



Karl Jaspers' Critique Of Rudolf Bultmann And His Turn Toward Asia

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Abstract: In this essay, I explore Jaspers' critique of Rudolf Bultmann's neo-orthodox theology and evaluate Jaspers' response to it. First, I analyze Jaspers' rejection of Bultmann's idea of demythologization and his anti-Semitism, as well as Jaspers' move toward valuing Asian ciphers. While both Jaspers and Bultmann rejected the literal interpretation of Jesus' resurrection, they viewed the place of Jesus quite differently. Bultmann contended salvation to be possible only through Christ, Jaspers contested such an exclusive view and instead recommended expanding from solely Western ciphers to include both Western and Asian ciphers. Part II evaluates Jaspers' critique of Bultmann in the light of theological and historical scholarship. Jaspers' criticism of Bultmann's demythologization and anti-Semitism has been supported by a number of scholars, but his ideas of cipher and transcendence have been received more controversially. Some have criticized their lack of tradition and commitment, while others have commended their openness and historical sensitivity. The essay evaluates why the interpretations of openness and historical sensitivity are more convincing.

Karl Jaspers had a somewhat unusual relationship to Christianity and seemed, in part, to have inherited his father's independent attitude that supported its social functions while questioning traditional Christian dogma. Jaspers was sympathetic to Nietzsche's criticism of Christianity, even though he rejected atheism. He and his Jewish wife paid church and synagogue taxes respectively, although they attended religious services infrequently. As he grew older, Jaspers became more interested in Christianity. Even then, his approach to it was unconventional, for he focused on criticizing the Christocentrism of neo-orthodox theologians and articulated a philosophical faith as a substitute.

Critique of Bultmann and Turning Toward Asia

Between 1953 and 1954, Jaspers and Bultmann were engaged in a heated debate that was later published as *Myth and Christianity*. At first, they seemed to share a

common stance based upon their emphasis on applying history to theology, but their differences in the end turned out to be greater. While Jaspers commended Bultmann for rejecting the literalness of Jesus' resurrection, he simultaneously excoriated Bultmann's Christocentrism. The contentious debate between Jaspers and Bultmann in the early 1950s reminds one of a similar exchange between older liberal theologians, especially Ernst Troeltsch, and Bultmann and other neo-orthodox theologians in the 1920s, such as Karl Barth, Friedrich Gogarten, and Emil Brunner. The attacks by these neo-orthodox theologians, which were part of the broad rejection of liberalism by younger neo-conservatives in various academic disciplines of the 1920s, succeeded in replacing liberal theology with dialectical theology at German theological faculties. Their dominance was also evident in the early 1950s, when Jaspers tried to turn this tide by pillorying Bultmann's neo-orthodox theology.

Jaspers judged Bultmann to be "a great scholar, but not a good theologian,"¹ and he regarded Bultmann to be a great historian. Being influenced by modern science and a modern historical approach, Bultmann provided "uncommonly reliable information" (MC 54). This was a particularly unique accomplishment for a neo-orthodox theologian, since the application of history to theology was uncommon among neo-orthodox theologians. Thus, Bultmann was able "to negate many articles of the Christian faith" (MC 4). Bultmann had "the rare honesty of acknowledging uncomfortable or awkward facts." He believed Jesus' resurrection to be historically inaccurate and also accepted that "Jesus was mistaken." Jaspers confessed his indebtedness to Bultmann's historical scholarship, "as a layman I have learned more from him and from Dibelius than from any other contemporary theologian" (MC 54).

But Jaspers criticized Bultmann for being a bad theologian. Bultmann's idea of demythologization mistakenly separated science and myth and regarded "mythological thinking as obsolete, as something scientific thinking has left behind" and then tried to transpose myth into "a truth valid today" (MC 15). In fact, despite pursuing scientific theology, Bultmann's theology was "alien to both science and philosophy." Although Bultmann denied the resurrection as a miracle, he reintroduced "the objectivity of the revelation" surreptitiously (MC 77). By arguing that the resurrection is still taking place "by way of that miracle of about 1950 years ago," Bultmann "implied that the word of God is bound to the actual words of the New Testament" (MC 76-77).

