



## Faith and Reason Isaac and Ishmael Revisited

Alan M. Olson  
Boston University  
amo@bu.edu

**Abstract:** The essay begins with a retelling of the well-known Bible story of Ishmael and Isaac in order to provide a biblical context, or *subtext*, as the case may be, for the title of Jaspers' book, *Der philosophische Glaube angesichts der Offenbarung*, and the basic question he raises, namely, "can the two faiths (*viz.*, philosophy and theology) meet?" The essay concludes, with Jaspers, that constructive dialogue unlikely if not impossible because theological discourse in the monotheistic traditions of the Middle East is controlled by the genetic fallacy and the persistent confusion of *truths* based on alleged facts and *values* for which axiological arguments should be made but usually are not because of the fear of relativizing truth-claims. The essay concludes by suggesting that a move towards toleration through the acknowledgement of value-pluralism is the only way philosophy and theology can engage in constructive dialogue.

---

The first so-called historical event in the Bible, we are told, is the "call of Abraham" and God's promise to bring out of him "a great nation."<sup>1</sup> The problem with God's promise to Abraham, of course, is that he has no

children, his wife, Sarah, is barren, and they are both old (perhaps in their late 70s or early 80s according to the Genesis chronology) when he first becomes aware of his extraordinary destiny through the bizarre series of theophanies that occur between his *call* and the *binding of Isaac*.<sup>2</sup>

Abraham suffers considerable depression following his conversation with the *Lord God*,<sup>3</sup> believing, or wanting to believe, in the promise but

---

<sup>1</sup> Most scholars view the first eleven chapters of Genesis as "proto-historical" or "mythical" accounts of primeval origins. See Gerhard von Rad, *Das erste Buch Moses* (Göttingen, 1956), and in English translation by John Marks, *Genesis* (Westminster, 1961). I should say that biblical theologians of the 1950s and 1960s typically made this mythical/proto-historical distinction, whereas today's scholars are quick to point out that there is no empirical, that is, no archeological, confirmation of any of the patriarchal history prior to the Babylonian captivity, including the existence of Solomon's Temple. Because the Abrahamic covenant, venerated as a foundational and authoritative text by Jews, Christians and Muslims alike, is littered with fantastical claims, one can easily be led to the conclusion that the monotheistic religions of the Middle East have far more to do with the irrational than the rational, and that Tertullian's alleged saying, *viz.*, *credo quia absurdum*, is painfully true.

---

<sup>2</sup> The principal variant on the "binding of Isaac" in Islam, of course, is the claim that Ishmael, the first born, and not Isaac, was the object of sacrifice on Mount Moriah (Qur'an, Sura 37:99-109). This is a hotly debated item amongst fundamentalist Jews, Christians, and Muslims today — not with respect to the problem of faith and reason but rather the authority of succession and dispensation.

<sup>3</sup> Following Wellhausen and the documentary hypothesis, von Rad identifies Genesis 15 as the 'E' or Elohistic source, the god being addressed as *Adoni Elohim*.

wondering how it can ever be fulfilled.<sup>4</sup> Sarah also suffers depression from Abraham's depression, no doubt, since she has to deal with his frequent complaint that "one of his slaves" may inherit his estate owing to the childless condition for which she is responsible (Genesis 15:3).<sup>5</sup> It also seems that Sarah initially thought her husband delusional and "laughed" at the idea of having a child in extreme old age. Whatever the case, she certainly must have greatly felt pains of inadequacy at not having been able to produce any heirs for her husband.<sup>6</sup> Accordingly, and strictly by rational calculation, Sarah provides Abraham with her young Egyptian slave girl, Hagar, to see whether his depression, and perhaps her own, might be alleviated through the production of a son.<sup>7</sup> And as in the more recent celebrated cases of Strom Thurmond and Saul Bellow, Abraham becomes a father, not only by the much younger Hagar, but also with Sarah who, thirteen years after the birth of Ishmael, conceives and gives birth to Isaac when both are in their 90s.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>4</sup> This promise includes control of a geographic space stretching from the Brook of Egypt to the Euphrates — the so-called "greater Israel (*Eretz Yisrael*)" (Genesis 15:17–21).

<sup>5</sup> His seed had fallen on "barren ground," as the saying goes in the ancient world.

<sup>6</sup> Sarah is skeptical as contrast to Khadija, Mohammad's first wife, patroness and convert who, in her 40s and perhaps 50s, produces several children of which only one, Fatima, survives, and no sons. To be "barren" in the ancient world was the worst thing that could happen to an otherwise happily married woman — especially a woman of position, for to be without offspring meant that one would be alone and without familial support in one's old age. This also seems to be the motive for Lot's daughters in their decision to sleep with their father in order to produce sons, *viz.*, the Moabites and the Ammonites (Genesis 19:30–38).

