

Revelation and Claims to Finality: Assumptions Underlying Fundamentalism in Christianity and Islam *

By Hans Zirker

Nowadays many different types of groups, movements and tendencies are called 'fundamentalist'; in using this word, one is not employing an unambiguous term to describe something definite, but rather a vague signal to indicate a variety of outlooks, which often do not have much more in common than that they stand out from their surroundings by their disparagement of modern ideas, together with uncompromising claims to certainty and suspicion of the multiplicity of possible positions that are open to adoption.¹ However, the widespread discussion of 'fundamentalism' makes it clear that from the outset this word is rooted in Christianity;² today, as previously, it still usually refers to tensions and confrontations existing within different churches.³ When people nowadays speak of religious 'fundamentalists', in a wider sense, particularly with regard to Islam, the question arises of whether this is based merely on a general expansion of the concept, or whether perhaps there is a deeper underlying structural relationship between the two religions, a relationship which could reveal a great deal of the theology of both sides.

In order for this to be examined, the problem must however be investigated more from the historical point of view and in more specific theological terms, than would be possible solely by the use of the term 'fundamentalism'. The Age of Enlightenment of modern times provides us with a more valuable starting point for this inquiry with its feeling of unease that, on the one hand, faith in God's revelation demands complete com-

* From *Islam and Christian Muslim Relations*, 3, 1992, 211–235; translated by Michael Walpole from the original German, 'Geschichtliche Offenbarung und Endgültigkeitsansprüche. Voraussetzungen des fundamentalismus in Christentum und Islam', in Jürgen Werbick (ed.), *Offenbarungsanspruch und fundamentalistische Versuchung* (Freiburg, 1991), 161–186.

In this online edition some slips of the English version have been corrected. Bibliographical references have been altered in details as well. [28 August 2006]

¹ For a general survey of this topic, cf. especially Thomas Meyer, *Fundamentalismus: Aufstand gegen die Moderne* (Reinbek, 1989) and also the collective work edited by him, *Fundamentalismus in der modernen Welt: die Internationale der Unvernunft* (Frankfurt a. M., 1989); in addition, Carsten Cöppe and Heike Papenthin (eds.), *Religiöser Fundamentalismus: unverzichtbare Glaubensbasis oder religiöser Strukturfehler?: Fundamentalismus in Gesellschaft, Politik und Religion* (Graz, 1989); Klaus Kienzler (ed.), *Der neue Fundamentalismus: Rettung oder Gefahr für Gesellschaft und Religion?* (Düsseldorf, 1990); Józef Niewiadomski (ed.), *Eindeutige Antworten?: Fundamentalistische Versuchung in Religion und Gesellschaft* (Thaur, 1988).

² Cf. Wilfried Joest, 'Fundamentalismus,' in *Theologische Realenzyklopädie* 11 (1983), 732–738. For the 'biblistical' trend in the Anglo-Saxon world, cf. also James Barr, *Fundamentalism* (London, 1977); Klaus Kienzler, 'Fundamentalismus und Antimodernismus im Christentum,' in *Der neue Fundamentalismus*, 67–91.

³ Cf. Michael N. Eberz, 'Fundamentalismus im Katholizismus: religionssoziologische Thesen und Notizen,' in *Frankfurter Hefte* 36 (1989), 223–233; Józef Niewiadomski, 'Katholizismus – Synkretismus – Fundamentalismus,' in *Eindeutige Antworten?* 195–203; Rudolf Pacik, 'Verrat am katholischen Glauben?: Marcel Lefebvre und die Liturgiereform,' *ibid.*, 1–40; Knut Walf, 'Fundamentalistische Strömungen in der katholischen Kirche,' in Thomas Meyer (ed.), *Fundamentalismus in der modernen Welt*, 248–262.

mitment, while, on the other hand, its power to persuade is limited in practice, and that faith is unable to overcome this troublesome fact either in theory or in practice – Lessing speaks of the difference between the 'necessary truths of reason' and the 'accidental facts of history'⁴; and that therefore 'the dreadful broad rift' between the two must always continue to exist, the rift, which, as Lessing writes, 'I have never been able to bridge, no matter how often or how earnestly I have tried.'⁵ The weightier critical charge levied against religion is that faith has never yet been willing to give adequate attention to the difficulties into which it has run with its claim to universal validity.

However, the question will not be tackled here with regard to its fundamental theological and philosophical nature, but only in the light of the special relationship between Christianity and Islam with their characteristic parallels and rivalry.⁶

1. Explanation of terms

In theological and philosophical circles, as well as in everyday speech, 'the claim to absoluteness' is frequently mentioned, a claim which can be made by anybody; in the history of religion, this claim refers particularly to Christianity and its relation to the other communities of faith. In this connection we sometimes find the expression, 'the claim to exclusivity'. Both expressions can vary enormously both in the meaning they convey and in their logical relation to each other; there is no unanimously accepted ruling as to their use. Each has a broad and vague range of associations, especially in view of the fact that religions are concerned not only with truth, values and obligations, but ultimately with promises of salvation and threats of damnation. In contrast to these, the expression used in this essay, 'claim to finality' is not burdened with such linguistic usage; what it means there is that facts are stated or demands are made, with the assertion firstly that they are valid, secondly that they are irrevocable for all time,⁷ and thirdly that their acceptance is binding.

If in this essay we regard revelations simply as 'historical' events, it does not imply the adoption of any particular criteria of historical reality, but limits the subject in three respects: one can speak of 'revelation' firstly with reference to a mythical pre-history; secondly, with reference to the eschatological end of the world; and thirdly, with regard to an eternal cosmic order. In none of these three cases, however, do we find the phenomenon which we find within the history of religion, and which is to be treated here: i. e. that, in spite of this contingency, an unbreakable obligation, which far exceeds all

⁴ Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, 'Über den Beweis des Geistes und der Kraft (1777),' in Paul Rilla (ed.), *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 8, 'Philosophische und theologische Schriften II' (Berlin and Weimar, 1968), 9–16 (here p. 12).

⁵ Lessing, 'Über den Beweis', p. 14.

⁶ This topic received comprehensive treatment in my *Christentum und Islam: theologische Verwandtschaft und Konkurrenz*, 2nd ed. (Düsseldorf, 1992). The following exposition is in part derived from this work (digital edition: <http://duePublico.uni-duisburg-essen.de/servlets/DocumentServlet?id=10713>).

⁷ A claim that something is valid could be 'revoked' either because it is ousted by an opposing claim to validity, or else because it is incorporated into a more comprehensive one, and so is 'overtaken'.

others, is bestowed on an event which occurs in an accident of time and culture, and which is thus, by definition, preceded and followed by a host of other occurrences.

This calls for special legitimating signs for the relevant individual moment in history, so that it stands out from the overwhelming mass of events: firstly, in its first immediate perception, and secondly, for its acceptance for all time. It is not only that something is revealed here in the course of time, which is unchangeable, and absolutely valid once and for all. (Something similar occurred when Pythagoras discovered the geometrical law of the square of the hypotenuse. In this case, however, the circumstances surrounding the discovery maintained their accidental character, had no share in mathematical validity, and can in principle be ignored as insignificant.) In addition, in the case of revelations which occur within history, which will be discussed below, the contingent reality itself carries the whole weight of the cognition which goes far beyond it. From the outset, this produces a strained relationship, which gives rise to problems both in theory and in practice.

