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JASPERS' PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION

(*Editor's Note:* This brief study is an extended book review essay prepared by Richard Klann, associate professor of systematic theology at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis. The book discussed is *Philosophical Faith and Revelation*, by Karl Jaspers, trans. E. B. Ashton [New York: Harper & Row, 1967], 368 pages, cloth, \$15.00.)

This is undoubtedly one of the impressive books in the area of philosophy of religion published in this decade. It was originally issued in 1962 by Pieper in Munich under the title *Der philosophische Glaube angesichts der Offenbarung*. As one of the existentialist opponents of Heidegger, Jaspers has had a remarkably pervasive influence on philosophers and theologians who wish to retain the importance and meaning of "transcendence" along with their humanistic program.

Trained in psychiatry and psychology, Jaspers moved to the study of philosophy and became professor in Heidelberg from 1921 to 1938, when the Nazis forced him out of his chair. After the German collapse of 1945, he contributed to the restoration of the university until he transferred to Basel in 1948.

The development of his philosophical investigation moved toward a transcendent existentialism (*Psychologie der Weltanschauung*, 1921; 4th ed., 1954). The core assertion of his philosophy (in *Philosophie*, Vol. II, "Existenzerhellung") holds that the ultimate or the most interior reality of man's existence cannot be grasped by means of an objectifying discursive knowledge but must be aroused by a challenging appeal to man. For this reason he also rejected Heidegger's existentialistic ontology as well as the claims of philosophical anthropologies for their unreliable rigidities. This judgment logically followed from Jaspers' conviction that ex-

istence can be apprehended only if the same process includes the force of the transcendent.

Since transcendence also cannot be grasped or possessed by discursive knowledge, the task of philosophy becomes "preliminary play," that is, the exercise of conveying as "ciphers of transcendence" the metaphysical teachings transmitted by history. This effort is intended to provide the necessary conditions for the existential apprehension of historic teachings by means of personal experience. In his analysis of the history of philosophy, Jaspers asserted that the development and exposition of the dominant ideas of Western thought must necessarily include the thoughts and concerns of Eastern and Asian thinkers, both for historical and substantive reasons, and because Asian thinkers also display an awareness of the "ciphers of transcendence."

Jaspers believes that

fewer and fewer people can satisfy their inmost needs in present forms of ecclesiastically authorized faith in biblical revelation. These forms will not unite the globe, not even the West. For almost two thousand years the Christian, ecclesiastically fashioned faith in revelation has failed to realize the ethos of truth in the ways of life and of thinking, in action and in personalities, so as to make it convincing for all. . . . Only in freedom can men come to be of one mind. Today we seek the ground on which men of every religious persuasion might meaningfully meet around the world, ready to recommit themselves to their own historic traditions, to purify them, to transform them, but not to abandon them. The only common ground for the diversity of faiths would be clear thinking, truthfulness, and a common basic knowledge. These are the premises of that limitless communication in which the serious origins of faith attract each other. (P. xxv)

Accordingly, Jaspers rejects "enlightened rationalism" because "it furnishes the means

of sophistical delusion which keeps the world in its fraudulent state." Nor does the "unanimous knowledge" of science yield a common ground of life. Jaspers proposes to speak from the source of philosophical faith. He wants to show that "loss of faith in revelation does not exclude a constant recommitment to the Bible's irreplaceable truth."

How does Jaspers propose to achieve his purpose? He begins with man's realization of being in *this* world and in no other. The ancient philosophical insight "definitely clarified by Kant" is his starting point: "The eye in the world, the light that we are and see by, signifies to us the way of being." This immanentism is the "phenomenality of existence."

Jaspers writes: "I do not believe in revelation; to my knowledge I have never believed in the possibility." Those who asserted that they had received a revelation and spoke accordingly ("Moses, the prophets of doom and salvation, and Jesus — and . . . Buddha"), ripped open the human situation, "not so as to bare a knowable, explorable cause, but as the experience of an inconceivable reality that appears to man and uses him as its voice." (P. 8)

Many superficial reasons have been given for believing revelations. But "the crux is that we cannot be indifferent to revelations which men proclaim they had, or to men in whom others believe as revelations, if the weight of what is believed to have been revealed makes it a matter of inescapable existential import to this day. The faith in revelation has brought forth contents, impulses, works, deeds, which are now true and humanly accessible without it." (Ibid.)