<sup>7</sup> Daughters didn't count in the world of rigid patriarchy; a tradition that persists in much of the world even today. Here we also see that the notion of "surrogate" pregnancy is very old indeed; in this case, Hagar giving legitimate birth to Ishmael ("God heard") "on the knees of her mistress (Sarah)." Conservative or fundamentalist readings of Ishmael's birth refer to him as the child of the "flesh" whereas Isaac is the child of "faith" — the "flesh" being equated with rational calculation and *eros*, and "faith" with the *promise*. Saint Paul also identifies the early followers of Jesus with Sarah and who, "like Isaac, are the heirs of God's promise" and "no slave woman's son" for "the slave woman's son was born according to nature and the free woman's son according to the promise" (Galatians 4:21–31). This is a rather amazing passage since it is a quite remarkable pre-Islamic condemnation of Islam.

<sup>8</sup> According to the text, Ishmael, at age 13, and Abraham, at age 99, are circumcised to "Seal the Covenant," and Isaac, born shortly thereafter, is circumcised on the eighth day, according to a much later prescribed ritual code (Genesis 21:1–2). This action marks the definitive and utterly unique transformation of circumcision as a

For the purposes of this essay, let the offspring of Abraham, Ishmael and Isaac, respectively, be called the "child of reason" and the "child of faith."<sup>9</sup> Ishmael is the product of Sarah's rational calculation — or, one might say, "the cunning of reason," whereas the birth of Isaac is entirely the result of faith and the "will to believe" when Sarah, "with the help of the Lord" and against all reasonable odds, becomes fertile in her 90s and successfully delivers a male child.<sup>10</sup>

Accordingly, my comments will fall under two heads: First, I place Jaspers' *Der philosophische Glaube angesichts der Offenbarung* (1962)<sup>11</sup> into historical perspective in order to deal with the basic question he raises in the final section of this work, namely, "Can the two faiths meet?" that is, are what Jaspers calls

---

puberty ritual in the ancient world to an infancy ritual — something that clearly marks the story of Abraham as a post-exilic text for, as Gerhard von Rad points out in his commentary, none of the Eastern Semites (including the Babylonians) practiced circumcision at all (p. 196). Thus the "call of Abraham," in its entirety and given its doctrinal importance, is a particularly lively mixture of 'J,' 'E,' and especially 'P' — the priestly account serving as the principal redactor of previous accounts in giving specific doctrinal attention to post-exilic ritual codes as well as to various etiological questions, *viz.*, why "such and such" is the case and not otherwise, in its interpretation of these events.

<sup>9</sup> By this characterization I make no reference to the intellectual capacities of Ishmael and Isaac (although the text implies that Ishmael, and later Esau, being "wild and unruly," are intellectually inferior to their brothers Isaac and Jacob). I refer only to the means by which Abraham obtains sons, namely, Sarah's rational calculation and intervention in the case of Ishmael, and the ultimate subordination of her skepticism to God's injunction at Mamre (Genesis 18:9–15) upon the successful conception of Isaac.

<sup>10</sup> It is thematic throughout Biblical literature that conceptions of "male" offspring take place "with the help of the Lord" (the preeminent example being the conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary), the implication being that "female" offspring are in some sense *autochthonic*, that is, the product of natural (female) and not supernatural (male) power. This miraculous confirmation of belief is what leads Kierkegaard, in his famous analysis of the binding of Isaac in *Fear and Trembling*, to dub Abraham as the "knight of faith" *vis-à-vis* Socrates who is the "knight of reason" grounded in the "universal," that is, in reason and logic. Thus "Abraham believed and it was reckoned to him as righteousness," as Saint Paul and the tradition asserts (especially Luther) — a notion affirmed again and again in the *Bible* and the *Qur'an*, the message being do not trust reason and philosophy but rather, as stated in Proverbs 3:5, "Trust in the Lord with all thy heart and lean not unto thine own understanding" or, as in Islam, "total submission to Allah."

<sup>11</sup> Unfortunately both *Der philosophische Glaube angesichts der Offenbarung* (1962, 1963) and the English Translation, *Philosophical Faith and Revelation* (1968) are out of print and only available in a few scattered used editions. Hereafter the German edition will be abbreviated as *PGO*, and the English edition as *PFR*.

"philosophical faith" and "religious faith" commensurable or incommensurable? Second, I discuss the genetic fallacy and its prominence in the theological discourse of the Western theistic traditions in order to argue that the problem of faith and reason cannot be surmounted when the Middle Eastern monotheistic traditions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) are dogmatically held and rigidly observed.

Jaspers, of course, holds a similar view but argues that *Anfechtung*,<sup>12</sup> mutually shared by philosophical and religious believers, somehow provides the means of transcending differences. I argue that the genetic fallacy, when unacknowledged by those adhering to the authority of supernatural revelation, makes dialogue between the believer and the unbeliever a virtual impossibility. On the other hand, when believers come to recognize the difference between "facts" and "values" and the validity of the "is/ought" distinction, as in David Hume, then dialogue is possible. I further suggest that the fact-value distinction should not be viewed as a *dichotomy*, but as a necessary *distinction* for pragmatic discourse and dialogue, as Hilary Putnam and others have argued.<sup>13</sup> Apart from intellectual, that is, "secular," conversion regarding the difference between facts and values, it strikes me that the sort of constructive dialogue and intercultural communication Jaspers' envisions between what he calls "philosophical faith" and "religious faith" is highly problematical if not completely impossible.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>12</sup> E. B. Ashton translates *Anfechtung* as "self-doubt" – which is a mild version of the kind of existential and ontological anguish Jaspers intends to convey by this term – an anguish perhaps limited to northern Europeans pondering the "absolute paradox" as defined by Luther and Kierkegaard.

