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CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Does the claim of absoluteness lead into interreligious conflicts?

In the complex debate about the role of religion in social and political conflicts we can distinguish three main positions. In his well-known article, “The Clash of Civilizations?” Samuel Huntington raised the hypothesis that the fundamental source of conflict in the post-Cold-War world will primarily be neither ideological nor economic. “The great divisions among humankind and the dominating source of conflict will be cultural.”²²⁵ And because cultures are always shaped and permeated by religious traditions, cultural and religious identities will be the main source of aggressive confrontations.²²⁶

With this hypothesis Huntington obviously takes a *primordialist* position²²⁷, perceiving cultural and religious groups as the primordial driving force of future conflicts.²²⁸ This position has been criticized by those who advocate an *instrumentalist* approach, arguing that religious convictions and motivations may become instrumentalized by the parties in a given struggle.²²⁹ According to this approach, conflicts are in fact instigated and triggered by political, economic, social, ethnic and (in the future increasingly important) ecological causes. The elites in a given society, motivated by anticipated advantages for themselves or for their class or for the society as a whole, have a vested interest in fanning the flames of potential conflicts with appeals to ethnic or national

225 Cf. www.foreignaffairs.org/19930601faessay5188/samuel-p-huntington/the-clash-of-civilizations.html. Note that the term “Clash of Civilizations” had already been coined by Bernard Lewis, a historian, orientalist and political commentator. In his essay “The Roots of Muslim Rage” (1990), he predicted increasing tensions and conflicts between the “civilisations” of the Western World and Islam. See www.travelbrochuregraphics.com/extra/roots_of_muslim_rage.htm

226 Huntington’s theory has been thoroughly criticized by Müller 2001 and Sacks 2003.

227 The scheme of the three types “primordialism, instrumentalism and constructivism” has been developed by Rittberger and Hasenclever 2000. In his brilliant 2007: 23ff, Markus A. Weingardt summarizes this instructive model developed by Rittberger and Hasenclever to explain the role of religions in conflicts (28ff).

228 Critics of religion like Richard Dawkins or Karlheinz Deschner forcefully employ the argument that religions cause hostility, aggression and war. In January 2006 Dawkins presented his television documentary, “The Root of All Evil” in two episodes (“The God Delusion” and “The Virus of Faith”) on channel 4 in the UK.—See also Deschner 1986.

229 Cf. Meyer 1997; Senghaas 1998.

myths, to cultural values and to religious truth-claims. The conflict between interests becomes overarched by a conflict of values, with the result that the conflict becomes emotionally loaded with an impassioned determination to defend the identity of one's own cultural and religious community against the alien threat. Religious identities are not themselves the *cause* of aggressive confrontations but they can certainly add fuel to the fire by exalting the group-position; by creating a feeling of solidarity and the conviction of a common bond within the community; by drawing a clear-cut line of demarcation over and against the other religious/cultural group, and by depicting this "other" not only as an enemy but indeed as the representative of a demonic force. Thus religious identity-formations have the potential power to magnify conflicts enormously.

But religious identities are ambiguous, for they can also lead to resistance against such instrumentalization and to the rejection of aggressive strategies. Moreover, they can inspire an ardent commitment to work tirelessly for peace and reconciliation.²³⁰ Nevertheless, the more the conflict-fostering elites succeed in suppressing potentially irenic tendencies and harnessing religious identity for their own purposes, the higher the probability that they will gain the active or at least passive support of the masses for their movement.

Instrumentalists argue that there are no genuine *religious* conflicts. On the other hand, insofar as religion functions as a legitimizing and motivating system of convictions, it can indeed exacerbate and accelerate latent conflicts — the causes of which, however, are to be located in social disintegration and injustice, economical decline and political corruption.

