

# KERYGMA AND MYTH

A THEOLOGICAL DEBATE

VOLUME II

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## THE CASE FOR DEMYTHOLOGIZING: A REPLY

I WAS at first pleased, indeed, I felt honoured when Karl Jaspers expressed himself on the issue of demythologizing. But after reading and re-reading his remarks,<sup>1</sup> I found it difficult to reply to them. I feel ever more strongly that they have little in common with the spirit of genuine communication. Their style is not that of a Socratic-Platonic dialogue, but rather of an *ex cathedra* pronouncement.

Jaspers has made it impossible for me to make any answer to a number of things. For were I to defend myself against the criticisms that I am "untouched by the least breath of Kantian or Platonic thinking", that my conception of philosophy is "that of nineteenth-century academicians or Hellenistic doxographers", or that I confuse "genuine enlightenment" with "sham enlightenment", I should seem a ridiculous figure. Nor can I reply to his doubts about how useful my theological work may be to the pastor. As for his characterization of my personality, no one can expect me to comment on that. You don't argue about your obituary.

I shall, moreover, refrain from dealing with Jaspers' criticism of my "assumptions", on which, he says, my theses rest "as upon two pillars". It may become clear indirectly, on the basis of what follows, that I neither hold that modern science provides us with a "world view" in Jaspers' meaning of this term, nor do I base my thinking on a philosophical doctrine. Regarding the latter question, I may gratefully refer to the analysis by Kurt Reide-

<sup>1</sup> First published in *Schweizerische Theologische Rundschau*, 1953, No. 3-4, pp. 74-106, and later in *Merkur*.

meister,<sup>1</sup> who has shown that demythologizing involves a hermeneutic problem arising from a concrete situation, and that in this situation, which is not defined by any special method of philosophizing, the distinction between "existential" and "existentialist" is unavoidable. Further, I can refer to Friedrich Gogarten's work *Demythologizing and History*,<sup>2</sup> which makes it clear that we do not necessarily subscribe to Heidegger's philosophical theories when we learn something from his existentialist analysis. The fact is that Heidegger attacks a problem with which theologians have grappled since Ernst Troeltsch, namely, the problem of history, which has become more acute for theology with every advance in historical understanding of the Bible. Trying to clarify the dependence of human existence on history, and by the same token, on historical comprehension, and going beyond the traditional "subject-object schema", theology is willing to learn from Heidegger. "Needless to say, we may learn from others besides Heidegger. If we can learn those things better elsewhere, it is all to the good. But they have to be learned." And it is true, more generally, that "he who reflects critically on the concepts he uses, whether theological or physical, by the same token comes close to philosophy and utilizes its conclusions" [Gogarten]. Whether theology is advanced or not by its recourse to modern philosophy depends not on arbitrary choice or individual preference, but on the historical situation: for both theology and philosophy have begun to realize how questionable is the thinking that has prevailed in science down to the present time.

Would not a genuine discussion of demythologizing have to begin by clearly formulating the problem involved? Does Jaspers see this problem? He takes it for granted that I want to salvage faith in so far as it can be salvaged in the face of scientific insights that cannot be ignored; that I want to give the unbeliever "a means to persevere in his faith with a good conscience". Now, this is most certainly not my intention. The purpose of demythologizing is not to make religion more

<sup>1</sup> Published in *Sammlung*, VIII, 1953, pp. 528-534.

<sup>2</sup> E.T. S.C.M. Press, 1955.

acceptable to modern man by trimming the traditional Biblical texts, but to make clearer to modern man what the Christian faith is. He must be confronted with the issue of decision, be provoked to decision by the fact that the stumbling-block to faith, the *skándalon*, is peculiarly disturbing to man in general, not only to modern man (modern man being only one species of man). Therefore my attempt to demythologize begins, true enough, by clearing away the false stumbling-blocks created for modern man by the fact that his world-view is determined by science.