<sup>13</sup> See Hilary Putnam, *The Collapse of the Fact – Value Dichotomy and other Essays* (Harvard, 2002).

<sup>14</sup> Jaspers also answers in the negative, but qualifiedly, as we will see, since *Anfechtung* affords the potential for dialogue. I will argue, however and following William James, that religious faith is compelled far more by the "will to believe" than by rational discourse and the "will to communicate." And the will to believe receives its energies primarily from the non-rational and not the rational aspect of consciousness, that is, from what Ricoeur calls the "involuntary" or the emotional complex of the unconscious. Belief may have rational implications regarding *phronesis*, as in Aristotle, *utility*, as in Mill, or the *practical*, as in Kant; but these are hypothetical and not categorical conclusions and require an axiology in order to attain the status of truth claims. Value theory or axiology typically raises questions of "the good" (in absolute axiological theory, as in J. N. Findlay's work, where what is good has ontological status) or of just "good" (in relativistic axiological theory, as in Martha Nussbaum, where "good" has no independent status apart from the valuer) with respect to moral goodness, social

## Philosophical Faith and Revelation

Since it has been nearly fifty years since the initial publication of *PGO*, it is well to recall the philosophical and theological context within which this book initially appeared. The mid-twentieth century was the heyday of logical positivism, analytic philosophy, and the philosophy of language – movements with little regard and even contempt for matters religious, as evidenced by the famous utterance of Anthony Flew, "There is no philosophy East of the Suez worthy of consideration." On the theological side, there were the influential movements known as Neo-Reformation, Neo-Orthodox and Neo-Thomistic theology and philosophy – all of which were attempting in various ways to salvage traditional religious faith from the onslaughts of positivism, modernism, liberalism and relativism.<sup>15</sup> Existential phenomenology and hermeneutics might be said to have occupied the middle ground between these dogmatic polarities through the deployment of various bracketing procedures designed to suspend the alleged subject-object and fact-value dichotomies in order to disclose what was held to be the more originary ground for a holistic understanding of the meaning of religious experience.

Jaspers was such a mediating thinker, and his most sustained theological and hermeneutical conversation during the 1950s was with Rudolf Bultmann concerning *Die Frage der Entmythologisierung* (1954)<sup>16</sup> – a conversation that ended in silence, not unlike the earlier famous debate between Karl Barth and Emil Brunner regarding *Natur und Gnade* (1934).<sup>17</sup> In motive,

goodness, and aesthetic goodness – categories that obviously converge very dramatically in the philosophy of religion but receive inadequate attention, as Findlay frequently pointed out.

<sup>15</sup> What Jaspers would have to say today regarding the various media luminaries representative of resurgent Neo-Evangelical Fundamentalism or fundamentalism generally in what he calls "the biblical traditions" is anyone's guess. But it is safe to surmise that Jaspers probably would be appalled by the degeneration of the so-called "Occidental" religious consciousness and perhaps surprised by the prominent role religion continues to play in international politics.

<sup>16</sup> Translated into English as *Christianity and Myth* in 1958.

<sup>17</sup> The Barth-Brunner debate, as you may recall, also had to do with faith and reason, or more precisely, with natural and revealed theology. After making his case for natural theology, Brunner is chided and dismissed by Barth as a naïve subjectivist excessively infected with Kierkegaardianism. To use the categories of William James, Barth accused Brunner of being "tender" rather than "tough" minded. It might be argued in his diatribe with Bultmann that it is

Jaspers' critique of Bultmann was similar to Hegel's critique of Schleiermacher, namely, to rescue the truth-claims of Christianity from being reduced to subjectivism. But curiously Jaspers' position with respect to Bultmann has more kinship with Schleiermacher than with Hegel given his endorsement of what one might call a quasi-romantic "re-mythologization" of the cipher language of revelation in order to recover or at least appreciate the truth of religious claims. Indeed, the ambiguity of Jaspers' position consists, on the one hand, of a relentless attack on the truth claims of dogmatic theology (whether Catholic or Protestant) and, on the other, advancing the vague and indeterminate "language of ciphers" as the only possible solution to the problem of interpretation. In any case, Jaspers' non-negotiable position with respect to the project of *Entmythologisierung* is very largely the reason why Bultmann abandons the conversation as being hopeless.<sup>18</sup> Somewhat shaken by this exchange, perhaps, Jaspers continued to refine his position regarding the "truth" of ciphers in the 1960s, especially in *PGO* and his final work, *Chiffren der Transzendenz*.<sup>19</sup>

While some theologians, including Fritz Buri and Harold Oliver, defended Jaspers in terms of a "theology of *Existenz*" and "thinking faith," Jaspers' position

remains unclear as regards the nature of truth and truth-claims.<sup>20</sup> Thus the question remains as to whether this ambiguity, which runs throughout Jaspers' philosophy, might be clarified by way of his later comments on religion. Is it possible to determine in a systematic way the "truth" of ciphers — especially ciphers of ultimate Transcendence? Christopher Thornhill, for example, has recently identified a "shift" (or *Umwendung*, a term used by Jaspers himself in *PGO*<sup>21</sup>) in the social and political writings of Jaspers — a shift that consists of a movement away from what he identifies as a metaphysical reading of Kant regarding the nature of the self in the early Jaspers, to a non- or at least "less" metaphysical reading of Kant in his later work. Thus we might ask whether it is profitable to take Thornhill's route, which entails a systematic contrast between the early and the late Jaspers, especially on matters of epistemology in his philosophy of religion, in order to clarify his position with respect to the nature of truth?<sup>22</sup>

