

21 February 1966

READING 5

INTRODUCTION

We have spoken recently of three kinds of Influence which can reach men and women and of the possible role which members of this Society could play in this field. In particular, we are hoping that, soon, enough interest in the Meditation will have been aroused among your friends for us to have another general talk about it like the rather successful one last year.

In speaking to unprepared people in the current Western idiom, the following interview given last December may be helpful to you. What is valuable is the sequence of ideas, since the interviewer starts with ordinary current questions which are in everyone's mind and the 82-year-old Professor of Philosophy at Basel University ends by speaking along much the same lines as the Shankaracharya does in his public talks, but in a form more natural to most of us.

The Future of Mankind

Karl Jaspers is Professor of Philosophy at Basel University and won the 1965 International Peace Prize for his last book *The Atomic Bomb and the Future of Mankind*.

This is part of what he said during an interview with Guy Valairé:

Of course, we must not imagine that we can get rid of the bomb, overnight. This is the mistake that the pacifist movements make. We can make progress towards this goal only step-by-step through a profound moral transformation of man.

The bloc of powers enjoying political freedom in the face of totalitarian dictatorship must be strong enough not to be threatened by the rest.

Q. In your book you state that mankind must undergo a profound change if it is to survive. What do you mean by this?

Do you refer to the need for a mutation comparable to the one that mankind underwent during what you call the 'axial period' of history, which saw the simultaneous appearance of Jewish prophets, Greek philosophers, Buddha, Confucius and Zoroaster? But if these were incapable of putting an end to the curse of war, why should they succeed to-day?

A. Here we have two different problems. First, I believe that the ability to 'mutate and convert' is in the very nature of man. To be capable of change means being capable of living, thinking and acting while consciously moving away from a state that is no longer desirable. But the form in which this conversion appears is always linked to a given historical situation. History teaches us how this came about... but it cannot tell us what will happen and what we must do. A conversion cannot be planned and rationalised. And yet it is the goal each of us should be aiming for so that it can gradually be reached in our actions and our thoughts... While those great men were unable to bring peace to mankind, ... it is their Teachings we have to thank for man's nobility, the loftiness of the values which he reflects, and that entire world of the mind which man has penetrated during his history, and which enables him to make use of all the possibilities of life...

That is why, in my opinion, you should reverse the question which you have just asked. What would have happened if such men had not existed, and if their thoughts,

images and symbols had not somehow penetrated the human race? When I try to imagine this I see man reduced to a state of purely biological existence. Perhaps the human species, as one of many forms of animal life, would already be on the road to extinction... So mankind as we conceive it with its ethics, its capacity for love and its knowledge, owes its existence to the apparent failure of these great minds.

Q. When you ask mankind to undergo a change, you appeal to reason. But the role you attribute to reason could also be attributed to love, as Christianity teaches. How would you define the respective positions of reason and love?

A. Since Plato, and down through the entire history of philosophy... there is not even an attempt to differentiate between the two, nor to consider them in opposition or dependent upon two different parts of the mind. The philosophical speculation of the Middle Ages was meditation, which was part of a surge of love towards God. Spinoza saw knowledge in its highest form as an intellectual love of God. Love and philosophy are of the same origin...

Q. In your book you say that the West should not oppose the Marxist creed with a creed. Why?

A. The characteristic of Marxism... is that it presents itself as a science, whereas it is really a belief... The endless confusion between these two notions is one of the misfortunes of modern thinking. It enables Marxist believers to make assaults on the world under the mask of science. That is why we cannot oppose this creed with another creed. Any creed that could combat Marxism on its own level would have to be of identical nature – in other words, marred by the same basic error...

Besides, there are any number of other creeds that consider themselves absolute... the attitude of a fighter for faith makes any reasonable discussion impossible. On the other hand, the faith displayed by the philosopher is a faith which, through its very nature, seeks out one's fellow man, and does not exert force but simply endeavours to testify and convince, searching truth through communication with others...

Q. After what you have just said about various creeds, what is your viewpoint concerning the most important of all: belief in God? To what extent do you believe it necessary for the spiritual evolution of mankind?

A. Belief in God? ... What is belief in God? A Catholic would answer, '... Without the Church there can be no faith in Christ; without faith in Christ, there can be no faith in God.'

Such faith has been a grandiose demonstration of man's seriousness. But how many can believe in such a way today? It seems to me that, on the whole, the majority of believers are seeking tranquillity in both life and death through a certain number of conventions, and also a liberation from fear and the consequences of sin... But does such an attitude towards divinity deserve to be called 'faith'? Is this 'faith' serious enough to wield a decisive influence over our resolutions and our everyday behaviour?

And this leads us to another question: What is faith? Faith is a disposition of man, the consequence of which is that what he considers most important appears to him as lying beyond space and time... like something that he does not know, that he cannot know, but that he has no need to know; which speaks to him in the infinite and changing language of the world of symbols. And here I would add that any man who is capable of referring to this basic factor – to which I do not even have to give the symbolic name of God – is capable of a reversal or a mutation. For such a reversal is an act of

freedom that science cannot explain, that reason alone cannot provoke, and that cannot be grasped in its entirety. That is why such a reversal cannot be the object of a psychological or scientific analysis.

When I reach the limits of my research, all that I can manage to understand is that the world cannot understand itself through itself alone; that I have not created myself; and that, if I am free, it is not due to my own doing, but due to something that has placed me in my freedom, something that I can call God if I use the historical symbol or else, more generally speaking, transcendency.

Having said this, I can now answer your question. Yes, belief in God is necessary for the progress of mankind and for each one of us, to the extent that we assume this to mean faith in a transcendental principle, no matter what its nature.

And a relationship with transcendency, no matter what its nature, is the prerequisite for any 'conversion'.

(*Realités*, December 1965, p.27)

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CONCLUSION

From our point of view, the question immediately arising from Prof. Jaspers' line is:

'How are those who have not so far enjoyed this "relationship with Transcendency" or experienced this new "disposition", "reversal" or "mutation", going to set about getting it?' And the answer, of course, is that they must use one of the methods which have been found to produce it (the simplest and most universally applicable being undoubtedly the Meditation), along with the Self-Knowledge that it engenders.

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