The church administered revelation and claimed to be its authoritative interpreter on the grounds that innumerable martyrs had witnessed to it.

Buddhism has no martyrs, Buddhists suffered persecution in China without raising up militant martyrs against their environment. Islam

was a warrior religion, conquering and dominating from the outset; martyrdom is alien to it. But the Church saw itself both as the Church Militant, witnessed by its martyrs, and the Church Triumphant, which made martyrs. The measure of its pride is symbolically evident in the famous statues of Church and Synagogue on the cathedral of Strasbourg: in the figure of the Church, the radiant arrogance of the supposedly knowing who see God Himself in Christ; in the Synagogue, the human destiny of failure in the "blindness" of not knowing, of never seeing the invisible God. . . . To enforce its authority, the Church had a unique weapon even before it came to temporal power. The weapon was exclusion from its community. (P. 35)

By way of explanation, it may be helpful to remember the enormous impact of the Enlightenment on German thought. One of the influential features was the importation and study of Far Eastern sacred texts and concepts. Hermann Samuel Reimarus (1694 to 1768), professor of Oriental languages in Hamburg, argued against the "particularity" of the Gospel to the point of denying its credibility. Hegel, although he confessed himself in a letter to be a genuine Lutheran, announced in his lecture on the "Philosophy of History" that no one has a right to claim to understand the meaning of history without a thorough knowledge of Far Eastern religions. Such attitudes exhibit the consequences of the resumption of the contacts with the Far East, beginning with the activities of the British East India Company in the 17th century, which had been interrupted by the Moslem conquest and control of the traffic routes to the Far East.

The total impact of the Enlightenment on the Christian theology of the West has worked to dissolve the particularistic claim of the Gospel in favor of a "universalistic" understanding of truth ("there are many routes to God and His heaven"). Accordingly, the modern view of philosophers of

religion is often "tripartite," including science, philosophy, theology.

Jaspers, however, insists on the "break" of science and philosophy with theological cognition. "Science has nothing to do with faith in revelation" (p. 55). But the break is of a different sort for philosophy. In its own way it has a great deal to do with faith in revelation. Here we meet a key idea in Jaspers' thought: the philosophy of the modes of encompassing—"We have a word for that which, split into subject and object, becomes appearance. We call it 'encompassing'" (p. 61). "The encompassing of Being itself—encompassed by the encompassing that we are—is called world and Transcendence" (p. 69). He means that "consciousness at large," existence, the mind, and *Existenz* according to his interpretation lead to reflection. "I am a thinking person. I have imagination." These considerations point to or exhibit a "world of the mind both discovered and produced by me" (p. 69). This means for Jaspers that "we live always in a basic knowledge that may be more or less clear. In great historic communities it is present at every step, from vague feelings to images and on to a systematic unfoldment in philosophy." (P. 86)

This kind of thinking, Jaspers asserts, is done by means of "ciphers."

When we say "ciphers," we expressly do not mean to refer to things, matters, facts, realities, although it seems that the cipher contents have mostly been viewed as real entities, like physical realities in space and time. People have lived under their pressure as under the pressure of physical threats. It was as such that they conquered nations and ages. The great step in which man transforms himself occurs when the supposed corporeality of Transcendence is given up as deceptive and the ambiguous cipher language is heard instead—when the contents that have been conceived and visualized are stripped of objective reality. Instead of tangles there remain ciphers open to infinitely

varied interpretation. . . . Ciphers may uplift us existentially or express Godless defiance or induce a Luciferian plunge into non-entity. Man lives in ciphers from the day he starts to think, but not until discrimination brightens his world and his knowledge does he feel called upon to purify this realm of language. Now he seeks truth and veracity. He wants to draw a strict line between reality and ciphers, and the basic perversion seems to be that of transforming the suspended cipher language into embodied reality. Ciphers are never the reality of Transcendence itself, only its possible language. (Pp. 92 to 93)

By means of such instruments of understanding (modes of encompassment, ciphers), Jaspers offers his analysis of major topics of theology and history until he arrives at the point of "breaking through ontology" (p. 200). This achievement of rational being he calls "periechontology," a basic knowledge that is not a cipher. Mindful of Jaspers' immanentism, the alert reader may rightly wonder whether or not this is a secularizing pillage of the classical theological concept of "perichoresis."