As Thornhill notes, the early Jaspers, like Heidegger, was vigorously opposed to Neo-Kantianism, especially Neo-Kantian "legal" definitions of the self.<sup>23</sup> Instead he opted for what might be termed a more mystical understanding of the self as *mögliche*

---

Jaspers who is "tender minded" in contrast to a rather more "tough minded" Bultmann, neither of whom, of course, compare with the toughness of Karl Barth. It may also be recalled that in the heyday of the debates between logical positivists and religious philosophers and theologians, Barth always enjoyed a higher measure of esteem from analytical philosophers than Tillich and Jaspers, both of whom, together with Gabriel Marcel, were regarded as being excessively "literary" and "romantic" in their approach to philosophy and theology. In other words, one might not believe that what Barth was asserting was true, but at least one knew "what" he was asserting.

<sup>18</sup> Bultmann insisted (with some troublesome exceptions, the major one being the historicity of the resurrection.) that the "demythologization" project was the only way late-modern interpreters of sacred texts could existentially appropriate anything meaningful from sacred texts, since their ontological and scientific claims were completely archaic. During the late 1950s and early 1960s, Pannenberg also challenged the project of demythologizing from what might be viewed as being more Hegelian and certainly Gadamerian reasons, whereas the early Ricoeur attempted to mediate, it seems to me, between Jaspers, Bultmann, and Schleiermacher by way of the development of what he called a "restorative hermeneutic of sympathetic reenactment."

<sup>19</sup> The results were mixed as contrast, for example, to Tillich's doctrine of symbols and the tremendous response his position enjoyed in the 1950s and 1960s and even today, especially in America.

<sup>20</sup> *Von der Wahrheit*, Jaspers' major work after *Philosophie* (3 vols.), remained unfinished. My own book on Jaspers, viz., *Transcendence and Hermeneutics* (Nijhoff, 1979) was a similar defense, in many ways.

<sup>21</sup> See *PGO*, pp. 131ff.; *PFR*, pp. 76ff. A philosophical colleague, Lydia Voronina, now working for the State Department, recently reminded me that "legal definitions of the self" worked very well in bringing down the former USSR.

<sup>22</sup> Here I refer to Christopher Thornhill's insightful paper, "Humanism and Wars: Karl Jaspers Between Politics, Culture and Law," presented at KJSNA, at the Annual Meeting of the American Philosophical Association, Eastern Division, Washington DC, December 30, 2003. See also Thornhill's fine analysis of Jaspers in *Karl Jaspers: Politics and Metaphysics* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002) where he argues that Jaspers transforms Kant's "transcendental theory of the unconditioned into a transcendent theory of the unconditioned" (pp. 46ff.). I think that Thornhill is correct, in other words, rather than understanding the unconditioned epistemologically strictly in terms of the "limits" of reason, Jaspers ontologizes the unconditioned (*das Unbedingte*) as the Transcendent and something that discloses its being "in a fragmentary but unambiguous way," to use the language of Tillich, in the language of ciphers and symbols. When combined with the Encompassing (*das Umgreifende*), as Jaspers does in *PFR*, understood as being the source of *Anfechtung*, we can see the full scope of his metaphysical, as distinct from a strictly epistemological, reading of Kant and *Grenzsituationen*.

<sup>23</sup> See both *PFR* (1962) and *CDT* (1970).

*Existenz* but tempers this position in his later social and political writings. This modification is far less clear, I would argue, in Jaspers' philosophy of religion where making such a move would entail the abandonment of metaphysics altogether. In other words, Jaspers may have moved to a "less metaphysical" reading of Kant in his philosophical anthropology and in his social and political philosophy, but he retains a *numinous* reading of the ciphers of Transcendence throughout his work. Moreover, his instance on the "encompassing ground" within which ciphers arise and are read remains the source and in some sense the answer to *Anfechtung* regarding the ultimate truth of Transcendence in the later writings.<sup>24</sup> Thus it may be that Jaspers' *metaphysical reserve*, so to speak, in matters religious and spiritual provides an important clue as to why Jaspers did not, as Thornhill queries, develop his social and political philosophy and his philosophy of communication with greater precision and rigor so as to be in tune with the discourse of his contemporaries.<sup>25</sup>

