

**PONTIFICAL GREGORIAN UNIVERSITY
FACULTY OF THEOLOGY**

**THE INCARNATE WORD OF GOD:
Christian and Islamic Doctrine on Revelation**
A Study in Comparative Theology

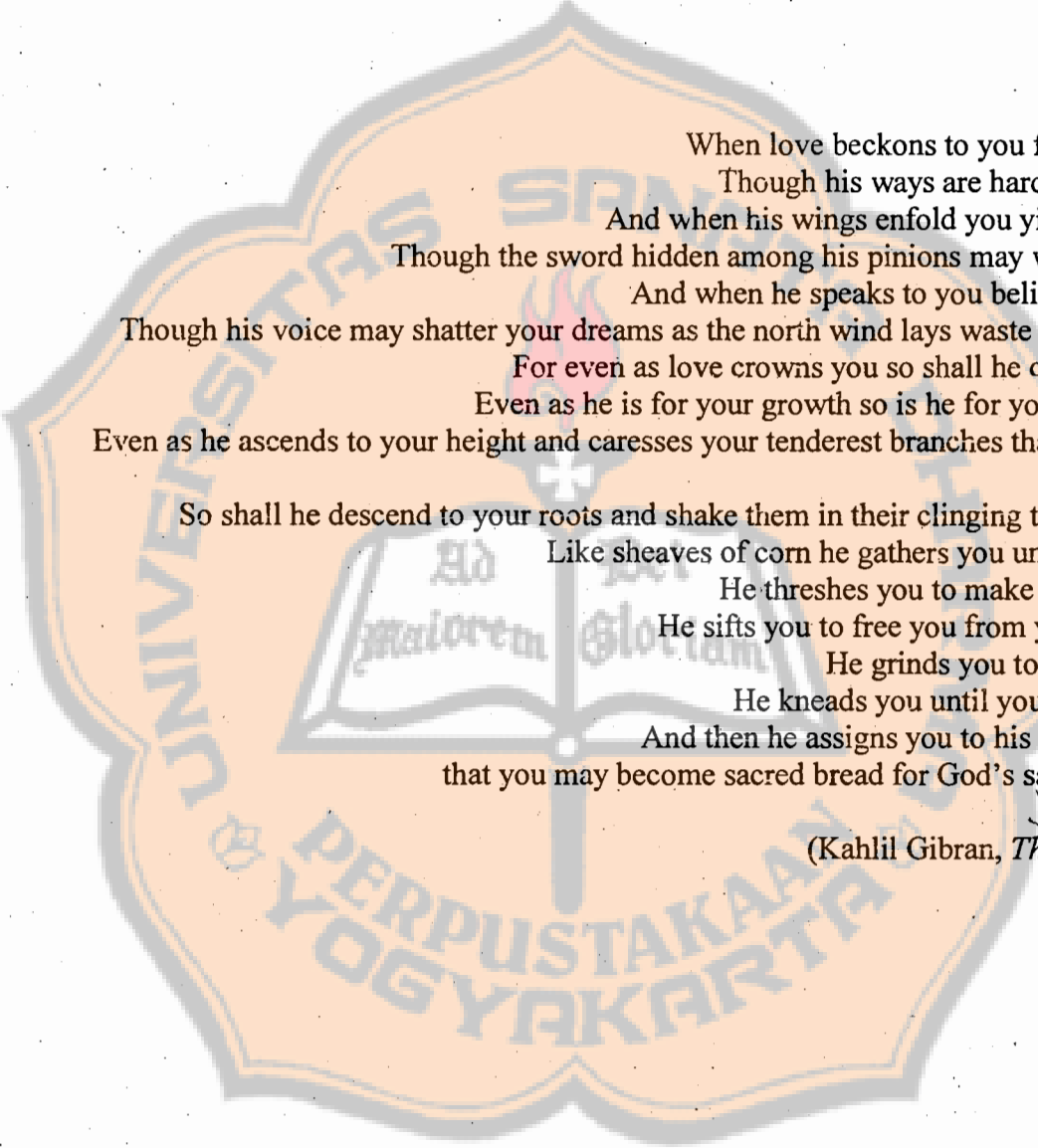


Thesis of Doctorate in Theology

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Rome - 2005



When love beckons to you follow him,
Though his ways are hard and steep.
And when his wings enfold you yield to him,
Though the sword hidden among his pinions may wound you.
And when he speaks to you believe in him,
Though his voice may shatter your dreams as the north wind lays waste the garden.
For even as love crowns you so shall he crucify you.
Even as he is for your growth so is he for your pruning.
Even as he ascends to your height and caresses your tenderest branches that quiver in
the sun,
So shall he descend to your roots and shake them in their clinging to the earth.
Like sheaves of corn he gathers you unto himself.
He threshes you to make you naked.
He sifts you to free you from your husks.
He grinds you to whiteness.
He kneads you until you are pliant;
And then he assigns you to his sacred fire,
that you may become sacred bread for God's sacred feast.

(Kahlil Gibran, *The Prophet*)

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

“All that God does is apt for its time” (Qo 3,11). I thank and praise my God - the Father and his only begotten Son and the Holy Spirit - for filling me with hope, patience and joy during the process of this work, from the beginning until its completion.

Within this grateful opportunity, remains for me the pleasant duty of expressing my cordial appreciation to those who have helped me in writing this thesis. First of all to Fr. John O'Donnell, S.J., who has served as the moderator of this study. His loving and sympathetic guidance has assisted and encouraged me at every stage of the work. I am greatly indebted also to Fr. Daniel A. Madigan, S.J., who has generously agreed to be the second reader of my thesis. His discerning and valuable remarks about the parts of the thesis concerning the Islamic doctrine on revelation have prevented me from showing all too noticeably the immense ignorance in which my little understanding is embedded. I am grateful also to all my professors in the Faculty of Theology and the Institute of the Study of Religions and Cultures of the Gregorian University.

Special thanks are due to Sr. Maura Fortkort O.S.F., and Sr. Mary Serbacki, O.S.F., who have unconditionally helped me to edit my dissertation. Thanks to their careful work of correcting these pages for their English, these human words on the Word of God might become intelligible to the person who reads.

I render my sincere gratitude to my Superior General, Fr. Wim van der Weiden, M.S.F., the Assistants General and all the confreres who supported me with their prayers and encouragement during my studies in Rome. I wish to thank Fr. Gilberto Ciuoli, C.M., and Fr. Giuseppe Strinati C.M., (the previous and present rectors of *Convitto Ecclesiastico Leoniano*) and all the confreres there. I am grateful also to the members and “relatives” of *IRRIKA* (the Indonesian Clergy and Religious Union in Rome). The experience of relationship with all of them has taught me a great deal about the value of friendship.

Last but not least, I would like to express my heartfelt thanks to my Dad, Mom, sisters and brothers, and also my best friends in Indonesia. Their prayers, support and help have been a great source of strength for me throughout this hopeful endeavor in the name of love.

Rome, on the memorial of St. Agnes, 2005

Y.B. Prasetyantha, M.S.F.



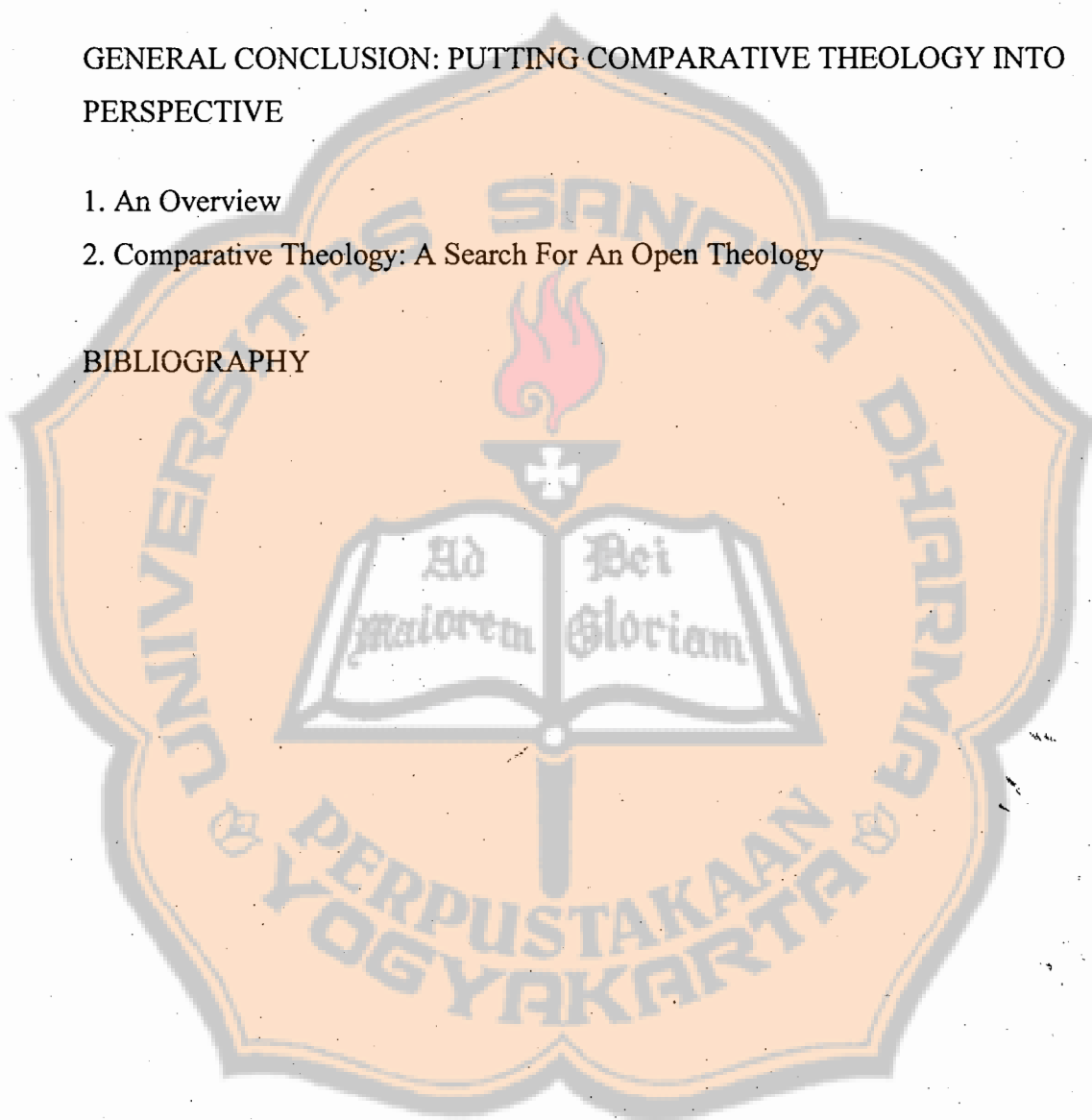
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ABBREVIATIONS

Books of the Bible

Ac	Acts of the Apostles	2 Jn	2 John
Am	Amos	Jr	Jeremiah
Ba	Baruch	Lk	Luke
1 Co	1 Corinthians	Mk	Mark
2 Co	2 Corinthians	Mt	Matthew
Col	Colossians	Nb	Numbers
Dt	Deuteronomy	Ph	Philippians
Ep	Ephesians	Ps	The Psalms
Ex	Exodus	1 P	1 Peter
Ezk	Ezekiel	2 P	2 Peter
Ga	Galatians	Qo	Qoheleth/Ecclesiastes
Gn	Genesis	Rm	Romans
Heb	Hebrews	Rv	The Revelation to John
Hos	Hosca	1 S	1 Samuel
Is	Isaiah	2 S	2 Samuel
Jb	Job	Tt	Titus
Jl	Joel	1 Tm	1 Timothy
Jn	John	Ws	Wisdom
1 Jn	1 John		

Documents of Vatican II

AG *Ad Gentes* Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity, December 7, 1965, in *AAS* 58 (1966), 947-990.

- DV* *Dei Verbum* Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, November 18, 1965, in *AAS* 58 (1966), 817-835.
- GS* *Gaudium et Spes* Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, December 7, 1965, in *AAS* 58 (1966), 1025-1120.
- LG* *Lumen Gentium* Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, November 21, 1964, in *AAS* 57 (1965), 5-71.
- NA* *Nostra Aetate* Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, October 28, 1965, in *AAS* 58 (1966), 740-744.
- PO* *Presbyterorum Ordinis* Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests, December 7, 1965, in *AAS* 58 (1966), 991-1024.
- SC* *Sacrosanctum Concilium* Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, December 4, 1963, in *AAS* 56 (1964), 97-138.
- UR* *Unitatis Redintegratio* Decree on Ecumenism, November 21, 1964, in *AAS* 57 (1965), 90-112.

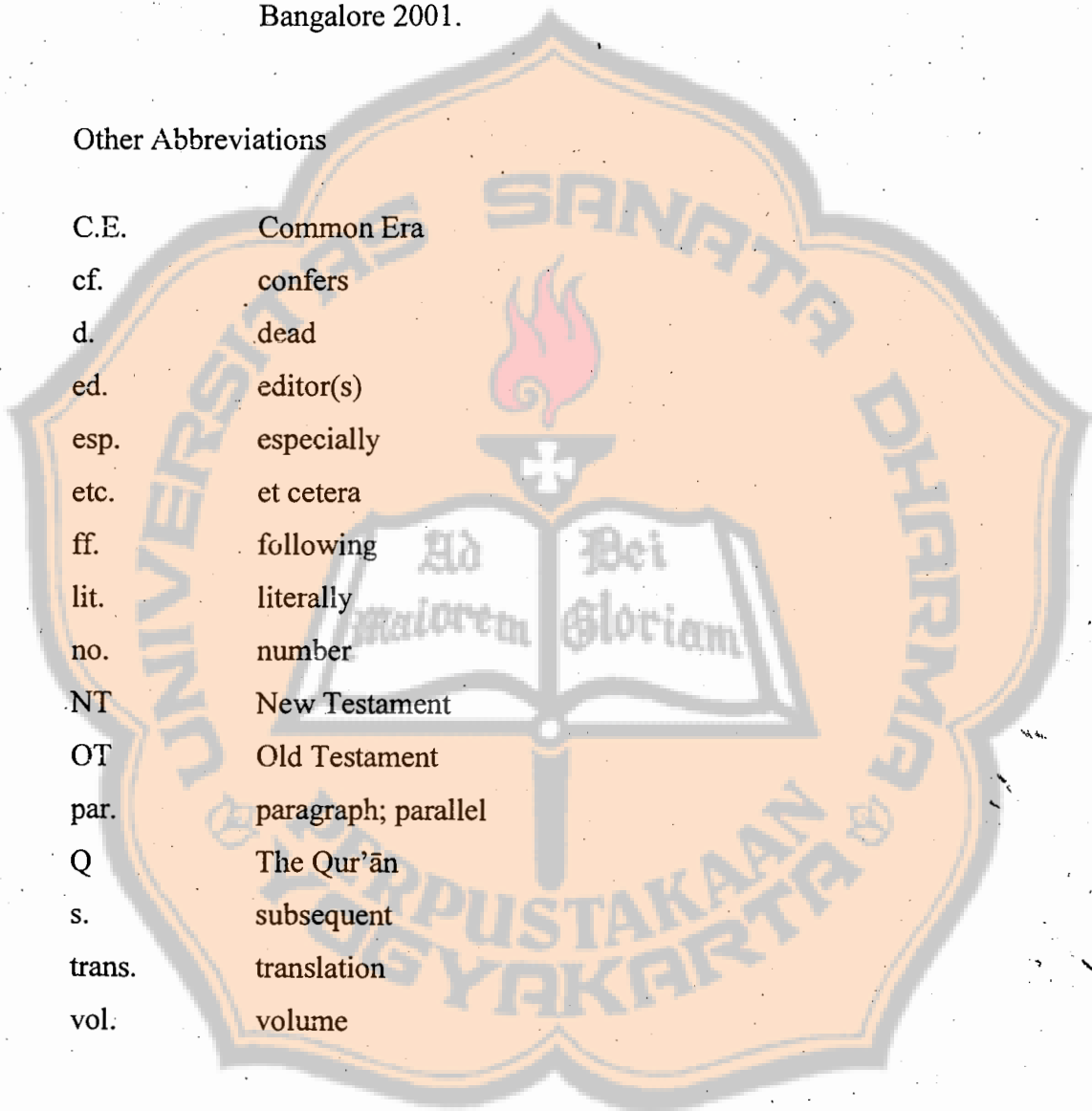
Other Documents and Sources

- AAS* *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* Commentarium officiale, Rome 1909-
- CCC* *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (English translation), London 1994.
- CL* *Christifideles Laici* Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, John Paul II, December 30, 1988, in *AAS* 81 (1989), 394-521.
- Denz. Heinrich Denzinger, *Enchiridion Symbolorum* (Collection of Church documents), edizione bilingue a cura di Peter Hünermann, Bologna 2000.
- DFT* *Dictionary of Fundamental Theology*, René Latourelle – Rino Fisichella, ed., New York 1994, 2000.²
- EQ* *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān*, 4 vols., Jane Dammen Mc Auliffe, ed., Leiden-Boston 2001 ff.
- ER* *Encyclopedia of Religion*, Mircea Eliade – al, ed., 16 vols., New York 1987.

- ES* *Ecclesiam Suam* Encyclical Letter, Paul VI, August 6, 1964, in *AAS* 56 (1964), 609-659.
- NM* *Novo Millennio Ineunte* Apostolic Letter, John Paul II, January 6, 2001, in *AAS* 93 (2001), 266-309.
- ND* J. Neuner - J. Dupuis, ed., *The Christian Faith in the Doctrinal Documents of the Catholic Church*, 7th revised and enlarged edition, Bangalore 2001.

Other Abbreviations

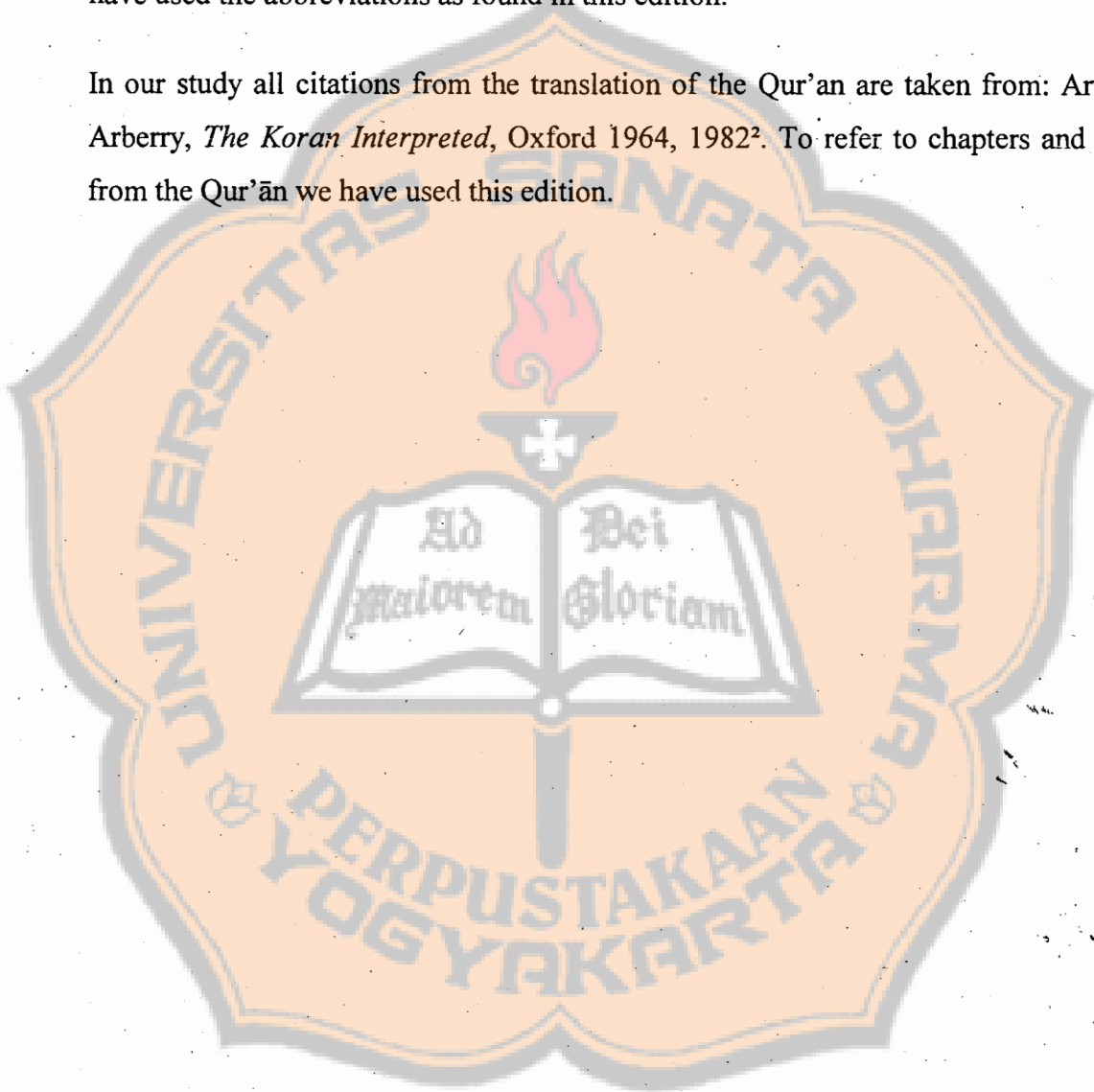
C.E.	Common Era
cf.	confers
d.	dead
ed.	editor(s)
esp.	especially
etc.	et cetera
ff.	following
lit.	literally
no.	number
NT	New Testament
OT	Old Testament
par.	paragraph; parallel
Q	The Qur'an
s.	subsequent
trans.	translation
vol.	volume



NOTE CONCERNING THE TRANSLATIONS

In our study all citations from the Bible are taken from: *The New Jerusalem Bible*, New York-London-Toronto-Sydney-Auckland 1985. To refer to passages from the Bible we have used the abbreviations as found in this edition.

In our study all citations from the translation of the Qur'an are taken from: Arthur J. Arberry, *The Koran Interpreted*, Oxford 1964, 1982². To refer to chapters and verses from the Qur'an we have used this edition.



GENERAL INTRODUCTION:
TOWARDS A COMPARATIVE THEOLOGY

1. The Background

This doctoral dissertation seeks to practice *comparative theology*. It aims at re-thinking and deepening our understanding of Christian revelation by comparing and contrasting Christian and Islamic doctrine on revelation. For Christians, God's self-revealed Word is Jesus Christ, for Muslims, the Qur'ān. The stimulus for the present work has come from three inseparable sources:

a) The Second Vatican Council is the first time an ecumenical Council has expressed an open approach to other Religions. In the *Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions (Nostra Aetate)* the Council has tried to go beyond an absolutist notion of Christianity and given the *impetus* for recognizing the spiritual and moral good, as well as the socio-cultural values found among followers of other Religions (cf. *NA* 2). Particularly toward Muslims, the Declaration urges Christians to leave behind their polemic mental outlook and to begin working for mutual understanding:

The Church also regards Muslims with esteem. They adore the one God, living and subsisting in himself, merciful and all-powerful, the Creator of heaven and earth, who has spoken to men. They take pains to submit wholeheartedly to even his inscrutable decrees, just as Abraham, with whom the faith of Islam takes pleasure in linking itself, submitted to God. [...]

Since in the course of centuries not a few quarrels and hostilities have arisen between Christians and Muslims, this sacred synod urges all to forget the past and to work sincerely for mutual understanding and to preserve as well as to

promote together for the benefit of all mankind, social justice and moral welfare, as well as peace and freedom. (NA 3)¹

The Second Vatican Council is, for us, more a point of departure than the point of arrival. In this connection, we would like to point out that it is the desire to regard and work for a profound understanding of the Islamic doctrine on revelation that we shall embark upon this comparative study.

b) Our theological context and pastoral experience have obviously contributed to the selection of the title of the thesis. The Catholic Church in Indonesia is a *communion* of small communities amidst a large majority of Muslims. On the one side, the most important theological questions are both how to understand, and how to deepen our experience of the full core of Christian faith in the context of Indonesian society that is colored by the widespread Muslim presence. Also, how can the Christian doctrine on revelation that we ourselves witness be intelligible to our Muslim neighbors. On the other side, there are some pastoral questions that have to be faced without further delay. The foremost question is how can we develop cooperation, dialogue and inter-religious friendship with Muslims. This study in comparative theology is made with the desire to understand the theological-pastoral background in order to deal with those questions.

c) The choice of the topic of the thesis is also influenced by our personal study interest. During our previous study, we were very much captivated by approaching religious plurality through a new theological method – that is an alternative to the Theology of Religions – one that attempts to explore understanding of Christian faith by re-thinking it in the light of the teachings of other religious traditions, namely doing

¹ Throughout this study all the citations from the document of the Second Vatican Council are taken from Marianne Lorraine Trouvé, FSP, ed., *The Sixteen Documents of Vatican II*, Boston 1999.

comparative theology. We believe that through cultivating inter-religious friendship and learning other religious traditions seriously, comparative theology will be a better way to deal with religious plurality. This thesis, re-thinking the Christian doctrine on revelation by comparing it to the Islamic one, is nothing other than an experimental study to continue our thesis of licentiate, entitled *Comparative Theology: A Perspective Toward A Post-Conciliar Theology in the Context of Religious Plurality* (Gregorian University, April 2002).

2. The Object of the Thesis

The basis and center of Christian theology is the revelation of God in Jesus Christ as transmitted by the Church. Its particular objective is the critical understanding of the content of Christian faith so that the lives of Christians may be fully significant in their situation and context.² In other words, the task of theology – that has been classically expressed as *fides quaerens intellectum* – is to “make use of various discourses of human thought and experience to explain the Christian message in terms that are both faithful to the inherited tradition and intelligible to contemporary human beings”³

As a part of Christian theology, this thesis is a theological reflection on the faith of the Church found in the mystery of God’s revelation in Jesus Christ. Consisting most basically in faith seeking understanding particularly in the context of religious plurality, this theological reflection attempts to deepen our understanding of the Christian doctrine of the revelation of God in Christ. Particularly, as a study in comparative

² Cf. Rino Fisichella, “Theology”, in René Latourelle and Rino Fisichella, ed., *Dictionary of Fundamental Theology*, New York 1994, 2000², 1060.

³ William Hénn, “Theological Pluralism”, in René Latourelle and Rino Fisichella, ed., *Dictionary of Fundamental Theology*, New York 1994, 2000², 783-784.

theology, this thesis begins to explore the Christian faith of God's revelation in Jesus Christ by comparing it with the faith of other religious believers. In our case, our study concerns itself with the Islamic doctrine on revelation. It is already evident that the object of study is the doctrine of revelation in Christianity and in Islam.

Christians claim that Jesus of Nazareth is the Son of God, the Word of God who became flesh, to bring salvation through his life, death, resurrection and gift of the Holy Spirit to all men and women in all times and places. Based on this concrete fact which dominates the Sacred Scriptures and from which the Church draws her life, the Second Vatican Council has set the authentic doctrine on divine revelation. In *the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (Dei Verbum)*, as Bushman observes, "revelation is seen in a personal way as God revealing himself through salvation history."⁴ Through Christ, the Word made flesh; God speaks to us as a friend and invites us to share in his own nature so as to live in fellowship with him in Christ, who is both the mediator and the fullness of all revelation (cf. *DV* 2). This revelation is the first Christian reality: "the first fact, the first mystery and the first category of Christianity."⁵ Therefore, "the claim to a truth that is given to all people with the revelation of the one God of all people, the Creator of the World, in the person and history of Jesus of Nazareth, is the starting point of Christian mission to the world and the source of its power."⁶

In order to serve, to clarify and to strengthen this truth claim, Christian theology must not forget that other religions also claim the truth of their revelation. The

⁴ Douglas G. Bushman, "Introduction", in Marianne Lorraine Trouvé, FSP, ed., *The Sixteen Documents of Vatican II*, Boston 1999, 404.