2. The situation of the history of religion

a) *The special nature of Christianity and Islam*

In all cultures it is assumed without question that certain religious facts should be regarded as absolute. However, the express assertion of claims to finality of the type already described is to be found only where people are aware of existing within a stream of history which produces sweeping changes, where much of the future remains unforeseeable, and which can introduce new elements into fundamentals. This kind of awareness of history exists only in Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

However, even with regard to these three, we must immediately draw distinctions: the history of Israel is so subject to fulfilment, development and correction, that it can be integrated into the New Testament proclamation of God's revelation as its pre-history. It is only in Christian and Islam belief that something of ultimate significance has already taken place in history. So that the passage of history is divided by an insurmountable caesura into the age of the provisional and the age of the eternal. In fact, the People of Israel with their memories of the liberating Exodus from Egypt and the Covenant on Mount Sinai, also speak of a unique past, and it is precisely from this that they gain their own identity; however, turning from this, their attention is directed so intensively towards a future in history, full of expectation, that, from the later Christian viewpoint, this appears to be their predominant attitude of faith. For Israel there are continual advances towards what has been promised. On such a path, it is possible to experience something 'new'; this thoroughly alters one's preceding perspectives on disappointments, upsets former certainties, and revises convictions which previously appeared to be fixed.⁸

⁸ Cf. Claus Westermann, 'ḥādāš 'neu,' in Ernst Jenni and Claus Westermann (eds.), *Theologisches Handwörterbuch zum Alten Testament*, vol. 1 (1971), 524–530; cf. also, R. North, 'ḥādāš' in Gerhard Johannes Botterweck (ed.), *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Alten Testament*, vol. 2 (1977), 759–780; Heinrich Groß, 'Motivtransposition als Form- und Traditionsprinzip im Alten Testament' in Herbert Vor-

'Consequently a survey of the great movements of her history gives us the impression of a lack of repose – the nation is always on a pilgrimage – and the constant emergence of new religious ideas seems to leave her a stranger in time.'⁹ God's faithfulness to Israel may well be promised for ever, but it is not tied to historical and institutional events in the same way as in Christianity and Islam. Thus the promise in which the prophet Nathan granted the Kingdom to David's house for ever (2 Sam. 7:16) was proved wrong by the course of history, and could be transformed into new hope only by considerable shifts of interpretation. For Judaism the Torah is God's continuing guidance in accessible, written form, according to its theological conception, sufficient and valid for all ages in its unalterable content. It is, however, part of a more comprehensive Bible, which in general is not regarded as being distinct from oral tradition and the Talmud, in the same way that the Bible is regarded in Christianity as being distinct from non-Biblical traditions.¹⁰ Moreover, it contains within itself the forecast that for the people of the 'New Covenant' every other law will be superseded: 'I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts ... And they shall teach no more every man his neighbour, and every man his brother ...' (Jer. 31:33–34). The proclamation of the New Testament endorsed this.

Both religions trace themselves back to the Jewish people, and at the same time set themselves apart from this community of faith as from something provisional. Both can indicate the point in time at which and from which they date history. Both start out with the conviction that at this one point in the history of humanity faith has obtained its necessary and far-reaching basis for all time to come. For Paul 'the time is fulfilled' with Jesus; history is qualified eschatologically (Gal. 4:4); 'All these things that happened to them ... were recorded for our benefit as a warning. For upon us the fulfilment of the ages has come' (1 Cor. 10:11); 'once for all' (ephapax). Salvation has come to mankind through Jesus Christ (Rom. 6:10; Heb. 7:27; 9:12; 10:10). For Islam in which Jesus is regarded as only one prophet among many others, Muhammad is the 'Seal of the Prophets' (Q. 33:40). According to this, one is also dealing here with a definitive, unalterable final end of the history of revelation.

With good reason, Judaism, Christianity and Islam are continually named together in the history of religion, but from the particular point of view treated here, they cannot be

grimler (ed.), *Exegese und Dogmatik* (Mainz, 1962), 134–152; Albert Gelin, 'La question des "relectures" bibliques à l'intérieur d'une tradition vivante,' in *Sacra Pagina* 1 (1959), 303–315.

⁹ Gerhard von Rad, *Theologie des Alten Testaments*, vol. 2, 5th ed. (Munich, 1968), 340 (*Theology of the Old Testament*, vol. 2 [Edinburgh, 1965]).

¹⁰ In spite of the possible, but controversial, determination of the relationship between scripture and tradition in Catholic theology, this counts as two 'sources' of faith. Cf. Peter Schäfer, 'Das "Dogma" von der mündlichen Torah im rabbinischen Judentum' in his *Studien zur Geschichte und Theologie des rabbinischen Judentums* (Leiden, 1978), 153–197; here, 'The idea of two Torahs, of a written one (*torah šäbikhtav*) and of one accompanying the written one from the outset, and this supplementary oral tradition (*torah šäbe^calpäh*), is one of the central theologoumena of post-Biblical Judaism.' Cf. also the same author's 'Die sogenannte Synode von Jabne', *ibid.*, 45–64, especially 56–61, on the formation of the Canon of Scripture.

regarded as one; as far as claims to religious finality are concerned, only Christianity and Islam appear related to each other. Comparing them is therefore particularly instructive in revealing the way each understands revelation, what are the underlying assumptions of each, and what are their consequences. An excursus to look at Islam's perceptions can enrich Christian theology's insight into the conditions and burdens of its own beliefs.

However, the apparent common features of Christianity and Islam should not lead to the rash assumption that these two religions share exactly the same understanding of history, and differ only as to its content, in that each refers back to its own special events. The differences are far wider and must be considered again specifically in a later section.

b) *Claims to universality and exclusions*

It is suggested that neither Jesus' proclamation nor the message of the Qur'ān originally viewed the whole of mankind as the people to be addressed. 'I was sent to the lost sheep of the house of Israel, and to them alone,' says Jesus (Mt. 15:24); and the Qur'ān emphasizes that it is a 'book in the Arabic tongue' (Q. 46:12), which is suited to the 'Arab' (Q. 41:44).¹¹ It is, however, unnecessary to give further consideration here to the problem of what role the particularity of the message should then play in the total history of the world; since both Islam and Christianity see the universality of their message proclaimed in the evidences of their own respective revelation: '... Go forth therefore and make all nations my disciples ...' (Mt. 28:19); 'Men, I am God's messenger to you all,' 'We have sent you forth to all mankind, so that you may give them good news and forewarn them,' 'It is an admonition to all mankind' (Q. 7:158; 34:28; 6:90).

This includes the idea that in fact all people must be able to understand what is said here, accept their obligations and carry them out accordingly. Therefore the proclamation includes at the same time the threat against those who withhold their assent. 'Those who believe and accept baptism will find salvation; those who do not believe will be condemned.' (Mk. 16:16); 'This Book is not to be doubted; it is a guide to the righteous ... As for the unbelievers, it is the same whether or not you forewarn them; they will not

¹¹ On this problem, see Frants Buhl, 'Fasste Muḥammed seine Verkündigung als eine universale, auch für Nichtaraber bestimmte Religion auf?', in *Islamica* 2 (1926), 135–149; Robert Caspar, *Traité de théologie musulmane*, vol. 1: 'Histoire de la pensée religieuse musulmane' (Rome, 1987), 65 f. Rudi Paret, *Mohammed und der Koran: Geschichte und Verkündigung des arabischen Propheten* (Stuttgart, 1985), 163–165 ('Zielstrebigkeit und Improvisation'). In Christian theology, the following, for instance, present a particular awareness of Muhammad of his mission: Nikolaus Monzel, *Die Überlieferung: phänomenologische und religions-soziologische Untersuchungen über den Traditionalismus der christlichen Lehre* (Bonn, 1950), 161–165, for the first phase of Muhammad's life (following Johann Adam Möhler, 'Über das Verhältnis des Islams zum Evangelium,' in Joh. Jos. Ignaz Döllinger [ed.], *Gesammelte Schriften und Aufsätze*, vol. 1 [Regensburg, 1839], 371); see also the more wide-ranging opinion of Ernst Troeltsch, 'Die Stellung des Christentums unter den Weltreligionen,' in his *Der Historismus und seine Überwindung, Fünf Vorträge*, eingel. von Friedrich von Hügel-Kensington (Berlin, 1924), 62–83, here p. 72. '... Islam is basically an Arabic national religion, which Muhammad's prophecy spread abroad by warfare in association with the migration of the Arab people, and which later, as it reached beyond the Arab world, no longer converted unbelievers, but maintained them as payers of taxes.'

have faith ... They will be sternly punished for the lies they told' (Q. 2:2, 6 f.). There is no sign here of awareness of a problem in hermeneutics, namely that the severity of the fundamental claim of obedience to the faith could be softened. Guilt falls only on those who withhold their understanding, and who do not join the community of believers. This basically applies wherever the Gospel of Jesus Christ or the Qur'ān is proclaimed as God's guidance to mankind.