This ambiguity and a less than complete "turn-about" or *Umwendung* in Jaspers' development has recently been noted in the European discussion of the social and political philosophy of Jaspers, Arendt, and "the question of German guilt." For example, Andrew Schapp argues that Jaspers' dedication to *mögliche Existenz*, or what Charles Taylor has more recently dubbed the "ethics of authenticity," is precisely what accounts for his rejection of Arendt's separation of the public and the private — the implication being that Jaspers, as a German Christian, could not ultimately

separate these spheres for cultural, political, and religious reasons.<sup>26</sup> Hannah Arendt, as an expatriate German Jew and émigré to the United States, and perhaps also owing to the influence of Heidegger, found it necessary to make a radical distinction between the public and the private in order to achieve some kind of closure on the catastrophic events of WWII. But Jaspers, according to Schaap, muddles the issues of "restorative reconciliation" (modeled on the Christian dialectic of "guilt and forgiveness") and the legal issues of "responsibility and reparation." This, he suggests, is one of the reasons *Die Schuldfrage* (1946) was ultimately unsatisfactory to many German nationals and surviving Jews as an adequate answer to the question of German culpability:

The danger of Jaspers' concept of purification and of the restorative conception of reconciliation is this: rather than leading citizens to enter into an open-ended political dialogue through which shared meanings may be created, the politics of authenticity instead threatens to reify identities based on guilt or innocence and hence encourage a retreat into the self rather than political engagement with others. The particularism which guilt introduces to the public sphere is, at best, likely to lead to a form of inverted chauvinism such as *philo-semitism* rather than the creation of shared meanings among diverse equals.<sup>27</sup>

Schaap's analysis, of course, is highly nuanced by the peculiarities of the contemporary discussion; and one must remember that Jaspers wrote *Die Schuldfrage* in the mid-1940s and *PGO* in the early-1960s. These were extremely precarious decades, and Jaspers' mature writings during this period were a courageous response to the political and cultural uncertainties of

<sup>24</sup> These essays were based upon his summer-semester lectures in Basel, shortly before he died in 1969, where Jaspers expands on the section in *PFR* which ends precisely on the relation between *Wahrheit und das Umgreifende* in terms of *Anfechtung* — the latter category being very culture-specific and inadequately translated as "self-doubt." See *PGO*, pp. 532ff.

<sup>25</sup> Indeed, it may be the case that the fuzziness in Jaspers' social and political writings, namely, a failure to take "the next step," as Thornhill argues, is due precisely to an un-reconciled position in philosophy and religion and whether "the two faiths can meet." This ambiguity may also be a primary reason why Jaspers is left out of the social and political discussion during the 1970s and 1980s, a debate inspired and controlled in large measure by Neo-Marxism and Neo-Kantianism in its analytic mode. Conversely, this ambiguity may be one of the reasons for an apparent Jaspers renaissance in the contemporary situation because of an increasing dissatisfaction with the discourse on "agency" and "procedure," with Dworkin, Rawls, and Habermas, and increasing attention to the necessity of developing new models on the "ethics of recognition" in intercultural philosophy — to which Jaspers' philosophy of communication lends itself, as Ram Mall and others have noted.

<sup>26</sup> In spite of his antagonism to Christianity, Jaspers, like Kierkegaard, remains a Christian since he, like his Jewish and Christian contemporaries, Tillich, Buber, Herberg, Maritain, Niebuhr, *etc.*, thinks of reality as a Judeo-Christian phenomenon with Jerusalem and Athens as its defining cultural poles. And even though Jaspers gives far more attention to Eastern traditions than the other existentialist philosopher-theologians of the period, Benares, Beijing and Mecca never fit into a larger equation. The same can be said of Charles Taylor whose "ethics of authenticity" derives its identity through the secularized "sources of the self" in the Enlightenment and Post-Enlightenment and who does, of course, include Benares and other foci of multi-cultural identity in order to be politically correct.

<sup>27</sup> See Andrew Schaap, "Subjective Guilt and Civic Responsibility: Jaspers, Arendt and the German Problem," *50th Annual Conference of the Political Studies Association-UK*, April, 2000. Jaspers, it will be recalled, frequently endorsed Plato's concept of philosophizing as "the philosophical analogue of redemption," that is, of "purification."

the time, especially as they bore upon the indeterminate future of the nascent *Bundesrepublik*. One notes this urgency in Jaspers' oeuvre beginning in 1958 with the publication of *Die Atombombe und die Zukunft des Menschen: Politisches Bewusstsein unserer Zeit* in 1958 — which, by 1962, the Berlin Wall and the official commencement of the Cold War, was in its fifth edition.<sup>28</sup> The atom bomb book was followed immediately by an important monograph on *Freiheit und Wiedervereinigung* (1960) or *Freedom and Reunification*, and was also included *Hoffnung und Sorge: Schriften zur deutschen Politik* (1965) and followed by another important book, *viz., Wohin treibt die Bundesrepublik? Tatsachen-Gefahren-Chancen* (1966). In sum, practically all of Jaspers' writings during the final decade of his life were political — the possible exception being the posthumous appearance of *Chiffren der Transzendenz* (1970), even though this monograph can also be read politically as the further elaboration and clarification of his section on ciphers in *PGO*.<sup>29</sup>

### The Genetic Fallacy and the Abrahamic Traditions

The problems of truth and truth-claims remains unresolved in Jaspers' philosophy of religion because of

<sup>28</sup> This was the focus of KJSNA at the APA meeting in Washington DC (2003), at which Thornhill and others addressed Jaspers' *The Future of Mankind*.