The ciphers of the existential situation, which is Jaspers' designation for his analysis of physical and moral evil, leads him to the topic concerning the knowledge of God and to the question, What is man? His book concludes with his analysis and recommendations regarding "a change in Biblical religion."

Jaspers' use of "cipher" appears to be his designation for the shadowy images of Plato's cave, retailed in modern mythological form. This would account for his stress on the universality of accessible knowledge by which man "transforms himself." But the way to this goal of self-transformation is the use of the cipher-myths (which I am tempted to call the ideology of self-understanding) as challenging images for self-reflection for the purpose of obtaining "clarity about the source and the point of our life." (P. 312)

Jaspers' thought cannot be classified as going beyond essentially humanistic assertions, despite his willingness to make room for "transcendence." The particularistic claims of the Christian church, reinforced by the refusal of Christian orthodoxy to maintain fellowship where these claims are denied, loom before him as the chief offence against the integrity of existentialist man in his aspirations toward freedom. In this offence converges historic Christianity's rejection of the claim of autonomous man, including the claims advanced by Jaspers.

Our general evaluation of Jaspers' thought cannot make room for a consideration of his analysis of topics of Christian doctrine in terms of his criteria, because Christians necessarily reject them in their "obedience to the Gospel." Jaspers himself recognizes this fact with some aversion in his quotation from Bultmann:

To one who believes in revelation, a philosophical faith cannot be faith in God. I quote from one of the most tolerant theologians: "It is indeed only either here or there that God is rightly understood, and from the standpoint of Christian belief a humanistic deism must be called an error and delusion — in so far as it is meant to be faith in God" (Bultmann, *Studium generale*, Vol 1). This example — without a trace of the arrogance we find now and then in theologians — may serve to show that it lies in the nature of the faith in revelation to make even such a man think in this fashion. (P. 324)

The topic of the authority and interpretation of the Bible illustrates for us Jaspers' understanding of the offence of historic Christianity. He writes:

The authority lies not in the word but in the "spirit" which in the Bible speaks only to kindred spirits. It is interpretative adoption, not learned knowledge or any kind of insight that awakens us to the present reality of original faith.

There is a distinction in the interpretation and adoption of the Bible. Theology knows

"scriptural evidence," philosophy does not. Both of them interpret, but in philosophical interpretation the Bible is not, as a matter of principle, superior to other texts.

In practice, one who acknowledges "scriptural evidence" reserves the right of correct interpretation to himself, whether on his own authority, like Luther, or by the catholic authority of a church. Other interpretations are deemed false. But experience teaches us that there is no end to such theological disputes; the real issue is who is empowered to make the correct interpretation. The self-certainty of a reformer claiming this authority disturbs his environment — provided it will listen — while the silent power of ecclesiastical authority brings peace. To follow the combat method of scriptural evidence is as irksome to clear-eyed believers in revelation as to people who philosophize, for this battleground shows what lies hidden in such dogmatically "proving" kind of faith: the persecution of heretics, Luther's "firm statements," a barren striving for religious knowledge, and specious attempts to reconcile the contradictions in the Bible. . . .

One who rejects scriptural evidence — because a procedure that will let you prove everything proves actually nothing, and because in the area of faith any "proof" is absurd — acknowledges for himself what he can make his own. He will grant the reality of another man's faith and will never make statements of absolute self-assurance. To him, essential decision lies in the choices of life, in the continuity of *Existenz* in phenomenal existence, not in acts of confession and tenets of a creed. In the Bible he finds the ground of both such freedom and such earnestness.