Jaspers unambiguously pilloried Bultmann's Christocentric arguments. He dismissed Bultmann's statement that the idea of God without Christ is madness "from the point of view of the Christian faith"² as the religion of Christ or "God in Christ."³ He rejected Bultmann's support of the Lutheran

dogma of justification by faith alone to be "the most alienating, the most outlandish of beliefs" (MC 84). Also, Bultmann combined Jesus' death, which was already "gruesome in comparison with the death of Socrates," with "the myth of a god sacrificing himself" (MC 84).

Highlighting Bultmann's Christocentric position, Jaspers contended that Bultmann's real intention in demythologization was not to be truthful to history, but to rescue religion "through existentialist interpretation" (MC 7). Despite repeated criticism of Bultmann's idea of demythologization in his lecture to Swiss theologians, Jaspers acknowledged that his real concern was with Bultmann's orthodoxy (MC 112). Despite "giving a new form to the old theological rationalism," Bultmann ultimately "refounded orthodoxy" (MC 40). Despite his liberalism as a man and a historian," he was "in effect altogether orthodox and illiberal (MC 49-50). Bultmann retained "a most peculiar mixture of false enlightenment and high-handed orthodoxy" (MC 55). He appropriated "a maximum of enlightenment, only in order to assert faith all the more resolutely" (MC 39). Jaspers recollected witnessing in person this peculiar mixture in Bultmann in the 1920s, when Bultmann visited Heidelberg. While Jaspers was impressed by Bultmann's enlightening lecture, he was simultaneously "amazed by the orthodox, conventional content" of Bultmann's sermon (MC 112).

In addition to critiquing Bultmann's Christocentrism, Jaspers pilloried Bultmann for perpetuating the long tradition of Christian anti-Semitism. This criticism was largely born out of his painful personal experiences during the National Socialist era in Germany. Jaspers suffered the loss of professorship and social isolation and he lived with the constant fear of a possible deportation of his Jewish wife or even both of them. After World War II, he relentlessly denounced Christian anti-Semitism, especially that of Christian leaders. He thus praised a 1963 play, *The Deputy*, by the playwright Rolf Hochhuth, which was opposed to Pius XII's Christian anti-Semitism. But he found Hochhuth's focus on the pope to be one-sided, since it was the majority of Christian leaders who have been "impotent when evil triumphed."⁴

¹ Karl Jaspers and Rudolf Bultmann, *Myth and Christianity. An Inquiry into the Possibility of Religion without Myth*, transl. Norbert Gutermann, New York, NY: The Noonday Press 1958, p. 54. [Henceforth cited as MC].

² Bultmann quoted by Jaspers in MC 48.

³ Karl Jaspers, *The Perennial Scope of Philosophy*, transl. Ralph Manheim, New York: Philosophical Library 1949, p. 105. [Henceforth cited as PS]. See also Karl Jaspers, *Von der Wahrheit, Philosophische Logik 1*, Munich: R. Piper & Co. Verlag 1947, pp. 850-855.

⁴ Karl Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History*, transl. Michael Bullock, New Haven: Yale University Press 1953, p. 214.

Jaspers was especially critically of Martin Luther. He harshly denounced some key anti-Semitic passages in Luther's essay, "On the Jews and their Lies." Luther recommended setting fire on synagogues, destroying Jewish houses, confiscating prayer books, barring rabbis from teaching, and disallowing Jews from using the highways. Jews were also not to practice usury, but to earn their bread by using "axes, picks, spades, distaffs, and spindles." Unlike some theologians who tried to portray Luther only as anti-Jewish, not anti-Semitic, Jaspers did not seem to make such a distinction and highlighted the strong continuity from Luther to Hitler: "What Hitler has done, Luther had counseled—except for the direct killing in gas chambers."⁵

Jaspers also placed Bultmann in the tradition of Christian anti-Semitism among Christian leaders. He was troubled by Bultmann's scholarly focus on the Gospel according to John, although this fourth gospel demonized Jews; "Ye are of the father, the devil" (John 8:44). Bultmann was "scarcely troubled by the absurdity of the Gnostic myth in the Gospel of St. John," even though it "mythically justifies the earliest Christian anti-Semitism, which was absent from both St. Paul and the Synoptics" (MC 21). Bultmann, who regarded salvation to be possible only through Christ,⁶ thought Judaism to be inferior to Christianity. In writing this comment in the early 1950s after the Holocaust, Jaspers fully realized how "catastrophic" such an argument had been for mankind (PS 88). Such view encourages fanaticism by limiting truth to only one group and threatening critics.