<sup>29</sup> *Philosophical Faith and Revelation* was published in English translation by E. B. Ashton, as Vol. 17 in the prestigious Harper/Collins "Religious Perspectives" series edited by Ruth Nanda Anshen. It is interesting to note that Ms. Anshen was a perennialist and that Jaspers' comments on perennialism are far from complimentary. It may also be important to note that *Philosophical Faith and Revelation*, in its first German edition (1962), was preceded by an essay entitled "*Der Philosophische Glaube angesichts der christlichen Offenbarung*" published in a *Festschrift* for Heinrich Barth in 1958. Heinrich (and not Karl) Barth is the only theologian quoted favorably in the book length manuscript bearing nearly the same title. I say "nearly" the same title because while the Christian understanding of revelation is still central to the book, the modifier "*christlichen*" is dropped with the adverb *angesichts* now suggesting a *vis-à-vis* stance regarding the fundamental incompatibility of "philosophical faith" and revelation generally. In any case, this is the way I read the modification. As an aside it is also worth noting that *PGO* appeared in print just prior to Pope John XXIII's convocation of the *Second Vatican Council* in October of 1962 and the deliberations of Catholic philosophers and theologians during the *Second Vatican Council*, which ended in 1965, play no part whatever in Jaspers' analysis of the Roman Catholic Church in this work. It may be fair to surmise, however, that what Jaspers says on *Katholizität* had an influence on at least some of more liberal theologians and prelates who played significant roles in the Council in order to bring about a measure of *aggiornamento*.

the need to address more adequately than he does the difference between truth-claims and value-claims. In order to do so, one must come to terms with the genetic fallacy in the religions of revelation. For example, in an essay written just prior to *PFR* entitled "The Non-Christian Religions"<sup>30</sup> Jaspers speculates as to how one might overcome the "dualism of moral enmity" as an inherent feature of the Christian consciousness. This dualism arises, according to Jaspers, by way of "monopolistic claims" of Christianity, on the one hand, and "loving affection for whatever bears human features," on the other. These "monopolistic claims," whether Catholic or Protestant, are based on cognitive assertions regarding the authority of revelation, whether the exclusive authority instantiated in "One Holy [Roman] Catholic and Apostolic Church" and its *magisterium*, or Protestant adherence to *sola scriptura* and the authority of the Bible. Thus the "loving affection" of the Deuteronomic injunction "to love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, soul, mind and strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself," as found in the *Sermon on the Mount* and the ethics of Jesus of Nazareth, is understood, according to Jaspers, as a warrant for "saving all God's children" through missionary activity based upon the alleged truth of *supersession* and doing whatever is necessary to establish the universal hegemony of Christianity.

Jaspers rightly argues that such dualistic notions are incompatible with what he calls the "idea of truth" and the obvious need to develop a more critical understanding of truth and truth claims, especially within the realm of religion, if we are also to hold to the values of communication and tolerance in the modern world. As Jaspers puts it:

It is now possible for us to see that a fundamental difference of the utmost importance lies in the idea of truth itself. Truth either is universally valid and identical for everyone — this is the type of scientific truth, which is always relative, however, true only for certain objects and under certain conditions, established by and related to certain methods, or it is an absolute truth, by which the believer lives and realizes himself, but at the price that its statements, as rationally communicable tenets of faith, are not universally valid for all men. *Absolute truth is historic because we as possible Existenzen are historic*. The manifestation of these historicities in recorded statements and other externals is infinitely fulfilled only for the man who lives in

<sup>30</sup> This essay is included in the collection, *Philosophy and the World*, E. B. Aston ed. (Gateway Editions, Regnery, 1963), but unfortunately contains no critical notes or even source citations.

them, because here eternity comes to be present, uniquely and irreplaceably present, in time. For one who merely understands, the manifestation remains a mere possibility and thus historically relative. *If we are not clear in our minds about this distinction in the idea of truth, we shall plunge either into empty bottomless abstractions or into monopolistic fanaticism.*<sup>31</sup>

The notion that only existential truth is absolute whereas scientific truths are merely relative is troubling, as is his either/or formulation of the alternatives of "empty, bottomless abstractions" and "monopolistic fanaticism." In the former instance, Jaspers' conception of scientific "universally valid" truth seems to be conditioned by indeterminacy with respect to the objects and conditions of scientific observation (a notion probably influenced by Heisenberg's "uncertainty principle"); whereas absolute truths, he says, are the truths of possible *Existenz*, that is, the truths by which one lives and dies as the investments of faith, belief, and commitment. For the non-believer, according to Jaspers, such truths are relative, that is, the products of historicity determined by the specific cultural and personal circumstances of each individual. And while he intimates, in the latter instance, that existential truth claims are really claims regarding *value*, the fundamental question for Jaspers, as for Hegel, is whether "historical" truths contain any real or ultimate validity.<sup>32</sup> Because this question remains central but unanswered for Jaspers, his philosophy remains ambiguous, especially in his philosophy of religion. For to be concerned with the question of historical truth beyond the truth of personal historicity reveals the conditioning background of teleology and eschatology – and not merely in terms of the "eschatological" or "authentic existence," as in Bultmann, but in terms of the larger historical truth-claims made by Jews, Christians, and Muslims regarding the nature of reality in its totality. Such claims, however modified or qualified, are the product of faith or belief (*Glaube*) in

the special truths of historical revelation. Jaspers clearly recognizes this as the great divide between the Eastern (that is, Far Eastern) and the Western (or Middle Eastern) religions, namely, traditions self-defined by the sacralization of nature (and the god *entheos*), in the former case, versus traditions self-defined by the sacralization of time (the god who "acts"), in the latter case. While this dichotomy between the oriental and occidental traditions presents an enticing opportunity for dialogue and communication, such dialogues remain inconclusive apart from clarification and agreement regarding the differences between the truth of facts and the truth of values. It is precisely here, within the philosophy of history and intercultural philosophy, where the genetic fallacy comes into play as perhaps the critical factor in the contemporary inter-religious and inter-cultural discussion.