Since the message by itself should be sufficient to move all people to assent, and its own power should be in no way limited, there are only two answers to the fact that people still reject it: 1) They themselves refuse to listen, understand and follow; 2) God has made them so stubborn that they are unable to do this. Thus we read in the Bible: 'They may look and look, but see nothing; they may hear and hear, but understand nothing; otherwise they might turn to God and be forgiven' (Mk. 4:12); 'God brought upon them a numbness of spirit; he gave them blind eyes and deaf ears, and so it still is' (Rom. 11:8); '... their minds had been made insensitive ... A veil lies over the minds of the hearers' (2 Cor 3:14 f), etc. Similarly, we read in the Qur'ān: 'God hath set a seal upon their hearts and ears; their sight is dimmed' (Q. 2:7); 'Some of them listen hearing lest they understand your words. They will believe in none of Our signs, even if they see them one and all' (Q. 6:25); 'Thus God seals the hearts of ignorant men' (Q. 30:59), etc.

In all this one should not overlook the fact that the conviction that God's Word has been set out as valid for all mankind can develop enormous potential for aggression towards those who believe they should perhaps be looking for another Word, one which can be better understood, which suits them better, which is more convincing. The claim to universal validity excludes in particular those who in practice oppose universal validity. 'Why do you not understand my language? It is because my revelation is beyond your grasp. Your father is the devil'; so says St. John's Gospel (8:43 f.) with regard to 'the Jews'. Accordingly, the Johannine Scriptures understand the event of the proclamation generally in terms of the polarized schema of 'light' and 'darkness'. It is a 'radical view, which recognizes only black and white,'¹² which dispenses with recognizing distinctions to such an extent that it virtually excludes consideration of the wide range of religious reality. In one extreme Biblical polemic – that of Peter's Second Epistle (to which the Epistle of Judas serves as a model) – it is in the last resort almost impossible to determine to which group the furious, abusive language could have been directed; opponents are denounced in the most aggressive terms as 'reckless and headstrong', who are 'like brute beasts, born in the course of nature to be caught and killed', and the author has no doubt that 'like the beasts they will perish' (2 Pet. 10:10–12).

When one takes into consideration features of this sort in the New testament proclamation, one can no longer cite similar sentences in the Qur'ān as symptoms of an intolerance that is peculiar to Islam, because the parallels are obvious: 'The basest crea-

¹² Rudolf Schnackenburg, *Die Johannesbriefe* (Freiburg, 1970), 317.

tures in the sight of God are the faithless who will not believe' (Q. 8:55), and: 'The meanest beasts in God's sight are those that are deaf, dumb, and devoid of reason. Had God perceived any virtue in them, He would surely have endowed them with hearing. But even if He had made them hear, they would have turned away and refused to listen' (Q. 8:22 f).

Certainly, such judgements are not inevitable consequences of Christianity's and Islam's claims to universal validity; (other ways of dealing with the problem will be discussed below); but neither have these violent reactions become part of the claim to universality simply as a product of intolerance that is incidental to the message. Anybody who maintains that the history of God's revelation for all mankind (and not only his work of salvation, which can also be active powerfully in secret) reached its culmination at one specific point in time, appears to run the risk of contradiction, if he does not at least have the force of growing acceptance on his side, and so can proceed realistically from this assumption that the proclamation will ultimately lead all reasonable people of good will to true understanding. A universal claim to validity for revelation demands that in practice it becomes manifest in all the world – and that cannot mean for one region only. If God manifests himself for all (and does not communicate himself only in inner grace), mankind in general should be able to find this out.

c) *Differences in theological foundations*

The fundamental difference between the two religions lies in question of how Christianity and Islam each see God's revelation as final. To make a simple distinction, one can first of all mention the following well-known fact: for Christianity, finality is given by the Word of God among mankind in Jesus Christ; for Islam, by the Word of God in Qur'ān. Thus, in one case the crucial starting-point is a person, in the other a book. This contrast, however, does not reveal the relevant theological context of each, and, in the eyes of Christians, suggests superficial judgements: is not a personal relationship far superior to a relationship to a book? Do not trust in someone and a relationship to him count for far more than the acceptance of what he says to us, even he has the force of law? Furthermore, even if one also considers that, according to Islam, God sent mankind countless prophets before Muhammad in order to reveal his will, then it appears that in one case – God's revelation of himself in Jesus Christ – we are dealing with an event that 'in principle cannot be superseded', and in the other case – the revelation of the Qur'ān – we are dealing merely with a 'definite of will' by God to bring the series of prophets to an end at some time or other, although in principle he could continue to speak to mankind.¹³ In the following it will be made clear that setting up these ideas in opposition to each other is part and parcel of the repertoire of theological tricks with which Christian theology takes the easy way out with regard to Islam, avoiding a discussion with the latter's completely different understanding of revelation.

¹³ N. Monzel, *Die Überlieferung*, 188.

According to Islam, mankind is presented with one and only one question from the very beginning of time up to the end of the world: whom do they recognize as their Lord? And from first to last there can be no answer other than belief in the One God as Lord of all the world. With this fundamental requirement, then, for Islam there can be no such thing as a history of faith. The Qur'ān declares this very succinctly, pointing out that the descendants of Adam were committed to this belief even before their earthly existence. Consequently, they can never be forgiven, if they should turn aside from God:

Your Lord brought forth descendants from the loins of Adam's children, and made them testify against themselves. He said: 'Am I not your Lord?' They replied: 'We bear witness that you are.' This He did, lest you should say on the Day of Resurrection: 'We had no knowledge of that' (Q. 7:172).¹⁴

This declaration expresses the nature of the relations between God and mankind, which remains for ever the same. This is why faith always reaches its fulfilment for Islam, when it corresponds to this original and ideal scene. The declaration of the unity of God and the natural relationship with him is the eternal and unalterable duty and honour of believers.

God's care was already fulfilled in its highest form through the Creation, in which he guaranteed mankind their living space, supplied them with nourishment, granted them companionship, and in which he set innumerable signs for all reasonable and understanding people, so that they might know who their Creator was. Finally he appointed mankind to be his 'regent' upon earth.¹⁵ Thus God gave mankind everything that they needed. At the same time he granted them their highest honour: that they should rule on his behalf, and like kings should be responsible for the preservation of the world and for achieving righteousness upon it. While with regard to God they could be nothing more than 'vassals', 'servants', or even 'slaves' (the Arabic word *ʿabd* conveys all these meanings), they should oppose all other conceivable terms of power from their position of superiority, in the knowledge that God has given them authority and set them free.

The high rank granted by God to mankind at the beginning of time has not been lost through the Fall. Mankind can indeed continue to gamble away this position; but God can continue to grant the chance to turn back. Just as he forgave Adam after his transgression, ('... and his Lord relented towards Him. He is the Forgiving One, the Merciful'), so he promises to all mankind: 'When Our guidance is revealed, those who accept it shall have nothing to fear or to regret' (Q. 2:37 f).

¹⁴ According to Muslim tradition, there is an allusion to a scene after the original Fall (cf. Régis Blachère, *Le Coran*, vol. 2 [Paris, 1950], 649). For a survey of the wider spectrum of Interpretations cf. Richard Gramlich, *Der Urvertrag in der Koranauslegung* (zu Sure 7, 172–173), in *Der Islam* 60 (1983), 205–230. In Jewish tradition there is a similar, possibly related, account, in which on Sinai the children of the Israelites are called as witnesses to the Covenant (cf. Heinrich Speyer, *Die biblischen Erzählungen im Qoran*, 3rd ed. (Hildesheim, 1988 [Reprint of 1st ed., 1931, 304 f.