Authority does not lie in the word, not in the text, not in the Bible, but in the encompassing that is at once subjective and objective in original adoption, in free association with the Bible.

Can we hear revelation? We can always hear its substance in human language — but that is not revelation.

Revelation has to be distinguished from the faith in it. If the revelation were real, it would be unconditional: if God himself

speaks, there is no authority that might impose conditions on his word. Nothing would remain but obedience. But the faith in revelation is a human reality and subject to conditions. (Pp. 335—336)

Major points of these quotations may be summarized as follows:

1. The problem of authority must be considered in relation to the nature of the Bible as a collection of religious literature representative of the religious experiences of the authors and the encompassing, autonomous "spirit" of the interpreting reader. For the existentialist, according to Jaspers, there is no Biblical authority nor Biblical truth apart from the autonomous interpreter. The existentialistic interpreter recognizes no objective authority; only subjectively apprehended effects have authority. The Bible, therefore, is not, and it does not report or exhibit, revelation objectively; rather, it *becomes* a word of God if and when the existentialist believes it. Believing it makes any word a word of God, regardless of where the existentialist finds it.

2. Since the interpretive reader following the autonomous activity of his own "spirit" cannot and will not make "firm statements" in the manner of Luther's *assertiones*, therefore neither "scriptural evidence" nor "dogmatic proofs of faith" exist, except as "specious attempts to reconcile the contradictions in the Bible." This kind of logic entails for the Christian interpreter who follows the existentialist program a consistent refusal to assert any Christian article of faith except as a personal or subjective and instantly revisable opinion. He cannot even assert his witness to another Christian on the basis of "scriptural evidence," since no "dogmatic proofs of faith" exist for the existentialist. For example, the witness of the apostles, that they have seen the risen Lord, has no objective validity or authority for the existentialist whose first loyalty belongs to the au-

tonomous activity of his own spirit. However the point is verbalized, the transcendence which the existentialist seeks is always limited by his own powers of religious sensitivity, by the strength and the number of rungs in the ladder of his religious imagination. It is a version of the Icarian flight to the sun.

3. Revelation is therefore not an objective reality for the existentialist: "If the revelation were real, it would be unconditional; if God speaks, there is no authority that might impose conditions on his word. Nothing would remain but obedience." Ethical freedom is the primal phenomenon for the existentialist. In the exercise of such a freedom he believes he tears himself free from the danger of understanding himself as a mere transitional link in the chain of causal necessity. In his *Dasein* the human person must stand in relationship to himself: the autonomous activity of his spirit requires this minimally. But if God really does reveal Himself, then even the existentialist must concede that "nothing would remain but obedience": that would destroy man in his *Dasein*, that is, in his autonomous understanding of himself and consequent self-relatedness. Therefore, the apostolic demand that Christians be obedient to the faith is not to be interpreted as a revelation of God's will; it is merely kerygmatic counsel whose potential may be realized only when the hearer is grasped by it.

It may be useful here to refer to Hegel's famous preface to his *Philosophy of Right* where he wrote: "What is rational is actual, and what is actual is rational." Remembering that Hegel clearly distinguished between *Wirklichkeit* (reality) and mere *Dasein* (existence), the quotation should not be understood as his unreserved approval of whatever powers there be. But the Young Hegelians construed this statement as a basically activist postulate which called for the

reconstruction of reality in terms of rational principles. The existentialist is never far from the Hegelian kingdom envisioned by modern activists. He does not downgrade rationality: that would diminish man in his *Dasein*. He maintains that the rational becomes the actual when man realizes his ethical freedom as the primal phenomenon in the understanding of his self-relatedness. In this light of existentialistic understanding the autonomous spirit of man must deny the obligation to obey the revelation of God. He must do that, because there is no unconditional revelation. The failure of the existentialist arises from his concentration on the ordinariness of the means of revelation and from his high estimate of the apprehending religious sensitivities of autonomous man. Logically extended, we deal with a solipsism: that the self is the only existent thing which knows and can know nothing but its own modifications and states.

