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Being True

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Abstract: Turning to Karl Jaspers's 1937 lectures, later published as *Philosophy of Existence*, this paper examines what might be meant by the colloquial expression "spiritual but not religious". In doing so, it is argued that while Jaspers's critique of organized religion mostly hits the mark, critiques of religion—as represented here by Jaspers's Existenzphilosophie—fail to undermine a form of genuine spirituality grounded in a faith in the revealed Christ.

Keywords: Heidegger; Husserl; Jaspers; Kierkegaard; revelation; spirit

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It has been two thousand and twenty-one years, more or less, since the revelation of Jesus Christ in the flesh. What does its occurrence entail? Frankly, likely nothing of fundamental human importance is left unaffected. Even attempts merely to rebuff it require the event be faced, and with that, its claim to universal and absolute authority is thereby countenanced, if only in passing. As for ambivalent responses to revelation, philosophy's own is a telling case in point. Many philosophical schools and systems, after all, fly the flag of materialism or atheism. For these that do, the incarnation is far from fact. Even when philosophy, instead of denying the fact of revelation, accepts it to be one, such thought nonetheless still frequently looks on revelation warily, seeing in it an encroachment, or a violation of its sovereignty, or an impediment to pursuing the form of truth it alone is suited to seeking through its open-ended questioning. This conception of philosophical inquiry as demanding a kind of open-endedness that revelation simply forecloses has become something of a commonplace. Despite disagreeing over so much else, Jaspers and Heidegger, for example, both agreed that philosophical thinking must methodologically subordinate faith in Christ to itself, if it is to access its proprietary domain of existential truths which the adherence to revelation, they said, only obscures. As either positive or methodological atheisms would have it, the status of revelation's relation to philosophy is as obvious as it is settled. Thought, as philosophy understands it, supersedes revelation.

Or does it? For phenomenology, after all, which always has defined itself as a philosophy whose task is to elucidate the situation in which we find ourselves, ignoring revelation would mean sidestepping the very existence it aims to make intelligible. To be sure, while phenomenology might have its reasons not to accord revelation the authority that religion does, it cannot deny that revelation is entitled a hearing. Simply in virtue of revelation's being among the things themselves that we encounter (or the way in which we encounter those things), phenomenology cannot remain silent on Christ's appearing—revelation, in some sense, is a matter of proper philosophical concern, a phenomenon no *phenomenological* philosophy can neglect.[1]

Of course, there is a venerable philosophical legacy behind phenomenology's embracing the question of revelation. In the wake of Kant and the German Idealism of Hegel, Schelling, and Fichte, and then later Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, the matter of where to locate and how to appropriate the phenomenon of revelation with regard to philosophy and religion was a well-worn issue by the time it came to captivate the public's attention

[1] For the most recent phenomenological treatise on the phenomenon of revelation, see (Marion 2020).

with Sartre's existentialism. Popular imagination now associates existentialism with the Parisian café. Yet, Sartre's was not the only existential philosophy in Europe on offer at its time. Just weeks after being dismissed by the Nazis from his chair at Heidelberg in 1937, Jaspers delivered a set of lectures that would form the basis of *Philosophy of Existence*. Although later that text's 1957 Epilogue explicitly disavows the label "*Existenzphilosophie*" owing to the misleading connotations that by then had accrued to the term thanks to Sartre, Jaspers in it reaffirms his commitment to "perennial philosophy"—a philosophy that seeks truth in transcendence, and an authentic experiential encounter with transcendent reality, through free and open rational questioning—a "*movement*" that "knows no stopping or ending."[2] In the process of staking out his idiosyncratic vision of philosophy, Jaspers articulates a sustained critique of institutional religion, if not religious faith per se. As a pursuit of transcendence rooted in reason, Jaspers's philosophy of existence nevertheless at the same time reserves an indispensable role for a sort of faith, "philosophical faith". Such faith, he says, "is the substance of a personal life; it is the reality of man philosophizing in his own historic ground, in which he receives himself as a gift."[3] Due to the historicity of our forms of life, all social, political, and religious traditions and institutions are, says Jaspers, symbolic ciphers of an absolutely transcendent reality that is irreducible to any particularized worldview. In this respect, Jaspers follows Kant, maintaining that what we encounter is appearance only, a partial, at best, manifestation of transcendence. As he says in the third lecture entitled "Reality", we are aware of transcendence "always *only by means of appearance* in concrete historic situations".[4] Confronting unvarnished reality, hence, requires "*breaking out of illusion*", namely all of the "Opinions, notions, customs, and vital feelings" that are mere ciphers of transcendence.[5] By relativizing every phenomenon to the symbolically mediated historic formation within which it appears, such philosophical faith accordingly jettisons the faith predicated on a revelation understanding itself to be absolute and universal. Thus, so Jaspers concludes, Christ cannot be the One that believers take him to be.