⁵ René Latourelle, *Theology of Revelation*, New York 1987, 14.

⁶ Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 2, Edinburgh 1994, xiii.

Muslims, in our case, believe that the Qur'ān is the revelation of God and the book in which his message to man is contained. It is the Word of God revealed to the Prophet Muhammad through the archangel Gabriel. It is the eloquent expression of the eternal covenant between God and man. "The Quran contains the message with the aid of which this covenant can be kept and the entelechy of human existence fulfilled. It is thus the central reality in the life of Islam."⁷

Today religious plurality may be said to characterize contemporary society as a whole. Each religion proclaims its own message of eternal truth and salvation. It cannot be denied that the question of many religions is "one of the issues that most disturb and therefore can most invigorate Christian consciousness."⁸ "Today the diversity of religions poses a challenge to Christians but also offers them an opportunity of incomparable value."⁹ On the one side, however, it would be absurd to declare all religions of equal value. On the other side, it would be naïve to presume that it is possible to do theology by ignoring the fact of religious plurality or to make a fully systematized theology of non-Christian religions before studying them seriously.

In light of the challenge and opportunity of Christians encountering their non-Christian neighbors, while avoiding on all sides *absolutism* as well as *relativism*, "plurality needs to be taken seriously and to be welcomed, not merely as a matter of fact but in principle. ... It must also be shown that commitment to one's faith is compatible with openness to that of another; that the affirmation of one's religious

⁷ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Ideals and Realities of Islam*, New Delhi 1979, 41.

⁸ Paul F. Knitter, "Key Questions for a Theology of Religions", in *Horizons* 17 (1990), 92.

⁹ James L. Fredericks, *Faith among Faiths. Christian Theology and Non-Christian Religions*, New York 1999, 104.

identity does not build on confrontation with other identities.”¹⁰ Moreover, in James Frederick’s words, “in addressing religious diversity, Christians need to be responsible to the demand their religious tradition places on them. At the same time, Christians should respond creatively to the enormous opportunity that religious diversity offers to Christians to think about their own religious tradition in new way today.”¹¹

In order to keep the tension between a commitment to Christian faith and openness to other faiths, this study will concern itself with *the content* of the Christian and the Islamic doctrine on revelation. Here we must immediately make more precise the object of our thesis. We shall compare and contrast Jesus Christ to the Qur’ān “on the grounds that they function in their respective traditions as the Word of God.”¹² This thesis does not attempt a comparative evaluation of Christian and Islamic interpretations of the Word of God. We do not pose the question of the truth of the content of the revelation nor seek for “Christian meanings” of the Islamic doctrine on revelation. On the contrary, we do not attempt to articulate an “Islamic Christology” that gains an approximation of Jesus as “Christ” in Islamic thought.

In this study, we hope to examine both doctrines of revelation in their own terms, as the respective community understands them. Our focus is on parallel doctrinal symbolism and the theological implications of comparable structural elements. In establishing parallels between Christ to the Qur’ān in the theological function of the Word of God, this thesis goes a step further than comparative religious studies. Our study will use the results of the comparison to shed light on our own doctrine of God’s

¹⁰Jacques Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology of religious Pluralism*, New York 1997, 2000², 201.

¹¹ Fredericks, *Faith among Faiths*, 8.

¹² John Rehard, “Comparative Theology: Definition and Method”, in *Religious Studies and Theology* 17:1 (1998), 12.

revelation in Jesus Christ. This is why we have entitled our thesis “The Incarnate Word of God: Christian and the Islamic Doctrine on Revelation, *A Study in Comparative Theology*.”

3. The Rationale for Comparative Theology

Comparative theology is “a theology deeply changed by its attention to the details of multiple religious and theological traditions; it is a theology that occurs truly only *after* comparison.”¹³ Comparative theology combines a careful study of other religions and a commitment to discover more about the meaning and significance of Christian faith. One may ask, “How does the Islamic claim of the Qur’ān as the Word of God, a claim that is radically different from the claim of Christianity, enable us to deepen our present understanding?”

We have yet to explain the rationale of our study in comparative theology. It is correct that to do theology *by keeping the tension* between creative fidelity to Christianity and faithful openness to other religious truths in such a manner is to place Christian self-understanding at risk. But, this manner is taken with a conviction that there is an opportunity for the enrichment of faith. “It is an act of resistance and hope. It resists the tendency to inoculate Christianity from the threat of religious pluralism ... It is an act of hope in that it looks to other religions as means to understand more fully the truths of Christian faith.”¹⁴

¹³ Francis X. Clooney, “Comparative Theology: A Review of Recent Books (1989-1995)”, in *Theological Studies* 56 (1995), 522.

¹⁴ James L. Fredericks, “A Universal Religious Experience? Comparative Theology as An alternative to A Theology of religions”, in *Horizons* 22:1 (1995), 87.

The deepest aspiration of our study is a spiritual transformation of Christian believers, a transformation that will be reached only through the conversion of Christian believers themselves. Christians always need *metanoia*, following the path of penance and renewal. It was also the intention, content and pastoral orientation of the Second Vatican Council. *The Constitution on The Sacred Liturgy (Sacrosanctum Concilium)*, the first document the Council promulgated, states that the Council's first and most general goal was "to impart an ever increasing vigor to the Christian life of the faithful" (SC 1). According to *the Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests (Presbyterorum Ordinis)*, there are three pastoral orientations of the Council: renewal of the Church, the mission in every land and dialogue with the world of today (PO 12). The Church always needs renewal and "every renewal of the Church is essentially grounded in an increase of fidelity to her own calling."¹⁵

This spiritual renewal reflects the inspiration and intention of Pope John XXIII, who convoked the Council. In his Opening Speech to the Council, October 11, 1962, the Pope stressed that it was called to "strengthen spiritual energies" so that the Church "will become greater in spiritual riches." Following him, Paul VI and John Paul II would look at the Council in no different way.

Paul VI, in his *Encyclical on the Church (Ecclesiam Suam)*, articulates renewal of the Church in a systematic and comprehensive way. Its three-point outline of the renewal process reinforces the call to holiness as "the most characteristic element in the whole magisterium of the Council, so as to say, its ultimate purpose."¹⁶ For Paul VI, renewal begins with awareness, which means, "the Church should deepen its

¹⁵ *Decree on Ecumenism (Unitatis Redintegratio)*, no. 6.

¹⁶ Pope Paul VI, *Motu Proprio Sanctitas Clarior*, March 29, 1969: AAS 61, 1969, 149.

consciousness of itself" (ES 9). "The starting point of renewal is to turn to the sources of revelation expecting to be challenged by God's Word, which comes to us anew."¹⁷ After awareness comes renewal proper. It is interesting that Paul VI puts "dialogue" as the final step of renewal. Following the example of the dialogue of salvation between God and his people in divine revelation, in dialogue the Church carries out its mission of salvation in the world.

[...] For it becomes obvious in a dialogue that there are various ways of coming to the light of faith and it is possible to make them all converge on the same goal. However divergent these ways may be, they can often serve to complete each other. They encourage us to think on different lines. They force us to go more deeply into the subject of our investigations and to find better ways of expressing ourselves. It will be a slow process of thought, but it will result in the discovery of elements of truth in the opinion of others and make us want to express our teaching with great fairness. It will be set to our credit that we expound our doctrine in such a way that others can respond to it, if they will, and assimilate it gradually [...]. (ES 83)

In the same way, Pope John Paul II sees the plan of renewal of Vatican II. In his *Apostolic Exhortation on the Vocation and the Mission of the Lay faithful in the Church and in the World (Christifideles Laici)*, John Paul II writes: "The Second Vatican Council has significantly spoken on the universal call to holiness. It is possible to say that this call to holiness is precisely the basic charge entrusted to all the sons and daughters of the Church by a Council which intended to bring a renewal of Christian life based on the gospel" (CL 16). And at the beginning of the new millennium, John Paul II, in his *Apostolic Letter Novo Millennio Ineunte*, invites the Bishops, Clergy and Lay faithful to: "put out into the deep". Citing the words: "*Duc in altum*" (Lk 5,4), the Pope invites us to remember the past with gratitude, to live the present with enthusiasm and to look forward to the future with confidence: "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday

¹⁷ Bushman, "Introduction", xvi.

and today and for ever" (Heb 13,8) but also to examine how far the Church has renewed herself in order to be able to take up her evangelizing mission with fresh enthusiasm (cf. *NM 2*) in the guidelines offered to us by the Second Vatican Council "as the great grace bestowed on the Church in the twentieth century: there we find a sure compass by which to take our bearings in the century now beginning" (*NM 57*).

John Paul II, who on January 24, 2002, went to Assisi to pray for peace together with many non-Christian leaders and believers, believes that inter-religious dialogue is a form of fidelity to the teachings of the Second Vatican Council. Therefore, he states strongly that a relationship of openness and dialogue with the followers of other religions must continue (cf. *NM 55*). Showing the place of inter-religious dialogue in the mission of the Church, John Paul II writes:

[...] Inter-religious dialogue "cannot simply replace proclamation, but remains oriented towards proclamation". This missionary duty, moreover, does not prevent us from approaching dialogue with an attitude of profound willingness to listen. We know in fact that, in the presence of the mystery of grace, infinitely full of possibilities and implications for human life and history, the Church herself will never cease putting questions, trusting in the help of the Paraclete, the Spirit of truth (cf. Jn 14,17), whose task it is to guide her "into all the truth" (Jn 16,13). This is a fundamental principle not only for the endless theological investigation of Christian truth, but also for Christian dialogue with other philosophies, cultures and religions. In the common experience of humanity, for all its contradictions, the Spirit of God, who "blows where he wills" (Jn 3,8), not infrequently reveals signs of his presence, which help Christ's followers to understand more deeply the message that they bear. Was it not with this humble and trust-filled openness that the Second Vatican Council sought to read "the signs of the times"? (*NM 56*)

"The relationship between renewal and dialogue is the key to grasping the centrality of the call to holiness in Vatican II's teaching."¹⁸ There are two elements of the spirit of *aggiornamento*, which infuse the conciliar texts. The first, implications for

¹⁸ Bushman, "Introduction", xvii.

the Church's inner life, especially focuses on holiness, which expresses self-entrusting to God. It also attempts to translate the Church's deepened self-understanding into a more adequate, practical and canonical organization of ecclesial life. Through renewal in the holiness of God's own life, Vatican II hoped to build the Church as a transparent witness to Christ. The second element regards the Church's relationship with the world. This is directly related to the enrichment of faith and holiness, as the Church's own life in Christ compels it to engage in a dynamic dialogue with the various groups of people to whom the Church is related, including non-Christian believers. The dialogue with the world is the fruit of increased spiritual transformation.¹⁹

This spiritual transformation of Christian believers deeply inspires us to do theology comparatively. In the spirit of Vatican II, implicit in doing comparative theology is a hope that Christianity's encounter with non-Christian religions can lead to a profound self-transformation as a religious community of believers. Of course, this is not a radical revolution and a change for its own sake is not praiseworthy, especially when we are dealing with matters as essential as our religious commitment. In other words, "comparative theology does not envision the abandonment of Christian belief, but rather its slow and careful transformation."²⁰ As a form of the hope of Christianity, comparative theology is a form of fidelity to Christian truths. But, this fidelity requires discerning its meaning and significance through the signs of the times. To attain the objective truth of our faith, we need humility, the disposition of being ready to defer to what is of truth in another.

¹⁹ Cf. Bushman, "Introduction", xxvi.

²⁰ Fredericks, *Faith among Faiths*, 178.

4. The Scope and the Limitation of the Study

“At many moments in the past and by many means, God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets; but in our time, the final days, he has spoken to us in the person of his Son” (Heb 1,1-2). Based on the witnesses of the Sacred Scriptures, particularly from the Letter to the Hebrews, the Church proclaims, as it is written in the Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Verbum*, that God has revealed himself fully by sending his own Son, his definitive Word; so there will be no further revelation after him (no. 4). “Yet even if Revelation is already complete, it has not been made completely explicit; it remains for Christian faith gradually to grasp its full significance over the course of centuries.”²¹

In the Christian doctrine of the revelation, the term “word of God” refers first of all to revelation. “Scripture and tradition contain this word; the preaching of the Church transmits it; the liturgy celebrates and actualizes it. But all this derives from the original word spoken *through* God.”²² In and through the person of Jesus of Nazareth, “the word became flesh” (Jn 1,14), the first intervention by which God comes out of his mystery, God addresses himself to humanity and communicates his plan for salvation. Jesus Christ is God’s supreme revelation. Therefore, “Christian faith cannot accept ‘revelations’ that claim to surpass or correct the Revelation of which Christ is the fulfillment, as is the case in certain non-Christian religions and also in certain sects which base themselves on such ‘revelations’.”²³

While there is a reference in the Qur’ān to Jesus as God’s “Word” (cf. Qur’ān 4:169), the Islamic doctrine of the revelation does not declare that Jesus is the fullness

²¹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, (English translation: London 1994), par. 66.

²² Latourelle, *Theology of Revelation*, 15.

²³ CCC par. 67.

of the revelation, as the New Testament witnesses. Radically being contrary to the Christian claim, the Muslim sees that Qur'ān desires, once and for all, to clarify, complete and universalize the intentions of all previous scriptures of Torah, Psalms and the Gospel. "According to Islam, these Scriptures fell into disuse, were misinterpreted, and were partially corrupted by translations from their original languages of Hebrew and Greek. Both Testaments are admittedly incomplete."²⁴ For Islam, The Qur'ān is the infallible Word of God. "It is in the Essence of the Book, with Us; sublime indeed, wise" (Qur'ān 43:3).

It is clear that the term "word of God" is understood differently in both Christian and Islamic doctrines. For Christians Jesus Christ, who was born, lived and died as a Jew, is *the eternal Word of God*. For Muslims the Qur'ān that was revealed in the Arabic language is *the uncreated Word of God*. In this radical difference, it is interesting that the Word of God both in the Christian doctrine and in the Islamic one seems to have *a similar function: as the doctrinal symbolism of the presence of God*. God's presence is manifest for Christians in the person of Christ, "it is in Qur'ān that Muslims directly encounter God".²⁵ Furthermore, both Jesus Christ and the Qur'ān bring the glorious message for humanity according to the respective community. It cannot be denied that the significance of the Qur'ān for Islam is the same as what Jesus is for us: *the "mediator" between God and man, the central reality in the life of the community and the source of the mission*.

It is obvious that comparing the Christian doctrine of revelation to the Islamic one leads us to profound similarities but also fundamental differences in the identity of

²⁴ Ira G. Zepp, Jr., *A Muslim Primer, Beginner's Guide to Islam*, London 1992, 64.

²⁵ William A. Graham, "Qur'ān as Spoken Word: An Islamic Contribution to the Understanding of Scripture", in Richard C. Martin, ed., *Approaches to Islam in Religious Studies*, Oxford 1985, 2001², 29.

the respective faith. One may say that there is only one plan of the self-revelation of God to the world but he/she must not forget that “in the humanities, it is the nature of human enquiry that there are disagreements about framework beliefs.”²⁶ Both Christianity and Islam have different religious roots, respective normative sources and the deepest cultural differences. This claim is not to promote a kind of relativism for Christian believers. Instead, the point is to direct Christians to a more creative appreciation for responding to the spiritual riches given by God to the nations.²⁷

If one views the growth of religious beliefs, in this way, as a historical phenomenon taking place over many generations and rooted in very primitive reactions to the world, then the diversity of religions is not very surprising at all. Cultures have very different sets of ideals, very different histories, and very different sets of values and priorities. Religion enters into culture in complex ways, but does not remain unaffected by it.²⁸

This study therefore seeks to expose the similarities and the differences of the Christian and the Islamic doctrine of the Word of God. At the end of this study, we hope to show that even such a modest comparison can open new ways to deepen the Christian faith in the Incarnate Word of God and, at the same time, to go beyond tolerance, to appreciate creatively friendships with Muslims.

In order to attain our scope, this study is restricted to the Christian and the Islamic *doctrine* of revelation, especially about the doctrinal symbolism of the Word of God and its theological implication. To compare Christ and the Qur’ān based on their role in their doctrine on revelation as the Word of God, we will use the sources from the literatures that resemble more the concepts as they are understood by the living community without going into a polemical exegesis and debate of the problems

²⁶ Keith Ward, *Religions and Revelation, A Theology of Revelation in the World's Religions*, Oxford 1944, 12.

²⁷ Cf. *Decree on the Mission Activity of the Church (Ad Gentes)* no. 11.

²⁸ Ward, *Religions and Revelation*, 14.

connected with the historical sources of the two traditions. Although we are not yet specialist in Islam, fortunately there are many Arabic works that have been translated in Indonesian, English, Italian and other important languages. In approaching this field of study, we are also fortunate to have a few Muslim friends who will correct a part of our study. Here we are aware of the fact that we “can never understand the realities of another religion such as they are understood by its followers, because this demands a surrender in faith to the line of that religion.”²⁹

We are also conscious of the limitation in comparing doctrines from two different religious and cultural traditions. In contrasting the objects of our study, at least from our view of point, we face the fact that the Christian doctrine of God’s self-manifestation in Christ is more systematic, well-defined and well-established than the Islamic doctrine on revelation. So, we attempt to seek comparable structural elements as far as possible by using concepts of theological function without forcing ourselves to make a rigid parallelism or leading to the reductive views of the Islamic doctrine reflected in a cultural and religious context significantly diverse from Christian doctrine.

When we speak about the Christian and Islamic doctrine of revelation, we would not like to investigate the entire “structure” of these doctrines; of course, they will be the wide context of our study. But as a study in comparative theology, this thesis is more modest and limited, that is to establish parallels in theological function between Christ and the Qur’ān. In addition, our study is practicing *the*

²⁹ Ary A. Roest Crolius, SJ, *Thus were They Hearing. The Word in the Experience of Revelation in Qur’ān and Hindu Scriptures*, Roma 1974, 252-253.

*phenomenological/ thematic model of comparative theology: how theologians can clarify their understanding of their traditions by observing parallels in other.*³⁰

5. The Method of Our Study

As is clear from the title of the dissertation, our study seeks to practice theology comparatively. To clarify our understanding of the Incarnate Word of God, we will observe its parallel in the Islamic doctrine on revelation. Of course, our study seeks to make use of the comparative method in the study of religions. However, this study is not a Comparative Religion nor Theology of Religions. Our comparative theology is based on Christian theological traditions. It “contributes to the ongoing evolution of Christian thought, by introducing a note, not of relativism, but of realism about the wider context in which any theology worthy of the name must be done.”³¹

As a systematic reflection, our study begins with the positive function of theology: *Auditus Fidei*. Our method incorporates the sources of theological knowledge: Scripture, the ecclesial Tradition and the Magisterium. Here historical research, exegesis and critical analysis will help to interpret Christian doctrines on revelation.

The result of critical attention to the sources of faith, then, will be reflected and actualized to respond to the demands and challenges of religious plurality. In this reflective phase of theology, *intellectus fidei*, we will make use of the comparative method. “A primary assumption is that it is possible to define some theological

³⁰ This is the model 5 of seven models of Comparative Theology outlined by John Renard in his article “Comparative Theology: Definition and Method”, in *Religious Studies and Theology* 17: 1 (1998), specially pages 6-14.

³¹ Renard, “Comparative Theology: Definition and Method”, 5.

concepts as genuinely comparable within the broader categories of theological form and function.”³² But, when we expose the Islamic doctrine on revelation, we will use the phenomenological method because we consider only the content of the Islamic doctrine, as Muslim followers believe it, without posing the question of the truth of the doctrine of the revelation. In the end of this systematic reflection, using the results of the thematic comparison, both similarities and differences, we would like creatively to formulate some theological reflections.

6. The Itinerary of the Dissertation

In accordance with the nature of the thesis, the study consists of four chapters. The first two chapters concentrate on the Christian doctrine on revelation as Christian theological tradition understands and lives it. The opening chapter of the dissertation offers a historical-theological analysis of *the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation*, one of the most significant documents to emerge from the second Vatican Council. Furnishing the solid foundation for a dogmatic discourse on revelation and the distinctive aspect of Christian revelation, *Dei Verbum* constitutes the point of departure of our study.

Based on essential aspects of Christian revelation which Vatican II considers newly and richly, the second chapter of the thesis attempts to expose the self-manifestation and self-giving of God in and through a historical economy culminating in Jesus Christ. This chapter focuses on the role of Jesus Christ as revelation. However, without intending to exhaust all aspects of Christian revelation, the exposition in this

³² Renard, “Comparative Theology: Definition and Method”, 12.

chapter attempts to place God's special personal revelation in Jesus Christ into the vast context of revelation in the history of salvation.

Having the solid basis of the heart of the Christian doctrine on revelation, it seems secure for us to enter into that "open conversation." However, as we have done in the previous chapters, the third chapter that attempts to describe the Islamic doctrine on revelation does not appear to have a comparative nature. Our open conversation intends first of all to recognize how Muslims understand the Qur'ān as revelation. Therefore, though the mode and style of presentation is our own, in this chapter we let them speak for themselves, as far as possible, on their own historical, cultural and religious context.

It is obvious from the beginning that this is a study in comparative theology which is based on the assumption that we can deepen Christian understanding of God's self manifestation in Jesus Christ by studying Islamic doctrine on revelation. In the fourth chapter we deal really with an *a posteriori* comparative theology. This last chapter of our thesis constitutes the active, creative, speculative phase of comparison. With the detailed understanding of the Islamic doctrine of the Qur'ān as the "Word of God, we attempt to re-think our understanding of Christian revelation in the context of the religious plurality today especially in its very core Christological centrality. We hope to set down the features that are specific to Christian revelation: both the identity of Christian revelation and its contribution to humanity in the pluralistic religious world.

CHAPTER I

THE POINT OF DEPARTURE:

VATICAN II ON DIVINE REVELATION

Based on the biblical and patristic notion of revelation, following in the footsteps of the Council of Trent and of the First Vatican Council, the Second Vatican Council (11 October 1962 - 8 December 1965)¹ in the *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation* sets forth the authentic doctrine on divine revelation and its transmission. The preface of the Constitution, although sober and short, is very profound. The opening phrase “*Dei Verbum religiose audiens et fidenter proclamans*”² is one of the most important formulations in the text. The phrase *Dei Verbum* that serves as the title of the Constitution expresses the theme and the whole of its content. “This phrase, the *Word of God*, refers first of all to revelation, that first intervention by which God steps out of

¹ Vatican II lasted for four sessions: 1) 11 October - 8 December 1962; 2) 29 September - 4 December 1963; 3) 14 September - 21 November 1964; 4) 14 September - 8 December 1965.

² All the Latin texts of *Dei Verbum* in this study are taken from Heinrich Denzinger, *Enchiridion Symbolorum definitionum et declarationum de rebus fidei et morum*, edizione bilingue a cura di Peter Hünermann, Bologna 2000.

his mystery and speaks to humanity to disclose to it the secrets of divine life and to communicate to it his plan of salvation.”³

Reflecting the great development, which had taken place in theology since Vatican I, *Dei Verbum* furnishes the solid foundation for a dogmatic discourse on revelation and the distinctive aspect of Christian revelation. All the essential points of revelation: its nature, aspects, dimensions and depths are conceived in a Trinitarian perspective by placing Jesus Christ, the Revealer and the Mystery revealed, as the center and the key for interpreting all the mysteries of salvation, all the Christian realities and the meaning of human beings' existence. The Dogmatic Constitution of Vatican II on divine revelation is the first time an Ecumenical Council's document has studied the basic and absolutely main categories of Christian revelation.⁴

However, it is true that Christian doctrine on revelation cannot exclusively be reduced to the doctrine of Vatican II on revelation. *Dei Verbum*, which is a point of arrival, summarized the whole theological discussion on the fundamental points of Christian revelation that had not everywhere arrived at their full degree of maturity. In other words, the text of *Dei Verbum* is the result of many compromises. Nevertheless, “the fundamental compromise which pervades it is more than a compromise, it is a synthesis of great importance. The text combines fidelity to Church tradition with an affirmation of critical scholarship, thus opening up anew the path that faith may follow into the world of today.”⁵ It is obvious that *Dei Verbum* basically provides foundations of our study of the Christian doctrine on revelation. It is the point of departure of our

³ René Latourelle, *Theology of Revelation*, New York 1987, 456.

⁴ Cf. Latourelle, *Theology of Revelation*, 484-488.

⁵ Joseph Ratzinger, “Origin and Background, Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation”, in Herbert Vorgrimler, gen. ed., *Commentary of the Documents of Vatican II*, Vol. 3, New York 1969, 164.

study. However, it is not our intention here to analyze the whole Constitution. To answer the main question of our thesis: what is Christian revelation, we shall consider only chapter I which concerns and describes revelation in itself. Before making a detailed analysis of the mystery of divine revelation, its nature and object of God's self-manifestation, we shall examine the history of the Constitution as background for our analysis.

1. *Dei Verbum* in the Making

The Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Verbum* was officially promulgated by Pope Paul VI on 18 November 1965, twenty days before the Second Vatican Council closed. *Dei Verbum* equaled in importance the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (*Lumen Gentium*) as the most fundamental documents produced by Vatican II. It is "the source document of the council's efforts" and "the hermeneutical key to all the other texts."⁶ Other documents of Vatican II will have more obvious practical effects for Christians within and outside the Church, but all depend on the faith in God's word to men, that is divine revelation, which the Council has spelled out in *Dei Verbum*.⁷ René Latourelle whose work stands as a major Catholic contribution to theology of revelation comments that "it was the first time that a council had systematically studied the nature and specific characteristic of the prime and fundamental Christian reality,"⁸ God's revelation in Jesus Christ.

⁶ René Latourelle, "Dei Verbum, Commentary", in René Latourelle and Rino Fisichella, ed., *Dictionary of Fundamental Theology*, New York 1994, 2000², 218.

⁷ Cf. R. A. F. MacKenzie, "Revelation", in Walter M. Abbott, gen. ed., *The Documents of Vatican II*, New York 1966, 107.

⁸ Latourelle, "Dei Verbum, Commentary", 218.

The idea of having a Constitution on the themes of revelation has been in the early beginnings of the preparations for the Council. According to Joseph Ratzinger, “there were three motifs that came together in the struggle for a Constitution on Revelation.”⁹ “The first was the new view of the phenomenon of tradition, which had been developing from the beginning of the 19th century.”¹⁰ “The second source of the Constitution on Revelation was what emerged ever more clearly as the theological problem of the application of critical historical methods to the interpretation of Scripture.”¹¹ “The third motivating element was the most positive one: namely, the biblical movement that has grown stronger and stronger since the turn of the century and has already brought about a fundamentally new attitude to Scripture in large areas of Catholic Christendom, giving rise to a new familiarity with it and an ever-increasing tendency, both in theology and piety, to go back to it.”¹²

Dei Verbum itself is the result of the work of long controversial discussions. Its history had begun with the pre-conciliar consultation in 1959. Having announced his intention on 25 January 1959, of calling a council, John XXIII appointed the following 17 May, a preparatory commission headed by Cardinal Domenico Tardini, the secretary of state. This commission had the task to establish a contact with the Catholic episcopates with a view to seeking advice and suggestions; to collate the proposals made by the various departments of the Roma curia; and to set down guidelines for issues to be discussed at the Council after listening to the opinions of the theological and canonical faculties of Catholic universities. From this worldwide consultation,

⁹ Ratzinger, “Origin and Background”, 155.

