

Karl Jaspers Applied to Karl Barth and Karl Bonhoeffer A Biographical Sketch of the Jaspers/Barth Issue

(April 4, 2015. Tired of researching, this Web-page welcomes corrective efforts. It's meant for serious discourse. Parenthetical references are more for my defense if needed.)

Pastor, Kurt I. Johanson, drew my attention to what he modestly refers to as a “booklet”—he edited the book entitled, “The Word in this World”. Kurt’s motivation for sharing the book contains no hint of controversy; he just, in the sense of justly, wanted to share some valued preaching material.

It’s hoped the pastor will tolerate my spin-off his efforts at highlighting two dynamic homiletic samples of declaring the gospel. I don’t disagree. But I’m impelled to get immersed in the hermeneutical situation, the times, spaces, and interconnectiveness; it’s part of my unplanned encompassing vertical and horizontal inner-outer incoming experience, plus some risky individual input and riskier output.

For decades the Jaspers/Barth controversy has simply amounted to a theologically-philosophically-“doctrinally” workout. The book received from the Pastor has led to a deeper immersion. I pray he’s affected in no adverse way.

Sinking of scientific assurance--The book contains two of Karl Barth’s sermons. One was delivered in 1912 “On the Sinking of the Titanic”, and the “Jesus walking on Water” sermon was delivered in 1934. From the Pastor’s perspective, both were-are very significant for marking the last throws of modernity, i.e., the waning of confidence in the presumed unsinkable physical sciences, and the buoyant-limits of political-social science relative to the Nazi era and the world war.

Flight or fight--In our current critiquing post-modern era, looking back, we can see that the loss of confidence in reason might affect decisions, and take the form of a pastoral-temptation to embrace an easy and disguised fatalism or painful political self-sacrifice. One Pastor can repose in the uncertain platonic world of theological academia, or become a disposed martyr in the despotic theocratic Nazi world. Karl Barth's 1935 exit from Germany for a Basel theological chair and Dietrich Bonhoeffer's extermination in Germany can serve as possible comparative figures in some biographical sketching. Here, we're getting ready to focus in on the issue between Jaspers and Barth. Here's a sketchy sketch:

This is Karl, this is another Karl, and the other Karl--The biographical sketchy sketches begins with a complex picture of some explosive institutional and non-institutional personalities—and some moving in and out groupism. It includes Karl Jaspers' and his in-depth acquaintance with the works of Karl Bonhoeffer, the father of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Karl Bonhoeffer was the psychiatrist-neurologist that Karl Jaspers referenced frequently in his general psychopathology work.

In the picture's foreground stand Karl Jaspers and Karl Barth in articulatory confrontation. Behind Karl Barth is his brother Heinrich Barth, as well as Karl Barth's son, Markus. Karl Bonhoeffer and Jaspers stand together on Sigmund Freud being hardly worthy of footnote reference.

In the background we see the hanging corpses of Dietrich and his brother, Klaus. Jaspers is looking at Hannah Arendt, his Jewish wife's Jewish friend, (and proud student of Jaspers). Jaspers is trying to get Hannah's attention and pointing at Dietrich's body, but Hannah is preoccupied—perhaps infatuated—with Martin Heidegger.

Karl Barth's son, Markus Barth, noted New Testament Scholar joined the University of Basel in 1963 just after Jaspers decided to respond to Karl Barth's "defamation" of Jaspers. We have to view the picture through the superimposed current flurry of activity involving Jaspers/Barth academic "confessing" societies where the understood creed is "publish or perish". Fixed creeds, whether patently understood as a constant affects the philosophy of psychology and psychopathology—and most relevant here, theology.

Approaching the issue...three theologians against Jaspers--A picture of Karl Barth is more complete when it includes his brother Heinrich's dashed hopes about occupying the chair of Philosophy at Basel. The brothers had been at Basel for a decade, but the position was given to Jaspers. He arrived in Basel in 1948. Jaspers later questioned whether Heinrich should serve as a philosophy professor at Basel.

Demything science--Karl Barth's son, Markus, was a noted New Testament scholar, notable enough to contribute slightly, in 1957, to the demythology issue--which Jaspers earlier had adequately debated in 1953. At that time Markus was on the Theological Faculty at the University of Chicago. Jaspers was making meaningful contributions to theology due to his experience with psychopathology; he, as a psychopathologist and professor of philosophy, had lectured at a congress of Swiss Theologians. He had no formal academic background in "theology", but he understood that if the God given capacity for abstraction, the myth area of the mind, were capped off from encompassing vertical inner and outer experience, it would result in a mythical atheism in the guise of science. How embarrassing for theologians!