Such an attempt does not aim at reassuring modern man by saying to him: "You no longer have to believe this and that." To be sure, it says this among other things, and may thereby relieve his pangs of conscience; but if it does so, it does so not by showing him that the number of things to be believed is smaller than he had thought, but because it shows him that to believe at all is qualitatively different from accepting a certain number of propositions. It is by striving to clarify the meaning of faith that demythologizing leads man to the issue of decision, not by "an intellectual assimilation of existential propositions in the Bible by means of existentialist exegesis", nor by "a new method for the true acquisition of faith" through existentialist interpretation.

It is this—to disclose what the Christian faith is, to disclose the issue of decision—that seems to me the only, the crucial thing that the theologian must accomplish in the face of "the real dangers that threaten us to-day . . . the deceptive hopes and expectations derived from fear and conceived in helplessness and confusion . . . the facile expedients resorted to by medicine, politics, theology, with uniformly ruinous effects". He must clarify the question that God poses to man, such a stumbling-block for the "natural" man, because it entails the sacrifice of all security attainable by his own unaided efforts.

That Jaspers has no clear conception of this stumbling-block is shown, on the one hand, by his obvious belief that it consists in Christian revelation's claim to absoluteness (to which we shall return later), and, on the other hand, by his reduction of Biblical

faith to trivial "consciousness of the God-created nobility of man"—he even equates this consciousness of the God-given *nobilitas ingenta* with the Biblical (incidentally, Pauline) "Christ in me"—by his failure to understand the Pauline doctrine of justification by faith alone without the works of law, and by his opinion that the Gospel according to St John: "mythically justifies the earliest Christian anti-Semitism".

The real problem, in other words, is the hermeneutic one, i.e. the problem of interpreting the Bible and the teachings of the Church in such a way that they may become understandable as a summons to man. But Jaspers, it seems to me, despite his lengthy disquisition on comprehension, has not really grasped the hermeneutic problem. Of course, we cannot reproach him for not having personally experienced the responsibility involved in interpreting a Biblical text. But had we not the right to expect that he would make an attempt to understand this task and the responsibility it involves?

He is as convinced as I am that a corpse cannot come back to life or rise from the grave, that there are no demons and no magic causality. But how am I, in my capacity as a pastor, to explain in my sermons and classes texts dealing with the Resurrection of Jesus in the flesh, with demons, or with magic causality? And how am I, in my capacity as a theological scholar, to guide the pastor in his task by my interpretations? How would Jaspers interpret, say, Rom. 5. 12-21 or 6. 1-11, if he had to? When he says that the redemptive history, which actually is related in the New Testament in the form of a myth (for instance, Phil. 2. 6-11), must "be tested existentially and judged on the basis of the strength that emanates from its language, and the truth that arises from it in the reality of life", I can only reply to such a vague statement by the question, "Well, how is this done?"

The magic word with which he dismisses the hermeneutic problem is "the cipher" (occasionally also "symbol"). The mythological statements in the texts, according to him, are "ciphers", and the mythological language is "a cipher language". What is in cipher? Is it "transcendence", is it the transcendent

God? "Myth is the language of reality that is not empirical, but existential."<sup>1</sup>

To define the myth as a cipher of transcendence merely describes the problem of interpretation; it scarcely solves it. All mythologies have this in common (if we set aside the purely etiological myths), that they refer to a reality situated beyond empirical reality, independent of man. But is that reality—and hence human existence—understood in the same way by all mythologies? In Indian, in Greek, and in Biblical mythology? Naturally, Jaspers cannot ignore the richness and diversity of the "ciphers". But is this diversity a matter of indifference, in as much as all myths are merely ciphers of transcendence? When Jaspers says that the revelation of truth is "a series of sudden illuminations in the history of the mind", he seems to look upon the diversity of myths as a purely accidental fact, determined by historical concretion.