Let us then turn to the third main position. Critics of the instrumentalist approach object that it underestimates the role of religion, and argue that religion is far more than a potential instrument of motivation lending itself to misuse by elites; indeed, it is a driving force in its own right. Against the primordialists, on the other hand, these critics insist that religion is not a monolithic system nor some primordial numinous power, but functions rather as a construction of identity and alterity. Like political ideologies, nationalism or ethnocism, religions form a kind of collective mental framework which shapes and orders worldviews, values, aims and behavioral orientations, expectations, understandings of the self, of one's own community and "the other". As such, the religions are in a permanent flux of transition and interaction with the developments in a given society. They are influenced by the self-understanding

230 Cf.: Appleby 2000; Scheffler 2002; Hempelmann / Kandel 2006 2006; Weingardt 2007; Oberdorfer / Waldmann 2008; Beck 2008.

and self-interpretation of the society, at the same time as they themselves exert an influence on this society.

As a form of collective consciousness, religious traditions interpret both history and the present situation—including the constellation that is causing the particular conflict. The traditions hold out prospects for the future and impose intersubjective normative patterns on the consciousness of the individual believers. Thus religions can not only offer elites a set of potential instruments for manipulating the masses but can also play an active role in conflicts. Though they are not actors—only persons and groups can act—religious ideas can enact the actors.

The three positions I have summarized—the primordialist, the instrumentalist, and the constructivist—indicate potentials within the religions that can cause, or be used to radicalize, or play an active role in the support of conflicts. I will not discuss the positions now (though I tend towards the third one) but try to identify such potentials—as sets of ideas which can, when they become dominant axioms, shape belief-systems in such a way as to favour hostile attitudes. Perhaps it is more apt to say that they can be used as mental swords to give hostile attitudes a material content. But we have to keep in mind that only those ideas can be used that carry the potential for such a utilization in themselves. In Perry Schmidt-Leukel's words:

I do not want to deny that there are and were cases for hijacking religions for malicious intentions of a non-religious nature, but there must exist a genuine religious potential for conflict, otherwise religions can not be misused. The question that needs to be addressed seriously by the religions is precisely the question of what it is that makes them so suitable and susceptible for such misuse.²³¹

His answer to that question is that religious groups may use violent means or legitimize the use of violence if they feel obliged to defend eternal ultimate religious values. It may appear to them that such a forceful defence of the ultimate truth and the means of salvation—including the persecution and execution of heretics—is a necessary protection of the faithful and a lesson for the infidels—and thus a work of charity.²³²

²³¹ Schmidt-Leukel 2004: 5; cf. also Schmidt-Leukel 2007.

²³² Cf. Karl Barths statement referring to Lessings "parable of the rings": "eben daraus, dass jeder seiner Liebe nacheifert, die er gewiss immer für unbestochen und vorurteilsfrei halten wird, entsteht ja die Religion und der Konflikt der Religionen" (KD I/2, 325; editors' translation: "precisely because each ardently pursues his love, which he will always take to be uncorrupted and unprejudiced, religion and the conflict between religions come about.")

But which are the central convictions to be so rigorously defended? Which are the ideas supporting the presumed superiority—or even the singularity—of one’s own way of salvation over against another way? What are the ‘mental swords’ which may lead to or foster religious violence? I restrict the field of observation to the family of religions of Semitic origin—Judaism, Christianity and Islam, and, as a Christian theologian, I concentrate on this tradition.

Claims of exclusive, of universal and of final validity

In the second part of my paper I will depict sets of convictions rooted in the “Holy Scriptures” and traditions of the so-called Abrahamic religions, which can serve as the raw material for the radical interpretations of those traditions referred to as ‘claims of absoluteness.’ In a systematic analysis and reconstruction of such claims we can distinguish between claims of (a) exclusive, (b) of universal and (c) of final validity. This distinction provides the structure for the following overview.

Exclusiveness

The claim of *exclusiveness* insists that the universal and ultimate divine truth is revealed *only* in the Torah or *only* in Jesus Christ or *only* in the Qur’an. There may be other revelations by other prophets for other people, but they cannot be regarded as having the same absolute authority.²³³

It is not primarily the monotheistic claim of the singularity of the one God and the distinction between the true God and false gods which lays the foundation for the claim of religious absoluteness (as Jan Assmann and others suggest²³⁴), but rather the claim that the *revelation* to which one’s own religious tradition refers is singular in its authenticity and ultimate validity. That God is the one and only ground of being and that there is no God beside him is the common belief of Judaism, Christianity and Islam; it follows then that claims of religious exclusiveness do not refer to the oneness of God but to the singularity of the normative *manifestations* of God in the origins of one’s own tradition.