Closing in on the issue—Karl Barth's chides Dietrich Bonhoeffer for "deserting" the German Confessing Church. It involved being committed to, confessing allegiance to the organization's statement

of faith and action determined by church convention. Dietrich had left Germany for academic reasons around 1933 during the initial phases of the German efforts to nationalize the religious forces. Bonhoeffer, though, was not taking flight; he returned to fight against the regime and was hung as a result. Barth left Germany in 1935, returning to his home country of Switzerland. There is a question of whether he was anymore forced to leave than Bonhoeffer was forced to return.

Karl Bonhoeffer and Jaspers--Karl Jaspers knew about the demise of Dietrich. Caught up in the plot to assassinate Hitler, Dietrich was executed several days before Hitler's suicide. To repeat, Dietrich's psychiatrist-neurologist father was Karl Bonhoeffer. Jaspers was familiar with his father. The first reference to Karl Bonhoeffer in Jaspers' General Psychopathology relates to the Messiah complex.

That's interesting when it's realized that Dietrich could be seen, albeit incorrectly, as having the germ of that complex--also his father disapproved of his son's theological commitments. However, Dietrich's father within secular and academic environment protected many Jews during the early years of persecutions. This is part of the reason Jaspers is trying to get Hanna Arendt to take note of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. To my recollection she did not follow his suggestion. It's also noteworthy that Dietrich had studied Jaspers' work "Nietzsche".

No creed but Messiah--The center of the constellation of relativities comes into focus in the Barth/Jaspers-quarrel wherein commitment to a creed, in short, captions and captures the issue. Turmoil in the constellation includes Hitler and endorsements from Rome and England. (The picture is especially appropriable when viewed from the American experience of the restoration movement, i.e., from the perspective of "no creed but Christ, more love than law, etc.)

Barth hurls “defamations” at Jaspers, and Jaspers footnote-raps Barth—Jaspers:

The theologian may forgive me for rapping on some of his theses in a way that must strike him as foolish—since to him, I presume, my theses can express only incomprehension and deplorable unbelief. (108, PFR)

The “theses” issue, in a nutshell, is that biblical words are ciphers as any cipher and in constant need of interpretation by the individual. The issue is that begging for extraordinary respect through the exploitation of biblical words, presumed to be under institutional control, can be used to conceal hubris. Its nemesis is reason on level ground, informed individualistic reason; it can refute institutionalized hubris.

Jaspers suggests that Barth escaped from individual responsibility for the sake of the “confessing” group—like when Barth “had” to leave Germany in 1935 (leaving one wondering if Barth’s call to a theology professorship was an excuse for deserting the German mission). It could appear, though perhaps more apparent than real, that Barth did desert—in the name of, for the sake of, the group—the very thing he wrongly chided Bonhoeffer for. Bonhoeffer fulfilled an individual decisive commitment, as did his brother, by paying the ultimate price of death (as did some others of the confessing church) in his effort to interfere with the exterminations.

The 1962 showdown, verbal shots--The issue between them begins with Barth’s only slightly veiled “defamation” of Jaspers’ views, arguing against Jaspers’ handling of the misuse of God in concepts about God. To avoid individual and group superiority views (hubris), Jaspers uses the therapeutic word “Transcendence”. The word points at individual responsibility restrained by the

awareness of humankind's individual and collective limitations, but includes the delimiting of those limits in individuals (whether in or out of a group) through incoming ciphers of inspiration. From my perspective, Barth takes the first shot.

The “defamation”--The theologian Barth says Jaspers is propounding an illusion. In reaction the psychopathologist Jaspers says,

Karl Barth employs a traditional psychological jargon, a ‘psychology’ that serves for purposes of defamation, not for cognition. (PFR, 326)

Jaspers is...famed...for his work beyond psychology, and famous for contributions toward using clear unifying terms in the field of psychopathology and using the adjustable tools of his trade in the field of philosophy and theology. Barth has attacked Jaspers' profession and professional status, as well as the intellectual honesty of those that recognize the value of his works.

Notwithstanding the Controversy

The Titanic Sermon is good--Living with the realization of natural disasters makes us vigilant, like constructing tsunami-walls. So, there's nothing overtly objectionable about Barth's sermon against thinking our position in life is unsinkable—though Barth himself seemed to have some later homiletic regrets about the sermon. The regret came later when being more exegetical was the safer way to preach. I see nothing objectionable about being aware that natural events might be a catastrophe for one established force and considered “providential” by another force, such as the Black Death contributing to the instability of established forces but opportunistic for the spread of Islam. This sort of preaching about proclivities would seem hardly something objectionable by Karl Jaspers.