¹⁰ Ratzinger, “Origin and Background”, 155.

¹¹ Ratzinger, “Origin and Background”, 157.

¹² Ratzinger, “Origin and Background”, 158.

there emerged some major issues that were proposed for discussion at the Council: the problem of the nature of revelation, ways of transmitting revelation, and the relationship between the Church's magisterium and God's word.¹³

In the preparatory Theological Commission, with Cardinal Ottaviani as president and S. Tromp, S.J., as secretary, the idea of including the problems of revelation in the schema on the Church was considered, but immediately dropped. Thus there first emerged a *Schema compendiosum Constitutionis de fontibus Revelationis*, developed in 13 points, which was sent to members of the Theological Commission but was not fundamentally amended. A special sub-commission was formed with the job of drawing up a schema on the sources of revelation. The text of the schema was finished and after further revisions on 22 June 1962, it was sent to the Central Commission to be examined. The result of all this work was a *Schema Constitutionis dogmaticae de fontibus Revelationis* in five chapters, which was finally approved by John XXIII on July 1962 and sent out to members of the Council prior to discussion within the Council itself.¹⁴

The *Schema De Fontibus Revelationis* composed of five chapters: 1) The Twofold Source of Revelation; 2) Inspiration, Inerrancy, Literary Genre; 3) Old Testament; 4) New Testament; 5) Sacred Scripture in the Church. When the Council debated this first schema on 14 November 1962, it met with severe criticism. The reasons that were pointing to a denial of the schema were determined in the first chapter. It was concerned with the significance of replacing "*partim - partim*" by "*et*" of the relationship between Scripture and Tradition. The equivocal use of the phrase

¹³ Cf. Rino Fisichella, "*Dei Verbum, History*", in René Latourelle and Rino Fisichella, ed., *Dictionary of Fundamental Theology*, New York 1994, 2000², 215.

¹⁴ Cf. Fisichella, "*Dei Verbum, History*", 215.

“double source” was pointed out that such formulation had doctrinal consequences that saw the Scripture and Tradition as independent sources. A good number of the Fathers who declared the schema to be unacceptable as such demanded that it be replaced by a more concise, more pastoral and more ecumenical text.¹⁵

A vote was taken on 20 November, to decide whether the schema should be returned to the commission to be rewritten. The result was affirmative by 60%; but according to the regulations set up beforehand, a two-thirds majority was required for this somewhat drastic step. It was at this point that Pope John XXIII made his famous intervention: on his authority, the document was remitted. He decided to have the schema revised by a special commission that was named on 25 November 1962. It was called the “Mixed Commission” because it was made up of members of both the Doctrinal Commission and the Secretariat for the Unity of Christians together with consultors and cardinals of the pope’s choosing. Cardinal Ottaviani and Bea were appointed chairmen and Tromp and Willebrands secretaries. “Since that day, the problem of the material content of Scripture and Tradition remains an open problem, one which theologians and exegetes can continue to explore in depth. The Council, for its part, chose to explore a different route, stressing rather the organic unity of Scripture and Tradition, as well as the intimate relationship between Scripture, Tradition and the Church.”¹⁶

¹⁵ They had been probably influenced by the three other schemas which were rivals to the official document that had been privately circulated. “The first had been drawn up by the Secretariat for the Unity of Christians with decisive contributions from Stakemeier and Feiner; the second, *De Revelatione Dei et Hominis in Jesu Christo Facta*, had been prepared at great speed and was submitted by Karl Rahner with the support of the Episcopal conferences of Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, and the Netherlands; the third was a paper produced by Yves Congar, entitled *De Traditione et Scriptura*.” (Fisichella, “*Dei Verbum*, History”, 215-216.)

¹⁶ Latourelle, *Theology of Revelation*, 454.

To be able to proceed quickly, the commission was divided into five sub-commissions, each dealing with one of the schema's five chapters that had to be reworked. In the session between 25 November and 7 December 1962, there was a general agreement of principle on the following matters: 1) the basic structure of the new document particularly as the title had been changed to *De Divina Revelatione*; 2) the drafting of an "introduction" aiming to set out the doctrine on revelation; 3) the title of the first chapter, *De Duplice Fonte Revelationis*, being replaced by *De Verbo Dei Revelato*.¹⁷ "The treatment in general became less philosophical, more biblical and historical. More stress was laid on modern methods of interpretation of Scripture, in accordance with the forward-looking doctrine of the encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritu* of 1943."¹⁸

The mixed commission completed its work in March 1963 and the Fathers were informed of the results in May of the same year, but in the course of the second session of the Council there was complete silence regarding the schema on revelation. Instead, it underwent further revision in a sub-commission set up within the doctrinal commission on 7 March 1964.¹⁹ After many revisions, the commission and sub-commission finally produced a new text that now had an introduction, which sought to give the schema a pastoral emphasis, and six chapters: 1) *De Ipsa Revelatione*; 2) *De Divinae Revelationis Transmissione*; 3) *De Sacrae Scripturae Divina Inspiratione et*

¹⁷ Cf. Fisichella, "*Dei Verbum*, History", 216.

¹⁸ MacKenzie, "Revelation", 107-108.

¹⁹ "This sub-commission was consisted of seven fathers (Charue, Florit, Barbado, Pelletier, van Dodewaard, Heuschen, and Butler) and nineteen experts (Betti, Castellino, Cerfaux, Colombo, Congar, Gagnebet, Garofalo, Grillmeier, Kerrigan, Moeller, Prignon, Rahner, Ramirez, Rigaux, Schauf, Semmelroth, Smulders, and Turrado); Ratzinger and van den Eynde were later added to the group of experts. Charue was appointed chairman and Betti secretary." (Fisichella, "*Dei Verbum*, History", 217.)

Interpretatione; 4) *De Vetere Testamento*; 5) *De Novo Testamento*; 6) *De Sacra Scriptura et Vita Ecclesiae*.

This new schema was discussed in the course of the third session of the Council. "As a whole, the text pleased the Fathers by its balance, its biblical flavor, its Christocentric character, the large treatise on Tradition, and finally by the freedom granted to theologians in the investigation of disputed questions."²⁰ Even though the Council approved the schema almost unanimously, there were also many amendments presented by the Council Fathers. Thus the Theological Commission or the appropriate sub-commission began immediately on the revision of the text based on the observations made by the Fathers, particularly on Chapter I and II. The revised text was sent out to the Fathers on 20 November 1964, but was only put to the vote in the Plenary Assembly of the Council in the last session.

In the fourth session of the Council, there were some votes that were taken on the text. The modifications of detail suggested by the Fathers and requested by Pope Paul VI, without changing the substance of the text, improved it considerably in its expression. After having been voted upon chapter by chapter on 29 October 1965, the results were as follows: 2081 *placet* (approved), 27 *non placet* (not approved) and 7 votes were invalid; in the eighth public session of the Council on 18 November 1965, the decisive vote was taken with the following result: 2350 total votes, 2344 *placet*, 6 *non placet*. On the same day, Pope Paul VI solemnly promulgated the Constitution *Dei Verbum* which deals in 6 chapters: 1) with revelation itself; 2) with its transmission in Tradition; 3) with the inspiration and interpretation of Holy Scripture; 4) with revelation as attested by the Old Testament; 5) with revelation in Jesus Christ as the

²⁰ Latourelle, *Theology of Revelation*, 454.

New Testament proclaims and applies this; 6) with Holy Scripture in the life of the Church. With the signatures of the pope and of all the members present the document became a Dogmatic Constitution.

2. The Mystery of Divine Revelation

“One of the most important events in the struggle over the Constitution on Revelation was undoubtedly ... the return to what actually happens in the positive sources, before it was crystallized into doctrine, when God “reveals” himself, and thus a re-appraisal of the whole nature and basis of Christian existence.”²¹ To describe what Christian faith means when it speaks of revelation, *Dei Verbum* went back to the comprehensive reality of the deeds and words of God, that is the mystery of God’s self-revelation that culminates in and through Jesus Christ. That is the fact which dominates both the two Testaments and to which the Church responds in faith. “We announce to you the eternal life which dwelt with the Father and was made visible to us (cf. 1 Jn 1,2)” (*DV* 1). “In his goodness and wisdom God chose to reveal himself and to make known to us the hidden purpose of his will (cf. Ep 1,9) by which through Christ, the Word made flesh, man might in the Holy Spirit have access to the Father and come to share in the divine nature (cf. Ep 2,18; 2 Pt 1,4)” (*DV* 2).²²

Article 2 of the Constitution seems to state first of all the fact of revelation, that is the self-manifestation and self-communication of God, the Absolute Mystery, in the economy of salvation. “Instead of the legalistic view that sees revelation largely as the

²¹ Ratzinger, “Origin and Background”, 170.

²² “Placuit Deo in sua bonitate et sapientia seipsum revelare et notum facere sacramentum voluntatis suae (cf. Ep 1,9), quo homines per Christum, Verbum carnem factum, in Spiritu Sancto accessum habent ad Patrem et divinae naturae consortes efficiuntur (cf. Ep 2,18; 2 Pt 1,4)” (Denz. 4202).

issuing of divine decrees, we have a sacramental view, which see law and grace, word and deed, message and sign, the person and his utterance within one comprehensive unity of mystery.”²³ Here Vatican II cites the Pauline term of *sacramentum* (“μυστήριον” (mysterium) in the Greek text). “The theme of *mystery* and *Gospel* is the principal theme St. Paul uses to reach to the very heart of the idea of revelation.”²⁴ If in the theology of St. Paul the idea of mystery refers to the divine plan of salvation as manifested and realized through Jesus Christ, in the Epistle of the Ephesians this divine plan of salvation is enlarged upon in a universal and cosmic dimension. “He has let us know the mystery of his purpose, according to his good pleasure which he determined beforehand in Christ, ... that he would bring everything together under Christ, as head, everything in the heavens and everything on earth” (Ep 1,9-10). Here the idea of mystery includes “the universality of salvation, ... the unity of mankind in the one Christ, the cosmic dimension of what is Christian, the relation of revelation to history, and finally its christological center. For the mystery of God is ultimately nothing other than Christ itself.”²⁵

“Having affirmed the fact of revelation, the Constitution *Dei Verbum* stated that it was essentially a divine initiative and a pure act of grace like all the rest of the work of salvation.”²⁶ Revelation must be called an effect of God’s good will. It is free and gratuitous initiative on the part of God and not the result of any constraint or previous request on the part of man. It is a work of love and proceeds from the goodness and

²³ Ratzinger, “Origin and Background”, 171.

²⁴ Latourelle, *Theology of Revelation*, 59.

²⁵ Ratzinger, “Origin and Background”, 171.

²⁶ Latourelle, “*Dei Verbum*, Commentary”, 219.

wisdom of God. It is grace.²⁷ Concretely, if the mystery of divine revelation is Christ, thus the Christ-event is the free gift of God, that is “the self-offering of God to the world in history.”²⁸

Here revelation is seen basically as dialogue between God and man. Stepping out from his invisible and hidden mystery (Col 1,15; 1Tim 1,17), God who is love (1 Jn 4,8) speaks to men as friends (cf. Ex 33,11; Jn 15,14-15), lives among them (cf. Bar 3,38) and invites them into fellowship with himself. There is a basic structure of communication. “Revelation is communication between God, who reaches out from his own mystery, and humankind, which is saved and transformed in the dialogue of love.”²⁹ This self-communication of God, whose climax came with Jesus Christ and the events of his life, death, and resurrection, is not self-indulgent activity, but aims at our salvation.

“If one compares the text of Article 2 with what was said at Vatican I (Denz. 3004 f.), it becomes clear how much Catholic theology has benefited ... from the theology of Karl Barth,³⁰ not only in the emphasis to the personal and theocentric starting point, but also on the basis of his Trinitarian understanding of revelation. For Karl Barth (1886-1968), “the Trinity stands at the beginning of theology and undergirds every doctrine of Christian faith.”³¹ All and each of the mysteries of our faith including the mystery of divine revelation have sense only with the point of departure in the Trinity. *Dei Verbum* speaks of revelation by first having a reference to

²⁷ Cf. Latourelle, *Theology of Revelation*, 458.

²⁸ John O'Donnell, “Trinity and Revelation”, in René Latourelle and Rino Fisichella, ed., *Dictionary of Fundamental Theology*, New York 1994, 2000², 1131.

²⁹ M. Cristina Carnicella, “Communication”, in René Latourelle and Rino Fisichella, ed., *Dictionary of Fundamental Theology*, New York 1994, 2000², 187.

³⁰ Ratzinger, “Origin and Background”, 170.

³¹ O'Donnell, “Trinity and Revelation”, 1129.

God himself in the Trinitarian concept. "The movement of revelation proceeds from God (the Father), comes to us through Christ, and admits us to the fellowship of God in the Holy Spirit."³² Stressing the Trinitarian perspective, explicitly in Article 2 but also in the whole Constitution, Vatican II gives the most complete, the richest, and the most suggestive expression of Christian revelation. The mystery of divine revelation is not an "isolated mystery" but is a "far-reaching economy" which "arises from the Father's initiative, enters into history and has its culmination in Jesus Christ, who is the fullness of revelation; it then continues on, under the action of the Holy Spirit, in the ecclesial community, through tradition and Scripture and under the sign of expectation of the eschatological consummation."³³

The merit of Vatican II is to make in close relationship three principal mysteries of Christianity: Trinity, Incarnation, and Grace. Moreover, although the text *Dei Verbum* has been composed in a definitely Christocentric view, it presents the doctrine on revelation in which Christ is described as the mediator of revelation and the fullness of revelation itself without overlooking the theocentric and pneumatological dimensions.

If, however, one wishes to consider it as Christocentric, then this should, at any rate, be understood wholly in the original Pauline sense: Christ stands in the center as the mediator, his "place" is characterized by the mediating word *per*; he enfolds us in the dimension of the Spirit, and our being in him means at the same time that we have been led to the Father. Thus, on the one hand, the pneumatological dimension is not overlooked here, this emerging naturally from a Christology of the resurrection as a correction to a one-sided Christology of Incarnation, and at the same time the theocentric position is given appropriate emphasis, towards which the Christocentric view, properly understood, is necessarily orientated.³⁴

³² Ratzinger, "Origin and Background", 172.

³³ René Latourelle, "Revelation", in René Latourelle and Rino Fisichella, ed., *Dictionary of Fundamental Theology*, New York 1994, 2000², 934.

³⁴ Ratzinger, "Origin and Background", 172.

3. The Object and Nature of Divine Revelation

Giving appropriate emphasis to the theocentric character, it is clear that *Dei Verbum* is in accordance with the emphasis of Vatican I that sees that the subject and source of revelation is God himself. Nevertheless, instead of speaking of the abstract values “wisdom and goodness” and “the eternal decrees of his will”, *Dei Verbum* uses a concrete and personal term. It is true that through revelation God communicated a body of truths, but for Vatican II, if God chooses to reveal himself, it doesn't mean other than God himself gives himself. Thus the object of revelation is God himself.

Furthermore, instead of the simple “to reveal” of Vatican I, *Dei Verbum* uses two verbs: “to manifest” and “to communicate”. In Article 6 Vatican II says: “Through divine revelation, God chose to show forth and communicate himself.” It is obvious that the Council's intention is “to personalize revelation”³⁵, that is both a self-manifestation and a self-giving of God in person. “Before he makes something known, namely, his salvific design, God himself manifests himself.”³⁶

Revelation is the active and constitutive manifestation of God, which is concretely realized by means of history and the Incarnation from the beginning. According to Vatican II, the manifestation and self-giving of God begins in the creation of the world. God “from the start manifested himself to our first parents” (*DV* 3). “The created universe constitutes a first presence and a first manifestation of God: it

³⁵ Latourelle, “Revelation”, 219.

³⁶ Latourelle, “Revelation”, 219.

is a permanent testimony of himself to humanity inscribed in the universe he has created (Rm 1,19-20).”³⁷

Although it affirms the manifestation on the part of God by the testimony of the created world, addressed to all men, the Council, however, does not call it a natural revelation thus differing it from a supernatural one like Vatican I did (cf. Denz. 3004). The Council simply states the fact of the self-testimony of God in creation without pausing to make it clear but directly beginning with a summary that describes the historical and personal revelation. The Council just seems to declare that the very God who through the Word creates all things (cf. Jn 1,3) is the same God who manifests himself in human history.³⁸ Moreover, Vatican II’s affirmation of the self-testimony of God in creation has to be placed in a Christological context, which emphasizes the unity of divine action (DV 6): from the beginning “creation was already oriented towards salvation.”³⁹

To define the object of revelation, Vatican II begins with the personal revelation of God and salvation in Jesus Christ. This personal revelation in Jesus Christ is the culmination of the historical revelation to the patriarchs that is separated from the creation and treated as a new action. The Council does not call the self-testimony of God in creation “revelation”. Vatican II uses the technical term “revelation” in the strict sense for the historical revelation. “After the fall of our first parents, God granted the hope of a salvation to come: this light of salvation, cited by Genesis, is the proto-

³⁷ Latourelle, *Theology of Revelation*, 464.

³⁸ Cf. Latourelle, *Theology of Revelation*, 464.

³⁹ Ratzinger, “Origin and Background”, 173.

gospel. With the promise, whose salvific implications are universal, the history of salvation is begun.”⁴⁰

“At the time he had appointed, God called Abraham in order to make of him a great nation (cf. Gn 12,2)” (DV 3). After the patriarchal age God instructed this people through Moses and the prophets, He taught them to recognize him, the one living and true God, as a Father who takes care of his children and as a just judge, and to wait for the Savior promised by him (cf. DV 3; 14). “The essential revelation of the Old Testament is both promise and instruction. Over the centuries, God formed his people in this way and traced out the paths of the Gospel. Israel knew God, not abstractly, but by experiencing the way of God in history.”⁴¹

The Council gives the appropriate emphasis to the importance of the Old Testament but at once orientates it towards its fullness in Jesus Christ. “The principal purpose to which the plan of the Old Covenant was directed was to prepare for the coming of Christ, the Redeemer of all and of the messianic kingdom” (DV 15). Thus, after dealing with the preparation of the Gospel as the historical context, the Council immediately returns to the theme of Christ as Mediator and fullness of revelation. In article 4 the Council cites the text of the Epistle to the Hebrews (1,1-2) and precisely understands it in the historical perspective. Jesus Christ is the peak of revelation.

The quotation from Heb 1 shows, on the one hand, the continuity of divine history with men: the word of God in Christ continues his words through the fathers and the prophets; but at the same time it reveals what is truly new in the New Testament: instead of words, we have *the* Word. Christ no longer speaks merely of God, but he is himself the speech of God; this man is himself and as an entity the Word of God that has made himself one of us.”⁴²

⁴⁰ Latourelle, “*Dei Verbum: Commentary*”, 221.

⁴¹ Latourelle, “*Dei Verbum: Commentary*”, 222.

⁴² Ratzinger, “Origin and Background”, 175.

The self-manifestation and self-communication of God in Jesus Christ allows the profound truth about God. In Christ, “through his words and deeds, his signs and wonders, but especially through his death and glorious resurrection from the dead and final sending of the Spirit of truth” (DV 4), we learn who God is: i.e., the Father who creates us and loves us as his children; the Son and Word who invites us to become adoptive sons and daughters of our Father; and the Holy Spirit who gives us a new life as children of God. The object of revelation is God himself and his salvific plan through Christ, the Word made flesh, and in the Holy Spirit. “Revelation is essentially a revelation of persons: the revelation of the mystery of the life of three divine persons, the revelation of the mystery of the person of Christ, and the revelation of our life as adoptive children of the Father.”⁴³

After having defined the object of revelation, the Constitution *Dei Verbum* outlines its nature. The Constitution retains the “analogy of language”⁴⁴ or “analogy of word”⁴⁵ present throughout the Old and New Testaments, in the whole theological tradition, and in the documents of the magisterium. “Through this revelation, therefore, the invisible God (cf. Col 1,15; 1Tim 1,17) out of the abundance of his love speaks to men as friend (cf. Ex 33,11; Jn 15,14-15) and lives among them (cf. Bar 3,38), so that he may invite and take them into fellowship with himself” (DV 2).⁴⁶ Our God is the God who has spoken to humanity: he speaks to Abraham, to Moses, to the prophets,

⁴³ Latourelle, “*Dei Verbum*, Commentary”, 219.

⁴⁴ Latourelle, “*Dei Verbum*, Commentary”, 219.

⁴⁵ Latourelle, *Theology of Revelation*, 459.

⁴⁶ “Hac itaque revelatione Deus invisibilis (cf. Col 1,15; 1 Tim 1,17) ex abundantia caritatis suae homines tanquam amicos alloquitur (cf. Ex 33,11; Io 15,14s) et cum eis conversatur (cf. Bar 3,38), ut eos ad societatem Secum invitet in eamque suscipiat” (Denz. 4202).

and through them, he speaks to his people. Our God is the God who speaks to the apostles and to us through Jesus Christ, his beloved Son.⁴⁷

Christian revelation, according to Vatican II, is basically a dialogue, as is indicated in the words *alloquitur* and *conversatur*. It is as a *colloquium inter Deum et hominem* (DV 25). God enters into communication with man in order to invite him into fellowship with himself. Here the quotation from Jn 15,14-15: "You are my friends, ... I shall no longer call you servants, ... I call you friends, because I have made known to you everything I have learnt from my Father" is given to stress this nature of revelation. If God, out of the abundance of his love, enters into dialogue with man, his creature, this can only be in order to invite him to a communion of divine life and with God to "share in the divine nature" (DV 2). That is the intention of revelation. It proceeds from love, develops in friendship, pursues a work of love and seeks to introduce man into the society of love that is the Trinity.⁴⁸ "The Council increases the number of scriptural quotations and references so that we understand revelation as the manifestation of God's agapē."⁴⁹

The plan of revelation, "God is with us to free us from the darkness of sin and death and to raise us up to life eternal" (DV 4), is realized "by deeds and words having an inner unity" (DV 2). Deeds (*gesta*) and words (*verba*), events and interpretation, works and words, "form an organic and indissociable whole; it is an economy that reaches its fullness in Christ, the Word made flesh."⁵⁰ By offering a new view of the

⁴⁷ Cf. Latourelle, *Theology of Revelation*, 459.

⁴⁸ Cf. Latourelle, *Theology of Revelation*, 460.

⁴⁹ Latourelle, "Dei Verbum, Commentary", 220.

⁵⁰ "It should also be noted that *gesta* has a more personalist resonance than *facta*. It is also has its equivalent in the related phrase *opera et verba*, works and words, which always emanate from a personal center (DV 2 and 4). These gestures or indissociable works of God are, e.g., in the OT, the exodus, the covenant, the founding of the royal line, the exile and captivity, and the restoration. In the NT, they are

relation between the deed and the word in the structure of revelation, Vatican II would like to “overcome neo-scholastic intellectualism, for which revelation chiefly meant a store of mysterious supernatural teachings, which automatically reduces faith very much to an acceptance of these supernatural insights.”⁵¹

The Council then explains how deeds and words are reciprocally reliant and assist one another. On the one hand, “the deeds wrought by God in the history of salvation manifest and confirm the teaching and realities signified by the words” (*DV* 2); on the other hand, “the words proclaim the deeds and clarify the mystery contained in them” (*DV* 2). However it must be noted “the union in question here is a union of *nature*, not always a union in *time*” and “the proportion between word and work can be variable.”⁵² By stating first of all that revelation is effected by a close union of deeds and words, Vatican II “expresses the all-encompassing nature of revelation”⁵³ in its concrete, active and constitutive realization.

Furthermore, “by insisting on the works and words as the constitutive elements of revelation and upon their intimate union, the Council emphasizes the *historical* and *sacramental* character of revelation: events explained by the word of the prophets, Christ, and the apostles.”⁵⁴ To communicate himself and to invite man to a communion of Trinitarian Love, God steps out of his mystery, takes a hand in human history and gives the interpretation and mutual support that exists between word and work. It is

the actions of the life of Christ, especially his preaching, miracles, examples, and passion. The words are the words of Moses and the prophets who interpret the divine gesture in history. They are also the words of Christ himself stating the meaning of his actions. Finally, they are the words of the apostles, witnesses, and authorized interpreters of the life of Christ.” (Latourelle, “*Dei Verbum*, Commentary”, 220).

⁵¹ Ratzinger, “Origin and Background”, 172.

⁵² Latourelle, *Theology of Revelation*, 462.

⁵³ Latourelle, “*Dei Verbum*, Commentary”, 220

⁵⁴ Latourelle, *Theology of Revelation*, 462.

through this self-manifestation and self-giving that “the deepest truth about God and the salvation of man shines out for our sake in Christ” (*DV* 2). He is at once Mediator and Fullness of revelation. He is the eternal Word of God, the only Son of the Father, and the Epiphany of the Father (*DV* 4). Christ is himself the sign and content of Christian revelation.

It is clear that according to Vatican II, Jesus Christ is both the beginning and the last word of revelation. Nevertheless, emphasizing the definitive character of the revelation that has taken place in Christ⁵⁵, the Council does not speak about the “closeness” of the revelation but understands it in an eschatological context, “before the glorious manifestation of our Lord Jesus Christ” (*DV* 4). There is “an increasingly profound assimilation and an increasingly rich and adequate formulation of the mystery that has been revealed.”⁵⁶

4. Conclusion

By considering the doctrine of Vatican II on divine revelation, finally we may answer the main question of this chapter: what is Christian revelation. The revelation described by Vatican II is the initiative of the living God and a manifestation of his personal love in human history to open up to human beings the secret of his intimate life in order to invite them into the reciprocal love of Trinity. Since the beginning God has already invited man to know his mystery. Considering it in the Christocentric perspective, creation is understood in the fundamental and universal context of revelation. However,

⁵⁵ “The Christian dispensation, therefore, as the new and definitive covenant, will never pass away and we now await no further new public revelation before the glorious manifestation of our Lord Jesus Christ (cf. 1 Tm 6,14 and Ti 2,13)” (*Dei Verbum* 4).

⁵⁶ Latourelle, “*Dei Verbum*, Commentary”, 223.

the God of Christian revelation is not simply a God of creation but a God who comes and intervenes, acts and saves in human history. The economy of revelation is not other than the actual attitude, words and deeds; God desires to enter into personal contact with human beings to which the Old Testament and New Testament witness. God's self-manifestation and self-communication in history is both the promise that began with the Abraham's call and fulfillment in Jesus Christ. Stressing the historicity of Christian revelation, immediately this implies the most specific feature of Christian revelation; God's self-manifestation and self-giving comes through the incarnation of the Son of God in the midst of humanity. Christ not only brings revelation but he is the revelation of God himself in person, the word made flesh.

Jesus Christ is both the revealing mystery and the revealed mystery, both the mediator and the fullness of revelation (*DV* 2 and 4). The Christian concept of revelation has come to refer more radically to the mystery of the gift of God's own self to the world in and through Jesus Christ. In other words, the content of Christian revelation is fundamentally the very reality of divine self and his plan of salvation with Christ himself as the center. So, to speak about Christian revelation, there is not other way but examining Jesus Christ as revelation.