¹⁵ For an alternative meaning of the word 'khalīfa' as (God's) 'governor', or 'follower / successor' of the angels?], see Johan Bouman, *Gott und Mensch im Koran: eine Strukturform religiöser Anthropologie anhand des Beispiels Allah und Muhammad* (Darmstadt, 1977), 184–189.

In the light of this, there can thus be countless 'Falls' – and this is in fact what happens – but there is not the one Fall at the beginning, which brings with it a history of guilt and damnation, an 'inheritance of sin'. For this reason there is no need in Islam for a 'history of salvation' or for a 'redemption'; it is enough that God continues to turn towards mankind in mercy, and leads them back onto the right path.¹⁶

For this reason there cannot in theory be in Islam right from the outset any place for a relationship of tension arising from historical particularity and the claim of universality. In the last resort, the revelation of the Qur'ān is what can be recognized everywhere and at any time. There is no difference in the way individual peoples and ages are chosen. In principle, God turned his face towards them all equally. Thus the Qur'ān can set the special revelation of God through Muhammad directly and without distinction side by side with the countless messages of prophets in earlier times: 'We have sent you with the Truth to proclaim good news and to warn your people; for there is no nation that has not had a warner' (Q. 35:24).

According to this, revelations are always isolated occurrences; but behind them there is the one original will of God for salvation, the one 'binding agreement' between God and mankind,¹⁷ established from the beginning; it is only through human transgressions that a multitude of histories arises, which, however, should always lead back to the one order, which was given to mankind in Creation. All God's messengers could sum up their proclamation in the words of the Qur'ān: 'Therefore, stand firm in your devotion to the true Faith (*ḥanīfan*), the upright Faith which God created for man to embrace. God's Creation cannot be changed. This is surely the right faith, although most men may not know it' (Q. 30:30). The best-known Muslim theologian and mystic of the Middle Ages, al-Ghazālī (d. 1111) refers to this teaching of the Qur'ān with a *hadīth* of the Prophet: Every child is born in its natural state (*fiṭra*). It is its parents that make it a Jew, a Christian or a Magian.¹⁸ Thus, anterior to the experience of all individual religious upbringing and all cultural differences, there exists the indispensable foundation of Islam, from which one can indeed turn aside in the course of one's life, but which is not first mediated through the events of one's life.

However, this does not justify the quoted assertion that according to Islam the sequence of revelations has reached its conclusion through God's simple act of will, namely that he now finally wished to publish abroad his Book: and that according to Christianity, on the other hand, revelation has in principle reached its final form through the personal presence of God in Jesus Christ.¹⁹ Although neither assertion can be dis-

¹⁶ Cf. my inquiry into 'Die Hinwendung Gottes zu den Menschen in Bibel und Koran,' in *Una Sancta* 43 (1988), 229–238.

¹⁷ The words '*mīthāq*' and '*c'ahd*' are often translated into German, following the language of the Bible, by 'Bund' (engl. 'Covenant') (e. g. the translation into German by Max Henning [Stuttgart, 1960/82 and Leipzig, 6th ed., 1984]). This easily leads to false theological associations.

¹⁸ Abū-Hāmid Muḥammad al-Ghazālī, *Der Erretter aus dem Irrtum: al-Munqid min aḍ-ḍalāl* (Hamburg, 1988), 5.

¹⁹ Cf. N. Monzel, *Die Überlieferung*, 188.

puted in itself, the comparison which emphasizes their differences is inappropriate. Firstly, the Muslim understanding is that the Qur'ān is qualified in form and content to be the end of the history of revelation, because, unlike all other previous scripture, it is intended for all peoples; and secondly its content is so protected that its text can undergo no alterations, deletions or additions. On the other side, the Christian faith also remains linked to a decision of will on the part of God, and thus to historical contingency, when it sees the final, unique revelation given in the one person of Jesus Christ and in the age in which he lived.

According to the theological concept, revelation should be for Islam – in contrast to Judaism and Christianity – identical with universal knowledge, and thus superior to any historical event. Since God's truth as a whole became evident to mankind as far back as the Creation, there should be no difference let alone confrontation, between faith and reason, since whether people are reasonable is proved precisely by whether they allow themselves to be directed by the unchanging guidance of God, which is present in the nature of mankind.²⁰ While Christianity links universality precisely to the identity of the one historical person, Jesus Christ, (Christ is the 'universale concretum'),²¹ Islam sees its universality anchored in mankind's unchanging nature, which directs their thoughts towards God, towards the Prophets sent in every age and to every people, and towards the Book which is valid for all, i. e. which can be read in all ages and in all places, and which draws mankind back to their own reason and religion.

3. Problems

In judging religious claims to finality, it is relevant to consider that they are not only challenged by specific religious criticisms, but also that they give rise to tension and dissent within their own particular communities of faith and within their own histories. Admittedly, this does not prove them wrong, but they do not display the fixed points of reference, in which uncertainties are resolved once and for all.

a) *Difficulties within systems*

It is not possible to demonstrate here the full range of historical and religious variations of this problem. Reference to a few prominent examples must suffice. Thus 'the whole of the early Church's language of tradition, of orthodoxy, and of thinking about church government' is determined by the idea: Nothing must be 'added to' and nothing must be 'taken away from' what has been written down, or from what has been handed down; one must 'hold on to' and 'preserve', must not 'introduce new ideas', 'disregard

²⁰ Admittedly Muslim theologians also see that the Qur'ān contains moments that are historically determined. There are the special occasions of a particular revelation (*asbāb al-nuzūl*) and even situationally conditioned passages of revelation, whose compulsory nature God withdraws, although they remain in the Qur'ān as withdrawn (*mansūkh*). However, these two facts do not fundamentally affect the basic characteristics of revelation.

²¹ Cf. Werner Löser, "'Universale concretum" als Grundgesetz der oeconomia revelationis,' in Walter Kern, et al. (eds.), *Handbuch der Fundamentaltheologie*, vol. 2 (1985), 108–121.

the old', nor 'make selections from it'.²² This, however, does not correspond to the facts of history; the truth is rather that, within a relatively short period of time, church declarations of faith show changes with a considerable range and variety. 'Theoretical discussions of the course of church history, in this early age' and 'the actual practice and theology of the Church' are miles apart. Examination of history shows that the same Church in no way practises such a slavish traditionalism as would correspond with the theory of the history of the Church ... For the early age as for the later, one must speak of what is new in content and quality in the history of the Church.²³

The division which has occurred, both in theory and in practice, is shown most clearly in the theological value placed upon the first Church Councils. At the Council of Nicaea, a new text was taught as being binding in the highest degree, although at the same time the Council did not want to give rise to the expectation that there could continue to be further binding statements in the future. So they chose the following solution: this Council was declared to be a unique event, not to be compared with any other synod, and not to be repeated, in which God himself in the power of his Spirit had secured the final form of the Church's doctrine.²⁴ It was thus decided that the Council marked – not without occasional theological objections²⁵ – the end of revelation history. (Running parallel to this in time was the longer-lasting history of the completion of the Church's Canon of Scripture.) However, in this way the foundations were laid for the next dilemma. Indeed, at the Council of Ephesus the bishops first of all protested against the drawing up of a new statement of faith; but in the end they did not maintain the original basic principle. They drew up new definitions with absolute binding power, and thereby caused the first Council to lose its recognition as God's revelation, but admittedly not its claim to finality. However, from now on it stood within an unforeseeable series of finalities. With the definition of papal supremacy, this became linked with one function in particular: 'These final decisions of the Bishop of Rome are irrevocable *per se*, and not through the consent of the Church.'²⁶ After it proved impossible to bring to an end the series of definitions of faith, a definite form was thus at least established in this way for a prescribed channel for the definition of faith. The plurality which is seen in every Council in the large number of participants, was to be eclipsed by a unity which could not itself be eclipsed, i. e. the unity of a single person.