One can argue, as Jaspers sometimes seems to do (although this is not always clear), that what separates the "two faiths" (religious and philosophical) more than anything else is the failure of orthodox monotheists to recognize the genetic fallacy as the critical reckoning point of conflict. Not only is the genetic fallacy a nodal point of intra-historical conflict for believing Jews, Christians and Muslims, but also for secularists who do not believe but who otherwise identify with the truth of the Abrahamic traditions for cultural and political reasons.

The principal manifestation of the genetic fallacy is *supercessionism*<sup>33</sup> in its various forms, and it is a difficulty that begins with the exile of Ishmael, the "child of reason" in the service of faith. The genetic fallacy, in brief, consists in confusing the order of logic and the order of time, the logical order having to do

<sup>31</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 150 [emphasis, mine].

<sup>32</sup> See especially *The Origin and Goal of History* (1948) where this is a major theme. In it Jaspers asserts: "...history remains the great question. It is the question which remains unresolved and can never be resolved by thought alone but only by reality; *viz.*, the question whether the movement of history is a mere interlude between non-historical conditions, or whether history is the breakthrough into the depths. If it is the latter, then history in its entirety will lead, even in the guise of boundless disaster and the accompaniment of danger and ever-renewed failure, to Being become manifest through man and to man himself, through an upward sweep whose limits we cannot foresee, laying hold of potentialities of which we can have no foreknowledge."

<sup>33</sup> *Supercessionism* has diverse manifestations and is not limited to religion as such. The most powerful contemporary example is the attempt of the Bush administration to spread *democracy* on the notion that it is the most righteous form of government – a different kind of missionary activity than previously witnessed, but missionary activity all the same in a partially secularized form. See Frank Fukuyama, *The End of History*, and Fukuyama, of course, one of the original signatories to PNAC and on the editorial staff of *The Weekly Standard*. Another signatory is Charles Krauthammer who, in a recent C-SPAN address, made the case for "Democratic Realism" as distinct from "Isolationism, Internationalism, and Democratic Globalism" – distinct in the sense that Democratic Realism "selectively implants democratic values *organically* in places like Iraq through territorial conquest." He failed to mention that "organic" normally means "intrinsic," that is *indigenous* or native to the soil upon and within which something grows. A more conventional and/or traditional form of supercessionism might be viewed as underlying the controversy surrounding Mel Gibson's enormously successful "The Passion of Christ."

with questions of truth (facts) and the temporal order having to do with matters of value (preferences). The two most common forms of the genetic fallacy are the *ad hominem* arguments that hold something to be true or false because of the individual who is the source of the argument, and *ab auctoritate* arguments hold something to be true or false because of the authority from which the argument springs, for example, the Torah, the Bible or the Qur'an. As Kelly Ross puts it: "While both *ad hominem* and *ab auctoritate* arguments can provide very good reasons to believe or not to believe something, they are not logical reasons as to why something is true."<sup>34</sup> In other words, truth-claims require rational justification and scientific proof independently of their origin. Value assertions and/or claims, on the other hand, do not require proof independent of origin, but clearly invite axiological demonstration that what is asserted or claimed with respect to a specific value is superior to an alternative value precisely because it is "more encompassing," to use the phrase of Jaspers.

It may be the case that Jaspers fails to discuss the genetic fallacy because of his difficulties with Neo-Kantianism and the manner in which the fact-value distinction evolves in analytic philosophy; and he does not, to my knowledge, discuss axiology at length anywhere in his works. Needless to say, a sustained discourse on values tends to be avoided amongst religionists since values discourse implies a certain relativism with respect to truth claims. Hence a reduction of religious truth-claims to claims regarding conflicting but negotiable values continues to meet major resistance, as the contemporary geopolitical and geo-religious situations bear witness in highly dramatic ways.<sup>35</sup> Such a reduction necessarily requires the abandonment of the foundationalism upon which the

various forms of fundamentalism and totalitarianism, whether religious or secular, utterly depend in advancing their truth-claims. Jaspers was not unfamiliar with the dangers of totalitarianism, but for him totalitarianism meant Fascism and Stalinism,<sup>36</sup> that is, totalitarianism in party-dominated national states. Jaspers obviously could not anticipate the new rather more amorphous but perhaps even more malignant totalism that would emerge in post-colonial Islamism, even though his critique of the institutional forms of Christianity, especially Roman Catholicism and its exclusivism (*i.e., nulla salus extra ecclesiam est*) suggests this possibility with regard to the collectivist mentality of theocracies. Indeed, when Jaspers refers to Judaism and Christianity, he usually does so by referring to them as the "biblical religions," that is, the religions for which the Bible is a sacred and foundational text;<sup>37</sup> and

---

<sup>36</sup> Nor could Jaspers speak out of a situation reflecting "religious pluralism" since, following WWII, the Jews had been eliminated from the public life of Germany and the Muslims were not, as yet, a factor. They become a factor in the 1970s as *Gastarbeiter* during the "German economic miracle."