CHAPTER II

CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE ON REVELATION:

JESUS CHRIST AS REVELATION

The mystery of God's self-manifestation and self-communication, as the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation *Dei Verbum* states clearly and definitively, has its fullness and completion in Jesus Christ. For Christians, therefore, the mystery of God's self-revelation is non other than the mystery of Christ because "all that God wanted to tell humanity about the mystery of God and the mystery of the human person has been said completely in the total and definitive word that is the Word of God."¹ The Christ-event is both the culmination and key of the interpretation of the gift of God's own self to the world that stretches from the beginning of the world to the end. From the perspective of biblical theology, if God's self-giving comes in the form of promise, thus the incarnation of the Word of God is its fulfillment. Christ is both the revealing mystery and the revealed mystery (*DV* 2 and 4).

¹ René Latourelle, "Revelation", in René Latourelle and Rino Fisichella, ed., *Dictionary of Fundamental Theology*, New York 1994, 2000², 936.

When focusing on Jesus Christ as the Word of God, however, one should not ignore the other divine activities through which God reveals himself from creation to the end. The Christ-event, which plays an utterly unique and central role, is one of the total pictures of God's action in history. From the perspective of the narrative interpretation, Jesus Christ as bearer of revelation is a part of "all integral parts of the Great Narrative of disclosure" and one of "the phases in the unfolding story of revelation."² In other words, to pick up any one picture or part or phase, including the Christ-event, as the essence of revelation is to misunderstand the total mystery of God's self-giving to the world. Thus, to understand Christian revelation one should keep in mind the whole mystery of the gift of God's own self to the world.

In this chapter we shall examine the unqualified centrality of Christ in Christian revelation. In order to explain the role of Jesus Christ as revelation correctly and precisely, there is no other way than to place God's special personal revelation in Jesus Christ into *the great design of revelation in the history of salvation*. Before observing revelation as fulfillment, in the first place we should deal with revelation as promise that reaches its fulfillment in the categorical event of Jesus Christ. Only after describing the objective events in the history of the world in which God manifests himself, we may speak about the historical event *par excellence* in which God reveals himself in Jesus Christ. Yet, we shall first of all observe the cosmos as the fundamental context of revelation. The cosmos itself in which the Word is created and kept in existence by God is "the more encompassing context of God's self-revelation."³

² Gabriel Fackre, *The Doctrine of Revelation, A Narrative Interpretation*, Edinburgh 1997, 8.

³ John F. Haught, *Mystery and Promise, A Theology of Revelation*, Minnesota 1993, 147.

1. Cosmos as the Fundamental Context of Revelation

“God, who through the Word creates all things (cf. Jn 1,3) and keeps them in existence, gives men an enduring witness to himself in created realities (cf. Rm 1,19-20)” (DV 2).

The Christian doctrine teaches that God created the world. The created world is in essence good. The significance of this teaching lies in the fact that God is the Creator of the world and not a part of the world. Just the opposite, “insofar as the world, established by God in his freedom, does indeed have its origin in him, but not in the way in which God possesses himself, it is not God.”⁴ Nevertheless, “the world is and remains only because of the ongoing presence of divine creative activity.”⁵

Furthermore, Christian faith believes that God through the Word creates the cosmos. A particularly influential illustration of this sort of reflection is found in the great hymn of Colossians:

He is the image of the unseen God, the first-born of all creation, for in him were created all things in heaven and on earth: everything visible and everything invisible, thrones, ruling forces, sovereignties, powers – all things were created through him and for him. He exists before all things and in him all things hold together, and he is the Head of the Body, that is, the Church. He is the beginning, the first-born from the dead, so that he should be supreme in every way; because God wanted all fullness to be found in him and through him to reconcile all things to him, everything in heaven and everything on earth, by making peace through his death on the cross (Col 1,15-20).

Paul identifies the God of creation with the God of Christian faith who has raised Jesus from the dead. Moreover, based on this text. Christian faith affirms that even “in the beginning” there was the Word of God who uncovers the importance not only of personal lives and of history, but also of the whole cosmos. “At no time in its existence,

⁴ Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith, An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*, New York 2000, 80.

⁵ Zachary Hayes, *The Gift of Being, A Theology of Creation*, Minnesota 2001, 50.

then, has the universe as known by faith been devoid of meaning. Though the Word breaks out into the daylight of consciousness only with the birth of persons and human history, faith allows us to discern a great promise even in the very earliest moments of the cosmic adventure.”⁶

From modern science we know that the events of our lives take place within the story of a cosmos that is much vaster than our earthly history. The universe itself has come into being eons before the arrival of human history. The contemporary scientific consensus informs us that cosmic evolution began in a singular event, known today as the “Big Bang”, happening fifteen or so billion years ago. After the mysterious Big Bang, “the universe continued to unfold in a series of transformations, none of which could have occurred the way they have unless the cosmic beginnings had already been configured in a very precise way.”⁷ The cosmos has its own story.⁸ “And like all stories, it is revelatory. From its very beginning, the universe seems to be unfolding and disclosing a mysterious secret potential and inexhaustible depth, aspects of which are only now being brought to light by science.”⁹ In the last observation, in accordance with John F. Haught, we can argue that the cosmos is “the fundamental self-manifestation of mystery, and our religions should be seen as further episodes in a continuous unfolding of depths of the cosmos itself.”¹⁰

Of course our direct concern is not the Big Bang theory. Here our concern is to place our understandings of Christian revelation within the larger story of the evolution of the cosmos. God’s self-manifestation and self-communication comes to us through

⁶ Haught, *Mystery and Promise*, 155.

⁷ Haught, *Mystery and Promise*, 149.

⁸ For this understanding of the cosmic story see Haught, *Mystery and Promise*, 149-150.

⁹ Haught, *Mystery and Promise*, 148.

¹⁰ Haught, *Mystery and Promise*, 151.

the medium of human history but revelation is not simply a plan for Israel, for the Church, or for humanity. God's plan is: "... to bring everything together under Christ, as head, everything in the heaven and everything on earth" (Ep 1,10).

As of now we cannot say if the Big Bang theory describes a fact or not. However, it is safe to think of the Big Bang as "a suggestive and helpful image or metaphor rather than as a literal description of cosmic facts."¹¹ It is interesting that physicists represent Big Bang cosmology by beginning to speak of creation from nothing. Here they are up against a mystery, which moved beyond the limits of their discipline. If "nothing comes from nothing," how do they clarify the reality that there is something that does not have to be? Scientists by virtue of their discipline cannot deal with the question of ultimate origin.

In the light of Christian faith, we can answer that question by appealing to "the creative love of God who calls things into being from non-being."¹² God creates freely 'out of nothing' (*creatio ex nihilo*).¹³ This Christian teaching underscores the immediate relation between creation and the Creator. God does not need the world in order to be God. "The divine act of creation is grounded in the primal richness of the triune being of God who is free to share something external to God."¹⁴ In other words, the beginning of the world is not infinite emptiness or nothingness, but rather is "the fullness which alone explains what is shared in and what is beginning. The fullness upon which a process of becoming can be based, and which can give it the power of a

¹¹ Hayes, *The Gift of Being*, 56.

¹² Hayes, *The Gift of Being*, 46.

¹³ Lateran Council IV (1215): Denz. 800; cf. Denz. 3025.

¹⁴ Hayes, *The Gift of Being*, 65.

movement towards which more is developed and at the same time more interior.”¹⁵ The universe exists in absolute dependence on the loving creativity of God.

If God is love, as in Christian (Johannine) understanding, and if love is understood to be relational, then the necessity of some self-diffusion is accounted for within the Godhead itself; the divine is what it is necessarily. The necessary self-diffusion is situated in the mystery of emanation that is internal to the Trinity. The emanation that brings forth the Son from the Father is seen to be the necessary emanation. The mutual relation between the Father and the Son is the mystery from which the Spirit emanates as the emanation of purest love. If God is seen to be supreme Good in these terms, it follows that God can be thought of as the supreme Good, and yet as free to create or not to create. The internal divine emanations are the presupposition for the external emanation, which produces creation. But any emanation external to the divinity is free on the part of God.¹⁶

The theological tradition speaks not only of creation from nothing, but also of God's constant sustaining activity. The cosmos is essentially open-ended and incomplete. It is in a course of becoming what it has not yet been. “In this sense God does not create anything new, but continually creates what was once created in the beginning.”¹⁷ Here God is seen as “the source of all possibilities.”¹⁸ “The finite world would move and grow as a result of a continual impregnation by the self-giving mystery of God.”¹⁹

In a sense, the cosmos itself is an ongoing revelation. “All of creation is marked by that goodness and carries within itself the desire for final union with the goodness from which it has come.”²⁰ “Evolution, when interpreted by the revelatory images of

¹⁵ Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 191.

¹⁶ Hayes, *The Gift of Being*, 64-65.

¹⁷ Hayes, *The Gift of Being*, 52.

¹⁸ Hayes, *The Gift of Being*, 52.

¹⁹ Haught, *Mystery and Promise*, 158.

²⁰ Hayes, *The Gift of Being*, 65.

God's love, is both the expression of God's gift of self to the world and at the same time the world's response to the non-coercive, defenseless divine self-bestowal."²¹

1.1. Creation: The Invitation to Know God

"In the beginning God created heaven and earth" (Gn 1,1). The Bible places the cosmos within a narrative setting. Instead of the interpretation of the six days of the opening chapter of Genesis as a realistic description whose conclusion seems unavoidable to contradict with the outlook of modern science, we would like to approach the opening chapters of Genesis through the insights of historical and textual criticism. This distinguishes between the physical world-view that seems to stand behind the biblical texts (best described as *archaic*) and the religious message that the texts attempt to communicate.²² From the point of view of historical criticism, it is common today to see them as coming from two different traditions: the Yahwist and the Priestly.²³

The Priestly account opens the book of Genesis by describing the familiar six days of divine creative activity and the seventh day of divine blessing and rest (Gn 1,1 – 2,4a). The Hebrew word *Bara* expressing the creative work of God is used in the Bible only for divine activity that is dynamic and different from all creaturely action. Besides that, the author uses another metaphor, namely, the metaphor of divine speech. "Then God said: let there be ..." and it came to be. The use of this metaphor of a commanding speech expresses both the divine *transcendence* and *personal*

²¹ Haught, *Mystery and Promise*, 158.

²² Cf. Hayes, *The Gift of Being*, 25.

²³ "The older tradition, known as the Yahwist tradition because of the name it uses most commonly for God, is understood to begin with Genesis 2,4b. This tradition dates back to the tenth century B.C.E. The more recent tradition, known as the Priestly tradition because of the identity of its author or redactor, is dated at the time of the Babylonian Exile, that is around the sixth or fifth century B.C.E. or shortly thereafter." (Hayes, *The Gift of Being*, 25-26.)

characteristics of God.²⁴ It is through the word that God creates the world out of chaos. At the same time, it is through the power of the same word that God creates new hope and promise out of every impossibility.

The Priestly tradition concerns the creative relation of God to the world and all in it, which is declared by Creator to be good, and with humanity, which has a particular place and function in the world. Humanity is created in the image and likeness of God. Both the male and female share in the same divine task with reverence to the created order: “to live in such a way that the loving creativity of God will become manifest”²⁵ within all living creatures and the earth as a whole. But in order to live in that way, it requires primarily human knowledge of the world and, then, human knowledge of God. “All knowledge of God is an a posteriori knowledge which comes from and through encountering the world, to which, of course, we ourselves also belong.”²⁶ Here the analogy becomes further qualified.

If God is the Creator of human beings, then naturally they are led to search for knowledge of their Principle, and they are possessed of an intellect appropriate to that quest. Accordingly, certain human words that they use should be capable of enunciating the names of God; no disorder, however great, in human life can wholly eradicate this power of words, because it is impossible to quash God’s creative work and absolutely corrupt the human intellectual. On the other hand, if God is Creator, he is not human and therefore cannot be named as human beings name themselves and the objects in their world; the names of God are the names of God as fundamental Principle.²⁷

In accordance with analogy, knowledge of God that comes from and through encountering the world signifies God properly but “is related to the proximity of

²⁴ Cf. Hayes, *The Gift of Being*, 26.

²⁵ Hayes, *The Gift of Being*, 26.

²⁶ Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 52.

²⁷ Ghislain Lafont, “Analogy”, in René Latourelle and Rino Fisichella, ed., *Dictionary of Fundamental Theology*, New York 1994, 2000², 6.

Creator to creature and to the distance between Creator and creature.”²⁸ This is what the First Vatican Council (Denz. 3004) called *natural* knowledge of God and which the Second Vatican Council affirms without calling it natural revelation (DV 6).

Nevertheless, human knowledge of God must be understood correctly. It is not only an intellectual achievement but also deepens as an existential human relation to the Creator. Human beings in their freedom are oriented towards God. The orientation of human existence towards the immediacy of God is what we call grace. Thus, the knowledge of God in creation is “a *transcendental* knowledge because man’s basic and original orientation towards absolute mystery, which constitutes his fundamental experience of God, is a permanent existential of man as a spiritual subject.”²⁹

However, the knowledge of God in creation must be placed in the wider context of the divine intention. Creation is a pure gift of God. It manifests the divine goodness. “God’s allowing the world to exist is made possible by a restraining of divine omnipotence.”³⁰ In other words, creation or cosmic evolution is “the story of a self-humbling God entering more intimately into the universe and drawing it toward a meaningful fulfillment.”³¹ The divine humility that arrives at its complete and definitive expression in the *kenosis* of the crucified man is the foundation of the creation of the universe. By knowing the universe more deeply, its mystery, its depth, and its value, we will arrive at the ineffable mystery. The cosmos truly speaks to human beings of God. But this knowledge of God is still very initial and difficult to discern. In all this human beings see indistinctly as “in a mirror” (1 Co 13,12).

²⁸ Lafont, “Analogy”, 6.

²⁹ Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 52.

³⁰ Haught, *Mystery and Promise*, 159.

³¹ Haught, *Mystery and Promise*, 158.

1.2. The Fall: The Noetic Consequences of Sin

If the Priestly account seems to emphasize the dignity of humankind, the Yahwist account beginning in Genesis 2b describes the earthy roots of humanity. Humanity is described as the result fashioned by God from the soil of the ground (Gn 2,7).³² The Hebrew word for ground is *adamah* and the name of that which is formed from the ground is *adam*. It appears that Adam is not first of all a proper name, but a description of the earthy roots of humanity.³³ Seen in relation to what is described later as God surrounded Adam with all sorts of animal life and then formed the woman to be a suitable partner for the man, it is clear that even though humanity is created as image and likeness of God, it is persistently tied to the earth.

While the first chapter of Genesis narrates the role of humanity as the image and likeness of God, the second chapter describes the failure of humanity to live up their God given task. It should be noted that according to contemporary exegetes, the Yahwist account of the fall reflects, rather, on the mystery of human existence as he finds it in his own time and place. So, the failure of Adam and Eve is best seen not as the experience of some eyes-witness of the beginning of human history but as a reflection of sin that is always present in human experience.

“Assuming that the author is a member of the Jewish people, we can envision him to be reflecting not only his personal experience, but on the experience of his people over the centuries. From this perspective he lays out what may be seen as a description of the polarities of human history not only as they may be seen in the case of the Hebrew people, but as they may be seen in human history as a whole.”³⁴

³² Cf. Hayes, *The Gift of Being*, 27-28.

³³ Cf. Hayes, *The Gift of Being*, 27.

³⁴ Hayes, *The Gift of Being*, 27.

Describing humanity as formed from the clay of the ground that is limited, Genesis sees the fall of Adam and Eve as “a failure to deal with limits appropriately.”³⁵ From the beginning, humans find it hard to deal with the other and have a heavy tendency to push beyond proper limits. The history of humanity is always marked by the failure that is by pushing beyond the limits of his nature in the desire to make himself the ultimate judge of good and evil.

In other words, the human fall consists in the fact that the human being makes the self as the center of the universe refusing the divine invitation to know God as the cosmos manifests. Even though humanity is capable of discerning the true meaning of the cosmos, he turns the good creatures of God into idols that replace God in his life. The primal sin is the human denial of God by making itself to be like God and to know as God.

The consequence of the self-idolatry is the alienation of humanity from God and all the intended partners to God's purposes. The account of human failure, beginning with Genesis 3 and going to Genesis 11, tells us about a history of the loss of human closeness with God, broken relationships among humans, and the painful relation of humanity to the non-human world. This is the result of human, free choices.

Here we can and must speak of original sin. “Original sin”, according to Rahner, does not mean, “the original, personal act of freedom at the very origin of history has been transmitted to subsequent generations in its moral quality.”³⁶ The sin of Adam and Eve, in original sin, is not imputed to us. Furthermore, Rahner states, “the nature of original sin must be understood correctly and only from an understanding of

³⁵ Hayes, *The Gift of Being*, 28.

³⁶ Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 110.

the effect which the guilt of a particular person or particular persons has on the situation of other persons' freedom."³⁷ This understanding is based on two factors: 1) "the universality of the determination by guilt of every person's situation" and 2) "the reflexive insight, deepening with history of revelation and salvation, into the nature of the relationship between God and man."³⁸

Original sin, therefore, expresses nothing else but the historical origin of the present, universal and ineradicable situation of our freedom as codetermined by guilt, and this insofar as this situation has a history in which, because of the universal determination of this history by guilt, God's self-communication in grace comes to man not from "Adam" not from the beginning of the human race, but from the goal of this history, from the God-Man Jesus Christ.³⁹

1.3. The Covenant with Noah: The Preservation of the Universal Revelation

If we read the text as a unit from Genesis 1 to Genesis 11, we discover an impressive movement. God with his creative action brings order out of chaos. From this moment there was felt the promise of God that is the self-outpouring of God into the whole created world where humanity is incorporated. Deep-rooted in the earth, humanity is called to a God-given task for the good of the whole. But immediately the text describes the failure of humanity that leads us to the disaster of the flood. While it presents the story of humanity as one of mistrust, fratricide, hostility and friction, the text also tells us that God does not abandon creation and humanity. He is faithful to his promise. The story of Noah leads to God's everlasting covenant with creation, which is symbolized with the cosmic sign of the rainbow.

³⁷ Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 112.

³⁸ Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 113-114.

³⁹ Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 114.

“Covenant” (in Hebrew *berith*) is God’s solemn promise to a people to carry out a divine purpose. This promise has its beginning with Adam as a “covenant of works” (Gn 3,15), which will in due course be seen as the *protoevangelium* (the first announcement of a savior). But following explicit biblical usage, covenant first appears in the promise made to Noah who represents the generations to come, the whole humankind after the fall. So, humanity beyond the particular history of God with Israel is not excluded from this covenant. It is available to all human beings as the New Testament allusions to revelatory light reflect (Jn 1,9; Rm 1,19-20; 2,14-15; 12,17; 13,1-6; Ac 14,17; 17,22-28; 1 Co 11,14-16; 15,31; 1 Peter 2,12, Mk 10,1-9; Mt 5,16; 7,11.16; 19,1-9, Lk 12,5; 14,8-10).⁴⁰

The covenant with Noah is a grace of God that counters the consequence of the fall. Even though the image of God has been seriously affected by sin, the self-gift of the promising God to the entire world of nature and to every person, namely universal or general revelation, did not change. Even when man has sinned, the possibility of an authentic knowledge of God through creatures never ceases.

The covenant with Noah carries with it a characteristic of all God’s covenant-making: irrevocability. God does not go back on the divine intention. The No of the world cannot turn aside the Yes of the Word. Covenants are for keeps. This unconditionality of the divine love in the economy *ad extra* is again rooted in the unreserved self-giving of the Persons, one to Another in the immanence of divine Love, *ad intra*. And now, after the fall, the depth of that bonding love is demonstrated as mercy toward sinful stewards; divine love absorbing divine wrath, giving the world yet another chance.⁴¹

“The covenant with Noah is the promise of *preservation*. Preservation is the work of the triune Providence sustaining the world in its journey toward its purposed

⁴⁰ Cf. Fackre, *The Doctrine of Revelation*, 65.

⁴¹ Fackre, *The Doctrine of Revelation*, 63.

End.”⁴² God’s preservation given to all has the shape of both horizontal and vertical reality: “knowledge of the things in human relationships that make life livable, and enough awareness of a Presence to which it is accountable to sustain the human journey forwards.”⁴³ God keeps the guarantee to provide for creation the necessities of life and the elementary laws of life together as justice, wisdom, peace, truth, honesty, and forgiveness. More important is that God gives a new awareness of their Source. The rainbow is light enough to point humanity after the fall beyond, bestirring it to search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him. It is a apt light-symbol for expressing that God is always present, cares for the earth and respects human worth. However, in the context of cosmic evolution, “God has created a world of such a sort that realization of the divine aim depends on the reaction of God’s human creatures.”⁴⁴ Inextricable from the covenant with Noah are covenantal imperatives (Gn 9,1-7). Human freedom, responsibility and ethical consciousness become all the more important in order to live up to the task that God has given to humanity. This happens only in history.

In summary, in the beginning of the world, God manifests himself and calls for religious homage on the part of man. God enters into gratuitous communication with man through the work of creation. Creation thus is a permanent manifestation of God and God’s perfections. Therefore, man can enter into the mystery of God and see God’s presence by contemplating the created world. Accompanied by actual grace, man can arrive at God in creation, and through the cosmos, as the Author of the world. Man can discover a present and personal God, his will, and his mystery. However, “for man in the present order of things, this knowledge frequently remains obscure, difficult, full of

⁴² Fackre, *The Doctrine of Revelation*, 63.

⁴³ Fackre, *The Doctrine of Revelation*, 56.

⁴⁴ Hayes, *The Gift of Being*, 98.

puzzles.”⁴⁵ Furthermore, “by reason of man’s sin, his pride, the weakness of his heart, there is always a tendency to confuse the Author of nature with nature itself.”⁴⁶ The covenant with Noah, however, preserves God’s fidelity to his promise throughout the history of humanity and its long-awaited fulfillment.

2. Revelation in the History of Salvation

The eternal God is the God who is always present in the events of his creatures’ history. By entering history and submitting to its dynamic, God manifests his free self-giving to humanity. Even though God still remains free to transcend it because “the mystery of his life-in trinity consists precisely in being *semper maior* with regard to any human limitation”⁴⁷, he makes himself history. “History thus becomes God’s manifestation, the place where he appears, and also the place of human decision to try to follow him.”⁴⁸ “History is the meeting place of God and humanity in freedom.”⁴⁹

It is especially this quality of freedom that gives us the deep basis to understand God’s revelation and at the same time human’s response to that revelation in the history of salvation. It should be noted that here we concern ourselves with revelation in the history of salvation and not with revelation in the universal history. Contemporary theology speaks of the historicity of revelation in two senses: God’s categorical revelation and God’s universal revelation. In this part we will concentrate on the

⁴⁵ René Latourelle, *Theology of Revelation*, New York 1987, 338.

⁴⁶ Latourelle, *Theology of Revelation*, 338-339.

⁴⁷ Rino Fisichella, “History III: Theology of History”, in René Latourelle and Rino Fisichella, ed., *Dictionary of Fundamental Theology*, New York 1994, 2000², 441.

⁴⁸ Fisichella, “History III: Theology of History”, 440.

⁴⁹ John O’Donnell, “History IV: Historicity of Revelation”, in René Latourelle and Rino Fisichella, ed., *Dictionary of Fundamental Theology*, New York 1994, 2000², 444.

categorical revelation, namely, “the objective events in the history of the world in which God manifests himself.”⁵⁰

Obviously for us the historical event par excellence in which God manifests himself is Jesus Christ. This event, however, we understand as the fulfillment of the whole preparatory history of God’s revelation to Israel as the letter to the Hebrews proclaims. “At many moments in the past and by many means, God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets; but in our time, the final days, he has spoken to us in the person of his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things and through whom he made the ages” (Heb 1,1-2). From Abraham to Jesus Christ, there is one single history of revelation, which is completed little by little, making progress in quantity and in quality. From promise to fulfillment, there is God’s one plan of salvation. “This plan, restricted to Israel first of all, enlarges to the proportions of all humanity, then, in the Church, tends to incorporate all men of all times.”⁵¹

For Christians the Christ-event is the fulfillment of God’s revelation because it is in Jesus Christ that God has expressed himself completely. In fact, it is in Jesus of Nazareth, that God himself intervenes in history. But “if Christ is God’s revelation in person, then revelation itself is temporal and historical.”⁵² Here we must deal with the big question that is how can the eternal God become temporal. To this question, according to John O’Donnell, Christian faith seeks to reflect on “God’s historicity”, namely, God’s capacity to become temporal.⁵³ In the ultimate observation, the thesis

⁵⁰ O’Donnell, “History IV: Historicity of Revelation”, 444.

⁵¹ Latourelle, *Theology of Revelation*, 346.

⁵² O’Donnell, “History IV: Historicity of Revelation”, 444.

⁵³ O’Donnell, “History IV: Historicity of Revelation”, 444.

that God manifests himself in history and therefore that God becomes temporal can be understood only in Trinitarian terms.

Jünger speaks of God's being as a triple coming. God comes from himself (Father), God comes to himself (Son), and God comes as God (Holy Spirit). There is a movement in God, from the Father to the Son in the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the guarantee of the unity of Trinitarian love and of its infinite fullness. The love of the Father for the Son and the Son's response to the Father is so rich that it contains the quality of being ever greater, ever new, ever young. Balthasar speaks in similar terms, using the category of event to explain the dynamic character of God's eternal Being. For Balthasar, God's being is the event of the Father's self-donation and the Son's obedient response, which contains an overflowing fruitfulness that is the Holy Spirit. For all these authors the event that God is, is so dynamic, fruitful, and altruistic that it opens out toward the world. God's being is a being of ecstatic movement. The Holy Spirit both completes the circle of love and is the infinite fruitfulness of love for the world and so can be described as the ecstasy of God. God's love is not retained for himself but is a free gift for the world. In such Trinitarian terms, God's historicity is the ground for his history with the world, which reaches its climax in the Christ-event.⁵⁴

Here we are also faced with the other mystery of divine revelation. On the one side, it is obvious that God desires to communicate himself to every man and woman. This is God's one single plan, which is that all be saved. On the other side, if God manifests himself in history, it means that he reveals himself to the specific person or people, in the specific time or period, through the specific event or history. To this point, we can state in accordance with René Latourelle who writes:

Regarding the interventions of God in history, we neither say nor predict anything. Everything depends on his free decision. Nothing, in God, demands an intervention at one given moment rather than another, more frequently or less frequently. Neither is there anything in man to demand that God converse with him. Revelation is a free and gratuitous event. The interventions of God stretch out over the course of many centuries. God did not say everything nor do everything all at once, he intervened at opportune moments, chosen by him.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ O'Donnell, "History IV: Historicity of Revelation", 445.

⁵⁵ Latourelle, *Theology of Revelation*, 345.

As we indicated above, history is the meeting place of God and humanity in freedom. Revelation is God's self-manifestation in his freedom and at the same time is the human's response in freedom. "It is especially this quality of freedom that allows human existence to be 'historical' in addition to be 'natural'."⁵⁶ As we observed in the previous part, the cosmos itself is historical and, in a sense, the cosmos itself is an ongoing revelation. So, we can speak about the cosmos as the fundamental context of revelation. However, even though any separation of nature from history is both scientifically and theologically questionable. Human and social events take place on the earth, therefore, some sort of distinction of human history from natural history is essential. Even while being continuous with non-human nature and constrained by it, human existence is free toward it. Thus, "because of the fact of human freedom we may here think of history as an aspect of our general 'situation', distinct, though not separate, from non-human nature."⁵⁷ "History is thus the framework for revelation."⁵⁸

In the concept of a free God who intrudes into human history is found the essence of biblical faith in God. Both the Old and New Testament narrate God's word and activity. God speaks and acts in history. Bible history is first of all a manifestation of God. "It is in Israel that, for the first time, we find an encounter between revelation and history."⁵⁹ "For Israel, time is linear: it has a beginning and an end. Salvation is accomplished in temporal history: it is bound up with a succession of events unfolding according to a divine plan and leading towards one unique fact, the death and

⁵⁶ Haught, *Mystery and Promise*, 171.