Jaspers's existentialism, then, it might be said, vehemently resists dogmatism in all its forms. It is not idiosyncratic only, but iconoclastic—and religion is not its sole target. Scientism, for one, is the recipient of a firm rebuke. Of interest for present purposes, however, is *Philosophy of Existence*'s related criticism aimed at deflating myth's and revelation's pretensions to the absolute. For in turning to Jaspers, we find a very sophisticated account of what today is meant by the colloquial saying that one is "spiritual but not religious". What sense is to be made of this statement? Is its implicit critique of religion valid? Is its contrasting notion of spirituality true? What, indeed, does it precisely mean to be spiritual?

One way to preliminarily address these questions is to note that the statement is an assertion best understood when appreciated in light of the particular stand it takes on the nature of truth generally, and more specifically the truth of (what Jaspers calls) transcendence. To begin with, we may thus ask a first question: is to say one is spiritual but not religious thereby to say (or imply) that religion itself is false? To have any hope of answering such a question, we must identify what concept of truth is relevant. Starting with propositional truth, we note with P.F. Strawson against Austin that remarks about truth are not merely remarks about linguistic conventions. Whether or not Strawson's further analysis of the truth-predicate is correct, according to which to say "that P is true" is equivalent just to saying "that P", it should be noted that, in any case, propositional truth is not the fundamental level of truth. As Heidegger never ceased emphasizing, the philosophical tradition tends to focus mainly on judgment as the locus of truth. This traditional analysis of truth assertions, typified in the debate between Strawson and Austin, remains at the level of ontic truth. In dealing strictly with entities and the truths expressed

[2] (Jaspers 1971, p. 58).
[3] (Jaspers 1971, p. 88).
[4] (Jaspers 1971, p. 79).
[5] (Jaspers 1971, p. 78).

about them in propositions, it overlooks truth as unconcealment (*Unverborgenheit*).[6] To illustrate with an example, the bouquet of flowers in my living room is white. All sorts of facts follow, and we can in turn make any number of statements about them. To wit, there is a white bouquet of flowers in the living room; the bouquet is next to the couch; it is visible through the driveway window; it looks like the flowers I can remember from childhood on the garden patio of Villa Montalvo. An entity as simple as a bouquet of flowers, thus, is the potential object of an indefinite number of assertions, and stands in relation to innumerable other entities and states of affairs. As Heidegger stresses, however, in order for the bouquet to figure in our assertions, the everyday linguistic discourse in which we articulate propositional truths always already itself draws upon a holistic context of significance (the "worldhood" of the world, in Heidegger's terminology) in light of which such true (or false) statements are made. To figure in judgment or assertion, the entity must already be disclosed, and this disclosure, says Heidegger, is typically first of all perceptual and practical. An ordinary statement's being true, then, is a matter of its corresponding to the way the world is. However, this correspondence is only expressed in virtue of a pre-predicative encounter with entities that occurs more primordially than that characterizing propositional truth. The meaning of being religious or spiritual is to be assessed at this basic level of comportment (*Verhalten*). As for the question of in what sense spiritualty shows religious statements to be false, this takes us beyond the merely propositional or the linguistic, and into the experiential domain of what one might call "existential" truth. At issue is not just entities and our beliefs and statements concerning them, but rather truths about our own being, truths concerning our values, beliefs, attitudes, and actions.