²² Norbert Brox, 'Kirchengeschichte als „Historische Theologie“, in Raymund Kottje (ed.), *Kirchengeschichte heute: Geschichtswissenschaft oder Theologie?* (Trier, 1970), 49–74, here 59.

²³ *Ibid.*, 601 f.

²⁴ Cf. Athanasius, Ep. ep. 2: PG 26, 1032 C: The fides Nicaena is 'the Word of God that endures for ever'. See on this topic Hermann Josef Sieben, *Die Konzilsidee der Alten Kirche* (Paderborn, 1979), 212. – The Council of Ephesus in 431 AD forbade new formulations of faith and itself consistently observed this injunction (cf. H. J. Sieben, *ibid.*, 238 f; with reference to Gesta, Eph., Acta conciliorum oecumenicorum 1, 3; 133, 11–16).

²⁵ Cf. H. J. Sieben, *Die Konzilsidee der Alten Kirche*, 206.

²⁶ Heinrich Denzinger, *Enchiridion symbolorum definitionum et declarationum de rebus fidei et morum*. Kompendium der Glaubensbekenntnisse und kirchlichen Lehrentscheidungen, ed. by Peter Hünermann, 37th ed. (Freiburg 1991) (= *DH*), 3074.

However, even this form of finality is inevitably relativized by the awareness of faith of the whole Church, which cannot be tied down once and for all in institutional form, even if it regards itself as being determined by unchangeable convictions.²⁷

Although Islam does not possess a teaching office with binding authority, it also faces, in its own way, the problem that a self-contained revelation of God, the Qur'ān, is not sufficient in practice as the basis of faith, and a further standard must be set beside it (admittedly, in theory, subordinate to it): namely, the tradition of the Prophet, the Sunna, contained in a series of *ḥadīths*, i.e. individual traditions of what Muhammad said, did and unexpressly approved. However, even these are not completely authoritative; and so they are subject to the competence of legal scholars to interpret them. The Sunnīs wanted to regard these as closed off after three hundred years, in order to achieve another finality, at least from then onwards. Yet the question, whether 'the gate of endeavour' is shut, or whether it can be re-opened, is today a matter of keen discussion in the Muslim world.

Because of its special understanding of Scripture, the problem is even more explosive for Islam than für Christianity. While the Qur'ān is regarded on the one hand as the direct Word of God and on the other as the comprehensive and final statement of the standards of custom and law, it relates to a basis of knowledge, handed down from the past, by means of which any uncertainties in human thoughts should be permanently ruled out. In a world of historical change, of social conditioning, and of rational controversies, true religion stands as an unchallengeable 'fortress of faith'.²⁸ From this point of view, according to its prevailing understanding of itself, Islam already contains 'fundamentalist' traits. Thus it is doubtful whether, on this basis, one can speak specifically of 'Muslim fundamentalists'.

However, even in Islam the religious and political culture is less uniform than was foreseen by the widely accepted dogmatic theory. Those who rigorously insist on organizing private and public life in accordance with the once-and-for-all normative standards of the past, (or in accordance with what they at any given time take to be these standards), are far from being representative of the whole world of Islam. And so these

²⁷ For the theological meaning of 'reception' see the relevant contributions to *Concilium* (21) 1985, no. 4: Die Lehrautorität der Gläubigen; Yves Congar, 'Die Rezeption als ekklesiologische Realität,' in *Concilium* 8 (1972), 500–514; Miguel Garijo-Guembe, 'Der Begriff "Rezeption" und sein Ort im Kern der katholischen Ekklesiologie,' in Peter Lengsfeld and Henz-Günther Stobbe (eds.), *Theologischer Konsens und Kirchenspaltung* (Stuttgart, 1981), 97–109; Alois Grillmeier, 'Konzil und Rezeption: methodische Bemerkungen zu einem Thema der ökumenischen Diskussion der Gegenwart,' in his *Mit ihm und in ihm: christologische Forschungen und Perspektiven* (Freiburg, 1975), 303–334; Hans Waldenfels, *Kontextuelle Fundamentaltheologie* (Paderborn, 1985), 470–472: 'Sensus fidei' – 'consensus fidelium'; Franz Wolfinger, 'Die Rezeption theologischer Einsichten und ihre theologische und ökumenische Bedeutung: von der Einsicht zur Verwirklichung' in *Catholica* (Münster) 31 (1977), 202–213.

²⁸ Cf. Tilman Nagel. *Die Festung des Glaubens: Triumph und Scheitern des islamischen Rationalismus im 11. Jahrhundert* (Munich, 1988).

groups can ultimately be singled out from the rest of their social environment as being ‚fundamentalist‘.²⁹

b) *‘Outbidding’ in the history of religion*

Apart from these internal shifts of opinion on final validity both religions – Christianity as well as Islam – must undergo a most explosive state of affairs: namely, the dogmatic declaration that God’s Word to humanity became at a specific place final and absolute did not bring the history of religion to an end, but on the contrary provoked a process of ‚ontbidding‘ with the simple repetition of the same claim: In the second century Montanus maintained that in him had come the fulness of revelation; in the third century Mani set himself up as the conclusion of the long series of divine messengers. Finally, the Qur’ān made the same claim for Muhammad. However, immediately after his death prophets arose in the Arabic world, who presumably were ‘imitating successors (*Nachfolgeretäter*)’.³⁰ In the tenth century there was talk of a Persian prophet who wanted to push Muhammad aside with his own revelation.³¹ From the eleventh century onwards the Druzes proclaimed their conviction that God was incarnate in the Egyptian Caliph al-Ḥākīm, and that thus all religions based on law, whose prophets stretched from Noah to Muhammad had come to an end.³² In the Christian Middle Ages Joachim of Fiore aroused the apocalyptic hope for the coming age of the Holy Spirit, the fulfilment of all ages. He was ‘the first Westerner to present clearly worked out ideas of progress’ and thus ‘gave expression to the lasting idea of a fundamentally better future upon earth.’³³ From the nineteenth century onwards the Bahai religion, spreading out from the world of Islamic culture, proclaimed the ‘eclipse’ of all previous religions, particularly Christianity and Islam. To restrict ourselves to the world of Islam, there was the community of the Ahmadiyya, whose founder claimed to be a new appearance of the God Krishna, (wor-

²⁹ Cf. Ludwig Hagemann, ‘Zwischen Religion und Politik, Islamischer Fundamentalismus auf dem Vormarsch,’ in Ernst Pulsfort (ed.), *Ihr alle aber seid Brüder* (Würzburg and Altenberge 1990), 244–260; Adel Theodor Houry, ‘Fundamentalistische und totalitäre Tendenzen im heutigen Islam,’ in A. Grabner-Haider and K. Weinke (see ref. no. 1), 86–95; Tilman Nagel, *Staat und Glaubensgemeinschaft im Islam: Geschichte der politischen Ordnungsvorstellungen der Muslime*, vol. 2 (Munich and Zürich, 1981), 7–140: ‘Der islamische Fundamentalismus’ (a historical retrospective study); Rudolf Peters, ‘Islamischer Fundamentalismus’ in Wolfgang Schluchter (ed.), *Max Webers Sicht des Islams: Interpretation und Kritik* Frankfurt a. M., 1987), 180–189; Jacques Waardenburg, ‘Fundamentalismus und Aktivismus in der islamisch-arabischen Welt der Gegenwart,’ in *Orient* 30 (1989), 39–52; William Montgomery Watt, *Islamic Fundamentalism and Modernity* (London, 1988); Rotraud Wielandt, ‘Zeitgenössischer islamischer Fundamentalismus: Hintergründe und Perspektiven,’ in K. Kienzler, *Fundamentalismus und Antimodernismus*, 46–66.