⁵⁷ Haught, *Mystery and Promise*, 171.

⁵⁸ Latourelle, *Theology of Revelation*, 345.

⁵⁹ Latourelle, *Theology of Revelation*, 343.

resurrection of Christ. For Israel, life is framed in the cosmic context but the focus of its attention is history.”⁶⁰

God’s history with Israel is the fact of revelation. “In fact, it is God who makes himself present in history in an infinite number of ways and means, and who at the same time offers himself as an object of thought, language and experience.”⁶¹ It is presented primarily “as the experience of the activity of a sovereign power, changing the normal course of history and individual existence.”⁶² At the beginning of Old Testament revelation, the independent events of exodus, covenant, and entry into the Promised Land are the decisive experience. These events mark the birth of Israel as a people and at the same time reveal God as God of history who fulfils his promise made to Abraham (Gn 17,3-8). It is obvious that in order to speak of revelation in history, promise and fulfillment make up the dynamism of this history in a threefold dimension: “the present heralds the future which is announced and promised in the past.”⁶³

The conception of revelation *in* history has two effects. First of all, it *gives value* to history. If God intervenes in history and manifests His will, historical events themselves acquire a new dimension: they become the bearers of God’s intentions and give history a meaning, a sense of direction. Since the other peoples did not know the God of history, they had no way of interpreting history; they are unconscious of their role and, in periods of crisis, they do not know how to orient themselves. The idea of a revelation in history thus gives revelation an intense character of *actualization*. God is He who, at every instant, can intervene and change the course of events: He is near, He is there, unforeseeable in His interventions as well as in His effect. Always, man must look to His Coming.⁶⁴

⁶⁰ Latourelle, *Theology of Revelation*, 344.

⁶¹ M. Cristina Carnicella, “Communication”, in René Latourelle and Rino Fisichella, ed., *Dictionary of Fundamental Theology*, New York 1994, 2000², 187-188.

⁶² Latourelle, *Theology of Revelation*, 21.

⁶³ Latourelle, *Theology of Revelation*, 344.

⁶⁴ Latourelle, *Theology of Revelation*, 345.

2.1. Revelation as Promise

God chooses first of all Israel as his people. "I shall take you as my people and I shall be your God" (Ex 6,7). To his people, Israel, God reveals his name, that is, his personal being. He reveals himself as a Person who can be called upon and who will answer Israel's call. There is an interpersonal relationship between God who reaches out from his own mystery by setting Israel free and his people (Ex 12,31-32) are saved and transformed by God's saving power (Ex 14,31). It is a lively dialogue between two persons: one person speaking and the other listening and responding. The Old Testament history of the elected people is no other than a series of communications from a personal God "who 'spoke' with human beings, brought them to a knowledge of his ways, explained his ways of acting, made promises, uttered warnings, proclaimed happiness or punishment."⁶⁵

In the Old Testament the most frequent and the most significant term to express the divine communication is "the word of God". What is important in the history of Abraham, Moses and the prophets is the fact of hearing God's word. "It is through His word that God, progressively, introduces man to the knowledge of his intimate being. The word of God, in the Old Testament, directs and inspires a history which begins with the word of God pronounced at the time of creation and ends up with the Word made flesh."⁶⁶

The word Hebrew *dabar* precisely expresses the meaning and force of the word of God. "The *dabar* is 'what comes out of the mouth' (Nb 30,13) or 'the lips' (Jr 17, 16) of man, but it also has its source in the heart of the man. The *dabar* expresses,

⁶⁵ Carnicella, "Communication", 188.

⁶⁶ Latourelle, *Theology of Revelation*, 22.

exteriorly what the man has already said in his heart (Gn 17,17; Ps 14,1), or what rises from his heart (Jr 3,16; Is 65,17) or his mind (Ex 11,5; 20,32).⁶⁷ For Israel, the word possesses a double force: *noetic* and *dynamic*.⁶⁸ It expresses thoughts, intentions and decisions, and the same time effects what man thinks, desires and decides. "The word is an active force whose dynamism is rooted in the very dynamism of the person who pronounces it. It is hardly distinct from the person whose mode of being and activity it represents. That is why the word is a revealer. No one speaks without revealing himself."⁶⁹ Such is the word of God, at once noetic and dynamic: it is the promise of God and the accomplishment of God; it is the elective discourse and the elective action; it is the proclamation and realization of God's plan of salvation.

When God speaks he reveals himself. In his efficacious word, God communicates in the immeasurable depths of his own mystery and the salvation that coincides with it. Israel descended from Abraham "experiences mystery especially in terms of 'future', and they understand deliverance or salvation as an experience whose definitive occurrence resides not in the past or present, but only in the future."⁷⁰ "Filled with an unprecedented hope for a future fulfillment within the context of history," ... Israel "learned to think of God as one who continually holds out a fresh promise for the future, as one who calls us to hope in a vision yet to be fulfilled."⁷¹ "Thus revelation may best be understood as the disclosure of God's vision of the future in the form of a promise."⁷²

⁶⁷ Latourelle, *Theology of Revelation*, 29.

⁶⁸ Latourelle, *Theology of Revelation*, 30.

⁶⁹ Latourelle, *Theology of Revelation*, 30.

⁷⁰ Haught, *Mystery and Promise*, 84.

⁷¹ Haught, *Mystery and Promise*, 85.

⁷² Haught, *Mystery and Promise*, 90.

Jürgen Moltmann who claims the biblical theme of promise and hope as central to the Christian vision of revelation defines promise in his book *The Experiment Hope* as follows:

A promise is a pledge that proclaims a reality which is not yet at hand. A promise pledges a new future, and in the promise this new future is already *word-present*. If a divine promise is involved, it means that this future does not result from those possibilities which are already present, but that it originates from God's creative possibilities. God's promise always points to a new creation as the word for divine "creation" in the Old Testament, *barah*, indicates. ... The *word* of the promise itself already creates something new.⁷³

The revelatory word of promise at once announces and also transforms. It opens us to the newness of God's future that goes beyond our wildest expectations. God's future cannot be predicted. "The future appears to us as a *mysterium tremendum*."⁷⁴ In fact, promising mystery is disturbing because it requires a great effort to let go of the untroubled present and to forsake our tendency to seek security in a settled past. The mysterious depth of God's future is an uncertain, but fulfilling future. Thus, the appropriate response to this mystery is nothing but faith in God's *dabar* by renewing hope in God's fidelity. God's revelation in history in the mode of a future promise first is made to Abraham. From this Abrahamic intuition of reality's promise, both the biblical understanding of God and the obedient faith would sooner or later blossom.

2.1.1. The Revelation of God's Promise to Abraham

God's revelation in the history of salvation begins with God's summons of election to Abraham. "Leave your country, your kindred and your father's house for a country which I shall show you; and I shall make you a great nation, I shall bless you and make

⁷³ Quoted in Haught, *Mystery and Promise*, 87.

⁷⁴ Haught, *Mystery and Promise*, 87.

your name famous; you are to be a blessing” (Gn 12,1-2). Abram experienced a call from God to leave his people and his land and to go forth to a new life of unknown promise. Towards this unpredictability of the future, Abram is pictured in Genesis as surrendering himself to God’s promise in an attitude of dependence. Abram believes that God is leading him, but in a direction of which he knows nothing (Gn 15,1-21).

God freely chose Abram to form a nation that would inherit the ancient blessings and promises bestowed by God on the occasion of the first creation (Gn 3,15) and the covenant with Noah (Gn 9,17). God, as Genesis narrates it, from time to time renewed the promise to Abram (Gn 12,7; 13,15; 15,5; 17,4). And when Abram was ninety-nine years old, God bestowed on him a new name. “And you are no longer to be called Abram; your name is to be Abraham, for I am making you father of many nations” (Gn 17,5).

In God’s promise to Abraham, it is obvious that revelation becomes the mystery of a *personal dialogue* between the living God and man. However, this covenant with Abraham is not a bilateral pact. This promise is a unilateral pledge in which God solemnly promises a heritage to Abram and his descendants. Its initiative is exclusively from God. In his part, Abraham responds to this promise with a total receptivity. “This oath may indeed be called a covenant, for it effectively creates a new relationship between Yahweh and Abraham.”⁷⁵

In addition to this relational aspect, God’s promise to Abraham was not addressed to all his descendants. “Including an election on the part of Yahweh, they will be transmitted through certain descendants, to the exclusion of others, and this is

⁷⁵ Édouard Hamel, “Election/Covenant/Law”, in René Latourelle and Rino Fisichella, ed., *Dictionary of Fundamental Theology*, New York 1994, 2000², 268.

the result of God's own design, and not because of the fault of human beings."⁷⁶ God chooses Isaac as the son of promise and not Ishmael. God will choose Jacob and not Esau to make the person of Jacob as the father and founder of the elect people. By divine choice Abraham, Isaac and Jacob-Israel will become the fathers of a blessed generation that one day will welcome his true descendant; Jesus Christ (Ga 3,16).

This promise seems in reality to be contradicted by the fact that Abraham had many actually concrete reasons to abandon his pursuit of the promise. Sarah, his wife, is sterile. When Sarah becomes the blessed one and gives birth to Isaac, Abraham was commanded by the same God to sacrifice his own son of promise (Gn 22,1-19). In the conditions, which seem to be impossible and incapable of accomplishment, Abraham continued to trust himself to the God who has shown Himself to be the master of history as well as the God of promises.

In this first stage of revelation, which is the prototype of all future revelations, God manifests himself through his action in history; this action takes the form of promise and fulfillment, of efficacious words that effect the salvation they promise. The counterpart of this promise is therefore not a "knowledge of God" but an obedient faith.⁷⁷

2.1.2. The Covenant with Israel: Elective Action

In the light of the whole historic process of the dialectic of promise and fulfillment, which has been begun with Abraham, "the covenant of Sinai is a decisive moment in the history of revelation."⁷⁸ Through this covenant God not only delivers Israel, His

⁷⁶ Hamel, "Election/Covenant/Law", 268.

⁷⁷ Latourelle, "Revelation", 908.

⁷⁸ René Latourelle, *Theology of Revelation*, 23.

people, from the hand of the Egyptians but also reveals Himself as the only God and the only Savior.

I shall take you as my people and I shall be your God. And you will know that I am Yahweh your God, who have freed you from the forced labour of the Egyptians. Then I shall lead you into the country which I swore I would give to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and shall give it to you as your heritage. (Ex 6,7-8)

The primordial fact is the liberation of Israel from the bondage of Egypt. This *exodus* is the work of God who forced the Pharaoh through the plagues of Egypt (Ex 7,14 – 12,34) and set Israel free by the miracle of the sea (Ex 14,15-31). After crossing over the Sea of Reeds, Moses led Israel into the desert where they wandered for a period. All the while, the dream of a Promised Land sustained them. According to Exodus, during the wilderness journey through the desert, Moses and his followers continued their relationship with a personal God of promise. However, on the other side, Israel is said to have murmured in rebelliousness of the divine promise given through Moses. They yearned for security in the present and the past.

Here the historical character of human response to God's promise may be understood as a struggle between authentic hope and unwillingness to adopt to patience and waiting. "God's promise to Abraham and to Israel sparks a unique kind of restlessness. ... The promise of a new and uncontrollable future opens out into the insecurity, indefiniteness, and adventure of history. History is both a gift and a serious challenge rooted in the promissory nature of revelation."⁷⁹ The mysterious depth of God's future in history "allows reality as a whole, and human life in particular, to take on the character of adventure."⁸⁰ Indeed, the adventure toward the Promised Land is

⁷⁹ Haught, *Mystery and Promise*, 172.

⁸⁰ Haught, *Mystery and Promise*, 172

full of risk. But, in the light of promise, this dramatic and meaningful time challenges the people to trust in the salvific acts of God unconditionally.

Through the exodus event God aims “to establish a covenant that will make Israel a free people, giving them their dignity, their law, and their mission in history.”⁸¹ On Sinai, God offers a new covenant that makes complete the covenant with Abraham. “If you are really prepared to obey me and keep my covenant, you, out of all peoples, shall be my personal possession, for the whole world is mine. For me you shall be a kingdom of priests, a holy nation” (Ex 19,5). In this covenant the interpersonal relationship between the God who reaches out from his own mystery and reveals his name (Ex 3,14) and his people is marked by the possibility of free cooperation on the part of Israel. Origen writes: “God is not a tyrant. He wants those who serve him to do so freely, so that they freely accept his plan of salvation and do good not out of fear but by their own free choice.”⁸² “The mere fact that Yahweh requires a free response from the people underlines the unique nature of the Mosaic covenant.”⁸³

In addition to giving birth to the holy people of God, this covenant also gave Israel who was already a free people “a law the aim of which was to ensure that Israel’s actions accorded with the demands of its sublime vocation.”⁸⁴ The ten words of Sinai (Ex 34,28; Dt 4,13; 10,4) pronounced by Yahweh are both the revelation of God’s will and His assertion as Lord of Israel. “The term *word* as applied to the common law of the code of the covenant (Ex 20:22-23, 19). means that the whole daily life of the

⁸¹ Hamel, “Election/Covenant/Law”, 269.

⁸² Quoted in Hamel, “Election/Covenant/Law”, 269.

⁸³ Hamel, “Election/Covenant/Law”, 269.

⁸⁴ Hamel, “Election/Covenant/Law”, 269.

Hebrews is subject to the will of Yahweh, enacted in His presence.”⁸⁵ The Mosaic covenant included religious and moral demands that must be examined if Israel wishes to remain the people of God.

2.1.3. Prophetic Revelation

“The revelation of Sinai always remains the central block of revelation; but if it lasted throughout the Old Testament, particularly during the royal era and the exile, and if it acquired new depth and development, all this is the work of the prophets.”⁸⁶ “The *prophētēs* of the LXX is confined to the *nābī*, identified as he who speaks clearly on behalf of someone else.”⁸⁷ The prophets are mediators of God’s word addressed to the people, as Moses is the mediator of the covenant and the Decalogue. “It is only with Samuel (I Sm 3:1-21) that prophetism begins to play its vital role and becomes a quasi-permanent phenomenon, in a form more charismatic than institutional, down to the fifth century.”⁸⁸

The prophets take part in a particular historical moment. The center of the prophetic interest is the daily life, the apparent muteness of the facts that seem to describe a contradiction between the promise of God and the choices of the people. The prophets know the same facts that people know, only that the point of reference is another: God's word. Here, the *pathos* that characterizes the prophetic message must be included in the depth sense of the transcendence and holiness of God in the existence of

⁸⁵ Latourelle, *Theology of Revelation*, 31.

⁸⁶ Latourelle, *Theology of Revelation*, 32.

⁸⁷ Rino Fisichella, “Prophecy”, in René Latourelle and Rino Fisichella, ed., *Dictionary of Fundamental Theology*, New York 1994, 2000², 789.

⁸⁸ Latourelle, “Revelation”, 909.

the prophet. In His *pathos* God goes out of himself and is interested in the people He has elected, becomes the partner of the covenant and is allowed to invoke. His *pathos* is a free relationship with His creation; it is suffering for the actions of Israel and for its sufferings. The prophetic sympathy forms the correlate of the divine *pathos*. It is manifested as the answer of the prophets to His inspiration. God's word grants to His servants intimacy with God; their emotional experience is transformed into the crucial point to be able to understand God. The prophets do not live only their personal life, but also the life of God, since they refract the divine *pathos*.⁸⁹

We can say that the prophet acts through two immediacies: with history and with God.⁹⁰ The prophet is a person inserted in the history of his time, convinced that history is the place to know God. For this the prophet recalls people to remain anchored to the events, what ever they are, to which abstract schemes must be sacrificed and standardized. The provocation of the event does not authorize one to look for escape from history and from the world, because faith is called not only to compare God with the facts that announce the wonder of God, but also with those that seem to deny its presence. The message of the prophet is a factor of the movement of history understood as the project of Yahweh (cf. Is 10,12; 28,29).⁹¹

The prophet is tied to the word of God (Jr 5,13; 1,9; 5,14; Ezk 3,1-3), whose priority is rooted in the rhythm of untranslatable experience of call that shows a clean separation with the preceding condition of life. It does not matter from what social category the prophet originates, but only the availability to let himself be conquered by

⁸⁹ Cf. Liborio Ascutto, ed., *Dizionario comparato delle religioni monoteistiche Ebraismo – Cristianesimo – Islam*, Casale Monferrato 2002, 571.

⁹⁰ Cf. Carmelo Dotolo, *La Revelazione Cristiana*, Milano 2002, 48.

⁹¹ Cf. Dotolo, *La Revelazione Cristiana*, 48-49.

the irresistible divine project (cf. Am 3,3; Jr 20,7). In virtue of such free and gracious call, the prophet is not afraid to remain single and to emit the strength of this liberty in the words, in the fundamental values and in the interwoven meaningful choices of love. Being nearer to God, he is freer. The consequence is that the idolatry or sin of apostasy does not point out only the transgression of the covenant, but in a particular way, the failure to appreciate the fundamental relationship between God and man (cf. Jr 2,10-11). In this sense, it must be said that the revealed strength of the prophet consists of applying the logic of the covenant and conducting it to maturation and a new consciousness. For this the prophetic report presupposes the unequivocal recognition that the covenant must be lived and the Law must be observed.⁹² “The prophetic message is that God is faithful to His promise but that the promise is not to be taken lightly.”⁹³

In fact, Israel had failed to follow the demands of the election and covenant. Israel who has “the presumption that being chosen by God from among the nations is a guarantee of salvation rather than a call to responsibility”⁹⁴ has failed to abide by the conditions of the Sinai covenant. The presence of divine mystery has been reduced to the superficial image of monarchical political power. The land had become a deity rather than a sacrament of the future. The religious sacrifices required by the law had become the superficial rite ignoring concern for justice.

The prophets stand out most sharply in their demand for justice. To the prophets like Amos, Hosea, Micah, Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, God’s presence can be experienced only if justice prevails. “Where justice does not yet reign, the appropriate

⁹² Cf. Dotolo, *La Revelazione Cristiana*, 49-50.

⁹³ Haught, *Mystery and Promise*, 98.

⁹⁴ Haught, *Mystery and Promise*, 98.

sense of God is also absent.”⁹⁵ The prophets who are bound to God by his efficacious word “rejected any sacramental religious solace which was not accompanied by positive social, political, and economic implications.”⁹⁶ At the same time, they criticized any narrow visions of the future, which tend to leave something out. They refused to let the children of Abraham forget the dark side of history, the sufferings of the past, or the poverty of their own origins. “To them, the vision of the future *shalom* had to be all-inclusive.”⁹⁷ “Trust in the promise requires an attitude of inclusiveness that embraces all and excludes none.”⁹⁸

The prophets, especially Jeremiah, Isaiah and Ezekiel, then reveal a fresh aspect of the divine covenant. It is a wholly gratuitous arrangement that relies not on the merits of the people but solely on the mercy of God whose oath endures forever.⁹⁹ The history of salvation is a series of divine promises; of God’s fidelity; and of his unconditional love in the history of holy people that is addressed to all human beings and the whole world, as interpreted by the prophets.

Israel is the biblical showcase of ‘covenant’, the trustworthy promise of life together and expectation of response in kind. From Israel’s book, we know that the God of Israel is the Promise keeper; the covenant with Israel exegetes the covenant with Noah and behind that the covenant with creation itself – the election of the world to partnership with God. And deepest of all, the *shalom* which God purposes for the world disclosed to the eye of the prophet points to the very *Shalom* that God is. The covenant which God makes with his people is a paradigm of the Covenant God, the triune Life Together, in the call of the world and the promise of divine faithfulness to it, and finally the bonding that God secures in Jesus Christ, our ‘peace’ (Eph 2, 14) and its completion in the last chapter of the story when God is ‘all and in all’.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁵ Haught, *Mystery and Promise*, 98.

⁹⁶ Haught, *Mystery and Promise*, 98.

⁹⁷ Haught, *Mystery and Promise*, 101.

⁹⁸ Haught, *Mystery and Promise*, 99.

⁹⁹ Cf. Hamel, “Election/Covenant/Law”, 270.

¹⁰⁰ Fackre, *The Doctrine of Revelation*, 106.

Revelation is the gracious and free intervention in which the holy and hidden God makes himself progressively known in historical events. It is the words of prophets, God's word in human words, which gives the meaning of God's intervention. It is also the same word that gives unity to the progress of revelation in the history of God's chosen people from the promise God made to Abraham. The words of the prophets point to God's intervention that directs the present history of the holy people towards a goal willed by him. "Each prophetic revelation signifies a fulfillment of the word, but at the same time it gives the hope of an even more decisive fulfillment. History thus moves toward a fullness of time that will see the carrying out of the divine plan of salvation in and through Christ."¹⁰¹

2.2. Revelation as Fulfillment

The history of the holy people is the history of salvation. In this history God reveals himself as the One who intends to lead the whole of humanity and through it, all creation to its final destiny, into God's own communion. In the history of the people of Israel, God is explicitly and tangibly disclosed in all human beings as the One who gives the salvific promise. The simplest statement of the promised plan of God is found in Genesis 12,3: "All clans on earth will bless themselves by you." This phrase obviously reveals God's ultimate intention for the whole of humankind.

Israel as God's chosen people has a specific role in God's saving plan, that is, both revelation of and witness to this plan. In the covenant of Sinai the very existence of Israel as a nation is guaranteed and in David the promises given to the patriarchs are

¹⁰¹ Latourelle, "Revelation", 912.

fulfilled and renewed. With exodus began the triumph of Yahweh the King (Ex 19,6) and history will end with the triumph of the Messiah King, "Son of David" (2 Samuel 7). The unconditional promise made to David, that confirms the Sinaitic covenant by centering it on the king, assumes great significance at the time of the exile, namely, as promising a future when God will reunite and save his people through an intermediary, the successor of David's successor. "Through what Yahweh is doing for the people in the present is revealed what Yahweh has in store for humankind, history, and the whole of creation."¹⁰²

However, Israel is called into the service of God to be mediator of his saving activity for the nations. According to John Fuellenbach, the election of Israel out of many nations is "a calling for the nations" that contains three aspects.¹⁰³ First, Israel is "a passive witness of God's power, glory, and might" (Is 44,23) through which the nations will recognize who Yahweh is. Second, "the active role of Israel as mediator for all nations is most explicitly expressed in being a servant." Being chosen by God means to be ready to be a servant in God's plan for humanity. Third, any election follows the pattern: "to be with him and to be sent out to proclaim the message" (Mk 3,14). There is no election without a call to active participation in the saving activity of God for the whole of humankind and creation.

"The history of Israel, however, became a history of a broken covenant."¹⁰⁴
"The long history of the disloyalty of Israel, punished in the time of Jeremiah by an unprecedented disaster, clearly proclaimed the ineffectiveness of the law and of the

¹⁰² John Fuellenbach, *The Kingdom of God, The Message of Jesus Today*, New York 1998, 38.

¹⁰³ Fuellenbach, *The Kingdom of God*, 38-40.

¹⁰⁴ Fuellenbach, *The Kingdom of God*, 40.

covenant that was its basis.”¹⁰⁵ The covenant was seemingly cancelled: “You are not my people and I do not exist for you” (Hos 1,9). When Israel was in exile in Babylon, everything seemed finished. In this hopeless situation, the prophets filled it up with their message of the new things God would do. For them, “this cancellation of the covenant was done not to abandon the people but to open the way for something *new*: ‘I am about to do a new thing’ (Is 43,19).”¹⁰⁶

The new is understood as a break so deep that what follows cannot be understood merely as the continuation of what preceded. However, the new takes its form from the old saving acts: a New Covenant, a New People, and a New Exodus. ... The old must come to an end in order to give way to the new. Yet there is continuity in the discontinuity. ... However, it did begin with the idea of a transformed world which included a renewal from within: a new heart (Ez 36,24-28); a New Covenant (Jer 31,31-34); a New People of God which would include the whole of humankind as expressed in the famous pilgrimage of the nations to Jerusalem (Is 2,1-5f; 19,16-25); the dead who will come to life to participate in the New Creation (Is 26,19; Ez 37).¹⁰⁷

Now what all the people can do is to expect with a hope a decisive intervention of God in the history of Israel that will, once and for all, make the promise of the covenant a true reality. The inclusion in Israel is no longer necessary for salvation because God’s final intervention is “a wholly gratuitous arrangement that relies not on the merits of the people but solely on the mercy of Yahweh.”¹⁰⁸ The entire history of Israel, however, has a typological value: “it signifies the hope of the one who relies on God’s promises (Abraham, Moses, David), and it is fulfilled in Christ.”¹⁰⁹

Christian faith believes that Christ is the culmination of the Old Testament. He is the sum of all promises: “For in Him is found the Yes to all God’s promises” (2 Co

¹⁰⁵ Hamel, “Election/Covenant/Law”, 271.

¹⁰⁶ Fuellenbach, *The Kingdom of God*, 40.

¹⁰⁷ Fuellenbach, *The Kingdom of God*, 40.

¹⁰⁸ Hamel, “Election/Covenant/Law”, 270.

¹⁰⁹ Hamel, “Election/Covenant/Law”, 272.

1,20). "What Christ brings, however, is first of all the visible, tangible and audible presence of 'Emmanuel, God with us' (Mt 1,23)."¹¹⁰ For all the authors of the New Testament, Jesus Christ represents the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The God of Jesus Christ is also the God of the Old Testament. If in the Old Testament the mystery of God's presence is experienced in and through historical events and words, which accompanied them, in the New Testament God's saving presence is expressed in and through the historical person of Jesus Christ. The compassionate love of Jesus of Nazareth symbolically reveals God's love. Furthermore, the person of Jesus manifests to us the reality of God.

"The New Testament speaks of revelation as the making known of a *mysterion* (Rom 16,25; Eph 3,3-4; 6,19; Col 1,27; 2,2; Mark 4,11). For Christian faith, this 'mystery', hidden in God from all eternity, becomes most fully manifested in Jesus."¹¹¹

"No one has ever seen God; it is the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known" (Jn 1,18). In Christ, the *mysterium tremendum* becomes the *mystery of present unconditional love*. "God is love. This is the revelation of God's love for us, that God sent his only Son into the world that we might have life through him. Love consists in this: it is not we who loved God, but God loved us and sent his Son to expiate our sins" (1 Jn 4,8-10).

The revelation of God's love, however, already runs like a thread through the entire story of the Old Testament. Prophets like Hosea and Isaiah witnessed to the deeply personal love of God to Israel. Yet, the radically and unqualified newness of the New Testament is that "this revelation comes through the incarnation of the Son of God

¹¹⁰ Gerald O'Collins, "Love", in René Latourelle and Rino Fisichella, ed., *Dictionary of Fundamental Theology*, New York 1994, 2000², 608.