Furthermore, claims of religious exclusiveness refer to the *Holy Scripture* of the particular tradition, which is regarded within that view as the direct utter-

²³³ I include the so-called “inclusivist” position in this description of exclusivism.

²³⁴ Cf. Assmann 2005 and 2006; Thonhauser 2008; Manemann 2005. See also: Krötke 2006; Schwartz 1997.

ance of God, written down by chosen humans whose own intellectual creativity has been overridden by the inspiration of God. As a consequence complete inerrancy is attributed to these written testimonies. They are considered as constituting the unquestionable norm for an understanding of the divine and the worldly reality, for ethical decisions and for moral action.

Finally, claims of religious exclusiveness refer to the *tradition* of the religion from its origins to the present — to the exegesis of the Holy Scriptures and the application of central doctrines to current situations. They cover the teachings of the religious authorities as well as the specific cultic and ethical practices considered to have been established by God. Because the traditions are believed to reflect the will of God, to disobey them is not only a violation of human law but of divine law. This is sin and will affect the relation not only of the individual to God but also the relation of the whole community to God. The members of the community are called to absolute obedience to the divine truth and to fight against deviations from it as against an infectious mental or spiritual disease. Divine truth is more important than human truth, and truth is more important than love.

Is it the claim of exclusive validity which potentially leads to such rigid attitudes, or is it rather the claim's material content? It is hard to draw the distinction between validity claims on the one hand, and the raw subject matter to which those claims apply on the other. Any subject matter can lend itself to this approach. Exclusive validity can be claimed for a pacifist attitude, or for an imperative to regard even the enemy as created in the image of God, or for a preferential option for the poor and suppressed. And that can and probably will provoke conflicts—conflicts within the faith-community itself, in the relation to political authorities or in the relation to adherents of other religious or secular worldviews. The content of the claim might restrict the choice of the means for realizing the imperative, as well as restricting the way in which these means will be employed; ultimately the content of the claim may lead to martyrdom. In any event, it will not prevent but rather foster conflict.

There are situations in which resistance is demanded, and the resulting protest receives its legitimation from exclusive truth-claims. The “Barmen Declaration”²³⁵ may serve as an example. Conflicts cannot and need not be prevented in every case. Obviously there are conflicts—even violent conflicts—that

235 In 1934 the Confessing Church issued a theological declaration opposing the “German-Christian” movement. It stated that “Jesus Christ ... is the one Word of God”—“We reject the false doctrine, as though the church could and would have to acknowledge as a source of its proclamation, apart from and besides this one Word of God, still other events and powers, figures and truths, as God's revelation.” See: www.sacred-texts.com/chr/barmen.htm.

bring about liberation, the enforcement of human rights and the overcoming of injustice. Religious convictions founded in divine authority and framed by exclusive claims belong to the most powerful motivating factors for the actors in such struggles. Therefore conflicts and their motivation by exclusive claims must not be seen only negatively as something which should not be.

On the other hand there are sets of religious convictions which, when interpreted in an exclusivist manner, can give rise to or support aggression with the aim of edging out other groups, occupying territories or coercing people into conversion.

In *Judaism*, for example, we might consider the conviction that God established an exclusive covenant with his chosen people, a covenant inextricably linked to the gift of the Holy Land. Turned into a political agenda, the belief in the “chosen people” can function as a justification for ethnic segregation and for claiming the “promised land” solely for one’s own people. Thus the exclusivist interpretation of Jewish tradition may lead to an ethnocentric worldview and become the ideological basis for antagonistic attitudes towards those who also lay claim to the land of Israel.