³⁰ Albrecht Noth, ‘Früher Islam,’ in Ulrich Haarmann (ed.), *Geschichte der arabischen Welt*, 3rd ed. (Munich, 1994), 11–100, here, p. 58.

³¹ Cf. William Montgomery Watt and Michael Marmura (eds.), *Der Islam II.: Politische Entwicklungen und theologische Kämpfe* (Stuttgart, 1985), 27.

³² Within the tradition of the Druzes there are the Black Muslims, whose founder, Elija Muhammad claimed to be a Messenger of God and a ‘new Moses’, Cf. Josef van Ess, ‘Drusen und Black Muslims,’ in *Die Welt des Islams* 14 (1973), 203–213.

³³ Robert E. Lerner, ‘Joachim von Fiore,’ in *Theologische Realenzyklopädie* 17 (1988), 84–88, here, p. 88; cf. also Joseph Ratzinger, ‘Joachim von Fiore,’ in *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche*, 2nd ed., 5 (1960), 975 f.

shipped by Hindus), of Jesus, (the Messiah expected by Jews), and finally also of Muhammad.³⁴

Of course, all these 'outbiddings' did not carry the same weight in the history of their effect. Muslims can rightly claim that the last great religious community came to mankind with the person of Muhammad. For Christianity, Islam remains up to the present 'the greatest provocation, because it cannot apply to Islam what it likes to say about older religions. Islam is not a religion which leads up to Christianity.'³⁵ In this way Islam shows that the Christian interpretation of human history does not sufficiently correspond to reality; that, in fact, 'the history of religion extends beyond Christ, indeed in a very dynamic and exciting manner.' It continually proves 'that the Christian church in its present form has not yet fulfilled the claim to present the absolute religion, that is, that it has not yet achieved its full universality and catholicity, an observation which could initiate a useful self-examination.'³⁶ This is particularly so, if, taking this idea as a starting point, both religions in their opposition to each other are seen to ask themselves more rigorously how religious claims to validity can be justified universally.

4. Ways of dealing with the problem theologically

That historical reality does not completely follow the dogmatic needs, expectations and claims of finality is a fact, no matter whether and in what way one attempts to tackle this circumstance theoretically. Certain basic patterns can however be recognized in all the different variations which appear in any particular case.

a) *The dogmatic, apologetic self-assertion*

The most obvious reaction to historical change consists of asserting the claim to finality, that is already taken for granted, in its most unchallengeable form, since the problems weigh all the heavier if uncertainty grows where people call of God as the guarantor of their faith. The basis which is seen as guaranteeing the validity and orientation of one's religious faith should in no way be challenged.³⁷

Two possibilities are available as a theoretical strategy to deal with historical change:

- 1) either to reject everything that stands in the way of, or endangers, the established claim as a reprehensible innovation, e. g. by declaring it anathema;
- 2) to marginalize it by means of critical definitions so that the historical change appears to be nothing more than simply the external shell of an unchanging kernel, as the changing outward form of a constant inner content, as the accidentals of a substance,

³⁴ Whether he thus literally described himself as 'Prophet' in the meaning of the Qur'ān (*nabī*), or merely as 'Renewer', 'Reformer' (*mujaddid*) is a matter of dispute between the various groups of Ahmadiyya. Cf. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, 'Ahmadiyya' in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam (New Edition)* 1, 301–303.

³⁵ Hans Waldenfels, 'Das Christentum im Streit der Religionen um die Wahrheit,' in *Handbuch der Fundamentaltheologie*, vol. 2 (1985), 241–265, here p. 263.

³⁶ Ernst Benz, *Ideen zu einer Theologie der Religionsgeschichte* (Wiesbaden, 1960), 472 (52).

³⁷ Cf. my inquiry 'Sicherheitsdenken in der Religion,' in *Katechetische Blätter* 115 (1990), 674–684 (digital edition: <http://duepublico.uni-duisburg-essen.de/servlets/DocumentServlet?id=10657>).

as the relatively insignificant clothing of the essential, etc. In this way the problem largely disappears as something harmless.

Examples of both types, which can easily be combined, are obvious. In Christian theology one can refer to the criterion of faith established by Vincent of Lérins in the fifth century, which was continually taken up in the course of the history of the Church: 'Care must be taken that we hold on to what is believed everywhere, at all times and by everybody,'³⁸ so that the Church through all ages 'allows no alteration and sustains no impairment of its individuality and no alteration of its nature',³⁹ so that it 'persists in the same teaching, i. e. in the same content and formulation.'⁴⁰ This last phraseology is encountered again in the Encyclical '*Ineffabilis Deus*' of Pius IX (1854)⁴¹ and in the Dogmatic Constitution on the Catholic faith '*Dei Filius*' of the First Vatican Council;⁴² and finally in the Anti-Modernistic Oath of Pius X (1910),⁴³ we find the following words: 'I accept without reservation the teaching which has come to us from the Apostles through the right-believing Fathers always in the same sense and with the same meaning (*eodem sensu eademque semper sententia*).'

Vincent of Lérins had in fact already combined the idea of 'progress' in faith with this understanding of the history of faith; but 'the doctrine of the Christian religion' should follow only the laws of progress, so that it is consolidated with the passing of the years, is expanded with time, and is refined with age, but so that it remains unspoilt and intact and in the whole compass of its parts, in other words in all its limbs and senses, entire and complete.⁴⁴ Accordingly the Second Vatican Council explained: 'understanding of things and words that have been handed down grows ...; for the Church continually strives over the centuries towards the fullness of divine truth, until the Words of God are fulfilled in her.'⁴⁵ With the use of metaphors of growth and unfolding, taken from biology, an inner consistency and correctness underlie all transformations of the faith, so that the whole path of the Church appears to be ordained already in its genetic conception. 'The idea of an embryonic, but as yet undeveloped condition of the Church existing from the outset, which unfolds into its fully developed form in the course of history, has deeply influenced understanding of the Church.'⁴⁶ However, even this view remains far removed from the emotion, the tensions and the radical changes, and above all the backward

³⁸ Vincent of Lérins: *Commonitorium* 2, 5 (PL 50,640): '*curandum est, ut id teneamus quod ubique, quod semper, quod ab omnibus creditum est.*'

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 23,9: PL 50, 668.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 23, 1–4: PL 50, 667 f: '*profectus ... in eodem scilicet dogmate, eodem sensu, eademque sententia.*'

⁴¹ DH 2802.

⁴² DH 3020.

⁴³ DH 3541.

⁴⁴ *Commonitorium* 23, 9: PL 50, 668.

⁴⁵ *Dei Verbum*, Article 8. For the theological, historical background, cf. Georg Söll, *Dogma und Dogmenentwicklung*, (Freiburg, 1971 – Handbuch der Dogmengeschichte I, 5). Cf. further from the viewpoint of systematic theology, Walter Kasper, 'Dogma / Dogmenentwicklung,' in P. Eicher (ed.), *Neues Handbuch theologischer Grundbegriffe. Erw. Neuauflage*, vol. 1 (1991), 292–309.

⁴⁶ Peter Stockmeier, 'Kirche unter den Herausforderungen der Geschichte,' in *Handbuch der Fundamentalthologie*, vol. 3 (1986), 122–152, here p. 125.

steps and errors of the actual history of faith.⁴⁷ Thus, in spite of its emphasis on progress, it turns out, on closer inspection, 'to be merely a variant of thoughts of identity.'⁴⁸

In general, this type of interpretation does not escape Ernst Troeltsch's accusation: 'Kernel and husk, form and content, abiding truth and temporal-historical conditions – these are the formulas of which amazing use is frequently made to help theology escape from this labyrinth. Yet the result of these various attempts is that the actual absoluteness of the kernel always absolutizes the husk as well, while the actual relativity of the husk always relativizes the kernel in turn.'⁴⁹ This also has the effect that all differences of this sort can never be ultimately explained. The 'shell' would also be largely superfluous – at the most, of tactical significance – if ever there were to be agreement on the one and the same 'kernel'. It is only in the light of history that its content can be fixed to a certain extent. So far as the future is concerned, on the other hand, it maintains its hypothetical and uncertain character: this and that should or ought to remain unchangeable.