¹¹¹ Haught, *Mystery and Promise*, 106.

in the midst of humanity. The incarnation introduces the fullness of time, the moment when the rhythm of history rushes headlong as it were and comes to a point in the person of the Word made flesh.”¹¹²

2.2.1. Revelation Through the Way of Incarnation

In the fullness of time, God spoke to humanity in the person of his Son (Heb 1,1-2). God not only enters into history but in order to manifest himself and to communicate his salvific plan he also makes himself history. “He takes to himself what is most unlike him: the body and flesh of a human being, with all the perils and limitation of language, culture and institution.”¹¹³ It is through the body and in the flesh of Jesus Christ that God makes himself present to humanity. It is through and in the Word of God, God made flesh that humanity was able to hear, see, watch and touch the living God (1 Jn 1,1-3). In Jesus Christ, humanity witnesses an event in which God makes himself known. “Since God reveals nothing less than himself, there is a perfect identity between God the revealer and God the revealed. Revelation in the strict sense implies the doctrine of the incarnation.”¹¹⁴

In the beginning was the Word, the Word was with God and the Word was God. ... The Word was the real light that gives light to everyone; he was coming into the world. ... *The Word become flesh*, he lived among us, and we saw his glory, the glory that he has from the Father as only Son of the Father, full of grace and truth. (Jn 1,1.9.14).

¹¹² Latourelle, “Revelation”, 932.

¹¹³ Latourelle, “Revelation”, 932.

¹¹⁴ John O’Donnell, “Trinity and Revelation”, in René Latourelle and Rino Fisichella, ed., *Dictionary of Fundamental Theology*, New York 1994, 2000², 1129.

Taking up Saint John's expression, Christian faith calls "Incarnation" the fact that the Word of God assumed a human nature in order to accomplish God's promises and his salvific plan for humanity and all the cosmos. "God has offered himself to us in immediacy precisely in history and as man, that we may grasp that God, the incomprehensible abyss who we call Father, really has a Logos, that is, really has the possibility of offering his very own self to us in history, and that this God is historically faithful, and in this sense the true One, the Logos."¹¹⁵

Christian faith believes that the creative Word of God, which establishes the world, is the same Word of God that becomes man. There is a process of God's self-giving and self-emptying from creation of the world through history to Incarnation. If God's self-giving creates the world and God's self-humility opens up the historical future as the arena of promise and hope, it is in God's self-emptying that history and humanity find their profound meaning and dignity.

Revelation challenges us to transform our history by submitting ourselves to no other constraints than those to which God has submitted, namely the self-limitation that allows others to be and that therefore permits the mutual relationships that constitute the stuff of history. Such a constraint is known as love. It is not the frustration, but the very condition of genuine historical fulfillment.¹¹⁶

In the person of Jesus of Nazareth, the Word of God which emptied itself taking the form of a slave, becoming as human beings are, and being in every way like a human being (Ph 2,7) and in which God wanted all fullness to be found (Col 1,19), God is revealed as love. Furthermore, God is now disclosed as tri-personal of the communion of love. "The Father is known as the ultimate source of divine life and

¹¹⁵ Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 214.

¹¹⁶ Haught, *Mystery and Promise*, 182.

love. The Son is the perceptible presence of this love. The Holy Spirit is experienced as the Gift of love (Rm 5,5) who moves us toward our eschatological fulfillment."¹¹⁷

It is obvious that God is the subject of revelation and Jesus of Nazareth, born, teaching, preaching, healing, serving, suffering, dying, rising, is the Word of God incarnate, the object of revelation. God himself, in person, manifests and communicates himself concretely in Jesus Christ, the son of Joseph and Mary. Christ's human nature is the tangible expression of God, whom he calls *Abba*, Father. Christ is Son of God even in his humanity. Indeed, the words of Christ are the human words of God; the acts of Christ are the acts of God in the form of human expression. In Christ's love, God's love becomes visible. "If the Son of God becomes incarnate in order to reveal, ... his whole human existence will be completely utilized to reveal the depths of the divine mystery."¹¹⁸

The most important means used by Christ to reveal divine things to men was that of oral speech. The Son of God made Man conversed with men as one of them. He used human words for the daily needs of his life, and to teach doctrines that could be acquired by natural means. He used them equally when he wanted to reveal mysteries of a strictly supernatural nature.¹¹⁹

It is important to place Christ's preaching in the context of prophetic revelation. However, Christ's preaching differed from that of the prophets. Christ did not just speak in the name of God but also in his own name. "I say to you" (Mt 5,22.28.32). "While in the case of the prophets the doctrine was from God, but the words were of the prophets, in the case of Christ the doctrine was from God, and the material words themselves were of God."¹²⁰ Furthermore, Christ's testimony was also different with

¹¹⁷ O'Collins, "Love", 608.

¹¹⁸ Latourelle, *Theology of Revelation*, 363.

¹¹⁹ C. Cassar, *Revelation in the Incarnate Word, Doctrine of St. Thomas*, Malta 1965, 32.

¹²⁰ Cassar, *Revelation in the Incarnate Word*, 54.

that of the prophets. "When speaking of divine mysteries, he could give not just extrinsic testimony to them by affirming the supernatural origin or his knowledge of them, but he could also give intrinsic testimony to their truth by appealing to his own direct vision of them in the divine essence."¹²¹ Whereas formerly God has spoken to us by the prophets, in Jesus Christ he spoke to us in the Son.

2.2.2. Jesus as the Revelation of the Coming Mystery of God

The essential content of Jesus Christ's preaching is the Good News of the Kingdom of God. "The most basic historical fact of Jesus' life is the symbol which dominated all his preaching, the reality that gave meaning to all his activities, that is, the Kingdom of God."¹²² "The time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God is close at hand. Repent, and believe the gospel" (Mk 1,15; Mt 4,17; Lk 4,43).

"Revelation, in the Christian sense at least, is born in the crucible of the Jewish mind, soul, and imagination of the man Jesus of Nazareth with his unique vision of the 'reign of God'.¹²³ Jesus links his preaching of the Kingdom of God to the contemporary standards of expectation of the Kingdom of God and in particular to the message of John the Baptist. In interpreting God's promises that runs from Abraham through the prophets, Jesus "does not uproot previous pattern of hope but instead seeks to transform the traditional images of Israel's understanding of its prospect. He came not to destroy but to fulfill."¹²⁴

¹²¹ Cassar, *Revelation in the Incarnate Word*, 56.

¹²² Fuellenbach, *The Kingdom of God*, 3.

¹²³ Haught, *Mystery and Promise*, 107.

¹²⁴ Haught, *Mystery and Promise*, 115.

When Jesus stood up to read the Isaiah scroll at the beginning of his ministry, he announced, "This text is being fulfilled today even while you are listening" (Lk 4,16-21). Jesus proclaimed that the restoration of Israel to the covenant ideal promised by God from the beginning is now entering into our life in a decisive way, that is, in him. The Kingdom has become a present reality; it is "at hand" (Mk 1,14). It demonstrates its effective presence as a liberating force through exorcisms, healing and forgiving of sins.

Jesus' personal sense of the present and coming Kingdom of God is an opening to and revelation of the divine mystery that embraces all things. Even though the realization of God's future is "not yet" complete, for him the Kingdom of God, that is, "God himself offering his unconditional love to his creatures and giving to each a share in his own life,"¹²⁵ has "already" happened in the historical reality. Jesus' vision teaches us how we should look at reality. It is eventually gracious and compassionate. "For Jesus, nature was filled with God's glory, cosmic generosity, and intensive care. Behind all reality we find a God who cares, who is in love with his creation, and who reaches out to creatures with compassionate solidarity."¹²⁶ In his images and parables, Jesus revealed the image of the God who comes to love us first.

The real content of Jesus' message of the Kingdom consists, therefore, in his image of God: God loves every human being with *unconditional love*. Jesus teaches us three important lessons: God always loves us, God always forgives us, and God is always present with us. Conversion to the Kingdom message of Jesus means, first of all, a conversion to the image of God that Jesus came to proclaim not as a worldview, not as an idea – as brilliant as it may be – but as his vision of reality, something he lived for, worked for, suffered for, died for.¹²⁷

¹²⁵ John Fuellenbach, "Kingdom of God", in René Latourelle and Rino Fisichella, ed., *Dictionary of Fundamental Theology*, New York 1994, 2000², 589.

¹²⁶ Fuellenbach, *The Kingdom of God*, 174.

¹²⁷ Fuellenbach, *The Kingdom of God*, 177-178.

This was Jesus' vision that determined his whole life. He proclaimed the coming Kingdom of God and, at the same time, he manifested God's unconditional love. His own life embodies in action what he proclaims in word. The New Testament clearly describes Jesus' exceptional outpouring of empathy for the poor, the captives, the abandoned, the children and the sick. Having sat down to eat not only with tax-collectors, prostitutes, and other sinners, but also with Pharisees and the wealthy, "he clearly signaled God's unconditional acceptance of them all."¹²⁸

Jesus' deeds, in particular his miracles, visibly incarnated the healing compassion of God. Through his miracles, Jesus wanted to demonstrate that God wants to repair the brokenness of human existence. Healings and exorcisms, as well as forgiveness of sins, demonstrate the presence of God's compassion in the world now. They indicate the kind of world the Kingdom ushers in. When the final intervention of God arrives, sickness and disease simply must disappear. When John the Baptist sent his disciples to ask him: "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to expect someone else?" Jesus answered: "Go back and tell John what you hear and see, the blind see again, and the lame walk, those suffering from virulent skin-diseases are cleaned, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised to life and the good news is proclaimed to the poor" (Mt 11,4-5). The kingdom of God is nothing other than justice, peace, and joy in the Spirit of love (Rm 14,17).

In the person of Jesus of Nazareth, God's unconditional love became visible and tangible. Jesus' words and deeds are no other than the revelation of God's gracious and unconditional love for everyone. Jesus' life is also a call to turn toward God's love,

¹²⁸ Haught, *Mystery and Promise*, 120.

the only security we can trust, "by making room for the incongruous, the unqualified, and the disparate within the dimensions of a single religious society under God's fatherhood."¹²⁹ The person of Jesus becomes the crucial factor for acceptance or rejection in the eschatological Kingdom of God, which is at once "a gracious gift from God and the task for human beings."¹³⁰ "Those who let the Kingdom into their life by becoming children of God will have to show the presence of the Kingdom by working to make all human beings their brothers and sisters."¹³¹

Here, the ultimate root of Jesus' Kingdom message should be regarded as his unique experience of God as *Abba*, Father. Jesus, in his prayers, addresses God directly with the word "Father" (Lk 10,21; Jn 11,41). Father expresses closeness to God because it is an intimate familiar term. For Jesus, the ultimate character of God's mystery is nothing other than the most intimate and inclusive love. Jesus lived in the conviction that God is love, as a father knows very well his son and gives whatever his son needs (cf. Lk 11,9-13). "By using this word Jesus reveals the heart of his relationship with God: the simple trust and confidence with which a little child comes to a father who is known, loved, and trusted."¹³²

"No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known" (Jn 1,18). In John's Gospel "Father" becomes the title for God. It denoted the particular relationship of Jesus to God. "The Father and I are one" (Jn 10,30). Jesus Christ is the Son of God incarnate. In and through the Word become flesh, human beings know who God is. To put it in the context of God's

¹²⁹ Haught, *Mystery and Promise*, 120.

¹³⁰ Fuellenbach, "Kingdom of God", 589.

¹³¹ Fuellenbach, *The Kingdom of God*, 100.

¹³² Fuellenbach, *The Kingdom of God*, 282.

mysterious promise in the history of salvation, Incarnation reveals to us at once God's mystery and the human's mystery: who God is and who the human is.

The point of our dwelling on Jesus as the Christ, then, is to bring us a clear sense of the meaning of the mystery of God revealed in him. Perhaps nowhere does the character of this promising mystery present itself more graciously, extravagantly, and surprisingly than in Jesus' exhortation to think of God as "Abba."¹³³

The word *Abba* encompasses the whole message and claim of Jesus: He came to lead us into a relationship with God that would be most adequately expressed with the word *Abba*. The astonishing point is that Jesus authorized his disciples to repeat the word *Abba* after him. We are called to share in this sonship and empowered to speak with our heavenly Father in the familiar and trusting way as a child would to a father. This is the new relationship which opens the door to God's Kingdom. Jesus leads his disciples into an intimacy with God expressed most adequately by being able to address God as *Abba*. What this means in reality is expressed very well in Galatians 4, 6 and Romans 8, 15. Both remarks show us that the cry of *Abba* is beyond all human capabilities and is only possible within the new relationship with God given by his Son. ... It is *the* gift of the New Age we are entering now – a totally new relationship with God – a relationship that only the Holy Spirit can adequately express in us.¹³⁴

2.2.3. The Death and Resurrection: God's Ultimate Revelation

Christian faith believes and confesses that Jesus Christ is the Son of God who has become man for the sake of humankind's salvation. Jesus Christ is both and equally God and man. In the Incarnation the Son of God identified with human beings. Although without sin, he took upon himself humanity's broken existence in a history of the loss of human intimacy with God, broken relationships among humans, and the painful relation of humanity to the non-human world.

¹³³ Haught, *Mystery and Promise*, 121.

¹³⁴ Fullenbach, *The Kingdom of God*, 282-283.

In the context of his concrete contemporary situation, Jesus announced his Gospel concerning the coming of the eschatological Kingdom of God. In addressing his Good news to those who were not only in but also outside the diverse systems, he indicated that sacred restrictions now had to be extended beyond what was conventional. The Kingdom that is already present in this world in the concrete life of Jesus is intended for all and includes total reality with all its dimensions: personal and social, religious and political, particular and universal. The Kingdom aims at the transformation of all human reality including all of creation. It encompasses everything.

Jesus' life was totally oriented by his vision of the future Kingdom of God. His life was ruled by two inseparable principles. He was totally dedicated to his Father: "My food is to do the will of the one who sent me and to complete his work" (Jn 4,34) and was totally dedicated to his mission, that is, to us: "No one can have greater love than to lay down his life for his friends" (Jn 15,13).¹³⁵ In order to manifest his vision of the unconditional love that saves human beings, Jesus called disciples to follow him and formed a community of love around him. Besides sharing companionship with his disciples and with people they never thought he would even sit down with (Mk 2,15-17, cf. Lk 14,12-24), Jesus also revealed a preference for the poor, the detested, and the marginalized. By associating with sinners and outcasts, he dismantled all non-inclusive arrangements of his contemporary social and religious reality. In order to enact the Kingdom, furthermore, Jesus interpreted in a new manner the great Jewish tradition of the Torah. By being faithful and free regarding the Torah, his interpretative key is the love that is the heart of the eschatological Kingdom of God.

¹³⁵ Fuellenbach, *The Kingdom of God*, 222.

Jesus was perfectly aware that in his earthly life the Kingdom of God was at once a present realization, an expectation and a coming. However, Jesus who saw himself in line with the prophets of Israel could foresee quite early the consequences of his mission, that is, the trials of suffering and persecution as part of the hidden character of the Kingdom of God. Indeed, He accepted the mystery of his passion as a part of his message and interpreted his death for that reason. "The eschatological perspective of Jesus' death is evident in the passages dealing with the Last Supper (Mk 14,17-25 and 1 Co 11,23-25)."¹³⁶ Even though the Gospels narrated that Jesus was afraid and even horrified when he thought of the death which was to come (Jn 12,27; Lk 22,44; Mk 15,34), he remained faithful to his mission. "He was humbler yet, even to accepting death, death on the cross" (Ph 2,8). Here the Incarnate Son has completely assumed the human condition of estrangement from God as an extreme consequence of sin but, at the same time, as a free surrender of self to the incomprehensible mystery of God's unconditional compassionate love.

The most surprising aspect of the Christian revelation regarding death is that God has turned death into a mystery of Christ's love for the Father and, at the same time, a mystery of the Father's love for Christ and, through him, for all human beings. Human death has become a saving event for Christ and for the world. Christ does not deny death but gives it its deepest meaning. Christ has an experiential knowledge of our death with all its menacing darkness, with its power shattered, its agony, its utter confusion and human helplessness. More than any other human being, Christ experienced a death marked by utter solitude, indescribable bodily sufferings, humiliations, and complete failure. He was spared nothing of the destruction death brings to human existence.

But Christ also gave death its true reality and deepest meaning. Death, which is the concrete manifestation of humanity's sin and its alienation from God, becomes in Christ the supreme expression of submission to God. Both sin and love here reach their maximum effectiveness. At the very moment when the sin of human beings finds its climactic expression by crucifying the Just One, the death of Christ becomes the Son's loving embrace as he surrenders himself to

¹³⁶ Fuellenbach, *The Kingdom of God*, 228-229.

the Father. Love thus finds its climactic embodiment, for Jesus keeps covenant with the Father to the very end: "You are my God." By this complete surrender to and trust in the Father, Christ conquered death. It is this gift of self to the mystery of God who is love, in acceptance of failure on the cross, that has given a meaning to human life as finally "fulfilled" in death. Without losing the element of darkness, death becomes something quite different, namely, a surrender of the whole person to God in order to share God's life.¹³⁷

Jesus died as a saving sacrifice to a universal vision of a future for humans, for the cosmos, and we may even say, for God. It is in the suffering and death in the crucifixion of Jesus that the fundamental content of revelation is nothing other than ultimate self-communication of God in love that opens up the future to a widespread vision promised in the resurrection. "What finally becomes manifest in Jesus, and especially in his death, is that the promising mystery that embraces our world is, at heart, utterly self-emptying love."¹³⁸

The cross is not the revelation of a revengeful God. On the contrary, it reveals two essential realities. First, it manifests the immensity and incomprehensibility of God's love as compassionate love. Compassionate love means that God did not redeem the world by reaching down from on high and pulling us to heaven. Rather, God "came down from heaven," entering into our human misery by experiencing it to the ultimate limits. In experiencing the effect of sin as condemnation God, in Jesus Christ, took on the destiny of a human kind alienated from its own being. "He descended into hell!" These are the "eschatological tribulations" which had to be endured for the Kingdom finally to come in full glory. Second, the cross reveals the utter hopelessness of our human condition as sinners who have rejected God's love. The cross tells us what sin really is. God redeemed the world in Jesus by taking on all the consequences of our free decisions against God; God suffered our state. By going to the limit God went ahead of us and caught us in our fall before we would smash to pieces.¹³⁹

¹³⁷ René Latourelle, "Death", in René Latourelle and Rino Fisichella, ed., *Dictionary of Fundamental Theology*, New York 1994, 2000², 212-213.

¹³⁸ Haught, *Mystery and Promise*, 123.

¹³⁹ Fuellenbach, *The Kingdom of God*, 232.

Here we are dealing with the profound revelation of the very notion of God. The New Testament presents the Easter experiences: the disciples' encounters with the risen Christ and confirming sign of his empty tomb. Having experienced the meetings with Jesus gloriously alive, the disciples believed and testified that God had already raised Jesus from the dead to a new and glorious life. "You had crucified and killed Jesus, but God raised him to life" (Ac 2,24). "God is a God of the living, and the dead no longer appear to have a relationship to the God of life."¹⁴⁰

"The first Christians identified and worshipped their God as a God of resurrection."¹⁴¹ By entering into and appropriating relationlessness in Jesus' death, God manifests ultimately his self-humbling and "with it the promise of ultimate reconciliation and unity that arises out of the unbroken love that gives itself away completely and by doing so manifests itself as the ground of all life and relationship."¹⁴² "The resurrection of the crucified Jesus is *the* truth about God from which everything else follows."¹⁴³ It also revealed and illuminated Christ's inseparable relationship with God, whom he had called *Abba*, Father. In the mysterious event of the incarnate and crucified Son of God risen from the dead, the self-manifestation of God reached its climax. It is the definitive high point of God's self-revelation.

¹⁴⁰ Haught, *Mystery and Promise*, 125.

¹⁴¹ Gerald O'Collins, *Interpreting Jesus*, New York 2000, 109.

¹⁴² Haught, *Mystery and Promise*, 125.

¹⁴³ Gerald O'Collins, "Paschal Mystery II: Resurrection of Jesus", in René Latourelle and Rino Fisichella, ed., *Dictionary of Fundamental Theology*, New York 1994, 2000², 773.

3. Jesus Christ: The Summit of Revelation

Christian revelation is God's self-manifestation and self-communication that at once happens in history and opens this history in the universal vision towards the absolute future. The dialectic of promise and fulfillment that marks God's self-communication in history which begins with God's summons of election to Abraham and continues along in the history of Israel finds its peak and irreversible finality in the historical Jesus Christ. "When God freely steps outside of himself in self-communication (not merely through creation, positing other realities which are not himself), it is and must be the Son who appears historically in the flesh as man."¹⁴⁴

Around A.D. 28 Jesus of Nazareth, whose mother was named Mary and his putative father Joseph, undertook the "unusual role of an itinerant celibate layman" and consciously chose the ministry of an itinerant prophet of the end time proclaiming the imminent arrival of the Kingdom of God.¹⁴⁵ His public ministry took its beginning from the public ministry of John the Baptist who proclaimed an imminent final judgment of God to all Israel that was to be inaugurated by one who was coming. Having been baptized by John the Baptist, Jesus inaugurated his own public ministry to proclaim the imminent coming of the Kingdom of God. Still being in the line of his mentor's message, Jesus "conjured up in his audience's imagination the whole biblical drama of God's kingly rule over his creation and over his people Israel."¹⁴⁶

It was God the King who in the beginning had called order out of chaos, who had saved a ragtag group of refugees from the slavery of Egypt and chosen them as his people Israel, who had exiled and scattered his people for their sins,

¹⁴⁴ Karl Rahner, *The Trinity*, New York 1997, 86.

¹⁴⁵ Cf. John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jewish, Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, Vol. 2, New York 1994, 1039-1041.

¹⁴⁶ Meier, *A Marginal Jewish*, 1042.

and who now in this last hour was gathering, healing, and forgiving his people in preparation for final judgment and final salvation.¹⁴⁷

Moreover, Jesus proclaimed and celebrated the imminent arrival of God's kingly rule and reign already present in his person, in his life and, ultimately in his death followed by his resurrection. People really encountered the mysterious power of a God who gathers, heals and forgives in Jesus. Jesus Christ revealed and presented the final judgment and the final salvation as the profound mystery of the compassionate God whose promise is coming to fulfillment. Jesus' ministry and message mediated God's revelation whose content is the love and fidelity of God. That Jesus' life is the true revelation of God is made explicit by the new act of God, that is, by raising him from the dead. Resurrection as a part of Jesus' life is "God's confirming and validating Jesus' life."¹⁴⁸ Resurrection is "God's declaration that Jesus' life is a true revelation of God."¹⁴⁹

The early Christian community that experienced the rising Christ was convinced that the person of Jesus symbolically reveals to us the reality of God whose love is unconditional, unlimited and universal. "He is the image of the unseen God, the first-born of all creation (Col 1,15). "He is the reflection of God's glory and bears the impress of God's own being (Heb 1,3). "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father (Jn 14,9). "For Christian faith, this 'mystery', hidden in God from all eternity, becomes most fully manifested in Jesus. ... Jesus himself is the primary sacrament of our encounter with the divine mystery of promise. ... Jesus is the 'Christ,' the Word of

¹⁴⁷ Meier, *A Marginal Jewish*, 1042.

¹⁴⁸ Roger Haight, *Jesus Symbol of God*, New York 2001, 150.

¹⁴⁹ Haight, *Jesus Symbol of God*, 151.

God, God's self-revelation."¹⁵⁰ Jesus Christ manifests the transcendent God who acts in history and, at the same time, communicates an unconditional love that creates new relationships and opens into the promising *shalom* that encompasses everything in the Spirit.

Since the resurrection of Jesus, the Kingdom of God that symbolizes the present God and his saving compassion is present in the Holy Spirit. Saint John in his Gospel narrates that before going to the Father, Jesus pledges the coming of the Spirit of truth who will lead to the complete truth (Jn 16,13). The coming of the Holy Spirit is also presented by a series of texts from Acts that communicate the close connection between the risen Christ and the Holy Spirit whom he promises to his apostles. "But you will receive the power of the Holy Spirit which will come on you, and then you will be my witnesses not only in Jerusalem but throughout Judea and Samaria, and indeed to earth's remotest end" (Ac 1,8). Jesus' promise is fulfilled at Pentecost. "They were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak different languages as the Spirit gave them power to express themselves" (Ac 2,4).

Christian faith believes that the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of God who is the source of all being and life, already present since the beginning of the world (cf. Ps 33,6; 104,29-30; Gn 1,2; 2,7) and the Spirit of prophecy who rests predominantly upon Moses and the prophets. For the New Testament, the Spirit who in the Old Testament is experienced as God's present and active power in the midst of the people "is intrinsically bound up with the historical Jesus."¹⁵¹ The whole life of Jesus from his birth, baptism and ministry until his death and resurrection is intimately linked to the

¹⁵⁰ Haught, *Mystery and Promise*, 106.

¹⁵¹ Fuellenbach, *The Kingdom of God*, 240.

Holy Spirit. "The final coming of the Kingdom was present for Jesus because the Spirit of the eschatological age was active in and through him."¹⁵² Thus, in order to continue his mission, the risen Christ sent from the Father the Holy Spirit as "the first fruit of Jesus' death out of love for us."¹⁵³ In other words, the outpouring of the Spirit of truth and of love is the result of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection so that the Kingdom that is "already" present in the person of Jesus Christ makes itself present and at work now in the world. This is true especially in the sacramental community of hope, the Church, which reaches towards the eschatological fullness of the Kingdom of God, when "God may be all in all" (1 Co 15,28).

However, God's self-revelation in history and through history and grows towards its eschatological fullness is "a love story that comes 'a Patre per Filium in Spiritu Sancto ad Patrem'."¹⁵⁴ The subject of revelation is the Father. The content of revelation is the Son. The power of revelation is the Holy Spirit who teaches and reminds us of everything the Son has said (Jn 14,26). He will guide humanity into all the truth by continually drawing out Jesus' revelation (Jn 16,13-14). The Father reveals himself by means of "the two hands" (see Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* 5.6.1). "The divine self-communication occurs in unity and distinction in history (of the truth) and in the spirit (of love)."¹⁵⁵

If hence the Son becomes incarnate in history, the Spirit it is who opens history to eschatology by making Christ the eschatological being, the Last Adam. Thus, by operation of the Spirit, the unique event of Christ acquires an abiding presence; his saving power crosses every latitude and extends to every hour of history. But the fulfillment wrought by the Spirit with regard to Christ must be

¹⁵² Fuellenbach, *The Kingdom of God*, 242.

¹⁵³ Fuellenbach, *The Kingdom of God*, 243.

¹⁵⁴ Francesco Lambiasi, "Holy Spirit", in René Latourelle and Rino Fisichella, ed., *Dictionary of Fundamental Theology*, New York 1994, 2000², 456.

¹⁵⁵ Rahner, *The Trinity*, 99.

rightly understood. It is not something added from outside, for nothing is lacking to the work of Christ, and in him all has been performed to perfection (cf. Jn 19,30); the Spirit makes universal the redemption by completing it from within, i.e., by interiorizing it. 'To accomplish this goal (the universal spreading of salvation to the ends of the earth and the end of time), Christ sent the Holy Spirit from the Father. The Spirit was to carry out his saving work inwardly' (AG 4).¹⁵⁶

"The sending of the Spirit is the eschatological event beginning the new time preparatory to the day of the Lord."¹⁵⁷ We are now in the end-time. After his death and resurrection, Jesus was no longer the only testimony to faith in the compassionate God whom he called Father. Like God himself, he had become the object of faith: Jesus himself was proclaimed as the Lord and Messiah, the Son of God. Jesus Christ is both the revealing mystery and the revealed mystery, both the mediator and the fullness of revelation. "All that God wanted to tell humanity about the mystery of God and the mystery of the human person has been said completely in the total and definitive word that is the Word of God."¹⁵⁸

3.1. Jesus Christ: The Word of God

Christian teaching declares that because of his basic and original orientation towards absolute mystery, which constitutes his fundamental experience of God, man can enter into the mystery of God through the objective medium of creation and human reason (Denz. 3015). "The knowledge of God through the contemplation of the created world

¹⁵⁶ Lambiasi, "Holy Spirit", 456.