4. Since revelation itself cannot be heard (except "its substance in human language—but that is not revelation"), therefore "to receive tenets of the biblical faith into the philosophical experience of Transcendence, we must divest them of the form of revelation"—a task accomplished with much success by the use of the historical-critical method of interpretation, although not always to Jaspers' satisfaction. Thus divested, man is open to the tenets of the Biblical faith and hears "in the sense of listening with all that one has in one—but it need not be the hearing that means to hear God reveal himself . . . we cannot admit in true openness that the revelation must be heard as revelation." (All quotations cited in the above four points are taken from pp. 336 to 337.) The point made here by Jaspers is not new. He says, for example, that the Bible may contain the substance of revelation in human language (which accounts for the many theologies in the Bible), but the

Christian Scriptures are unconditionally not revelation. If they contain the substance of revelation, even this residue cannot assume reality and authority until the autonomous spirit of man is willing to give it commensurate recognition according to his capacities for his self-relatedness. Jaspers' argument turns out to be a remarkably weak philosophical support for those historical-critical interpreters of the Bible who "save" the meaning of the religious utterance of the texts or terms only by denying to them the cognitive function Christians have claimed for them. Their objectives are clear enough, but hardly edifying or praiseworthy. Astonishing is the tenacity of the "spirit of autonomous man" dominant in these interpreters as well as the ideological receptivity of their readers or hearers.

"Unless there can be communication between the two origins of faith, theology and philosophy will remain separate and mutually exclusive," Jaspers writes (p. 356). How can this communication be brought about, according to Jaspers? "For the controversy between theology and philosophy to disappear, the things proclaimed in the church would have to shed their character of revealed realities, dogmas, and creeds—in other words, their proclamation would have to become a conjuration of ciphers. Today such a metamorphosis appears utopian in all churches, and perhaps it would indeed cancel what no church can be without: the historic authority itself as an element of faith." (P. 357)

Jaspers sees "obedience to the faith" as submission to the totalitarian authority of rulers who "themselves are always human, members of the very species that is supposed to need slavery because it cannot be free" (p. 358). The recognition and acknowledgment of authority entails man's enslavement, Jaspers argues, and he cites the Constantinian victory of the ancient church as an illustra-

tion of such objectionable spiritual-political bondage. Hope, "the deceptive gift from Pandora's box," is the only option by which men can "live and die and work" (p. 359). "There does remain a very different distinction between faith in revelation and philosophical faith, and that lies in their ways of hope. Hope on the ground of revealed promises, for instance, or of the reality of Christ as revealed in the Resurrection, differs radically from hope on the ground of the truth shown by philosophical reason." (P. 360)

"Is mutual rejection an inherent necessity" for theology and philosophy? Jaspers answers affirmatively, but he believes that the self-doubt of both Christian believers and philosophical believers may turn their feelings of certainty into feelings of deficiency (p. 361). "The conquest of their doubts is what makes both sides recognize each other's faith, if they are honest." (P. 362)

Jaspers' conclusion is therefore similar to Tallyrand's advice to a young friend: "No zeal, please." Vinson, the late Chief Justice of the United States, said it more bluntly in a written majority opinion of the Supreme Court: "There are no absolutes." This is the prudence of the autonomous and pragmatic man determined to minimize the risks of living, loving, and believing, and to maximize their coveted benefits. He is the sensible man who insists monistically on the signiory or lordship of his judgment of the sensible data. Ultimately he must defend the solipsist position that only knowledge of the self is possible, so that for each individual the data of which he is aware are the only existent reality.