Jesus walking on water--Barths' exegetical sermon regarding Jesus walking on the water is hardly objectionable; it's in the book, and homiletics should teach from the book. And Jaspers, after all, prefers a biblical religion to a vatic religion, and in the role of pastor Jaspers too would "not leave out...something that would remain lost" if not declared. (To Bultmann, p. 104) On the other hand, making hermeneutics relevant to specific times might require discernment and more spin-off risky expositions, i.e., "trespassing" over the line that separates church-force and state-force. If the pastor is not prepared to endure the cost to self and others, or is inadequately informed and dangerous, it's best to be exegetically and hermeneutically restrained but non-judgmental toward the secular missionary.

EXTRA PERTINENT DATA

Barth as a non-practicing-Catholic viewed as an up-dated replacement for "St" Thomas—"Pope Pius XII" described Karl Barth as the most important theologian since Thomas Aquinas, and invited him to the 1962 Second Vatican Council. That's important here. This is the 1939 "Pope" that handled the Vatican's concord with Hitler signed in 1933. About that concord Jaspers said,

It seemed impossible, at first, but it was a fact. It made us shudder ["us" includes Gertrude, his Jewish wife and others].
(93, Guilt)

Without citing sources here, but capable of so doing, the Catholic search for an updated philosopher to claim as part of the family has been in the works for some time. Other than the theologian Barth, it was Kierkegaard, then it was non-practicing Catholic Heidegger (which explains why there was an effort to make Jaspers dependent on Heidegger). By the grace of God, Jaspers was astute enough and partly too sick to be infatuated with Rome's regalia. He therefore had nothing to lose except a few book sales by being a

true protestant—but even the “defenders of the one true church” would be obligated to buy his books.

The protestant pastor’s son, Nietzsche, was a hopeless product of protestant extreme independence. He was not a candidate, though he could be exploited if misunderstood. He lost his dear heavenly father at around the age of 6; he lived thenceforth in extreme individualism with extreme headaches. He lived as though his earthly and heavenly father were dead and untouchable. He was anti-papal; there was no substitute.

Barth slams Wycliffe, Jaspers hits back—So, it is no wonder that Jaspers objects to Barth’s criticism of John Wycliffe. Wycliffe was considered “The Morning Star of the Reformation” (Foxe’s Book of Martyrs), and being critical of Wycliffe and his disciple Huss would be ingratiating to Rome. Barth’s criticism of Wycliffe is like participation in the postmortem martyrdom of Oxford’s Wycliffe—as well as the burning alive of John Huss. No wonder Barth was invited to Rome. Wycliffe dared to seek elsewhere than Rome for inspiration and Revelation and thus made the bible available to English speakers. It’s this commonsense break from Rome that leads Jaspers to defend Wycliffe in this following manner:

Hence [, to Barth,] the rich and glorious symbolism of water plays no part at all in the interpretation of baptism—only God’s use of natural things for signs of quite another language. (PFR 111)

The “other language” is the intervention of church authority, e.g., the sinner submits to baptism to enter the Church corporation and salvation primarily because it’s the Church’s sacrament. Jaspers is saying water itself, without vatic authority, has meaningful and reasonable significance. Water has historical cipher-value by itself and prior to the “Sacraments”. Water can cleanse, and in the

abstracting area of the mind, God can reveal a thorough cleansing of the soul. A deluge can destroy humankind, but water can save a few.

Barth's "Other language" means the bible amounts to a hidden unreasonable strange tongue and is only readable by church officials. It propounds a dependency on truth strained or filtered through uniformed men of the organization. Wycliffe's English translation for individuals was a challenge to "the other" language. (Jaspers' view of water as a cipher apart from and part of bible should sound familiar as seen in the American experience relative to the Restoration Movement).

The Confessing Church—Barth's criticism of Jaspers' open-ended concept of transcendence--which when given high-case "T" includes God's revelational and inspirational incomings to the individual, is seen as having no definite power or authority, and no definite compelling words. Jaspers' retort is that creedal words can limit the individual's response in the emergent moment that requires decision. The individual's confessional group's stance

...in our human situation, always involves the risk of escaping from the challenge into comfortable confessing the faith in a fixed revelation. (326 PFR)

In Barth's case, his modified or qualified allegiance, unacceptable to Hitler, led to being expelled or otherwise exterminated--but the latter carried some international political risk. That was fortunate for Barth, but I wonder whether he was physically forced over the border.