With this in mind, immediately we see how any straightforward ascriptions of truth or falsehood in this context are especially messy. For as it happens, very often, those who profess to be spiritual but not religious claim to be so on the basis of rejecting the applicability of universal or absolute truth upon which ordinary religious conviction is said to depend. By deflating truth in this way, all religions are in some sense held to be equally true or valid, insofar as they are "really" false. This affirmation of religious pluralism, however, renders unclear on what grounds spirituality itself is true. To be spiritual, after all, is not merely to suspend judgment on the validity of world religions or even to positively reject them. Whatever else it is, being spiritual at the minimum involves affirming *something* in religion's stead. A second question can here be made explicit: what, then, does spirituality affirm to be true? Even for somebody who rejects the doctrines and dogmas of organized religion in the name of a strictly personal set of beliefs and convictions, the fact remains that, within this albeit limited scope of personal validity, they are taken to be true. In the case of beliefs or principles that one self-consciously understands to be true for nobody but oneself, they are true in some respect—namely, true for oneself. Consequently, a third question arises. Assuming such a thing is possible, what would it be for a spiritual belief (or practice) to be true for oneself?[7]

Considering Jaspers's approach to this question proves illuminating. For despite formulating a criticism of organized religion, Jaspers acknowledges the existence of reason's impulse for one truth. As he says, reason seeks unity and wholeness—"The basic characteristic of *reason* is the *will to unity*".[8] In its "striving for the One", though, reason must content itself with an "unlimited openness" and "availability for questioning", since there is no final and absolute doctrine to be "firmly established".[9] There is a plurality of worldviews, none of which deserve to be treated as universal. When, however, the essentially partial and fragmentary nature of any particular religious worldview is recognized, the impulse to attain absolute reality remains as strong as ever. According to Jaspers, reason desires to

[6] For probably the best treatment in English of Heidegger's conception of truth as unconcealment, see (Wrathall 2011).

[7] The work of Pierre Hadot springs to mind immediately in this context. For an exploration of the nature of phenomenological method in relation to Hadot's understanding of spiritual exercise, see (DeLay 2020).

[8] (Jaspers 1971, p. 54).

[9] (Jaspers 1971, p. 58).

comprehend reality in its totality, yet reality by its nature inevitably resists being rendered into an object of thought. Invoking Husserl's language, here we might say that there is always a further horizon within which anything given can appear. Additionally, if there truly is a horizon of all horizons, an absolute horizon, we cannot grasp it in thought. For if we did so, ex hypothesi, we would have rendered it an object, and hence, no longer a horizon. The horizonality of experience is a feature of reality captured in Jaspers's similar notion of "the encompassing": "The encompassing always merely announces itself—in present objects and within the horizons—but it *never* becomes an *object*. Never appearing to us itself, it is that wherein everything else appears."[10] Yet, as Jaspers clarifies, the encompassing is not only "the horizon of our knowledge at any particular moment" but in fact a "realm" that lies outside our conceptualizations and symbolic orders, a plenum whose reality in itself remains unknowable, a "presence of being" that is felt but not cognized. Whereas Heidegger in his 1929 Marburg address had suggested that here, the Nothing is at stake, for Jaspers, by contrast, it is not nothingness that we encounter in transcendence—but rather, "being itself."[11] Consequently, authentic philosophizing begins with a "leap," a resolute decision to deploy reason beyond the limits of discursive knowledge and its objects, to instead think the unthinkable truth of *Existenz*. At the conclusion of this first lecture, Jaspers makes a very brief and cryptic remark about love. His suggestion seems to be that love somehow uniquely saves us from the abyss of nothingness, delivering us instead to what the text terms "the origin".[12] At this point in the lecture's reflections, everything takes on a distinctively mysterious feeling. Perhaps that is Jaspers's intention.