According to an exclusivist interpretation of the *Christian* tradition, only in Jesus Christ can both the revelation of God’s will and very essence and salvation be found. The New Testament support for this claim is provided above all by John 14:6: “Jesus saith unto him, I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me.” In Acts 4:11f Christ is proclaimed to be the “cornerstone.” “Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved.” The belief in Jesus Christ is the only path to God. “He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned” (Mk 16:16).

These citations of single verses from the New Testament, isolated from their literary and historical context and interpreted within a militant framework, were to lead to coerced baptisms of Jews in medieval times, to violence against Muslims during the Crusades and to a dehumanizing treatment of indigenous peoples in the course of the colonial-mission.

Claims to exclusive religious truth have been present in the Christian tradition at all times, but they did not and need not *necessarily* support hostile attitudes or violent behaviour. They could also be associated with the Pauline trias of faith, love and hope, along with strict pacifism and active engagement for liberation and justice. It is not the claim itself nor even its material content but rather its framework of interpretation and application which renders it susceptible to militant attitudes. The attitude shapes the truth-claim—the truth-claim expresses the attitude.

Let me take the declaration “Dominus Iesus” (2000) as an example. It intended to “reassert the definitive and complete character of the revelation of Jesus Christ” (§ 5). And because the Church is the body of the risen Christ in history, it represents the salvific mystery (§16). Belonging to the Church is necessary to achieve salvation (§ 20). Followers of other religions “are in a gravely deficient situation in comparison with those who, in the Church, have the fullness of the means of salvation” (§ 22).—With these words the declaration expresses an exclusive truth-claim, but one cannot then conclude that such a position leads by its very nature to interreligious conflicts or violence against non-believers.

An exclusivist interpretation of the *Islamic* tradition rests upon the claim of its superiority over other religions. Thus we read in Sura 9.33: “It is He Who has sent His Messenger (Muhammed) with guidance and the religion of truth, to make it superior over all religions, though the idolaters may be averse.”²³⁶ Despite the distinction between idolaters on the one hand and Jews and Christians as “people of the Scripture“ on the other, Sura 9.29f instructs the Muslim to “fight against those among the people of the Scripture who do not believe in Allah and in the Last Day, and who do not forbid that which has been forbidden by Allah and His Messenger, and who do not acknowledge the religion of truth (i.e. Islam) ...” Allahs curse will be on Jews and Christians, because they believe Esra or Christ to be the Son of God. They have been taken in by a delusion. It is obvious that such statements could and can be used to legitimate the oppression of Jews and Christians — not to mention polytheists and atheists. In Sura 3,85 we read: “Whoso desires another religion than Islam, it shall not be accepted of him; in the next world he shall be among the losers.”

Universality

The claim of *universality* insists that the revealed truth is not only valid for the adherents of the given religion but for the whole creation. Thus it gives rise to missionary activities aimed at spreading this universal truth throughout the world. Where religions with a universal message meet up with one another, a “clash of universalisms” is unavoidable.²³⁷

236 Quite similar Sura 48.28: “It is He Who sent His Messenger with the guidance and the religion of truth, that He may exalt it above every other religion. Allah suffices as Witness.” - 61.9: “It is He Who has sent His Messenger forth with the guidance and the religion of truth, to make it triumph over every religion, even though the idolaters may be averse.”

237 Cf. Beck 2008: 207ff. “If the *clash of universalisms* ties in with political or economic crisis, violences may erupt suddenly” (213; editors’ trans.).

Islam not only denotes a particular religion but is above all the originary revelation to *all* humankind (Sura 7,172) and the ‘natural’ alignment of *all* humans to God. Islam in that broader sense of the term means devotion and obedience towards God. In addition to the verbal revelation in the book of the Qur’an Islam also teaches in a continuing, nonverbal, symbolic revelation in the creation, which is addressed to *all* people (2,164; 6,95ff). And even the verbal revelation of the Qur’an calls *all* men and women to believe that there is no god but God and Muhammad is the prophet of God, and thus *all* people are called upon to follow his guidance. According to Sura 13,7 and 35,24 God has sent apostles to *every* people to warn and teach them his truth. Every Muslim is called to proclaim the message of the Qur’an and to spread the “invitation to Islam” (da’wa).²³⁸ But as a consequence of the belief in predestination Islam did not develop missionary activities aiming towards the conversion of individuals, as Christianity did. An important reason for that restraint is proclaimed in Sura 2,6f: “As for the unbelievers, alike it is to them whether thou hast warned them or hast not warned them, they do not believe. God has set a seal on their hearts and on their hearing, and on their eyes is a covering, and there awaits them a mighty chastisement.” More important than missionary activity for realizing the claim of universality is the pursuit of expanding the “house of Islam” (“Dar al-Islam”). Thus “jihad” can be understood and put into practice as the militant expansion not only of Islam as religion but also of the Islamic rule.