However, Jaspers is mindful that one can be a believer in revelation and still be a skeptic (a genuine Existenz protestant), for being skeptical

...[M]ay be an indispensable way of faith. A man who does not 'confess' need not be a sceptic [as in skepticism]. His very faith may bar the formulated creed. Confessing a creed, as a statement of absolute truth worded in human language, seems to be a fatal act, for it divides people and opens the chasm of uncommunicativeness if accompanied by the demand that others join in it, as in the language of absolute truth. (85, 86, PFR, also see 342)

Insulting the protestant spirit--if Barth's practical conversion to Catholicism could be consummated, it would be a good Thomistic modern substitute or extension of the Church's academic "Saint". Barth is a good candidate for harvesting because "Having excellently described a fifteenth-century Japanese sect whose positions, in part, curiously resemble Protestantism, he ends by saying that, after all, they still remain poor, lost heathens." (328 PFR) This is the sect that Jesuit missionaries found to be conceptually hardly distinguishable from protestant thinking, and of course saw all the greater need for being converts to the one true church. The members were too close to being protestant heretics. They had to be converted or somehow disempowered.

Jaspers grounds for being anti-Thomistic--I'll not go into it here except to say that Jaspers' disagreements regarding Thomistic doctrine are well documented in his "Reply to My Critics" (Library of Living Philosophers). And there is this:

I consider myself a Protestant, I am a church member...guided by the Bible and by Kant." (78, PFR)

Jaspers had studied more of Kant's Critique of Pure Reason, whereas Barth had studied more of Kant's Critique of Practical Reason. Pure reason can be more intellectually honest.

Overlapping professorships at Basel—Again, I’m only touching on some elements worthy of in-depth evaluation. Soon after that 1933 signing of the Concord with Hitler, Barth is in Basel serving as professor of Theology from 1935 through 1962. Jaspers’ Basel professorship in Philosophy began in 1948, thus the Barths/Jaspers overlapping occurred till 1962. The close quarters resulted in an overlapping between a magisterial theology vs. a developing critical philosophy of theology. It was three theological Barths to one recognized psychopathologist who was rapidly developing the most systematic philosophical logic in post-modern therapeutic terms that also had a theological resounding ring. Jaspers was the most systematic existential thinker of the day.

Kierkegaard—Barth’s take on his studies of Kierkegaard could be considered a point of contention too. Jaspers participates in “Existenz” with a most protesting inherent meaning of the German word. He sees Barth as missing the import of the human...individual... standing in suspense directly before God and between God and the world. Jaspers:

For as Existenz I read the suspended and ambiguous ciphers, but I do not make myself an image of God. (325, PFR)

Jesus, heroic anti-Semitic?—Barth’s homiletic approach to his last sermons in Germany should, or at the very least, could be read and best understood if two things are remembered. Barth is one of those leading the cause for the separation of the “confessing church” from the Nazi regime’s efforts to remold the institutionalized religious bloc for its propaganda efforts. Secondly, the Nazi gospel was to fashion Jesus as an anti-Semitic martyr. It was an easy decision to be more verse-by-verse biblical, i.e., strictly sticking to the biblical “word”. From this perspective it is clearer why when leaving Germany he admonished “exeges, exeges, exeges”.

In view of these two situational forces it's understandable and "practical" that Barth would defend the autonomy of the organization that's held together by the confessional creed. The problem with this is the exclusivity involved, i.e., if one does not confess allegiance to the creed, then the force of the organization provides no protection. In the later execution of the Aryan policy, not even convenient or sincere Jewish converts could be institutionally protected. If one wanted to protect non-confessing individuals or groups, one had to step outside the group and that would put the group at risk.

Bonhoeffer gets Jaspers attention--Bonhoeffer was one theologian associated with the confessing church that did not use the creed as an excuse to securely simply do an exegesis of the bible. Jaspers could very well remember in 1962 that Barth in 1935 escaped the situation rather than do what he had once derided Bonhoeffer for not doing, i.e., staying in Germany for the sake of the Confessing Church.

Bonhoeffer took up his cross, i.e., the love of any persecuted individual—whether of the confessing church or not. Not even an individual converted Jew was safe for the confession did not change one's "Aryan" status—nor was there hope for those married to a Jew, as in the case of Karl and Gertrude Jaspers. The systemic problem with the creedal confessional church is its outstanding recognized force to be harvested.

The corporate church could be infiltrated from the top down much more easily than from the bottom up. And exegetical requirements were easier to enforce from the top than from the provincial bottom, e.g., the locally controlled church. This is why Jaspers placed more hope for the church in small sects than large institutions. (So, we end up having to evaluate the "restoration movement" in the American experience with the separation of church and state.)