¹⁵⁷ Haight, *Jesus Symbol of God*, 165.

¹⁵⁸ Latourelle, "Revelation", 936.

is revelation in a certain sense; for it is a gift of God and a manifestation of God which calls for religious homage on the part of man.”¹⁵⁹

However, “apart from what natural reason can attain,” according to the First Vatican Council, there are proposed to man “mysteries that are hidden in God, which can never be known unless they are revealed by God” (Denz. 3015). That is the mystery of “the grace and truth that have come through Jesus Christ” (Jn 1,17). It is, using Saint Paul’s expression, nothing other than “the mysterious wisdom of God ... that was hidden, which God predestined for our glory before the ages began, ... To us, though, God has given revelation through the Spirit, for the Spirit explores the depths of everything, even the depths of God” (1 Co 2,7-10). Of this revelation, the Second Vatican Council writes: “in his goodness and wisdom God chose to reveal himself and to make known to us the hidden purpose of his will (cf. Eph 1,9) by which through Christ, the Word made flesh, man might in the Holy Spirit have access to the Father and come to share in the divine nature (cf. Eph 2,18; 2 Pt 1,4)” (DV 2).

The living God has spoken to humanity.¹⁶⁰ The experience of hearing the word of God is the great fact that dominates both the Old and New Testament. In the Old Testament, “the expression ‘Word of Yahweh’ remains a favorite expression, the most

¹⁵⁹ Latourelle, *Theology of Revelation*, 337.

¹⁶⁰ “We are talking about a God who used a unique code of communication that was capable of assuming the multiformity necessary to express an infinite number of resonances. We are speaking, in fact, of “the Word of God”, but in an analogical sense. It differs from all human words. It reveals itself as a word containing many meanings, which directs itself toward the physical senses of human beings, but also toward their internal senses. It is a word that also manifests itself under the form of the physical elements: thunder, lightning, wind, and fire. His word reveals, but at the same time obscures. It cannot be completely reduced to simple meanings of verbal communication in that it is the word that is “generative”, not only of meanings but also of things and events, and at the same time is an image, vision, feeling, encounter, and action that burst forth in history and shape its course irrevocably, thereby defining the will of the sender and the disposition that the receiver must adopt in order to be attuned to it. This is what appears in a clear way from the very moment in which words and action are based on the manifestation of this complex system of signs that determines the dynamic of evolution with regard to God’s plan of salvation, and in particular of those signs that mark the basic stages and then cast light upon daily life, giving it a new meaning.” (Carnicella, “Communication”, 188.)

frequent and the most significant to express the divine communication.”¹⁶¹ God’s call and promise to Abraham is presented as a pure act of speaking on the part of God (Gn 12). Through his word God presents himself as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and to Moses reveals his saving promise for Israel (Ex 3,6-10). “In the revelation on Sinai, the whole burden of the story rests on the word of God.”¹⁶² And in the prophetic revelation, the most obvious feature of prophecy is the prophet’s intimacy with the word of God. The prophets are presented as witnesses of the word of God. In the Old Testament God was the one who communicated his mystery and wisdom, through the events followed by the words. The New Testament discerns that the analogy of the word receives its full and strict completion in Jesus Christ. In Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Word incarnate, preaches to human beings and testifies to what he has seen and heard in the bosom of the Father.

In the beginning was the Word: the Word was with God and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things came into being, not one thing came into being except through him. ... The Word became flesh, he lived among us, and we saw his glory, the glory that he has from the Father as only Son of the father, full of grace and truth. (Jn 1, 1-3. 14)

Saint John recognized in the historic person of Christ the Word of God which fills the Old Testament. Based on the experience of encountering God’s presence in Jesus (1 Jn 1,1), St. John presents Jesus Christ as the Logos of God incarnate, the only Son of the Father. For John, the Logos is the person who distinctly pre-existed with God. It is in the beginning that “by the word of Yahweh the heavens were made” (Ps 33,6; cf. Ws 9,1). For John, finally, the creative word, which comes to the prophets, has now become flesh and lived among humankind. God speaks to us in the person of his

¹⁶¹ Latourelle, *Theology of Revelation*, 21.

¹⁶² Latourelle, *Theology of Revelation*, 21.

Son (Heb 1,1). Christian faith claims that it is God who is 'encountered in Jesus, in the flesh, so that God is truly revealed in him.

In Jesus Christ, God "becomes the God who, now incarnate, meets humankind 'face to face', thereby overcoming the inequality of the different natures by communicating in such a way as not to leave any room for uncertainty; now, in fact, sender and receiver are in the same spatio-temporal dimension."¹⁶³ Jesus Christ is God's gift of self to humanity in total giving of oneself in a reciprocal exchange and indwelling of love. "Christ is not only the one who conveys God's message, as in the case of the prophets; he is that message itself, which is made visible in a concrete way in his taking human flesh and assuming the countenance of humankind."¹⁶⁴ In the Incarnate Word, the Son of God, humanity finds a unique and repeatable experience of God's self-communication in history.

3.2. Jesus Christ: The Testimony to the Father

Revelation is essentially the self-manifestation and self-communication of the personal mystery of God. "God is interiority *par excellence*, the personal and sovereign Being whose mystery can be known only through *testimony*."¹⁶⁵ However, only God can give an absolute guarantee to his testimony. That is why God, out of his abundant love and unfathomable wisdom, sent his beloved Son to the world to testify to God's personal mystery and plan of glory.

¹⁶³ Carnicella, "Communication", 188.

¹⁶⁴ Carnicella, "Communication", 188.

¹⁶⁵ Latourelle, *Theology of Revelation*, 323.

In and through Jesus' life, we may know that God is personal. He it is who attends to everything, the Creator of heaven and earth. He it is who acts in history; the Savior is with the people. In Jesus, God is both transcendence and immanence. In Jesus, this God is the Father. "This fatherhood is rooted in the exceptional and unique meaning assigned to the establishment of the relation between Jesus as Son and God as Father."¹⁶⁶ "Everything has been entrusted to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, just as no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him (Mt 11,27).

Jesus Christ is the faithful witness (Rv 1,5; 3,14); "for Christ to testify amounts to manifesting and revealing the Father."¹⁶⁷ The whole of Jesus' words and deeds is the testimony to the heavenly Father. In other words, Christ bears witness by his whole being and throughout his total existence. However, in his case, to testify to the Father is "to reveal himself, to make himself known – to make known what he is and whence he comes, namely, from the Father."¹⁶⁸

"The Father and I are one" (Jn 10,30). Christ is conscious that his power to do his work is non other than the Father's power because the Father is in him and he is in the Father (cf. Jn 10,38). The life of Jesus testifies to his consciousness of a filial relationship with God whom he calls "my Father". His actions and his words imply an authority that surpasses that of the prophets and belongs to God alone. In fact, Christ's scandalous message meets with denial and the Jews reject his testimony. However, he does not want to disavow the experience of his identity as Son of the Father, even

¹⁶⁶ José Caba, "Abba, Father", in René Latourelle and Rino Fisichella, ed., *Dictionary of Fundamental Theology*, New York 1994, 2000², 1.

¹⁶⁷ René Latourelle, "Testimony I: Form of Revelation", in René Latourelle and Rino Fisichella, ed., *Dictionary of Fundamental Theology*, New York 1994, 2000², 1049.

¹⁶⁸ Latourelle, "Testimony I: Form of Revelation", 1050.

though his testimony has to be sealed with his blood in the cross. "Christ is the witness who carries in himself the guarantee of his testimony."¹⁶⁹

"If this revelation reaches its climax on the cross, the reason is that the cross brings the supreme revelation of Christ, i.e., of the incomparable love of the Father for human beings, a love manifested in the incomparable love of Christ for those who belong to him."¹⁷⁰ God is love. Roger Haight notes three characteristics about the loving God revealed by Jesus which appear paradoxical, but are not, because they describe an infinite love:¹⁷¹ 1) God's love is universal, without conditions and all inclusive; 2) God's love reaches to individuals and includes compassion, mercy and forgiveness; 3) God's love is partiality for the poor and others who are weak and marginalized. Jesus Christ is testimony to the Father, "a God who is anthropocentric," that is, a God who is for humanity, as creator and thus one who is intrinsically interested and concerned about the well being of what God creates."¹⁷² The whole life of Jesus Christ testifies to God the Father as salvation for human beings and the whole universe.

3.3. Jesus Christ: The Encounter between the Trinity and the Human Being

"Although revelation includes the idea of 'knowledge' of God, it reaches beyond it to the experience of meeting or encountering God. Thus ... revelation is salvation, and salvation is constituted by revelation."¹⁷³ When the divine Son and Word testify to the

¹⁶⁹ Latourelle, "Testimony I: Form of Revelation", 1050.

¹⁷⁰ Latourelle, "Testimony I: Form of Revelation", 1050.

¹⁷¹ Haight, *Jesus Symbol of God*, 115-116.

¹⁷² Haight, *Jesus Symbol of God*, 116.

¹⁷³ Haight, *Jesus Symbol of God*, 344.

Father, there is nothing other but salvation for humanity. The son's sending by the Father and his incarnation had as their goal the salvation of the world (Jn 3,17).

Revelation of this kind already constitutes a reconciliation between God and human existence, a restoration of union and fellowship with God. Jesus makes present God's self in a second act of love over and above the love of God the creator. Jesus saves because Jesus is God's being for human beings, God's turning in freedom to be with human beings. ... Jesus is God entering into a personal conversation, interchange, and communion with human beings. Jesus Christ is God with us and this is salvation.¹⁷⁴

Jesus Christ is salvation by being the testimony to and the symbol for an encounter with God who is love. The Gospel tells us that the saving Kingdom of God is already present in the person of Jesus Christ because the entire life of Jesus is oriented to the Father's love and filled with the loving power of Spirit. The entire relation of the incarnate Son with the Father presumes in the first place the mediation of the Holy Spirit. In the whole life of Jesus of Nazareth, there is a real encounter between the Father who loves the Son, the Son who receives the Father's love, and the Holy Spirit who is love itself. It is obvious that the trinitarian communion of love for us is established in the Incarnation that reaches its culmination in the death and resurrection of the human form of the incarnate Son. "It was the Father – in response to Jesus' faithfulness until death – who raised Jesus to glory through the Spirit who gives life (Rm 8,11; Eph 1,19-20; 1 Co 6,14; 2 Co 13,4)."¹⁷⁵

As the Father is present to the world for its salvation through the sending and death of the Son, and as his fatherly love is thus revealed, the Son has actualized the deity of God in the world and glorified in it God's name and kingly rule. Certainly this glorifying in the world presupposes constant glorifying in God's eternity. Yet in the world the kingly rule of the Father is first glorified by the Son and Spirit as the incarnate Son, by obedience to his mission, glorifies the name of the Father among us, and as the Spirit teaches us to see herein the mission of the obedient Son. Since we cannot separate the

¹⁷⁴ Haight, *Jesus Symbol of God*, 344

¹⁷⁵ Fuellenbach, *The Kingdom of God*, 243.

deity of God from his royal lordship, it follows that the irruption of the future of this lordship in the work of the Son has as its content the absolute reality of God in and for the world. Because, however, the sending of the Son and the Spirit is from the Father, in relation to the fulfillment of the mission by the obedience of the Son and the work of the Spirit, we thus may speak of a self-actualization of the trinitarian God in the world.¹⁷⁶

The mystery of Incarnation, moreover, not only reveals the mystery of God's loving communion to human beings but also the mystery of the inclusion of all humankind within the eternal love which God so loved the world as to give his own Son (Jn 3,16). In the historical Jesus, humankind experiences God's loving presence and God's internal transformative power personally and, therefore, man can respond to such a personal initiative. "The Incarnation of God is the unique and highest instance of the actualization of the essence of human reality, which consists in this: that man is insofar as he abandons himself to the absolute mystery whom we call God."¹⁷⁷

In the Incarnation, the human being is caught up into the mystery of divine love. In Jesus' case, "the humanity of Jesus is created by the Logos and united with the Logos in one and the same act. As a created reality, the humanity of Jesus is fully autonomous. As the humanity of the Logos, the humanity is God's own humanity."¹⁷⁸ Here, the humanity of Jesus is drawn by the Spirit into the mystery of divine love so that his humanity participates in God's own love. However, Christ, the witness par excellence, not only reveals to human beings their condition as children of God but also initiates them into this kind of new life by himself living as Son in their midst and before their eyes and, after his death and resurrection, pouring into their hearts the Holy Spirit. In Jesus Christ, we are children of God, because God has sent into our hearts the

¹⁷⁶ Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology* vol. 2, Edinburgh 1994, 392-393.

¹⁷⁷ Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 218.

¹⁷⁸ O'Donnell, "Trinity and Revelation", 1132.

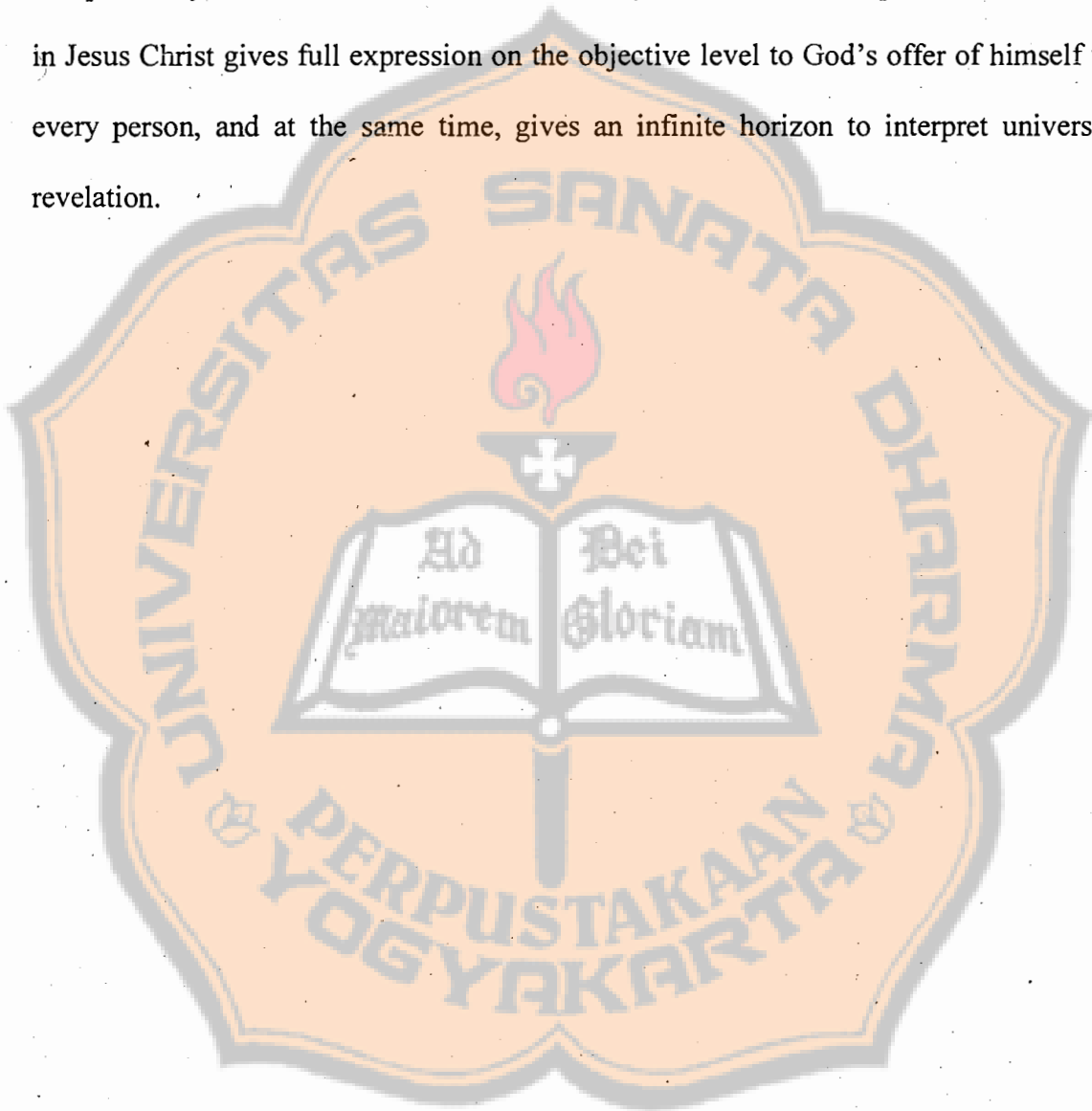
Spirit of his Son who enables us to cry out “*Abba, Father*” (Rm 8,15; Ga 4,6; Jn 1,22; 3,1-2).

4. Conclusion

Revelation in the history of salvation, in the Christian faith, is first of all the economy of self-gift of God and the self-manifestation of God to humanity in history that reaches its fulfillment in the historical Jesus of Nazareth. Christian faith believes and proclaims that the mystery of God’s offer of himself to the world and humanity has its profound and tangible expression in and through the mystery of the incarnate and risen Word of God. Jesus Christ is at once God the revealer and God revealed. The true God whom he preached is the God announced by him and recognized in him, so that in confessing the Son we confess also the Father and the Holy Spirit. Christ is at once God who speaks and God who is spoken of, witness and object of testimony, he who reveals the mystery and the mystery itself in person. He makes known what God is (the mysterious-incomprehensible personal communion of love among the Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit) and what we are (sinners reconciled as children of God who are invited to share in God’s loving communion). Jesus Christ is at once the fullness of revelation and the perfect response of humanity to revelation.

In and through Jesus Christ, moreover, it is clear that the center of Christian revelation, which is first of all a gift of God, lies in the mystery of God’s self-emptying love. It is in the *kenosis* of the Son of God (Ph 2,6-11) that the mystery of God’s self-withdrawal in creation of the universe and God’s self-absenting that opens to historical existence arrives to its ultimate and profound expression. Only on the basis of the

actual creative and salvific event of God's unconditional love in the crucified man, Jesus of Nazareth, can we build our hope for history's ultimate fulfillment. In other words, in the mystery of the incarnate Word of God, the vision of God that opens possibilities of the unfolding of the world and that gives the meaning of history is accepted fully. In the last observation, we can say that the historical personal revelation in Jesus Christ gives full expression on the objective level to God's offer of himself to every person, and at the same time, gives an infinite horizon to interpret universal revelation.



CHAPTER III

ISLAMIC DOCTRINE ON REVELATION:

QUR'ĀN AS REVELATION

“The Quran for the Muslim is the revelation of God and the book in which His message to man is contained. It is the Word of God revealed to the Prophet through the archangel Gabriel. ... Not only the content and meaning comes from God but also the container and form which are thus an integral aspect of the revelation.”¹ Muslims look upon the Qur'ān as the very words of God himself, which convey God's knowledge and will, warning and promise to humanity. In fact, the Qur'ān has a place of unequalled importance at the very heart of Muslim religious life and practice.

This chapter attempts to describe the Islamic doctrine on revelation as Muslims understand and live it. In order to present the Islamic faith in the Qur'ān as revelation, in the context of our study, we will utilize a phenomenological approach. This approach may assist us to reach a sympathetic intellectual understanding and appreciation of the Qur'ān as Muslims have experienced it. Moreover, this approach - as far as it conforms to the ideal approach based on an interpretation of the Qur'ān and

¹ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Ideals and Realities of Islam*, New Delhi 1979, 42.

Sunna - is well accepted in Muslim intellectual circles. Fazlur Rahman affirms, "I welcome the phenomenological approach with the provision that its users recognize the Qur'ān and Sunna as normative criterion-referents for all expressions and understanding of Islam."²

In this chapter we shall first of all observe the scriptural text of the Qur'ān, which Muslims currently possess. Without exception, Muslims regard the text in their possession today as comprising the revelations given to the Prophet Muhammad over the last twenty-two years of his life (from 610 to 632 C.E.). The Prophet, for the Muslim, was the Messenger (*rasūl*) chosen by God to deliver the Qur'ān to mankind.³ In order to understand the text of the Qur'ān, therefore, it is important to give attention to the prophetic experience through and from which historically the Qur'ān came to be, was written down, and became the canonical scripture or Holy Book of the Muslim community.

However, we shall not limit our study to the documental text of the Qur'ān only. As William Graham has pointed out, "a more adequate understanding of scripture has to include an awareness that it refers not simply to a text but always to a text in its relationship to an ongoing tradition, that is, in its relationship to persons and communities of faith for whom it is sacred and normative."⁴ Therefore, after respectfully examining the content of the Qur'ān, we shall examine the central role of the Qur'ān in the lives of Muslims.

² Fazlur Rahman, "Approaches to Islam in Religious Studies: Review Essay", in Richard C. Martin, ed., *Approaches to Islam in Religious Studies*, Tucson 1985, (reprinted in Oxford 2001), 198.

³ "When in any Islamic language one says *the* Prophet, it means Muhammad – whose name as such is never iterated except that as a courtesy it be followed by the formula '*Sall' Allāhu 'alaihi wa sallam*', that is, 'may God's blessing and salutation be upon him'." (Nasr, *Ideals and Realities of Islam*, 67.)

⁴ William A. Graham, "Qur'ān as Spoken Word, An Islamic Contribution to the Understanding of Scripture", in Richard C. Martin, ed., *Approaches to Islam in Religious Studies*, Tucson 1985, (reprinted in Oxford 2001), 27.

1. The Text of the Qur'ān

The Qur'ān is the founding text of Islam. It is a complex work consisting of the revelations given by God through the angel Gabriel to the Prophet. According to the Islamic community, there is a close relationship between the Qur'ān and the personal history of the Prophet.⁵ Muhammad was born in Mecca at 570 C.E. His father, 'Abd Allāh, is said to have died while his mother, Aminah bint Wahb, was still pregnant. Since he was about six years old when his mother died, he was raised by his grandfather 'Abd al-Muttalib, and later by Abū Tālib, his uncle and later protector. The Qur'ān is seen as confirming his early days of loss, poverty, and confusion: "Did He not find thee an orphan, and shelter thee? Did He not find thee erring, and guide thee? Did He not find thee needy, and suffice thee?" (Qur'ān 93:6-8).

According to Muslim tradition, Muhammad grew up and at the age of twelve he accompanied Abū Tālib on trade journeys to Syria. Muslim tradition has it that during one of these journeys, a Nestorian monk, Bahīrā, predicted that Muhammad would become a prophet of God and exhorted Abū Tālib to take good care of his nephew, who was destined for greatness.⁶ When he was about twenty-five, he married Khadīja bint al-Khuwailid, a wealthy widow, who had engaged him to conduct a trade journey to

⁵ Our knowledge of early Islam and the Prophet Muhammad's history rests specially on the writings we call *Sīra* that have been the most commonly used names for the traditional account of Muhammad's life and background as transmitted by Ibn Hisham on the basis of the work by Ibn Ishāq (see Ibn Ishāq, *Sīrat Rasūl Allāh*, trans. A. Guillaume, Karachi 1955). About characteristics of *Sīra* texts, W. Raven observes that they all want to "build up the image of Muhammad in rivalry to the prophets of other communities, to depict him as a statesman of international stature, to elaborate on Kuranic texts and create a chronological framework for them, to record the deeds of the early Muslims,... and to set standards for the new community" (W. Raven, "Sīra", in *Encyclopedia of Islam*, 2d ed., vol. 9, 660-663). For a more complete discussion of the critical survey of modern studies on Muhammad, see Ibn Warraq, ed., *The Quest for the Historical Muhammad*, New York 2000.

⁶ Cf. Ibn Ishāq, *Sīrat Rasūl Allāh*, 79-81.

Syria. Muhammad rejoiced in his marriage to Khadija. It is also from her that Muhammad received the first support when he underwent a traumatic experience, the experience of receiving the Qur'anic revelations. These, as Charles J. Adams states, "transformed Muhammad from an ordinary citizen of Mecca into a religious visionary who subsequently became not only the leader of his people but one of the most influential individuals in all of history."⁷

1.1. The Origin of the Qur'ān

According to F.E. Peters, "Muslim authorities were as uncertain as we are about which revelation recorded in the Quran was the earliest received by the Prophet, and which, if any, of the early suras describe the experience of revelation."⁸ However, as Seyyed Hossein Nasr observes, "according to traditional sources, which alone matter in such questions, the Quran was revealed to the Prophet when he was spending some time, as he often did, in a cave in the mountain of Hirā' near Mecca."⁹ Muslims are unanimous on the points that it was God himself who chose the Prophet for the revelation of His Word and it was Gabriel who was the agent of revelation. "This Koran could not have been forged apart from God; but it is a confirmation of what is before it, and a distinguishing of the Book, wherein is no doubt, from the Lord of all Being" (Q 10:38).

According to the received doctrine of Islam the Qur'ān is eternal; it is the uncreated Word of God. ... The Qur'ān is the Eternal Word in book-form. More popularly and concretely, if with less theological exactitude, the original of the Qur'ān is thought of as a book preserved in (the seventh) heaven in the presence of God. This is assumed to be what is meant by the preserved tablet, *lawh*

⁷ Charles J. Adams, "Qur'ān, The Text and Its History", in Mircea Eliade, ed. *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, vol. 12, New York 1987, 156.

⁸ F. E. Peters, *A Reader on Classical Islam*, Princeton, New Jersey 1994, 50.

⁹ Nasr, *Ideals and Realities of Islam*, 42.

mahfūz, spoken of in LXXXV, 22. Sometimes it is thought of as having been sent down to the nearest heaven on the night of power, *lailat al-qadar*, described in XCVII, so as to be available for revelation to the Prophet by the angel Gabriel. Muhammad is thus not the author, but only the recipient of the Qur'ān.¹⁰

The firm belief of the divine origin of the Qur'ān constitutes the basis of the Islamic doctrine of revelation. Muslims, as the Qur'ān confirms, look upon the Qur'ān, both the content and the form, as divine and the Prophet as the instrument chosen by God. "Truly it is the revelation of the Lord of all Being, brought down by the Faithful Spirit upon thy heart, that thou mayest be one of the warners, in a clear, Arabic tongue" (Q 26:192-195).