Furthermore, after World War II Jaspers pointed out the urgent need for Christians in the West to eradicate their Christocentric tradition. But how was it to be achieved? He emphasized the importance of tolerating other religions and accepting plural truths. The Bible is not the only way to salvation, since "the Asians can find it without the Bible" (MC 46). Revelations occur "not only in the West (Judaism, the various Christian denomination, Islam), but also in Asia" (MC 45). Moreover, he recommended

Europeans to expand their ciphers of the Bible and Greek epics and tragedies by adding "the sacred books of Asia" (MC 20). Not only were Jesus and Socrates ciphers for the West, but so, also, were Buddha and Confucius were. More importantly, Jaspers saw in these Asian ciphers some relevant qualities which could help Western Christians to overcome Christocentricism and its anti-Semitism.

Jaspers recommended that Christians in the West to learn from the Buddha and Buddhism's emphasis on plural truths. He did not consider cultural differences between Europe and Asia to be a hurdle, although Asia is "far removed from us ... in the whole view of life and manner of thinking." A common ground exists between the two due to their common humanity; "we are all men, all facing the same questions of human existence."⁷ Also, the open nature of human beings enables people to overcome cultural differences to a large extent. In contrast to Christianity, Buddhism sees the Buddha himself to be one of many Buddhas and accepts all human beings having "the prospect of becoming Buddhisattva, or future Buddhas" (SBC 38). Buddhism's tolerant spirit can be observed also in its active absorption of foreign cultures. When Buddhism spread to the diverse areas of Asia, it assimilated "all the religions, philosophies, forms of life with which it came into contact" (SBC 12). Nonetheless, Jaspers pointed out that the original teachings of the Buddha are still present in different manifestations of Buddhism.

Jaspers also recommended that Westerners learn from Confucius' non-dogmatic approach to religious matters. Unlike orthodox Christians who hold onto many dogmas, Confucius was mostly free from them. Confucius was not focused on "the last things" and refrained "from all direct statement on metaphysical questions" (SBC 54). He had no fundamental religious experience, no inner rebirth and, no revelation. He seldom spoke of prayer. He accepted death, seeing "no ground for emotion" or terror (SBC 55). Confucius rejected dogmatic questions and instead focused on an essential reality and accepted the heavenly will.

⁵ Karl Jaspers, *Philosophy and the World. Selected Essays and Lectures*, transl. E. B. Ashton, Washington, DC: Regnery Gateway 1963, p. 147.

⁶ Rudolf Bultmann, *The New Testament and Mythology and Other Basic Writings*, Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress Publishers 1984, p. 29.

⁷ Karl Jaspers, *Socrates, Buddha, Confucius, Jesus. The Paradigmatic Individuals*, From *The Great Philosophers*, Volume I, ed. Hannah Arendt, transl. Ralph Manheim, San Diego & New York: A Harvest Book 1962, p. 40. [Henceforth cited as SBC].

By adopting the tolerant and non-dogmatic approaches of these Asian paradigmatic individuals, Jaspers sought to refute orthodox Christianity as represented by Bultmann. Jaspers tended to idealize the qualities of these two Asian paradigmatic individuals, Buddha and Confucius, focusing chiefly on their positive aspects. Nonetheless, these positive attributes, though one-sided, still point out some chief characteristics of these Asian sages. Although Buddhism was not as free of violence as Jaspers pointed out, its history still shows fewer religious wars and inquisitions against other religious groups than in Christianity. Although Confucius was not as free of dogmas and superstitions as Jaspers portrayed, it is still true that Confucius was hardly interested in questions concerning the afterlife and salvation and he focused rather on human conduct. Due to Jaspers' preoccupation with the problems of Christocentricism and anti-Semitism, his appreciation of these pluralistic religions has been accentuated.

