



# Existenz

Volume 20, No 1, Spring 2025

ISSN 1932-1066

## Letter to Karl Barth; Basel, 18 September 1949

Karl Jaspers

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**Abstract:** This unpublished letter by Karl Jaspers is preserved at the Karl Barth Archive, Switzerland (KBA 9125.354). It provides contextual insight into the communication style between Jaspers and Barth and shows Jaspers' differentiated argumentation in letter form as he replies to a strongly worded letter by Barth. The broader circumstances of this correspondence are briefly outlined in Ola Sigurdson's essay, which is included in this present volume of *Existenz*.

**Keywords:** Karl Barth Archive; Karl Jaspers Stiftung; communication; truth; epistemology; absolutist relativism; difference philosophy theology, Christian.

Prof. Karl Jaspers  
Basel  
Austrasse 126

Basel, 18.IX.1949

Dear colleague!

Thank you very much for your kind words. Your decisive statements—refreshing in comparison to everything half-hearted—I may answer just as decisively.

I find it difficult to accept that the terms "poor" and "lost" are meant to signify "true, genuine, authentic heathens," and that the expressions should have no weight other than designating a boundary. You imply—also in context—as it seems to me, a general judgment about heathens, which, when applied to this Japanese sect despite its astonishing resemblance, also underscores a profound abyss.

"Absolutist relativism," I cannot accept as my position. I have attempted to clarify in my *Logic* the difference between the truth that is historical, unconditional, manifold in its appearance, essential,

and the truth that is universally valid for all, relative in terms of methods and viewpoints, and only one of them is existentially indifferent in appearance. If I am mistaken in this, then your assessment is accurate.

As far as my current understanding goes, I would never recognize the "good reasons" that lead to a refusal to engage with the Christian position (or, rather, the many Christian positions) or simply allow for outright dismissal. I mean with this: whatever is said in the world in human language must also be verifiable, hence discussable,—and: fundamentally, all humans must be connected, so we should seek communication without fundamental restrictions—hindered only by the actual possibilities of strength—in order to recognize each other in an understanding manner. This contrasts with the reality of war, which is based in the seemingly innocuous breakoffs in communication that occur in everyday life.

You cannot effectively counter my reluctance to relinquish the label of "Christian" by using the

analogy that everyone would then also be allowed to call themselves Cartesian, Kantian, and so on. The spiritual might of a historical world of the Occident—in this sense, also Occidental Jews and Christians—is incomparable to a doctrine, school, or the power of a person.

The decisive sentence in your letter seems to me to be: "How do you know that it (the interpretation as a symbol, cipher) objectively corresponds to this (the Christian position) and is permitted to be upheld by its representatives?" Of course, I don't know that, but rather wish to inquire into it again and again. For I believe knowing that a breakdown in communication, intolerance, and war are the inevitable consequences if the attempt at such interpretation—as a representation, for instance, as

in the mathematics of non-Euclidean geometry in Euclidean geometry—is not continually pursued and desired by both sides. The motive is not a rational one, but rather an awareness of God and his demands, which a philosopher must not invoke, but by which he may ultimately be guided nevertheless, just like the theologian. The saying, "I have not come to bring peace, but the sword," cannot come from God, perhaps not even from Jesus.

I am once again moved to engage with your theology and thank you very much for a volume of your *Dogmatic*, which I will receive soon.

With most respectful regards

Yours

Karl Jaspers