The most important point of reference for *Christianity’s* claim to universality is the Great Commission (Mt. 28:18-20) which obliges the disciples to preach the gospel to all nations, baptizing them in the name of God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. When linked with the theological claim of exclusiveness it can even seem to be a work of charity to save humans by bringing them to believe in Jesus Christ—by whatever means. Aggressive methods of missionizing whose goal is the conversion of adherents of other religions to Christianity are the cause of conflicts in a number of countries today, for example India.

In a speech given in September 2000 at the United Nations Millennium World Peace Summit in New York the Indian Vedanta-scholar and monk, Swami Dayananda Sarasvati, voiced a sharp criticism of missionary activities as he experienced them in India mainly by Christian missionaries. “Conversion is violence” was his central message. In a previously published “open letter” he had drawn the conclusion: “Religious conversion should stop—the aggressive

²³⁸ Cf. Wrogemann 2006.

religions should realize that they are perpetuating violence when they convert.”²³⁹

The claim of universality is central to Christianity and Islam, but not to *Judaism* which is closely linked with ethnicity and focussed on the land and people of Israel. Though the Hebrew people pursued strong missionary activities in the ancient world there has been virtually no Jewish mission since. As a rule, one’s birth from a Jewish mother constitutes one’s belonging to Judaism—and not (or only exceptionally) an act of conversion. Whereas claims of universality lead in practice to the expansion of one’s own religion, the particularism inherent in Jewish self-understanding tends towards a separation from other groups. The chosen people should not mingle with other people (Esr 9f). In its radical forms that kind of separatism can lead to the drawing-up of clear lines of division, and when these “borders” are then militantly defended conflicts may well arise. Thus we see that both extremes—an absolutized claim of universality on the one hand, and an absolutized claim of particularity on the other—can produce the same kind of hostility towards adherents of other religions. Particularism easily can become attached to the exclusivist attitude.

Finality

The claim of *finality* insists that the manifestation of the divine truth in the fundamental and central revelation of one’s own tradition is of ultimate validity and thus unsurpassable. The decisive breakthrough in God’s self-communication, in his revealing, saving and guiding activity, has occurred in the event which constitutes the given religious tradition: the Torah, Jesus Christ or the Qur’an. That breakthrough is considered to be the centre of history, dividing time into a period of preparation and a period of fulfilment. And even if the ultimate fulfilment of God’s promises is yet to come, a further or “superior” revelation is not only not to be expected but is even strictly ruled out.

At the heart of the conflicts between Islam and Christianity lies a clash of claims to ultimate finality. According to John 5:36 and 17:4, Jesus has finished the work which the Father has given him. He announced that the time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand (Mk 1:15). Those who believe in his proclamation and follow him participate in the kingdom of God.

It was thus a severe stab in the very heart of Christianity’s self-understanding when Islam appeared on the stage of world-history, raising the claim that Mohammed is the seal of the prophets (Sura 33,40) and spreading

²³⁹ Cf. Sarasvati 1999.

with terrific speed into former Christian territories. John Damascene answered the challenge of Islam's claim of finality theologically with a theory which laid the intellectual foundation for the Crusades and for the later antagonism towards Islam: He applied the apocalyptic visions of the Book of Revelation to Islam, elaborating a view of Islam as the 'final power of temptation' announced by God. Mohammed is the false prophet of Rev 19:20. With him the Antichrist (or at least his forerunner) has appeared, recognizable (according to I John 2:22) by his denial of the Son of God. The beast from the abyss prophesied in Rev 11:7; 17:8 is here or is very near: "Therefore we know that it is the last hour" (I John 2:18).