Evaluating Jaspers' Critique of Bultmann

Is Jaspers justified in dismissing Bultmann's idea of demythologization and connecting Bultmann's Christocentricism with anti-Semitism? Like Jaspers, other scholars also have pointed out discrepancies in Bultmann's role as a historian and theologian. For example, Eugene Thomas Long finds Jaspers' critique of Bultmann's objectified revelation to be extreme,⁸ and he still found Bultmann's "apparent indifference to the what of Jesus' life" to be more problematic. Long argues that until it is explained, "Bultmann's departure from Jaspers' more negative approach to God's revelation will be seriously impaired" (JBD 52). On the relationship between faith and reason, Long regards Jaspers' philosophical faith to be more satisfactory than Bultmann's demythologization (JBD 127). Jaspers rightly demands that the theologian be open to the philosopher's critique of religious judgments and propositions (JBD 152).

Long's critique of Bultmann's idea of demythologization is echoed by other scholars. Leonard Ehrlich agrees with Jaspers' view that interpretation can only be a vehicle for objectivity, but it cannot confirm the

objectivity itself.⁹ Chris Thornhill recognizes certain similarities between Bultmann and Jaspers, but he in the end detects more differences than similarities between them. He agrees with Jaspers' critique of Bultmann's orthodoxy and criticizes "Bultmann's fusion of anti-mythical rationalism and orthodox religious dogma."¹⁰

Several scholars support Jaspers' critique of Bultmann's Christocentricism and its anti-Semitic implications. Long agrees with Jaspers' objection to Bultmann's exclusive view that salvation is possible only through Christianity (JBD 56). Bultmann's view discourages "any genuine dialogue between religions" and "falsifies the understanding of revelation as event" (JBD 61). Ehrlich also questions Bultmann's exclusive view and instead sides with Jaspers' idea of true tolerance by abstaining "from identifying the only truth which is absolute for me with the one truth which is absolutely" (KJP 107). In addition, a connection between the fourth gospel, which Bultmann emphasized, and anti-Semitism which Jaspers pointed out, has been noted by a number of theologians, including C. K. Barrett, J. Louis Martyn, and Raymond E. Brown.¹¹

Like these theologians, a number of historians on twentieth century Germany have sharply rejected the anti-Semitism of Bultmann and his fellow neo-orthodox theologians. For example, even though Bultmann had opposed to the Aryan Paragraph which forbade Jews to become ordained ministers, Robert Ericksen and Susannah Herschel argue that his theology was anti-Semitic.¹² Bultmann, like many members of the

⁹ Leonard Ehrlich, *Karl Jaspers: Philosophy as Faith*, Amherst, MA: The University of Massachusetts Press 1970, p. 107. [Henceforth cited as KJP]

¹⁰ Chris Thornhill, *Karl Jaspers. Politics and Metaphysics*, London and New York: Routledge 2002, p. 155. [Henceforth cited as JPM]

¹¹ Anders Gerdmar, *Roots of Theological Anti-Semitism. German Biblical Interpretation and the Jews, from Herder and Semler to Kittel and Bultmann. Studies in Jewish History and Culture*, Leiden, the Netherlands: Brill, 2008, p. 382. See also C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel according to St. John. An Introduction with Commentary and Notes*, Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press 1978, pp. 60-71. J. Louis Martyn, *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel*, Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press 2003, pp. 46-49. John R. Donahue, ed., *Life in Abundance. Studies of John's Gospel in Tribute to Raymond E. Brown*, Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press 1994, p. 92.

¹² Robert P. Ericksen and Susannah Herschel, "Introduction," in *Betrayal: German Churches and the Holocaust*, eds. Robert Ericksen and Susannah Herschel, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999, p. 18.

⁸ Eugene Thomas Long, *Jaspers and Bultmann: A Dialogue between Philosophy and Theology in the Existentialist Tradition*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press 1968, p. 48. [Henceforth cited as JBD]

Confessing Church, continued to regard Judaism to be inferior to Christianity. Ericksen observes that even after World War II it was not unusual for German theologians to have anti-Semitic views in varying degrees. Emanuel Hirsch influenced several post-WWII theologians in the "Hirsch Circle."¹³ Ericksen sees this anti-Semitism as being shared even by mainstream dialectical theologians outside the Hirsch Circle, such as Bultmann, Barth, and Friedrich Baumgärtel. These neo-orthodox theologians separated Christianity and Judaism and regarded Christianity alone, and no other religions, as absolute (BGC 33-34).