Or do I misunderstand him? After all, he also says that myths are opposed to myths, and that it is possible to struggle for what we believe to be the true faith within the terms of mythical thinking. Since Jaspers gives no examples, confining himself to the general remark that for us the Bible is the favourite arena for such spiritual struggle, and that another arena is provided by the Greek epic poems and tragedies, and still another by the sacred books of Asia, I cannot imagine how, in his opinion, this spiritual struggle should be fought. Must we not interpret the various myths with regard to the existential understanding expressed in

<sup>1</sup> Disregarding the question of whether this reality can be expressed only in mythological language, as Jaspers maintains, I should like to ask whether his conception of the myth, in so far as he defines it as a statement in cipher, is so different from my own. When I say that the myth expresses man's knowledge of the ground and limits of his being, is this so different from what Jaspers implies? At all events, I agree with him that the myth is misunderstood when the reality it denotes is conceived of as empirical, and its language as that of "a guaranteed and guaranteeing physical presence". In my opinion such misunderstanding is not accidental; rather it is a characteristic of original myth that in it empirical reality and existential reality are not distinguished. Mythical thinking is just as objectifying as scientific thinking, for instance, when the former represents the transcendence of God in terms of remoteness in space, or when it personifies the power of evil as Satan. This is precisely what makes demythologizing necessary.

them? Is it only in philosophy that there are existential differences, between Jaspers and Heidegger, for instance, not in mythology, too?

In short, Jaspers does not seem to have grasped the hermeneutic problem or to have taken it seriously. His assertion that assimilation of the mythical language of faith must be effected by transforming the content of the myth itself, by giving it meanings cogent in our own time, tell us nothing at all about what such a transformation may actually be, or what is transformed by it; nor does he tell us what is the element of truth that persists throughout the transformations of the myth.

Jaspers also eludes the hermeneutic problem by denying that the task of interpreting the Bible objectively is the scholar's: he assigns it to the minister who "boldly sets out to understand the language of transcendence (which he conceives of as the language of God) and to speak it himself in his congregation". Must not the minister, in order to understand the language of the Bible as the language of transcendence and thereby as the language of God, also understand the Hebrew and Greek languages? And if he does not know these languages, must he not rely on scholars who do know them? Does translation into contemporary German amount to no more than transposing foreign words into German ones? Does not the minister need for this purpose a deeper understanding of the language, of its conceptual pattern, of the thinking that guides it? In other words, is not translation always interpretation as well?

Furthermore, must not scholarly translation be "correct" (in so far as this is attainable)? Can the exegete, who strives to comprehend that which was "primarily comprehended" (to use Jaspers' term) understand the primarily comprehended with its "valuations" of good and evil, true and false, beautiful and ugly before he has correctly understood the text? "Biblical faith is not acquired by study", says Jaspers. It certainly is not—but when have I maintained that it was? Comprehension of religion (surely this must mean believing comprehension), Jaspers also says, has nothing to do with scientific method. It certainly has not—yet religious-comprehending appropriation of the Biblical

word is possible only when the Biblical texts are translated into a language understandable to-day. Is such a translation possible without methodical study?

Now, it is true that such methodical study (aiming at "secondary comprehension") is impossible unless a potentiality for primary comprehension is present in the student, i.e. unless he has a primarily comprehending, existential rapport with the subject treated in the text he is to interpret.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, when he wants to show what the text regards as good or evil, true or false, etc., he can do this only if he himself experiences good or evil, true or false, as existential possibilities. This does not prevent him from suspending, i.e. from keeping under question, his own "valuations". Objective interpretation of what is "correct" leads the hearer or reader *indirectly* into the situation of decision. But interpretation itself can only discover and strive to show what is "correct". In so far as it discloses possibilities of existential understanding through indirect appeal to the hearer or reader, it does not deprive him of decision. Naturally, it cannot prevent the hearer or reader from misunderstanding what has been said, when he has failed to perceive the appeal.