The definition of historical change as an illegitimate phenomenon is found in a similar manner in both Christianity and Islam, in the latter above all under the concept of 'innovation' (*bid'ā*). In terms of this, it is possible to disqualify all those manifestations in the life of the community which cannot be proved to be justified on the basis of valid tradition, i. e. in conformity with the Sunna of the Prophet and ultimately with the Qur'ān.⁵⁰

b) *Reduction to relative absoluteness*

For Ernst Troeltsch the 'development of a thoroughly historical attitude towards human concerns' is 'one of the most important features' of the modern world.⁵¹ Thus two

⁴⁷ Cf. the informative and critical commentary of Joseph Ratzinger on the quoted Passage from Vatican II, in *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche*. 2nd ed., *Ergänzungsband 2* (1967), 519–521; on the unreliability of the development and Progress model for the history of faith cf. also Max Seckler, 'Der Fortschrittsgedanke in der Theologie,' in his *Im Spannungsfeld von Wissenschaft und Kirche: Theologie als schöpferische Auslegung der Wirklichkeit* (Freiburg, 1980), 127–148; and the same author's 'Tradition und Fortschritt,' in Franz Böckle et al. (eds.), *Christlicher Glaube in moderner Gesellschaft*, vol. 23 (Freiburg, 1982), 5–53; Dietrich Wiederkehr, 'Das Prinzip Überlieferung,' in *Handbuch der Fundamentalthologie*, vol. 4 (1988), 100–123, here p. 111–113: 'Optimistische Deutungsmodelle'.

⁴⁸ Joseph Ratzinger, *Das Problem der Dogmengeschichte in der Sicht der katholischen Theologie* (Köln and Opladen, 1966), 22. Cf. also the formulation used by Benedict XV: '*Non nova, sed noviter*' (Encyclical, '*Ad beatissimi Apostolorum*,' [1914], *DH* 3626; also here following Vincent of Lérins: '*doce, ut cum dicas nove, non dicas nova*' [*Commonitorium* 22: PL 50, 667]).

⁴⁹ Ernst Troeltsch, *Die Absolutheit des Christentums und die Religionsgeschichte* (1902 / 1912), *Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 5, ed. by Trutz Rendtorff (Berlin 1998), 145 (= *The Absoluteness of Christianity and the History of Religions*, trans. from 3rd German ed. [1929] by David Reid, [London, 1972], 71). Cf. also the same author's different remarks on the questions, 'Was heißt "Wesen des Christentums"?' [What is the essence of Christianity?], in his *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 2: 'Zur religiösen Lage, Religionsphilosophie und Ethik', (Tübingen, 1913), 386–451, especially p. 432–448: 'Subjektivität und Objektivität in der Wesensbestimmung'.

⁵⁰ In this respect, it must easily be seen that '*bid'ā*' is not equivalent to reprehensible, since there can also be 'innovations' which are consistent with '*taqlīd*', holding to tradition. Cf. J. Robson, '*Bid'ā*', in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam (New Edition)* 1, 1199.

⁵¹ *Die Absolutheit des Christentums und die Religionsgeschichte*, 112: „Einer der wichtigsten Grundzüge dieser neueren Welt ist die Ausbildung einer restlos historischen Anschauung der menschlichen Dinge.“

ways of attempting to rob the Christian faith of its claim to being determined by history are denied him:

the supra-natural theology, which permits the Christian faith to be based on a uniquely miraculous beginning; 'in the absoluteness of a Christian Sunday causality in antithesis to the relativity and mediacy of a non-Christian weekday causality',⁵² and

the evolutionary philosophy of religion (he is thinking above all of Hegel), which comes from a 'wondrous realm of transparently obvious consequences'.⁵³

If one does not want to follow these two ways, then, according to Troeltsch, the only remaining possibility is to elevate Christianity above the multiplicity of religions, so that Christianity is recognized as an absolute religion on the basis of historical relativity. In contrast to that, every idea which is directed towards 'the wish to possess the absolute in an absolute way at a particular point in history', must finally be judged to be 'an illusion'.⁵⁴

The debate which has centred around Troeltsch right up to the present cannot be expounded in detail here; however, it is generally accepted that he has 'discussed the problem with a rare conciseness, honesty and clear-sightedness'.⁵⁵ In retrospect, Troeltsch himself doubts whether it is completely consistent, when he tries to see Christianity as a 'point of convergence of all recognizable directions of the development of religion, as the central summary and as the opening up of what is in principle a new life'.⁵⁶ He thinks 'he ought to indicate more clearly than previously that (... all religions) lead in the same direction and all strive out of an inner drive towards an unknown final height, where alone the final unity and the objective-absolute can be found'.⁵⁷

The attractiveness of Troeltsch's thought in theology up to the present, is shown by Paul F. Knitter's book, *No Other Name?*.⁵⁸ The question in the title alludes to Acts 4:12: '... for there is no other name under heaven granted to men, by which we may receive salvation.' In the face of the Biblical and ecclesiastical traditions which understand confessing Jesus in an exclusive sense, and which see the salvation of the world as given exclusively through him, Knitter argues in favour of a theological 're-interpretation', which does not diminish the personal relationship of Christians to Jesus, but no longer maintains that even people of other religions are dependent upon him.

Within Islam there have hitherto been too few attempts to understand this religion historically for there to be a need to set them out here;⁵⁹ empirical knowledge, such as that which the Enlightenment has made irrefutable für us, does not yet need to be consid-

⁵² *Ibid.*, 125 (= *The Absoluteness of Christianity*, 52).

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 127 (= *The Absoluteness of Christianity*, 54 f.)

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 204 (= *The Absoluteness of Christianity*, 122),

⁵⁵ Karl Lehmann, 'Absolutheit des Christentums als philosophisches und theologisches Problem,' in Walter Kasper, *Absolutheit des Christentums* (Freiburg, 1977), 13–38, here 26.

⁵⁶ *Die Absolutheit des Christentums und die Religionsgeschichte*, 197.

⁵⁷ Ernst Troeltsch, 'Die Stellung der Christentums unter den Weltreligionen', 82, cf. 75 f.

⁵⁸ Paul F. Knitter, *No other name?: A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes toward the World Religions* (New York, 1985).

⁵⁹ Cf. Rotraud Wielandt, *Offenbarung und Geschichte im Denken moderner Muslime* (Wiesbaden, 1971).

ered in Islam – partly because even timid approaches towards critical thinking have met with massive discrimination and rejection. What the future will be für Islam in this respect remains one of the most explosive issues in the history of religion.

c) *The acceptance of underlying universal structures*

The idea that, in spite of all cultural differences and throughout all the changes brought about by history, mankind is united in the fundamental elements of a common truth is found as far back as early Christianity. Yet there is a note of caution in Justin's concession that the 'seed of the divine Word' (*logos spermatikos*), which at heart corresponds to the Christian proclamation, reaches also people outside the Christian faith.⁶⁰ More concerned with historical continuity, Augustine declares: What is now called the Christian religion, has always existed among the Ancients, and was never lacking, from the very beginning of the human race, until Christ himself appeared in the flesh. From this time onwards, the true religion, which was already there, began to be called the Christian religion ... This is why I said: This is the Christian religion of our age; not because it had not been there in earlier times, but because it has taken this name in recent times.⁶¹ From this point of view then, Christianity's claim to final truth refers to the formulation of what in other places and in other ages is not given the same form, but which is certainly identical in substance. This relative recognition of alien cultures implies at the same time a fundamental reservation: In no way should other religions, no matter what merit there may be in them, be considered as 'having saving power'; in other words, they cannot and should not enter into competition with belief in Christ, nor seek to remain in such competition.⁶²

In a completely new and different way, at the time of the Enlightenment, 'religion', (together with 'reason' and 'nature'), was ascribed to humanity as a fundamental spiritual structure, and attempts were made to investigate it. Clearly there is no longer a place for making a distinction between religion's content of truth and saving power, since the emphasis now runs completely counter to the plurality of the historical religions: 'Should not that which has its origins in time, and also what is genuine and true – should not this be the *a priori* of all religion?'⁶³ Thus Diderot writes, as if he is going back to Islam's idea of itself as the 'natural religion' (Q. 30:30): 'There is not a single religion upon earth, whose date of birth is not known, except natural religion. This alone will never come to an end, although all others will pass away.'⁶⁴ For Diderot, only natural religion possesses what

⁶⁰ Justin Martyr, *Apologia* II 13: PG 6, 465.