Does Jaspers' appreciation of Asian ciphers mean abandoning the Christian tradition or is it rather expanding its horizon? Although Jaspers' criticism of Bultmann's demythologization and anti-Semitism was supported by a number of scholars, Jaspers' ideas of cipher and transcendence were received more controversially. Long, who is sympathetic to Jaspers' criticism of Bultmann, raises serious objections against Jaspers' idea of cipher. Jaspers overlook the fact that "if all men followed his direction there would be no tradition" (JBD 73). He adds that Jaspers' cipher has "the character of ambiguity" (JBD 85) and makes "a leap to silence" (JBD 87). Also Paul Ricoeur sharply criticizes Jaspers for being a Don Juan of religion, for embracing the totality of myths from various cultures and thus lacking commitment.¹⁴

In contrast, Ehrlich finds Jaspers' idea of transcendence to be more persuasive than Bultmann's demythologization. Ehrlich affirms Jaspers' "taking seriously the second commandment," i.e., the imageless God. Jaspers was right to be vague about specific qualities of transcendence (KJP 176). Similarly, Thornhill considers Jaspers' idea of cipher to be better than Bultmann's demythologization. Jaspers' understanding of myth was "rather more nuanced than is often imagined," since he views "myth as a fragile, historically relative indication of possible transcendence" (JPM 154).

Between these two opposite interpretations of Jaspers' ideas of cipher and transcendence, I find the broad scope of the second group (Ehrlich and Thornhill) to be more convincing than the narrow scope of the first group (Long and Ricoeur). The first group's emphasis on certainty, i.e., tradition and commitment, is understandable, but it is problematic, for it inadequately explains a historical phenomenon, namely the reality of frequent intercultural exchanges throughout history. They thus make the mistake of viewing civilization statically, not dynamically. Even Christianity did not originate in the West; it was transmitted from the Middle East. Ricoeur seems to forget this example, when he dismisses Jaspers for being open to other religions.

In contrast to Ricoeur, Ehrlich and Thornhill acknowledge that full certainty is not feasible and we need to accept some degree of uncertainty as a historical fact. As Jaspers pointed out, we need to be careful in reading ciphers. Gregory J. Walters' term, "weak cultural relativism," seems to better describe Jaspers' position.¹⁵ These theologians rightly commend Jaspers for being sensitive to historical uniqueness, thus not ascribing specific qualities to cipher and transcendence.

In addition, it is important to note that despite Jaspers' willingness to learn from Asian ciphers, he did not support creating one universal religion. Instead, he emphasized preserving some degree of uniqueness. He thus criticized the Enlightenment thinker, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, for lacking appreciation for uniqueness, even though he strongly agreed with Lessing's emphasis on toleration. Lessing, in his famous ring parable in *Nathan the Wise*, assumed all three rings, i.e., the three monotheistic religions, to be ultimately identical in their teachings, despite different appearances. By contrast, Jaspers viewed all religions as possessing unique teachings, not merely unique appearances. Yet such uniqueness is not absolute and religions are thus able to communicate and learn from each other. In this context Jaspers provided an intercultural framework for an increasingly globalizing world.

¹³ Robert P. Ericksen, "Assessing the Heritage. German Protestant Theologians, Nazis and the 'Jewish Question,'" in *Betrayal: German Churches and the Holocaust*, eds. Robert Ericksen and Susannah Herschel, Minneapolis: Fortress Press 1999, p. 26. [Henceforth cited as BGC]

¹⁴ Paul Ricoeur, "The Relation of Jaspers' Philosophy to Religion," in *The Philosophy of Karl Jaspers*, ed. Paul Arthur Schilpp, New Haven: Yale University Press 1981, p. 638.

¹⁵ Gregory J. Walters, *Human Rights in an Information Age: A Philosophical Analysis*, Toronto and London: University of Toronto Press 2002, pp. 248-49.