This apocalyptic interpretation of Islam furthered the readiness to do the utmost in order to defeat the satanic power. Thus the clash between Christianity's claim that the revelation in Christ is the ultimate word of God and Mohammed's claim that the Qur'an is the final revelation created an enormous potential for conflicts and for the legitimization of hostilities between the two religions.

Apocalyptic visions potentially provide a most powerful motivation for combatting the adherents of other religions as enemies of God. Whether or not they actively function that way depends on the type of eschatology involved.

For on the one hand, if the world is seen as wholly sinful and therefore eternally lost, it does not make sense to fight to make it a better place, but only to save as many souls as possible from extinction. The expectation that the world is in tribulation and will perish—characteristic of the pre-millenniarist view—will lead to a retreat from the world, perhaps even to an engagement in the final battle which will annihilate the world. The word "Armageddon" was written on the cannon barrels of some American tanks in the first Gulf War in 1991. In interviews the soldiers involved stated that they understood the war as the last day's battle and their engagement in it as their Christian situation. The more destruction, the earlier the end would come.

On the other hand, if the world is seen as a place of probation and of the realization of God's promises—characteristic of the post-millenniarist view—then it is worthwhile to engage in evangelization and to work for the transformation of the world into the kingdom of God. Yet this strategy may lead to conflicts when the attempts to evangelize are implemented in a coercive way or when the attempts are associated with political and military power.²⁴⁰ In such cases the conviction that there is an eschatologic time-pressure functions as a driving force of conflicts and in conflicts.

240 Cf. Mühling 2007:217: "Post-millennarism inevitably tends to become totalitarian."

Claims of absolute validity—exclusive, universal or particularistic, and ultimate—are part and parcel of every religious tradition. It is not the claim itself but a certain interpretation, contextualization and application of it which make it amenable to conflict-supporting ideologies. The claim is not in itself aggressive; it can however be ‘armed and loaded,’ so to speak, and thus utilized to justify violence. It then becomes a sharp mental and spiritual sword, which can indeed call forth the real swords.

In the history of the three religions and right up to the present day, the claim of absolute truth could be exploited as a key element in a belligerent attitude, creating and sustaining violent conflicts. Those claims have been able to trigger certain constellations of the collective consciousness, and these can, in turn, increase the willingness of those who participate in this consciousness to actively engage in conflict-strategies or at least support them.

In addition to their presence in large-scale *interreligious* conflicts, claims of absoluteness can also be present in authoritarian or even coercive social and mental structures *within* religious communities, and can indeed destroy families or friendships. Ironically this can be observed even in communities which are emphatically pacifistic, as is the case in the Jehova’s Witnesses.

Claims of absolute truth are often accompanied by a metaphysical dualism and a moral rigorism: as torn between a good and an evil power, between light and darkness, heaven and hell. In the cosmic struggle, those who follow the one and only path to God will prevail. The moral rigorism is based on the distinction between clean and tainted. Whatever is not in accordance with the divine commandments—be it in the life of the individual or in the community—must be expelled. This notion can lead to projections of the evil onto those who follow other religious paths and who will therefore be eternally lost.

Theological counterparts to the claims of exclusiveness, universality and finality

Religious communities and their authorities can contribute to the prevention or suppression of such negative interpretations and applications of the religious traditions, as well as to the encouragement of their peace-promoting potentials. For one thing, the communities and their representatives can strengthen the solid core-convictions which foster peace-furthering attitudes. For another, they can work to de-absolutize the claims of exclusiveness, universality and finality. No external principle of tolerance can compel them to do that but only the insight that these irenic potentials constitute a vital part of the very essence of

their tradition. Only on the basis of their central convictions can such an irenic self-understanding be generated and intensified.