<sup>37</sup> As in the case of Hegel, Islam occupies a very minor and even non-existent position in Jaspers' consideration of "the revealed religions." Were he alive today, Jaspers would probably be more circumspect with this reference since the designation "biblical religions" is no longer used in scholarly circles, or used only with major qualifications. During the 1950s and 1960s, when Jaspers was producing his major writings on monotheism, it was commonplace for Western scholars to speak of the Judeo-Christian tradition as though it were some kind of seamless reality, even though there were numerous institutional, denominational and ethnic differences within these religions. Today, when Americans and Europeans make references to the Judeo-Christian tradition, these voices usually come from politicians and/or from the religious right. In the former case, pandering politicians make what they believe to be a necessary appeal to both Christian and Jewish voters; but in the latter case, that is, the Christian case, the hyphenation represents and/or conceals temporal *supercessionism* in which Christianity is thought to be the fulfillment of the older dispensation with the New Testament the definitive completion of the Old Testament. This is hazardous ground, for if one adds Islam to the genetic equation, the Qur'an becomes the definitive completion, and the devotees are left to determine whether the earliest or the latest revelation is definitive. If one asserts, as do religious Zionists, that the earliest revelation is foundational and therefore definitive, then Jesus and Mohammad are viewed as impostors. If one holds, with Christian fundamentalists, that Jesus is the fulfillment of the promise to Abraham, then Mohammad is the impostor. If one holds, with Muslim fundamentalists, that both Moses and Jesus have prophetic authority but that Mohammad is the final prophet, it is still necessary to establish the ethnic succession and this is accomplished by way of Abraham's first born, Ishmael, the exiled child of reason. In short, Islam can have it both ways through an adroit utilization of the genetic fallacy

---

<sup>34</sup> Ross continues: "There is a difference between a reason why something is *believed* (*ratio credentis*, explanation) and a reason why something is *true* (*ratio veritatis*, justification). Ideally the latter would be used for the former, but we do often have reasons, even good reasons, for believing things even if we do not know the reasons why they are true. But if reasons for belief are used as though they are reasons for truth, this has been recognized for most of the history of logic as an informal genetic fallacy, in which the origin or the cause of a proposition is taken to have some bearing on its truth when it does not." It is *informal* because such arguments do not otherwise violate the rules of logic. See <http://www.friesian.com/genetic.htm-text-1>

<sup>35</sup> Two of the more prominent cases of this resistance are the opposition to gay and lesbian marriages, in the United States, and the insistence, of Shi'ites that Shar'iah and Islam be officially recognized in the proposed Iraqi constitution.



Islam may properly be included since it was Mohammad himself who coined the phrase, "people of the Book," when speaking of relations between Jews, Christians, and Muslims, and also convinced, as it were, of the truth of genetic propositions.

At the end of *PFR* Jaspers proposes a solution to the problem of the "two faiths" by way of what has more recently been termed the *ethics of recognition*. Through dialogue and communication, according to Jaspers, the "two sides," that is, those adhering to philosophical faith, on the one hand, and religious faith, on the other, can come to recognize the legitimacy of the other's position:

Originally different ways of life, and of the faith that goes with them, are indeed mutually exclusive: they cannot be realized in the same human being. But they do not exclude each other if they meet in different human beings. Each Existenz is historic; each can be earnest about loving the other; each can know that between him and the other runs an encompassing bond.<sup>38</sup>

With this assertion, Jaspers counters an earlier reference to Schopenhauer who proclaimed: "No one who is religious comes to philosophy, for he does not need it. No one who truly philosophizes is religious; he walks without leading strings, dangerously, but in freedom."<sup>39</sup> Against Schopenhauer, Jaspers believed that the gulf between philosophical and religious faith could be overcome by *Anfechtung* combined with a critical rationality capable of recognizing the "limits" of reason in order to, as in Kant, "make room for faith." But religious faith, as defined by the Biblical traditions, has no limits. It has to do with the "unseen," as Saint Paul famously observed, and what is beyond any kind of rational verifiability. As such, religious faith derives primarily from emotional and not rational sources, and for the individual completely in its grasp "faith can move mountains."<sup>40</sup>

---

whereby both the values of the "earliest" and the "latest" revelations are used to confirm absolute temporal truth-claims.

<sup>38</sup> *PFR*, p. 363.

<sup>39</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 360.

<sup>40</sup> And "skyscrapers," we might add, since the Jihadists who pirated the airliners on the fateful morning of 9-11 and flew them into the New York Trade Towers were resolute "men of faith" – absolutely convinced that their actions were pleasing to the Almighty. So also Mr. Bush who, like Elijah and with the comeuppance of "shock and awe," demonstrated even greater power against the "prophets of Baal."