Probably no one can quarrel with Jaspers' concern when he writes: "The basic phenomenon is that the Church, a group of men, turns the call upon God into an instrument of worldly power" (p. 44). What he sees as "the basic phenomenon," however, is only

the basic phenomenon of the perversion of the mission of the church. When he writes that "authority requires means of compulsion" (p. 45), so that we are led to conclude that all authority *qua* authority is demonic, inasmuch as the autonomous freedom of man in his existence is displaced, he has not yet offered us insights beyond the complaints of libertarian humanism. His basic position is not really mitigated by this paragraph:

Now that they no longer have a "secular arm," the churches firmly reject the methods once developed by their own totalitarianism and now far more cunningly used in behalf of total rule. Yet even now the ecclesiastic faith, with characteristic totalitarian naiveté, regards itself as the sole, authorized infallible vessel of truth and inwardly denies the equal rights of the "heathen," the infidel, the heretic. (P. 47)

Excommunication is for Jaspers a reprehensible aspect of the particularity of the Gospel which "denies the equal rights" in the Christian church of those who will not believe the Gospel. His concern for the equal rights of unbelievers in the Christian church is the product of his affirmation of the autonomous spirit of man, his denial of revelation, authority, obedience. He does not explain how the Christian church can possibly grant, or even acknowledge, equal rights in the Christian church for those who openly deny and work against the very articles of faith which make the Christian church uniquely what it is. Nor would the charitable willingness either of individual Christians or of Christian churches to grant such equal rights to the autonomous spirit of existentialists be at all helpful. Equal rights in the Christian church are the gift of the Head of the church available to those who make no autonomous claims.

Jaspers' polemical remarks about excommunication, beyond some conventional judgments of the medieval church, reveal his

failure to apprehend the Biblical meaning of membership in the Christian church. Luther did not invent a private interpretation when he asserted in his *Treatise Concerning the Ban* of 1520 that unbelief in the Gospel concerning Jesus Christ alone separates a person from the church of Christ, never the merely formal ban of the ecclesiastical institution. In its proper sense, excommunication is a public recognition of a broken relationship—like divorce. It is a protective decision of the Christian church against the sowing of doctrinal wild oats within the household of God. After all, every denial of the unique claims of the Gospel, or of the Christian articles of faith, in imitation of the style of Ishmael, must in principle lead to the abolition of the Gospel.

This is such a well-known fact that one remains in the grip of perpetual astonishment at the liberality of the humanism of those who object to this position on any grounds whatever. Applied to those within the church, the incident of Abraham-Sarah-Hagar-Ishmael would appear to suggest that the bearers of the promise may indeed use philosophical-humanistic ideas or concepts as "Egyptian servants," but the begetting of paralegitimate offspring through them is bound to have undesirable consequences for both parents and offspring in their relation to the promise of the covenant. Jaspers has indeed reached for the jugular of the Christian faith when he denies the authenticity of its particularity as well as the Christian church's right to defend it by the excommunication of those who will maintain their perdurable rejection of it.

Jaspers has well understood that the particularity of the Gospel, its historical uniqueness, and its total claim on man is the encompassing offence of historic Christianity.

The Gospel simply has no room for the claims of autonomous man, including the claims advanced by Jaspers. Since the Christian church is the community of those who accept, believe, trust, and hope in Jesus Christ, whose Gospel is the new covenant, it is impossible to assimilate this Gospel to another gospel which is grounded in philosophical existentialism.

To summarize: The core assertion of Jaspers' philosophy directs its impact against the historic Christian doctrine of revelation which the Scriptures both record and exhibit. Furthermore, when Jaspers maintains that the ultimate and most interior reality of man's existence cannot be grasped by means of an objectifying discursive knowledge, but must be aroused by a challenging appeal to man, he is correct if we translate his statement to mean that the Gospel cannot be effectively preached or taught by mechanical transmission on the order of a Tibetan prayer wheel. But he is quite wrong on this point if his thesis implies a denial of the objective content and form of the Scriptures as revelation, as well as their instrumental effectiveness by the operation of the Holy Spirit on the person of the believer, without any kind of contributory participation of man to effect his conversion.

The publication of this fine translation of Jaspers' opus unquestionably is a great service to the American reader. He will be able to inform himself directly that Jaspers' challenge to the faith of the Christian church is at least as great and encompassing as that which Erasmus hurled at Luther in 1524. Jaspers' argument, if taken seriously, will compel theologians either to gather about the Gospel or to abandon the form and content of the Bible as revelation altogether.

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