⁶¹ Augustine, *Retractationes* I XIII, 3: Corpus Christianorum. Series Latina 57, 37.

⁶² Henri de Lubac, 'Die Kirchenväter und die nichtchristlichen Religionen' in his *Geheimnis, aus dem wir leben*, (Einsiedeln, 1967), 131–143, here p. 138 f. Cf. Augustine, *De vera religione* 5, 9: 'To sum up all this, one should in no way look for religion in the bewildering confusion of the pagans or in the vituperation of the heretics, nor in the slackness of the schismatics, nor in the blindness of the Jews, but only among those who are called catholic and orthodox Christians, in other words, these who preserve the faith unscathed, who follow the true path' (Corpus Christianorum. Series Latina 32, 194).

⁶³ Ernst Cassirer, *Philosophie der Aufklärung* (Tübingen, (1932) 1973), 227, in his explanation of Denis Diderot, 'De la Suffisance de la Religion Naturelle,' in *Oeuvres Complètes*, vol. 2, (Paris, 1975), 181–195.

⁶⁴ Diderot, *ibid.*, 190, § 18.

all others lack, even if, like Christianity and Islam, they claim the opposite, i. e.: 'unchangeability and universality'.⁶⁵ He poses the rhetorical question: 'Could one not say that all the world's religions are only sects of natural religion, and that Jews and Christians, Muslims and even heathens are only heretical and schismatic naturalists?'⁶⁶

The speculative attempt of present-day theology to detect a universal piety behind the variety of religions should be seen against the double background of a theological tradition dating back to the Church Fathers on the one hand, and the attempts at mediation by the Enlightenment on the other. Special attention should be drawn to Karl Rahner's theory of anonymous Christians⁶⁷ and to Eugen Drewermann's theory of religions having their roots in the archaic layers of the soul.⁶⁸ While Rahner concentrates entirely upon the dogmatic foundation of the universal possibility of salvation in a 'transcendental' faith, and thereby is able to leave out of consideration the actual cultural conditions of the other religions, Drewermann seeks to prove (definitely also for the sake of human salvation), on the basis of a psychoanalytical hermeneutic, that the statements of religions are identical. In this he poses a problem which Rahner does not consider: namely, how what is claimed to be the profound structural identity of faith can be verified, in the face of the diverse and apparently also contradictory evidence in the history of religion. The simple declaration that, according to the premisses of Christianity, there can also be the promise of a way of salvation to non-Christians, contributes nothing to this; it ignores the question of the credibility – and this also means the reasonableness – of the one faith in its relation to the others. The more weight one puts upon the idea that the 'genuine', 'personal' fulfilment of faith precedes its individual statements ('transcendentally'), the less important the cultural circumstances become. Drewermann, on the other hand, gets involved in these questions to an almost excessive degree. The reliability of his methods and the validity of his results cannot be discussed here; yet his theological concerns are a considerable element within the subject under consideration: a particular claim to finality in the course of history should be supported by a universal basis of timeless validity.

In Islam this idea of an underlying religious structure, which is common to people of all ages and cultures, must not be introduced in the first place as a theological theory;

⁶⁵ *Ibid.* 187, § 11.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 193, § 25.

⁶⁷ For both sides of the argument, see especially Karl Rahner, 'Bemerkungen zum Problem des "anonymen Christen"', in his *Schriften zur Theologie*, vol. 10, (Zürich, 1972), 531–546; Elmar Klinger (ed.), *Christentum innerhalb und außerhalb der Kirche* (Freiburg, 1976); also, from a critical point of view, Hans Küng, 'Gibt es die wahre Religion?' in his *Theologie im Aufbruch: eine ökumenische Grundlegung* (Munich and Zürich 1987), 274–306.

⁶⁸ Typical is the powerful work of Eugen Drewermann, *Tiefenpsychologie und Exegese*, vol. 1: 'Die Wahrheit der Formen'; vol. 2: 'Die Wahrheit der Werke und der Worte' (Olten, 1988–1989). The debates which previously existed are proof of the barriers to mutual understanding; cf. Albert Görres and Walter Kasper (eds.), *Tiefenpsychologische Deutung des Glaubens?: Anfragen an Eugen Drewermann* (Freiburg, 1988); Gerhard Lohfink and Rudolf Pesch, *Tiefenpsychologie und keine Exegese: eine Auseinandersetzung mit Eugen Drewermann* (Stuttgart, 1987). For the approach of Mircea Eliade, similar in its 'gnostic' character, but still using the methods of comparative religion, cf. Alex Stock, 'Bild und Symbol,' in *Religionspädagogische Beiträge* 23 (1989), 3–16.

since, as already seen, this religion sees itself as the realization in history of the relation to God, which is founded in creation and which is in principle available to all men. Islam is thus, in its own eyes, the only 'natural religion' (*dīn al-fiṭra*, according to Q. 30:30).

5. Hermeneutical survey

The need for something to continue to exist through all the changes wrought by time and the varieties of cultures, as well as the experience and conviction that it does so, are themselves all dependent upon historical conditions, and can alter accordingly. Every claim to finality thus faces the double test, whether it is in practice always recognized, and also how far it is socially accepted. Thus one can justifiably claim that all people with a sense of responsibility in our world must agree that the building of concentration camps for genocide is absolutely reprehensible and can never be justified.

A similar declaration regarding religious faiths cannot be maintained. Therefore, if one does not accept that their validity could be in principle non-universal, then they are propped up by additional interpretations. Two methods suggest themselves in the first place:

1. Ideas that appear to be different, are presented as being 'basically identical'.
2. It is maintained that the position of those who do not agree with oneself is irrelevant – either with the comment that they are not yet sufficiently advanced to be recognized, or that they will never be recognized; in either case, the others suffer from a 'false awareness'.

However, even these two ways of coping with the absence of agreement, by imposing these interpretations on the situation, have to rely on their being accepted as credible. It is only too easy to suspect them of being merely defensive strategies. However, the person most likely to face this accusation is the one who chooses yet another hermeneutic possibility:

3. He concedes that our convictions – even those which on religious and moral grounds we consider it impossible to give up – are subject to historical and social proof, and that all claims to ultimate validity (other than those of logic and mathematics) always remain hypotheses and postulates, – absoluteness in relativity.

Admittedly, it is clear from what has been said above that considerable barriers stand in the way of the acceptance of this third possibility in Christianity and Islam. However, it is only by this means that fundamentalist temptations can be resisted logically in thought and action. Narrow concentration upon a transfigured past, the dominance of thoughts of security, regression into the shelter and protection of one's own group, the protection of one's consciousness against alien irritations, the zealous search for mutual confidence building, placing a high value on uniformity, suspicion of doubt and criticism, simplification through fear of facing problems, aggressive rejection of other positions, the use of authorities to outlaw discussion, etc.: reactions of this sort to cultural differences lead to the suspicion that they are attempts to satisfy the quite justifiable need for a stable identity by questionable means.