Accordingly deprived of a "secure foundation",[13] we in turn recognize how the truth of *Existenz* is different from other truths. Jaspers cites, for instance, the validity of statements based on visual experience and logical argument. All that is empirical truth. Then, there is pragmatic truth, the truth regarding what is suitable for preserving and extending life, for obtaining lasting satisfaction, and for enabling everyday communication.[14] Both empirical and pragmatic truth belong to the "understanding", to a mode of consciousness grounded in sense experience, discursivity, and, in turn, the public norms and cultural institutions to which this entire symbolic order gives rise and sustains. However, there is a truth beyond this stable order of conceptual and cultural convention. There is more to reality than custom. To indicate it, Jaspers sketches the outlines of what he terms "the Exception", the individual who breaks out of universality, and who surpasses the "ethos, institutions and the laws of the land".[15] Acting in the service of transcendence, the exception wills the universal, but by willing it in none of its current or accepted conventional instantiations—the exception, in short, "calls everything into question".[16] In reading Jaspers's portrait of the exception, one's mind turns naturally to Kierkegaard's "single individual" or "knight of faith". Like Kierkegaard's knight, Jaspers's exception is not lawless; the exception is not a soldier of chaos. Rather, a kind of order is at stake—and the exception's life is the expressed embodiment of it. The order is accessible only at a deeper level than the superficiality typifying a thoughtless obedience to the "institutions, laws and systems of thought".[17]

[10] (Jaspers 1971, p. 18).

[11] (Jaspers 1971, p. 28). A recurring focus of Heidegger's thought in the period surrounding Being and Time, transcendence receives a particularly intensive treatment in the essay "On the Essence of Ground" from 1928. Heidegger there equates transcendence with being-in-the-world, such that "transcendence means: in the essence of its being it is world-forming, 'forming' [bildend] in the multiple sense that it lets world occur, and through the world gives itself an original view (form [Bild]) that is not explicitly grasped, yet functions precisely as a paradigmatic form [Vor-bild] for all manifest being, among which each respective Dasein itself belongs" (Heidegger 1998, p. 123). Or, more succinctly if not simply, "Transcendence constitutes selfhood" (Heidegger 1998, p. 108). And in the last line of the essay when Heidegger says, "Only being able to listen into the distance awakens Dasein as a self to the response of the other Dasein in whose company [Mitsein] it can surrender its I-ness so as to attain itself as an authentic self" (Heidegger 1998, p. 135), it is difficult not to see Jaspers's concern with the fragility of existential communication discussed in the 1937 public lecture as partly reflective of his own frayed friendship with Heidegger.

[12] (Jaspers 1971, p. 28).

[13] (Jaspers 1971, p. 35).

[14] (Jaspers 1971, p. 37).

[15] (Jaspers 1971, p. 44).

[16] (Jaspers 1971, p. 47).

[17] (Jaspers 1971, p. 48).

Once again, Jaspers stresses that the task is not one of flouting authority altogether, or of creating oneself free of all tradition. As he explains, the exceptional is an individual still wanting to discover "his truth" in the form of an external authority, a process of appropriation which Jaspers characterizes as a "liberation *in* authority".[18] While the details of the account of authority are elusive, it is clear enough that the claim of transcendence simultaneously comes from without and within. As transcendence, according to Jaspers, cannot be instantiated fully in a historic form for the reasons already mentioned, the truth the exception is seeking to communicate can never be made sufficiently transparent, or known publicly. Truth, Jaspers says, is in time and historic. As a consequence, "one truth and one human nature do not exist".[19] From the perspective of Jaspers's *Existenzphilosophie* explicated here, thus, to be spiritual but not religious is to deny the "absolute reality of one historicity".[20] Philosophical "faith in transcendence" exceeds revealed faith in Christ.