It may seem naïve to trust in the power of rational insight, of theological argumentation and ethical obligation as a means of de-escalation. Yet though this approach will not work in every case, nevertheless the constructivist position, as sketched in the first part of the present paper, holds that this power should not be underestimated. Religious differences are normally not the *causes* of conflicts; rather, insofar as they constitute an appeal to specific convictions, they may add fuel to the fire. In this light the “fire” can be contained and perhaps even extinguished by de-legitimizing any justifications for the so-called ‘holy war’ and by calling instead for respect for the opponents while criticizing one’s own community’s pretensions to theological superiority. In this way, community leaders can influence the attitudes, motivations, strategies and behaviour of the actors and—no less important—of the masses who support them.²⁴¹

In the third part of this essay, I would like to suggest three sets of theological ideas that can work as counterbalances to the three claims of exclusiveness, universality and finality. They might function as ‘fundamentalism-blockers’, i.e. as strategies of self-relativization—not in terms of an external critique of “religion” but rather as the particular religion’s own internal, theologically appropriate critique of its own self-absolutization.²⁴² Thus “relativization” has to be clearly distinguished from relativism.

Against exclusiveness

Against any claim of religious *exclusiveness* a double distinction can be advanced: The distinction between the reality of God in himself, the revelation of God and the religious concepts that are built upon that revelation. Now every

241 Cf. Rittberger 2006: 82: “There are...indications that the appeal to religious convictions not only can escalate but also de-escalate conflicts” (editors’ trans.); cf. also Appleby 2000.

242 Cf. the five theologoumena pointed out by Krötke 2006: 58-61: (a) The belief in a transcendent God transcends and thus relativizes all worldly situations and interests. (b) The conviction that faith is a gift of God who reveals himself makes it impossible to take that revelation into one’s own possession. (c) The God portrayed in the Bible has on the one hand the character traits of a stringent ruler, but on the other hand is portrayed as a caring shepherd: gracious, benevolent and unconditionally loving. (d) God created all human beings in his own image, which entitles them to claim an inalienable dignity, (e) and calls them to strive for God’s truth in an atmosphere of freedom, corresponding to the freedom that results from their relation to God. If those five theologoumena are taken seriously, monotheism cannot unleash destructive power.

religious tradition which is founded on a divine revelation must distinguish not only between its own teachings and practices on the one hand and the divine revelation on the other, but also between that revelation and the revealing God. The “revelation” itself states that God is ‘greater’ than his revelation, just as a person is ‘greater’ than all of his/her self-revelations. The ‘Word’ of God—the Torah, Jesus Christ, the Qur’an—is the fully authentic representation of God, but it is not God. The revelation is the self-mediation of God which establishes a relation to God. But the transcendent God transcends his revelations.

The revelations at the basis of Judaism, Christianity and Islam themselves give clear evidence of this distinction:

(i) The *Torah* is the declaration of God’s will for the life of his chosen people in the Promised Land. But God’s blessing reaches far beyond the chosen people. In Is 19:25 the Egyptians are called “my people” and the Assyrians “the work of my hands”. To be sure, the Torah is not addressed to those peoples. But they are included in God’s mercy and charity.

(ii) *Jesus* obviously had a clear consciousness of the distinction between himself and God. He pointed beyond himself towards God and the kingdom of God, and said (Mk 10:18): “Why callest thou me good? [there is] none good but one, [that is], God.” God’s infinite and unfathomable mystery supremely surpasses all “solidified” forms of God’s revelation: it transcends them and relativizes them. He is the “Deus semper major” (1. John 3:20), “dwelling in the light which no man can approach unto; whom no man hath seen, nor can see”. The so-called “negative theology” served as a reminder of that transcendence.

(iii) The Islamic tradition distinguishes between the heavenly original of the *Qu’ran* and the worldly copy of it. Sura 18,109 says: “If the sea were ink for the Words of my Lord, the sea would be spent before the Words of my Lord are spent, though We brought replenishment the like of it.” That means: the Word of God is far more comprehensive than the words found in the written Qu’ran. Mahmut Aydin, an Islamic scholar, concludes: “The Qu’ran is truly God’s revelation, but it is not the totality of God’s revelation.”²⁴³ The basic prayer of Islam—“Allahu akbar”—means: “God is greater than everything else”.