What is true of every interpretation applies also to interpretation of the Bible. Here, too, what is "correct" can only be discovered and demonstrated when the interpreter stands in definite relation to the matter in question. But this does not imply the impossible requirement that the interpreter should assume that he has faith; what it does imply is that he must be vitally concerned with the existential question, to which faith is a possible answer, though not an answer that can be demonstrated by the interpretation.

Jaspers' failure to understand the predicament of the interpreter seems to me linked with his denial of the possibility of existentialist analysis. Why the latter should be impossible, I cannot see. Certainly, what Jaspers calls "existential clarification" differs from Heidegger's phenomenological analysis of

<sup>1</sup> Cf. my paper "Concerning the Hermeneutic Problem", in *Glauben und Verstehen*, II, 1953, pp. 211-235. E.T. in *Essays Theological and Philosophical*, Tr. by J. C. G. Greig, S.C.M. Press, 1955.

empirical existence in this, that existential clarification is effected only in the act of existing, and is inseparable from "existential communication". But Jaspers cannot help explaining what he calls "existential clarification" in such a way that it becomes universally understandable, i.e. he is obliged to objectify it as a doctrine. And if Jaspers were to claim that the objectification is transcended in genuine (existential) comprehension, much the same could be said of Heidegger's analysis. Heidegger's phenomenological analysis of empirical existence as self-contained and self-resolved in Being towards death does not debar anyone, not even those who are convinced by this analysis as a doctrine, from the existential venture. Rather, it shows that the existential venture is always personal, and it clearly emphasizes the appeal, which Jaspers regards as basic, "to selfhood, to authenticity, to actual being, to a sinking into the original, historical facticity (*Sein*), in order to be appropriated—the appeal to earnest questioning in a hopeless situation".

Whether such propositions of Jaspers as this one: "Everything is comprehended. . . . Comprehension is the mode of presence of the Being that we are" are or are not to be termed "existentialist analysis", seems to be a purely verbal question. The same goes for his statement about "the responsibility of man thrown back upon himself. It is only through freedom that he experiences how he is given to himself by transcendence—in freedom not by freedom". Or his remark that "every man in his freedom has the possibility of experiencing himself as being given and guided by transcendence". Were a reader to accept such sentences as a clarification of his Being, would he be accepting a scientific philosophy of the kind evolved by "nineteenth-century academicians"? Jaspers, too, it would seem, can be misinterpreted. But to misunderstand or abuse existentialist analysis is surely not to demonstrate its impossibility.

In my opinion, Jaspers comes closest to the hermeneutic problem when he reflects on the relation between subject and object. But if he were interested in a genuine dialogue, i.e. in a joint search for the truth by means of reciprocal critical questioning, he could not fail to see that the problem of the relation between

subject and object also motivates my hermeneutic efforts: for my purpose is to arrive at a genuine comprehension of past existential insights, a comprehension that would go beyond the horizons of objectified thinking. I feel that Jaspers misses the point when he suggests that I am not subjectively committed to my objective conclusions, that in my case "the objectivity of what is said and the subjectivity of the speaker" do not coincide.

For my part, however, I would not agree with Jaspers' view that such a coincidence, when it does take place, is attributable to "the Encompassing"; rather, it occurs when the subject perceives the object as a summons to him in the genuine encounter. To account for it by "the Encompassing" is, in my opinion, not only to engage in superfluous speculation, but also to miss the earnestness of the summons, of the encounter. In Jaspers' thinking the Encounter and the Summons play no part whatever; and as I see it, this means that he has failed to grasp the full importance of the historicity of human existence. In so far as I can judge from his analyses, he understands by historicity merely the fact that man is always situated at a certain point in time, that he lives under accidental historical conditions and is influenced by historical traditions.

