But the explanation is: Marx—as *always* if one man represents something—*represents* something which otherwise is present.

We have in Europe a continuous development of revolution, since the end of the Middle Ages. First the great Peasant Revolutions; then the bourgeois revolutions; and then the socialist-Communist, the revolutions of the fourth [force? i.e. labor? working?] class of society, as we had it in Europe. All these movements had a special relationship to religion. The peasants' movement, the twelve articles of the peasants were done in the name of the religiously sanctified natural law, as derived from the Stoic-Christian doctrine of the situation of man in the Paradise, which was identified with the natural law. In the bourgeois revolution, it was also the religious idea of the equality of all men before God, which then became secularized to the equality of all men in terms of rationality—not of reasonableness—nobody was ever stupid enough to say such a thing, not even Hegel, who is sometimes considered much more stupid than a 10-year old boy—but what these men meant was that man is potentially rational, and that this power of reason in him can be developed equally in everybody, if the chances are given—whereby reasonableness is not identified with intelligence; the differences in [gifts was always accepted. [571]

Now this idea was the religious background of the bourgeois revolutions, and the religious color of it was even visible in the moment in which the Goddess of Reason was put on the altar of Notre Dame in Paris. They didn't [wouldn't have?] put it on the altar if they had the feeling that this is a matter of *ultimate* concern—this is not only a matter of the “third estate” (*le tiers état*), namely the bourgeois revolt against aristocracy and clergy (the first two estates), but it was a real belief *in* social justice (which they wanted to provide) as an ultimate concern. But again the economic situation was in the foreground. Bourgeois society became victorious; it already a long time had become very powerful in the old aristocratic system. And after it *had* become victorious, it didn't want to give up its economic superiority over the working classes and the peasants, and was able to establish a system in which the bourgeois upper classes could stop the revolutionary principles in the name of which they had produced the revolution, and so gave occasion to the next wave of revolutions, namely the proletarian revolutions, by keeping the proletariat under their political and economic power.

The proletarian revolutions also were often done consciously, and always unconsciously, in the name of an ultimate concern, of religious principles, although they were more secularized than the original bourgeois revolutions and much more secularized than the original peasant revolutions in the 16th century. Nevertheless the so-called utopian socialists, in contrast to Marxism, were often sectarian people of a strong religious feeling, applying their religious principles [just as the same sects did in the Reformation period, [572] to participate in the revolution. In all these cases, one idea was extremely important, namely the idea of the third stage of history. This is a very old idea, and its origin can be sought in Joachim di Fiore (whose name you all know), a monk of the 12th century. This man wrote, in the beginning of the 12th century, prophecies on the basis of which he gave the first—not the first, but a very important—anti-Augustinian sectarian interpretation of history, namely that the Trinity is not only eternal but is also *historically* relevant, that there is an age of the Father, and an age of the Son, and an age of the Holy Spirit; that the Old Testament and all before it, represents the age of the Father, that the thousand years of church history represents the age of the Son, and that now the age of the Spirit will come in which the whole society will be transformed, the earthly and ecclesiastical authorities will disappear; every individual will be taught directly by the Divine Spirit; everybody will become a monk. And by abstinence from sexual relationships, mankind and, with it, history, will come to an end.

Now these prophecies had a tremendous influence on the Franciscan movement, and

the later Franciscans revolted against the papal hierarchies in the name of the prophecies of Joachim di Fiore, in the hope that the third stage of history will now start with the Order of Saint Francis. They were suppressed by the power of the popes, and their ideas remained in a more secularized form. And the idea of a third stage of history is from now on a continuous symbol, as you can call it, for such ideas—for all revolutionary movements in the Western world. The sects of the Reformation period used the idea, and later on the bourgeois fulfillers, largely dependent on the sects of the Reformation period, also construed their age as the Age of Reason, which is the last age after all the others are only preparatory. [573]