Against universality

The claim of *universal* validity is countered by theological insight into the historicity and particularity of the revelation. God’s word underwent an “*inhistorization*”—which is to say, an entrance into history as a time-conditioned manifesta-

²⁴³ Cf. Aydin 2005: 234.

tion—in the proclamation of the Torah, in the man Jesus of Nazareth, in the book of the Qur’an.

Contrary to Greek idealism, the Jewish-Christian understanding of truth approaches the revelation of God not as a set of timeless ideas but as a *relation*. God’s word has become part of the human world and has thus exposed itself to particularity and relativity, to social and cultural influences. It is in fact not universal and timeless, but historical and concrete, related to persons, people and places. It can be received only in terms of culture-conditioned human perspectives.

For the Christian tradition this follows from the very heart of the Christian belief in God’s incarnation. The biblical narratives of the history of God with his people and with humankind in general made him known as a God who accompanies his wandering people and speaks to a particular context in concrete terms related to the specific situation. Precisely in this *kenosis*, in this self-humbling, God manifests the power of love.

Against finality

The counterbalance to the claim of *finality* lies in the conviction that only at the consummation of the creational process will God’s word be complete and full truth become manifest. Then even the Son of God will be subject unto God, so that God may be all in all (I Cor 15:28). The gospel of Christ stands under an ‘eschatological proviso’—it points to the eternal ground of being, which can only be striven for, and never wholly grasped and possessed.

Like the claims to universality the claim to finality is not to be related to the reality of Christianity within history— and this includes the message of Christ. Rather, it hints at the eschatological fulfilment of God’s promise. Joseph Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict XVI, citing Joachim Jeremias, pointed out that “in Jesus’ own message universalism is ... pure promise”.²⁴⁴

The three counterbalances against the three forms of the claims of absoluteness belong to the very essence of Christianity. They can be emphatically put forward against any attempts to interpret the Christian tradition in a way which despises other religions and cultures, and thus they can promote attitudes that lead to respect, esteem and acknowledgement. Theological convictions can then serve as tools for a self-interpretation of the Christian tradition able to stand up against a conflict-creating or conflicting-supporting radicaliza-

²⁴⁴ Ratzinger 1967: 26f.

tion. They could promote de-escalation and establish a foundation for the peaceful coexistence of different cultural and religious communities.

This does not mean that the differences between the religious traditions will no longer be taken seriously; nor does it entail the notion that the religions should be seen as equally valid “ways of salvation”. Human beings have no access to a perspective which would allow such a judgment, for only the absolute perspective of an omniscient observer could arrive at such a judgment. Yet from the Christian point of view it is possible—and even necessary—to state that God did not leave the other nations without witness to himself (Acts 14:17). To state this is by no means to cast doubt on the *uniqueness* of the Christian path to God, it is merely to question the claim that the Christian path is the *only* way to God.

Such a theological modesty does not undermine the validity of the Christian tradition and the affiliation of Christians with it. On the contrary—this modesty brings to bear that tradition’s central insights into the mystery of God which extends beyond his revelations: in the unconditional universality of his love for humankind, in the historical concreteness of his self-representations, and in the hope for an ultimate fulfilment that transcends all religious traditions.

In the light of the three counterbalances the claims to exclusiveness, universality and finality can indeed be retained as an expression of the Christian certainty of faith—without lapsing into an absolutist attitude. As existential testimonies they articulate the trustworthiness of God’s revelation in Christ. Thus they are not to be understood as rational assertions of facts leading inexorably to the repudiation of other forms of faiths. Rather, their appropriate place is not in the ‘horizontal’ relationship to other traditions but in the ‘vertical’ relationship to God—in the praise of God, in doxology. The claims employ the language of devotion with all its superlatives. It is passionate poetry of the heart, not the theoretical prose of reason.²⁴⁵

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245 For further explorations of the so-called claim of absoluteness see Bernhardt 1993, 1994, and 2005.

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