For the same reason Jaspers' concept of transcendence seems to me questionable. Transcendence obviously has at first for him the negative sense of the non-objective; then, the insight that *Existenz* does not belong to the world of objects leads him to hypostatize the non-objective as the All-Encompassing, indeed, as God. This enables him to speak in the language of myth, which, according to him, is indispensable. Thus he says that man has the possibility of experiencing himself as given to himself and guided by transcendence, and that the liberal faith does not regard it impossible for God, conceived of as absolute transcendence, to effect anything. This All-Encompassing reminds us of the "universum" of Schleiermacher, to whom Jaspers occasionally refers rather maliciously. Other statements remind us of Kant. According to Jaspers, direct relation with the godhead is possible for every man in his own responsible freedom of reason. "In the direct relation of his own freedom to God", man knows that he

is determined by God. In the last analysis, what is this transcendence but that which was formerly called "the spirit"?—the spirit which, to be sure, is transcendent in relation to "physical presence", but is immanent in human reason! Is such transcendence the transcendence of God? And since, according to Jaspers, "the mystery of the revelation of the truth" is disclosed in sudden illuminations within the history of the spirit, his transcendence seems also to be immanent in history.

Jaspers' concept of transcendence now leads him to his interpretation of the revealed faith. He says that the belief that "God manifests himself at a given place and time, that he has revealed himself at one place and time and only there and then, makes God appear as a fixed thing, an object in the world". Very true! It is also true that the Christian churches often interpreted and still interpret the revealed faith in that way. But does not Jaspers see that such a conception of the revealed faith has been fought against repeatedly? Does he not know that what I am fighting against is just this fixation of God as an objective entity, against misconceiving the revelation as an act accomplished once and for all? Does he not grasp that the purpose of my demythologizing is to interpret the mythological eschatology of the New Testament in such a way that the process of revelation is given its genuine meaning of an "eschatological" process? He may regard my conception as false, but can a genuine dialogue take place if one of its participants ignores the intention of the other?

Now, I have the impression that Jaspers thinks it impossible to have a genuine dialogue with me, on account of what he calls my orthodoxy, or because as a Christian theologian I assert the absoluteness of the Christian revelation. Does Jaspers realize that wherever a revealed faith speaks, it asserts, and must assert, the absoluteness of its revelation, because it regards itself as the true fulfilment of the commandment: "I am the Lord thy God. . . . Thou shalt have no other gods before me." Everyone is free to regard such a revealed faith as absurd. But a man who does, should not talk about revelation. At all events, it is absurd to look for various instances of revelation in the history of religion or the spirit. As a historian I can only discover various instances

of faith in revelation, never of the revelation itself. For the revelation is revelation only *in actu* and only *pro me*; it is understood and recognized as such only in personal decision.

It follows that it is also absurd to ask: "How do we recognize revelation? What criterion of truth is given for the direct revelation of God?"—for such questions presuppose that we can ascertain the truth of the revelation before recognizing it as revelation. When we speak of revelation in the true sense of the word, such questions cannot arise, and the impossibility of applying criteria is part of the stumbling-block inherent in the revelation. As though God had to justify himself to man! As though every demand for justification (including the one concealed in the demand for criteria) did not have to be dropped as soon as the face of God appears! As though man's justification were not a gift to the man who has fallen to his knees before God! After all, that is the meaning of the doctrine (which Jaspers regards as mythological) of justification by grace alone without the works of law. For "the works" denote here the actions of a man who strives to justify himself before God by his own strength, who boasts and asserts his claims before God.

If this doctrine of justification by faith alone without the works of law is the content of the revelation, then it is true that the Christian faith must assert a revelation "frozen in its definitiveness". Otherwise it could not speak seriously of revelation. It is, however, clear—and I think that Jaspers should have seen this—that this content of the revelation can never be accepted as a doctrine in the sense of an orthodoxy, without at once losing its truth. If this were to come to pass, Jaspers' liberal faith would be perfectly right in refusing "to arrest its movement in time by a revelation frozen in its definitiveness". But, after all, revelation is truth only in the event.