At issue in this dispute concerning revelation's claim to absoluteness is an underlying disagreement over the nature of hubris. On the one hand, Jaspers (and those like him) in the name of humility cautions against taking any religious tradition to be absolute. The lesson is that the unboundedness of reality (and God) cannot be adequately represented by any worldview. Anyone who fails to heed this truth of transcendence refuses to accept the inherent finitude of human understanding, and is being dogmatic. Usually, this charge of intellectual immodesty is coupled with a further comment about intellectual integrity. Whereas whoever settles for any particular religious outlook is said to be intellectually lazy, or complacent, or perhaps simply unsophisticated, the one who rejects such naïve outlooks and continues questioning is said to be honest. In this way, the one who seeks by questioning rather than believing is thought to be more faithful to reality itself. On the other hand, however, is there not an opposing lesson in the name of humility that might be drawn? For supposing God were to desire to communicate himself to us adequately, who is anyone to say God cannot, that doing so would be, indeed *must be*, impossible? How, we might ask, is it less hubristic to assert one knows the limits of possibility to be such that God is therefore unable to reveal himself unambiguously? In a word, any revelation essentially incapable of accomplishing itself would not be worthy of the name.

Perhaps, then, a third way lies open to us, one not fitting squarely within the division between spirituality and religion, as typically understood. Considering Jaspers's own critique of institutional religion itself suggests why this dichotomy, taken at the level he proposes it, is ill-posed. With Jaspers, it is possible to agree that the institutions of historic religion are indeed alienated from the fullness of transcendence. Yet still, against Jaspers, it is possible to affirm that the revelation of Christ has occurred, and occurred absolutely and universally. With those who in the name of spirituality criticize organized religion as dogmatic, we concede that God does not dwell in temples or houses built by hands. Jaspers, ultimately, is correct in holding that salvation is not attained by "participating in a [single, visible, and holy] church".[21] Salvation, which is to say redemption and life in Christ, does not come from performing rituals, reciting credos, or anything of the sort. The notion of a visible church is an oxymoron. However, for this very reason, those who in the name of spirituality deny that Christ is the truth, the way, and the life, only exhibit the existential superficiality they rightly condemn in formulaic religion. God is greater than us, much greater than any limits our reason might encounter. God transcends the limits of cognition itself, surpassing all understanding. Accepting the limits of reason means (among other things) recognizing that even if God cannot be thought sufficiently, God can be known otherwise. We are not a robot or computer, but living beings capable of love.

Starting from itself and as itself, revelation happens. Encountering the revealed Christ hardly entails denying the mystery of transcendence. To the contrary, entering fully into it for oneself means walking with him. Doing so is neither to be religious nor to be spiritual,

[18] (Jaspers 1971, p. 48).
[19] (Jaspers 1971, p. 51).
[20] (Jaspers 1971, p. 86).
[21] (Jaspers 1971, p. 88).

as the common expression "spiritual but not religious" has it. Walking in faith means being true, living truly by being in the Spirit—"God is Spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth" (John 4:24).[22]

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[22] From a theoretical perspective overlooking the phenomenality of revelation in its first-personal givenness, the Scriptures are texts like any other, subject to the ordinary scholarly and scientific techniques and methods developed by anthropology, religious studies, deconstruction, and historical and textual criticism. To cite the words of Christ plainly as we do here, thus, it might be argued, is to appeal naively to the very sort of historic tradition that Jaspers's Existenzphilosophie shows cannot sustain a claim to universality and absoluteness. In brief, does not the process of textual reception preclude John's Gospel's claim to universal authority? But this entire way of understanding the words of Christ ignores their origin in what Michel Henry calls life (or what Kierkegaard called inwardness): the spoken words of Christ recorded on the page have always already spoken to us, which is why, upon encountering them in that form, if we listen, we recognize them to be authoritative. As Henry observes in the introduction of I am the Truth, "The truth of Christianity [. . .] has precisely no relation whatsoever to the truth that arises from the analysis of texts or their historical study" (Henry 2003, p. 3). Historical analysis and textual criticism cannot establish whether Jesus is the Christ. Nor even can direct perception, since many of those who were present at the actual events described still did not believe. The truth is revealed in life alone. Henry explicates the view further in Words of Christ, trans. Christina M. Gschwandtner (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2012).