

Four Presuppositions Concerning Religion

1. It belongs to religion as such, and thus to each particular religion, to lay claim to decisive authority. As the primary form of culture through which the existential question about the ultimate meaning of our lives can be explicitly asked and answered, a religion claims to be the authorized re-presentation of the answer to this question. Because from its standpoint the self-understanding it re-presents is uniquely appropriate to, or authorized by, the very structure of ultimate reality, its own re-presentations of this self-understanding have decisive authority for the understanding of human existence. In other words, a religion expresses or implies a claim to decisive existential authority because it claims to be true—indeed, to be *the* true religion, in the sense that it itself is the formal norm for judging all other religious—in fact, all other existential, including philosophical—truth.

2. In the case of the so-called world religions—or, as I prefer to call them, the axial religions—there is an underlying agreement about the fundamental human problem to which their answers to the existential question are all offered as solutions. Whereas so-called primitive or preaxial religions typically focus the existential problem on one or more of the "boundary situations" of individual and social existence—death, fate, chance, suffering, loneliness, and so on—the axial religions characteristically focus it on a fundamental flaw in each of us as an individual person. At the root of the human predicament, as they view it, is an inauthentic understanding of our existence, a thoroughgoing self-*mis*understanding, if you will, that pervades the whole of our ordinary life in society and culture. Indeed, even religion as it ordinarily exists serves more to further this misunderstanding than to overcome it. Accordingly, the only solution to our human problem from the perspective common to these axial religions is a correspondingly radical transformation of our own individual existence; and the existential truth of which they each claim to be the formal norm is the truth that authorizes the transition to just such a transformed self-understanding.

3. But now this understanding of the human predicament has an interesting implication that is rarely understood and appreciated. If our most fundamental problem as human beings is our inauthentic understanding of ourselves as individual persons, then each of us must always already have somehow understood the truth about her- or himself prior to her or his self-misunderstanding. Our problem, in other words, is not simply that we live in darkness rather than light, but that we have each freely and responsibly *chosen* to live in darkness against the light originally given to us. By the same token, the solution to our problem offered by each of the axial religions involves authoritatively *re-*presenting, or presenting *again*, a *second* time, the very truth about ourselves originally presented to us before our fateful decision to turn away from the light to live in darkness.

4. This means, however, that, from the standpoint of any of the axial religions—including the three radically monotheistic religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—our situation as human beings with respect to religious or existential truth is the same, in principle, as with respect to any other kind of truth. It is a truth to which each and every one of us must always already have access, since otherwise we could not possibly be in the predicament of having freely and responsibly misunderstood ourselves, nor could any of the religions possibly offer the solution to our problem, as they each claim to do. But, then, there is every reason why there can and should be dialogue about religious or existential truth, just as there can and should be dialogue about any and all other kinds of truth—scientific, moral, political, philosophical, or what have you. Because each of us has—and, from the standpoint of the axial religions, *must have*—access to the truth about our human existence that all religions claim to re-present, we have everything we need, through our own common human experience and reason, to enter into genuine dialogue with persons of any religious tradition and to critically validate our respective claims to religious or existential truth.