The same idea, then, was finally taken over by the proletariat, and the idea of the third stage of history, the final revolution, the revolution of the lowest class, which will abolish all classes, was the religious impetus behind the proletarian revolutions. And this is even the case in Karl Marx, who is usually accused by sometimes very questionable Christianity as “atheist,” but who, in spite of his so-called atheism, was grasped by the idea of a completely secularized kingdom of God, which has very similar structures to the religious idea of the kingdom of God *in history*, only in a secularized form without the traditional religious symbolism. For him, in *some* of his utterances at least, there was a kind of original communism—*Urkommunismus*, as he called it—or at least a state of things like in Rousseau, in which the separation of classes did not exist. Then, with the establishment of private property, the differentiation of classes started, and at the same time the tremendous economic development which Marx describes in the *Communist Manifesto*, almost in hymnic praises of the bourgeois society and its achievement. But at the same time, it was the period of the class wars, and now a third period will come: the classless society.

This structure of thinking gave the religious impetus without which no strong movement can exist—if you interpret religion, as I do, as being ultimately concerned.

In all these cases, the problem was the economic situation of the revolutionary classes. First the economic situation of the peasants, and partly the lower nobility, who also revolted against the aristocratic structure of society. Then secondly the bourgeois society, which revolted against the two other classes in the name of their economic interests and possibilities. And finally the proletarian groups, who followed the same lead and opposed the bourgeois society after it had come to a victory. [574]

A very interesting cooperation of philosophical thought and this sociological development can be mentioned here, namely the development from the rationalism (which is critical) to the bourgeois victory (which is positivistic); the revolution of which Rousseau, Voltaire, Diderot, the Encyclopedists of the 18th century gave the formulas, was done in the name of critical reason. In the moment in which the bourgeoisie was victorious, critical reason was replaced by positivistic reason, by calculating reason, because now, that which is positively given should be *recognized*, but it shouldn't be transformed any more. Positivism is the function of victorious bourgeoisie. Therefore the revolutions of the proletariat were again done in the name of natural law, in the name of *critical* reason, not in the name of a given positivism. I cannot go further into this—this is only a footnote which shows the relationship of intellectual problems to such problems.

Now I said that in all these things the economic was very important. Let me come to a conclusion today only with preparing the next lecture by saying a few words about this term “economic,” because it betrays innumerable people. If you say that the economic realm is the basis (as the Marxists say) and everything else is the consequence, is *caused* by this basis, then you make half a dozen primitive logical mistakes, and mistakes which

can easily be discovered. |

[575]

The first mistake is the definition of the economic. What is that? Economy means building a house, originally. It is derived from *oikos*, house. So economy means the whole structure in which man builds its house on earth. This of course is limited, in the language which we now use, to those productions which are basic for human existence, to fill the needs which arise in human life. All this is economy. Now if you say that this economy is the basis, and that the arts and the philosophies and the religions are only the expression of this basis, then you must ask yourselves: let's look a little bit more intimately at this basis. What *is* the economy? Then you discover it is not only *work* done, but it is also work done with special technical possibilities. Now these technical possibilities come out of the autonomous development of sciences—and technical sciences. They cannot be derived from that which *shall* be derived from them. This is simply a vicious circle. If economy *includes* already the realm of the scientific and technical development, then this development cannot be derived from it.

But the same is true in other respects: the problem of want. What does one *want* to have? The Medieval Church wanted something *else* than the American suburban man of today. They are two completely different societies, with respect to *want*. If you *derive* culture from *want*, then you must see that the *kind* of want is already a *product* of culture. So it is again a vicious circle to derive the culture from want, if want is already an *expression* of a special culture. |

[576]

The same is true of the legal forms within which economy is always going on. If you derive the system of law from the economy, then you must see that economy never goes on, not even if two people work together, without some laws regulating their togetherness, regulating the division of what is produced by them, etc. So law is *already* presupposed and cannot be derived from that which *is* presupposed in it.

Now all this does not mean we must turn the whole situation around: that would be an idealistic interpretation of economy which is equally wrong as a materialistic interpretation of a culture *out* of economy. The whole thing is a *total structure* in which every element is mutually dependent on all other elements. Only if we consider society as such a *Gestalt*, a living structure, are we able to understand the relationship of the economic to the others. On this basis we go on next time.