Does Jaspers imagine that I fail to realize that "whatever is said and done in the name of revelation" is "said and done in worldly form, in worldly language, in human acts and human perceptions"? After all, the Christian doctrine of incarnation explicitly says this very thing (in mythological language!). What matters is that the incarnation should not be conceived of as a

miracle that happened about 1950 years ago, but as an eschatological happening, which, beginning with Jesus, is always present in the words of men proclaiming it to be a human experience.

If the redemptive history were an objective event in a remote past, if it were "an objective redemptive history" in *that* sense, liberal faith would be perfectly right in repudiating it, "as an absolute event and as a prerequisite of salvation for all men". But in the Christian conception, faith is not "weakened" by the denial that historical objectification is absolutely and universally valid, i.e. by the denial that "faith can find objective guarantees in the world". On the contrary, it is only when there is no such objective guarantee that faith acquires meaning and strength, for only then is it authentic decision.

When the revelation is truly understood as God's revelation, it is no longer a communication of teachings, nor of ethical or historical and philosophical truths, but God speaking directly to me, assigning me each time to the place that is allotted me before God, i.e. summoning me in my humanity, which is null without God, and which is open to God only in the recognition of its nullity. Hence there can be only one "criterion" for the truth of revelation, namely, this, that the word which claims to be the revelation must place each man before a decision—the decision as to how he wants to understand himself: as one who wins his life and authenticity by his own resources, reason, and actions, or by the grace of God. The faith that recognizes the claim of the revelation is not a blind faith, accepting something incomprehensible on the authority of something external. For man can understand what the world of the revelation says, since it offers him the two possibilities of his self-understanding.

But we must also say that faith accepts the incredible on authority! For the possibility of living by the grace of God can, by its very nature, be given only to me; it is not a possibility open to all for the taking. If it were, the very meaning of the revelation—the grace given to man who is nothing before God—would be lost. Man does not live by the *idea* of God's grace, but by the grace *actually granted him*.

Thus the revelation has to be an event, which occurs whenever

and wherever the word of grace is spoken to a man. The "demythologized" sense of the Christian doctrine of incarnation, of the word that "was made flesh" is precisely this, that God manifests himself not merely as the idea of God—however true this idea may be—but as "my" God, who speaks to me here and now, through a human mouth. And the Christian message is bound to a historical tradition and looks back to a historical figure and its history only to the extent that it regards this figure and its history as evidence of the Word of God. The "demythologized" sense of the assertion that Jesus Christ is the eschatological phenomenon that brings the world to its end is precisely this, that Christ is not merely a past phenomenon, but the ever-present Word of God, expressing not a general truth, but a concrete message, that Word that destroys and in destruction gives life. The paradox of the Christian faith is precisely this, that the eschatological process which sets an end to the world became an event in the history of the world, and becomes an event in every true sermon, and in every Christian utterance. And the paradox of theology is precisely this, that it must speak of faith in objective terms, like any science, while fully realizing that its speaking becomes meaningful only if it goes beyond the "objective" formulation.

For Jaspers, the Christian faith's stumbling-block is its claim to absoluteness. Perhaps I should be quite satisfied with the effect my attempt at demythologizing has had on him. After all, the purpose of demythologizing is to make the stumbling-block real. However, I doubt whether I have been successful in this with Jaspers; for I doubt that he has correctly understood the stumbling-block. Viewed as an assertion of the absoluteness of the Christian *religion*, it is not correctly understood. As such, it would be meaningless. The Christian religion is a historical phenomenon, as other religions, and like the latter it can be considered with regard to its spiritual content and its existential understanding of man. Certainly, the religions of this earth can be classified from the point of view of their spiritual content and the depth of their existential insight. But even if, in attempting such a classification, we were to give the Christian religion the

highest rank, if, for instance, we were to assert its irreplaceable value for human culture, this would mean something fundamentally different from the claim of the Christian faith to absoluteness. This claim can—but also must—be raised by the believer only, not on the basis of a comparison with other modes of faith, but solely as answer to the word that is concretely addressed to me. And this answer is: “Lord to whom shall we go? thou hast the words of eternal life” (John 6. 68).