The Qur'ān affirms that as God has communicated with the messengers before Muhammad, God also communicated with Muhammad: "We have revealed to thee as We revealed to Noah, and the Prophets after him, and We revealed to Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, and the Tribes, Jesus and Job, Jonah and Aaron and Solomon, and We gave to David Psalms" (Q 4:163). Moreover, in accordance with the conviction that the Qur'ān is eternal, Muslims believe that the Qur'ān contains fundamentally the same message as that given to the earlier messengers. The believers, therefore, are expected accept the revelations given before the Qur'an: "Say you: 'We believe in God, and in that which has been sent down on us and sent down on Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac and Jacob, and the Tribes, and that which was given to Moses and Jesus and the Prophets, of their Lord; we make no division between any of them, and to Him we surrender'" (Q 2:130). And again: "O believers, believe in God and His Messenger and the Book He has sent down on His Messenger and the Book which He sent down

¹⁰ Richard Bell, *Introduction to The Qur'ān*, Edinburgh 1953, 37.

before. Whoso disbelieves in God and His angels and His Books, and His Messengers, and the Last Day, has surely gone astray into far error” (Q 4:135).¹¹

However, in another chapter (5:16), “the Qur’ān accuses the local Jews and Christians of willfully altering their scriptures (*tahrif*), sometimes by distorting the words themselves, other times by using them in an unjustified context.”¹² In sum, the Qur’ān sees the revelation sent down to the Prophet as superior to all others: “It is He who sent His Messenger with the guidance and the religion of truth, that He may uplift it above every religion, though the unbelievers be averse” (Q 9:33). Farid Esack states:

In general, Muslim scholars, because of this ‘distortion,’ believe that the previous scriptures have no contemporary validity. Thus, while belief that all the previously revealed books indeed came from God is required for Muslims, in effect they hold that the only valid scripture is the Qur’an and the only path to salvation is through Islam. ... Those who heard of the message of Moses were thus obligated to believe in it and to follow the *Tawrat* until the coming of Jesus when his message, the *Injil*, superseded that of Moses until the coming of Muhammad when the final form of faith was irrevocably determined.¹³

1.1.1. The Experience of the Qur’anic Revelation

It was during one of his night vigils in the month of Ramadan of 610, according to tradition, that Muhammad experienced the first Qur’anic revelation. In the traditional account the early revelation occurred when Muhammad saw in a vision the angel Gabriel who said to him, “Recite (*Iqra*)!” At first Muhammad replied, “What shall I

¹¹ Daniel A. Madigan, however, observes that the Qur’ān’s affirmation of the kinship of the Quranic revelation with the previous revelations “raises a difficulty for the notion of verbal inspiration, since the actual text of the Qur’ān is not identical to the other extant scriptures” (Daniel A. Madigan, “Revelation and Inspiration”, in Jane Dammen McAuliffe, ed., *Encyclopaedia of the Qur’ān*, Vol. 4, in press).

¹² Farid Esack, *The Qur’an, A Short Introduction*, Oxford 2002, 49.

¹³ Esack, *The Qur’an, A Short Introduction*, 49-50.

recite?"¹⁴ Thereupon, Gabriel reportedly pressed him three times until Muhammad "thought it was death." Finally Gabriel said, "Recite: In the Name of thy Lord who created, created Man of a blood-clot. Recite: And thy Lord is the Most Generous, who taught by the Pen, taught Man that he knew not." According to F.E. Peters, "these are, as a matter of fact, the opening lines of what was later numbered as the 96th Sura of the Quran, and here it is being plausibly put forward as the earliest of Muhammad's revelations."¹⁵

A hadith (lit. report, news, narration) recorded in the collection of Bukhārī recounts what happened with Muhammad after his extraordinary experience.

Then Allāh's Apostle returned with the Inspiration and with his heart beating severely. Then he went to Khadija bin Khuwailid and said, "Cover me! Cover me!" They covered him till his fear was over and after that he told her every thing that had happened and said, "I fear that something may happen to me." Khadija replied, "Never! By Allāh, Allāh will never disgrace you. You keep good relations with your kith and kin, help the poor and the destitute, serve your guest generously and assist the deserving calamity-afflicted ones." Khadija then accompanied him to her cousin Waraqa bin Naufal bin Asad bin 'Abdul 'Uzza, who, during the Pre-Islamic period became a Christian and used to write the writing with Hebrew letters. He would write from the Gospel in Hebrew as much as Allāh wished him to write. He was an old man and had lost his eyesight. Khadija said to Waraqa, "Listen to the story of your nephew, o my cousin!" Waraqa asked, "O my nephew! What have you seen?" Allāh's Apostle described whatever he had seen. Waraqa said, "This is the same one who keeps the secrets (angel Gabriel) whom Allāh had sent to Moses. I wish I were young and could live up to the time when your people have turned you out." Allāh's Apostle asked, "Will they drive me out?" Waraqa replied in the affirmative and said, "Any man who came with something similar to what you have brought was treated with hostility; and if I should remain alive till the day when you have been turned out then I would support you strongly." But after a few days Waraqa died and the Divine Inspiration was also paused for a while.¹⁶

¹⁴ "There are three different versions of Muhammad's response: *ma dha aqra'u* ("What shall I read?"), *ma ana bi qari'in* ("I am not a reader/reciter") and *ma aqra'u* ("I do not read")." (Esack, *The Qur'an, A Short Introduction*, 39.)

¹⁵ Peters, *A Reader on Classical Islam*, 51.

¹⁶ Muhammad Muhsin Khān, *The Translation of the Meanings of Sahih Al-Bukhārī*, Vol. 1, Gujranwala Cantt. West Pakistan, 3-4.

According to tradition, Muhammad for his part was not so certain of what had befallen him. For a time he doubted the genuineness of his experience. He was also distressed and grieved by a prolonged absence of Gabriel. "In any event, once revelations began, they continued to come with more or less frequency throughout Muhammad's lifetime except for a short period early on his career (known as the *fatrah*, or pause) that caused him much soul-searching and doubt."¹⁷

As happened in the initial experience of revelation described in the account above, the experiences of the Qur'anic revelations, that is, the encounters with the divine, were physically violent and frightening to Muhammad. Even though the Qur'an itself tells us little if anything about the experience of revelation, there are reports that the continuing revelations were often accompanied by physical difficulties. Charles J. Adams notes this argument with these observations:

It is said that when Muhammad received the revelation he underwent a kind of seizure in which foam appeared at his mouth, his head sank down upon his chest, and his face became pale or deep red. Often he fell to the ground. At times he would cry out, or the sweat would stream from his brow, even in cold weather. ... From the Muslim perspective these stories underline the special and unusual nature of Muhammad's state at the times of revelation. He was not his normal self, was oblivious to his surroundings, and appeared to have been possessed by an outside power. His state is thus taken evidence that what he proclaimed was, indeed, a revelation from his Lord.¹⁸

Apart from the physical effects, as Daniel Madigan observes, there are three important elements that the people experienced in Muhammad's prophetic revelations:

- 1) the revelations are responsive to the present situation in which they find themselves,
- 2) they are experienced as authoritative and powerful words, and 3) those recited words

¹⁷ Adams, "Qur'an, The Text and Its History", 157.

¹⁸ Adams, "Qur'an, The Text and Its History", 158.

have aesthetic force and poetic beauty.¹⁹ That is why from the beginning of Islam, by maintaining that the Prophet was illiterate and therefore incapable of producing any literary work, Muslim tradition has upheld the notion of the miraculous and inimitable nature (*i'jāz*) of the Qur'ān.

The Muslim tradition also records reports about the different manners in which the revelation was experienced: “sometimes it is (revealed) like the ringing of a bell, this form of Inspiration is the hardest of all and then this state passes off after I have grasped what is inspired. Sometimes the Angel comes in the form of a man and talks to me and I grasp whatever he says.”²⁰ Although among Muslim authorities there is theological divergence on the modes of revelation, all seem to be at one in denying direct oral communication between God and human (the Prophet). While it confirms much of the tradition, the Qur'ān differently outlines the modes of revelation: “It belongs not to any mortal that God should speak to him, except by revelation, or from behind a veil, or that He should send a messenger and reveal whatsoever He will, by His leave; surely He is All-high, All-wise” (Q 42:50). According to the Qur'ān, there are three modes of revelation: inspiration, behind a veil, and the sending of a messenger. “The third mode is that exemplified throughout the Qur'an, where the Angel Gabriel spoke God's messages to Muhammad.”²¹

¹⁹ Cf. Madigan, “Revelation and Inspiration”.

²⁰ Khān, *The Translation of the Meanings of Sahih Al-Bukhārī*, 2.

²¹ Esack, *The Qur'an, A Short Introduction*, 42.

1.1.2. The Process of the Qur'anic Revelation

“One very striking feature of the Qur’ân is its insistent claim to kinship with the revelation to the Christians and Jews.”²² Like the same scripture whose exemplars were given to Moses for the Jews (Q 28:43; 32:23 etc.) and to Jesus for the Christians (Q 3:43; 19:31), according to the Qur’ân itself, the Qur’ân originated with God. The original text is the tablet corresponding to the words of God: “... It is a glorious Koran, in a guarded tablet” (Q 85:21). According to the Muslim commentator Zamakhshari (d. 1144 C.E.), “this writing is designated the ‘Mother of the Book’ because it represents the original in which the individual books are preserved. They are derived from it by copying.”²³ Zamakhshari, as noted by F. E. Peters, was summarizing what the Qur’ân itself asserts: “that the Book of revelation is one and is preserved in Heaven. It contains all God’s decrees and sums up all wisdom.”²⁴

Although constantly holding on to the doctrine of the preexistence of the Qur’ân in which the text is preserved on the heavenly Tablet, the Qur’ân and the Muslim tradition also affirm the fact that the Qur’ân was not revealed all at once but in separate pieces. “The unbelievers say: ‘Why has the Koran not been sent down upon him all at once?’” (Q 25:34). “... And a Koran We have divided, for thee to recite it to mankind at intervals, and We have sent it down successively” (Q 17:107). In fact, Muslims believe that the Qur’ân, which is already complete in the realm of eternity, was transmitted to the Prophet piece by piece in response to the various challenges, which he and his followers faced. Daniel A. Madigan writes:

²² Daniel A. Madigan, *The Qur’ân’s Self-Image, Writing and Authority in Islam’s Scripture*, Princeton, New Jersey 2001, 13.

²³ Quoted in Peters, *A Reader on Classical Islam*, 171.

²⁴ Peters, *A Reader on Classical Islam*, 171.

It comes gradually (*munajjaman*) and in response to situations (*jawâban li-qawlihîm*), rather than as a single completed pronouncement (*jumlatan wâhidatan*). God's constancy in sending down reveals his engagement with the world, God's ceaseless activity in providing for human need and addressing the human situation.²⁵

It can be said that Muhammad's mission constituted a response to the Qur'anic revelations that were delivered chapter by chapter, and even occasionally verse by verse. The Prophet began publicly to preach in Mecca when the words of God were sent down to him: "So shout that thou art commanded and turn thou away from the idolaters" (Q 15:94) and again, "Warn thy clan, thy nearest kin. Lower thy wing to those who follow thee, being believers; then, if they disobey thee, say, 'I am quit of that you do'" (Q 26:214-216). When his contemporaries raised an objection to the genuineness of the Qur'ân, the Prophet answered by the words of God given to him: "Say: Then produce a sura like it, and call on whom you can, apart from God, if you speak truly" (Q 10:39). However, Muhammad's belief in the continuity of the religious experience was soon put to the test. The Quraysh incited people against him and beat the companions of the Messenger who had become Muslims. When he saw the affliction of his companions, Muhammad commanded them to emigrate to Abyssinia. But, because of the boycott of the Quraysh, finally, the Prophet asked his followers to go to Yathrib while he stayed in Mecca waiting for the Lord's permission. After the words of God came down to him, the Prophet decided to migrate (*hijra*). On September 17, 622, the Prophet with his companions arrived at Yathrib. Here in Yathrib, now renamed al Madinah (the city of the Prophet), Muhammad and Isiam "entered a new

²⁵ Madigan, *The Qur'ân's Self-Image*, 141.

phase: that of spirituality based socio-political responsibility and leadership.”²⁶ There the Prophet received the revelations that constitute more than half of the whole Qur’ān.

Muslims strictly hold that the process of revelation is always an exclusively divine activity. God sends down to the Prophet his guidance. The word of God appears in a particular context in response to a particular situation. In that process, while the angel Gabriel has a role as the mediator between God and human (Muhammad), the Prophet plays the role of recipient. By comparing it with the role of the Virgin Mary in Christianity, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, comments on the role of the Prophet in this process of revelation:

The unlettered nature of the Prophet demonstrates how the human recipient is completely passive before the Divine. Were this purity and virginity of the soul not to exist, the Divine Word would become in a sense tainted with purely human knowledge and not be presented to mankind in its pristine purity. The Prophet was purely passive in the face of the revelation he received from God. He added nothing to this revelation himself. He did not write a book but conveyed the Sacred Book to mankind.²⁷

“Revelation is a free act of divine sovereignty. Human beings can neither expect nor demand it. ... It is understood to be God’s customary way of acting. Revelation both emanates from God’s mercy and leads back towards it.”²⁸

To understand Qur’anic revelation, in particular the process of revelation, it is important to give attention to the characteristic terms that the Qur’ān itself employs to characterize the revelation. “The process of revelation is most commonly characterized by the spatial metaphor of ‘coming or sending down’--*nuzûl*, *tanzîl*, *inzâl*, or *tanazzul*.”²⁹ In the Arabic language, the root N-Z-L from which these words are derived

²⁶ Esack, *The Qur'an, A Short Introduction*, 47.

²⁷ Nasr, *Ideals and Realities of Islam*, 44.

²⁸ Madigan, *The Qur'an's Self-Image*, 133.

²⁹ Madigan, *The Qur'an's Self-Image*, 139.

has the general connotation of movement from a higher plane to a lower one. In this sense *tanzīl* could be said to be neutral and to be used also in the Qur'ān to indicate other objects: mountain (Q 24:43), various kinds of rain (Q 30:48; 31:34; 27), manna and quails (Q 2:54; 7:160; 20: 82), and armies (Q 9:26).³⁰

However, in the Qur'ān, the noun and related verbs are used many times to indicate the oral delivery of revelation through the agency of the angel. "With the truth We have sent it down, and with the truth it has come down; and We have sent thee not, except good tidings to bear, and warning; and a Koran We have divided, for thee to recite it to mankind at intervals, and We have sent it down successively" (Q 17:107). The process of revelation presupposes a two-tiered universe where the initiative is always from above and the direction is always to below.

The Islamic tradition ... is certainly careful to maintain the distance between God and humanity. Nevertheless, even if the divine essence remains inaccessible, a genuine unveiling of the divine knowledge and manifestation of the divine will take place. Probably the Qur'ān's most insistent claim is that God is constantly sending down *āyāt*, whether through prophetic activity or natural phenomena, that manifest all we need to know. The *kitāb* that is sent down in fact reveals a great deal about God.³¹

Another term employed in the Qur'ān to describe the revelation process is "*wahy*" ("revelation" or "inspiration") along with the related verb "*awhā*" ("to reveal" or "to inspire"). "*Wahy* eventually became the specific term employed by Muslim theologians to designate the messages that the angel brought to the prophet, but it is not used exclusively in this sense."³² "Recite what has been revealed to thee of the Book of thy Lord ..." (Q 18:26). Words like *tanzīl*, *wahy* refer to oral messages rather than

³⁰ Cf. Madigan, "Revelation and Inspiration".

³¹ Madigan, *The Qur'ān's Self-Image*, 140.

³² Adams, "Qur'ān, The Text and Its History", 159.

written. "Indeed, Muslim tradition has almost univocally described the phenomenon as auditory, often even lacking verbal clarity. ... The Qur'ân itself also refers to *wahy* as visual, or at least as accompanied by visions."³³ "This is naught but a revelation revealed, taught him by one terrible in power, very strong; he stood poised, being on the higher horizon, then drew near and suspended hung, two bows'-length away, or nearer, then revealed to his servant that he revealed" (Q 53:4-10).

It was mentioned earlier that in respect to the distance between the divine and the human the Qur'ân outlines three modes of revelation. One of them is by *wahy* (inspiration). An example of this mode is Surah 37:101-102, where Abraham receives guidance in a vision during his sleep that he is to sacrifice his son. In this sense, revelation is a process of communication of God's will. However, in other cases, what is communicated is doctrine: "Say: 'I am only a mortal the like of you; it is revealed to me that your God is One God. So let him who hopes for the encounter with his Lord work righteousness, and not associate with his Lord's service anyone'" (Q 18:110). In sum, *wahy* indicates not just the revelation of scripture but more generally a kind of (divine) communication "that remains impenetrable, and perhaps exotic to a third person observing it, yet it remains full of meaning for the one receiving it."³⁴

1.1.3. The Names of the Qur'anic Revelation

"The Muslim community has recognized certain terms as being so central to the Qur'ân's self-image and its understanding of revelation that they have effectively

³³ Madigan, *The Qur'ân's Self-Image*, 141.

³⁴ Madigan, *The Qur'ân's Self-Image*, 144.

adopted them as names for the scripture rather than as simple descriptions of it.”³⁵ In order to deepen our understanding of Qur’anic revelation, in this part we shall examine these names briefly. We shall begin with the word *qur’ān* itself. The noun *qur’ān* is normally said to be derived from the Arabic root “*qara’a*” (“to read” or “to recite”). Others argue that it is from the verb “*qarana*” (“to gather” or “to collect”). There is also an opinion that says that *qur’ān* is a borrowed form of the Syriac word “*qaryana*” (“a liturgical reading”).³⁶

According to Farid Esack, “*qur’an* is used in the Qur’an in the sense of “reading” (Q 17:93), “recital” (Q 75:18) and “a collection” (Q 75:17)”³⁷ which is not always used in the concrete sense of a scripture as it is commonly understood. Based on his observations of the literal meaning in the text, Farid Esack says that in the Qur’ān *qur’ān* “refers to a revealed oral discourse which unfolded seemingly as a part of God’s response to the requirements of society over a period of twenty-three years.”³⁸ For Muslims, the continuing revelation is viewed first of all as God’s direct speech that comes to them on the lips of the Prophet. Here the Prophet’s primary function was to memorize and to recite what had been made known to him in the revelation experiences. In other words, as William Graham observes, “the first important consideration in understanding the earliest meaning of *qur’ān* for Muslims is that God’s revelatory process was apparently understood by the Prophet and Companions and by the next several generations of Muslims in a relatively dynamic rather than

³⁵ Madigan, *The Qur’ān’s Self-Image*, 123.

³⁶ Cf. William A. Graham, “The Earliest Meaning of ‘Qur’ān’”, in *Die Welt des Islams*, 23-24 (1984), 361-377; J. D. Pearson, “Al-Kur’ān”, in C. E. Bosworth, all., ed., *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Vol. 5, Leiden 1986, 400-402; Madigan, *The Qur’ān’s Self-Image*, 127-131.

³⁷ Esack, *The Qur’an, A Short Introduction*, 30.

³⁸ Esack, *The Qur’an, A Short Introduction*, 30.

static fashion.”³⁹ Only toward the end of the process is the Qur’ān presented as the name of the scripture of Muslims: “God has bought from the believers their selves and their possessions against the gift of Paradise; they fight in the way of God; they kill, and are killed; that is a promise binding upon God in the Torah, and the Gospel, and the Koran; and who fulfils his covenant truer than God?” (Q 9:112). In sum, as Farid Esack notes, “the word “*qur’an*” is thus used in two distinct senses: first, as the designation of a portion or portions of revelation and, second, as the name of the entire collection of revelations to Muhammad.”⁴⁰

Three other terms used in the Qur’ān to indicate the particular revelations are *furqān*, *dhikr*, and *kitāb*. According to early Muslim tradition, *al-furqān*, that appears in the text seven times, is understood to be a name for the whole Qur’ān.⁴¹ It simply is recognized as deriving from Arabic “*faraqa*” (“to separate” or “to distinguish”), thus arriving at the meaning of “standard” or “criterion.” However, “there seem to be two basic elements influencing Qur’anic usage of this term: a soteriological sense, possibly deriving from an Aramaic or Syriac origin, and the notion of separation and discernment characteristic of the Arabic verb *faraqa*.”⁴² Both the salvation and separation aspect are evident in the career of the Prophet: “... We sent down upon Our servant on the day of salvation, the day the two hosts encountered” (Q 8:42). In fact, even tradition associates the coming of the *furqān* with the Battle of Badr (624 C.E.) when the small Muslim force achieved victory over the Meccan forces by the salvific action of God. Thus, “God’s revelation in the Qur’ān distinguishes (*faraqa*) right from

³⁹ Graham, “The Earliest Meaning of ‘Qur’ān’,” 362.

⁴⁰ Esack, *The Qur’an, A Short Introduction*, 30.

⁴¹ Cf. Madigan, *The Qur’ān’s Self-Image*, 125.

⁴² Madigan, *The Qur’ān’s Self-Image*, 126.

wrong and also differentiates (*faraqa*) the Muslims from the unscriptured and from the recipients of earlier revelations.”⁴³

Besides being the basis of distinction between Muslims and others, the Qur’ān is also “a Reminder (*dhikr*) to thee and to thy people” (Q 43:43). As a name of the revelation, *dhikr* is “to indicate that the revelation is an admonition and a warning, the point is underlined by references to Muhammad as an admonisher.”⁴⁴ However, according to Al-Tabarī, the word “*dhikr*” bears another meaning, that is, honor or source of pride for the community to which it has been given.⁴⁵ The Qur’ān is both the reminder from God of His commands and the honor of Muslims. It is why the Qur’ān is said to be the center of Muslim community.

Another term for the Qur’anic revelation that is often used to indicate the Qur’ān is *kitāb*.⁴⁶ Indeed, “there is probably no word more important to the understanding of the Qur’ān than *kitāb* and yet its meaning is far more complex than the simple and almost universal translation “book” would seem to imply.”⁴⁷ The noun *kitāb* derives from the verb “*kataba*” (“to write”). Literally, it is applied to something written, such as a letter or a document or to the act of writing itself.

In the text, in perhaps the most general sense, the term conveys God’s knowledge. “Didst thou not know that God knows all that is in heaven and earth? Surely that is in a Book; surely that for God is an easy matter” (Q 22:69). And again, “On the day when We shall call all men with their record, and whoever is given his

⁴³ Madigan, *The Qur’ān’s Self-Image*, 127.

⁴⁴ Adams, “Qur’ān, The Text and Its History”, 161.

⁴⁵ Cf. Madigan, *The Qur’ān’s Self-Image*, 131.

⁴⁶ For the basis of these observations about *kitāb* I am indebted to Daniel A. Madigan, *The Qur’ān’s Self-Image, Writing and Authority in Islam’s Scripture*, Princeton 2001, *ibid.*, “Book”, in Jane Dammen McAuliffe, ed., *Encyclopaedia of the Qur’ān*, Vol. 1, Leiden 2001, 242-251.

⁴⁷ Madigan, “Book”, 242.

book in his right hand - those shall read their book, and they shall not be wronged a single date-thread" (Q 17:73). The *kitāb* keeps both the inventory of everything created and the detailed record of all human deeds and thoughts. Based on this *kitāb* that represents the completeness of God's knowledge of all that exists and all that takes place, on the Day of Judgment each person will be judged (Q 18:47).

In this context, "it is sometimes difficult to make any separation at all between the recording of deeds and the determination of judgement."⁴⁸ "This is Our Book, that speaks against you the truth; We have been registering all that you were doing" (Q 45:28). On the one side, it is said that the length of one's life is "in a Book" (Q 35:12), but on the other side, it is said that one will be judged in accordance with all deeds and thoughts recorded in the Book. The divine authority of judgement, however, is inseparable from God's knowledge. This very ambiguity, according to Daniel Madigan, "suggests that the Qur'ān does not so much contain a reference to a heavenly archive with separate registers and inventories as it does, in a more amorphous sense, to the overarching knowledge and authority of God."⁴⁹

Moreover, still as Daniel Madigan observes, it is important to understand what the Qur'ān means when it speaks of *kitāb* by viewing the word within the whole semantic field of vocabulary that is used in the context of revelation. In this respect, there are two key terms which appear with *kitāb* in something like a creedal formula: *āya* (pl. *āyāt*) and *hikma*. "Our Lord, do Thou send among them a Messenger, one of them, who shall recite to them Thy *āyāt*, and teach the *kitāb* and the *hikma*" (Q 2:123). The term *āya* is used to refer to everything that reveals God's will and ways. The *āyāt*

⁴⁸ Madigan, "Book", 244.

⁴⁹ Madigan, "Book", 244-245.

of God are intended to prompt people to come to faith. The term *hikma* is often translated “wisdom” but should be understood as the practical wisdom or the wise authority of the experienced ruler. So, the sending down of *kitāb* with its *āyāt* provides insight into what God knows and what God commands. “Therefore, far from being clearly distinguished from the above-mentioned registers, the *kitāb* of revelation is intimately linked with the same divine knowledge and authority that they symbolize.”⁵⁰

As the symbol of God’s knowledge and authority, “the Qur’ān does not present the *kitāb* as a closed and definable corpus of text, but rather as an ongoing relationship of guidance.”⁵¹ This concept is clear in the text when the Prophet is challenged by his opponents to produce a writing from heaven as proof and he is told to reply that he is merely a human messenger (Q 17:95). “So when the Qur’ān speaks of itself as *kitāb*, it seems to be talking not about the form in which it is sent down but rather about the authority it carries as a manifestation of the knowledge and command of God.”⁵²

Based on these observations it appears that *kitāb* functions in the Qur’ān’s discourse primarily as a symbol, rather than as a concrete entity. ... It is the primary symbol of God’s sovereignty and knowledge. The *kitāb* given to the Messenger, and through him to the people, is not ... the record of God’s wisdom and judgement, but rather the point where that timeless authority and insight address the time-bound human condition. The *umm al-kitāb* ‘the source (lit., mother) of the *kitāb*’ is not just some larger, primordial book from which each of the scriptures derived; it is the very essence of God’s universal knowledge and authoritative will. To have been given the *kitāb* is to have been given some access to that divine realm where everything is “written,” that is, known and determined. To say that a people has been given the *kitāb* is not to say they have been vouchsafed some great work of reference that contains all they need to know and act upon; rather it means that they have entered into a new mode of existence, where the community lives in the assurance and expectation (or perhaps even the fear) of being personally addressed by the divine authority and knowledge. For all the attempts to specify it and reduce it to manageable proportions, the Qur’ān’s *kitāb* still insists on seeing itself as the

⁵⁰ Madigan, “Book”, 246.

⁵¹ Madigan, “Book”, 247.

⁵² Madigan, “Book”, 250.

potent symbol and authoritative locus of divine address to the world through the Arabian prophet in the language of the Arabs.⁵³

1.2. The Formation of the Text

In the previous part we have seen how Muslims, based on the text of the Qur'ān and tradition, have understood the origin of the Qur'ān, that is, the dynamic communication of God's knowledge and authority as the prophet experienced, memorized, and transmitted it to his companions and followers. Muslims believe that it is the word spoken by Gabriel to the Prophet—that is contained in the scriptural text of the Qur'ān. From this perspective it is obvious that until now we are speaking about the Qur'ān without making a strict verbal distinction between two inseparable functional modes of the Qur'ān as an oral discourse and a written text. Here we shall highlight the organic relationship between the Qur'ān as both all that was ever revealed to Muhammad and its written manifestation. How did “the Book of God” become the textual material of the Qur'ān while at the same time, despite having been codified into the official book, the oral function of the Qur'ān constantly plays the central role in the life, piety and practice of Muslims?

Among Muslim scholars both Sunni⁵⁴ and Shi'i⁵⁵, there are different opinions of the compilation of the Qur'ān. Moreover, “the traditions about the collection of the Qur'ān into a book often contradict one another, and even individual accounts often

⁵³ Madigan, *The Qur'ān's Self-Image*, 77.

⁵⁴ “Sunni Islam: the majority form of Islam. Its main teaching is that one's life should be lived in accordance with the laws and teachings of the Qur'ān and the example set by the Prophet Muhammad.” (Moojan Momen, *The Phenomenon of Religion, A Thematic Approach*, Oxford 1999, 544-545.)

⁵⁵ “Shi'i, Shi'a: Name given to those who followed 'Ali, the son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad, and his progeny, as the true, divinely inspired leader in Islam; as distinct from the majority Sunnis who followed the political leadership of the caliphs.” (Momen, *The Phenomenon of Religion*, 544.)

find themselves at cross purposes.”⁵⁶ Many scholars, as Farid Esack observes, hold that the process of the compilation took place in three overlapping periods: during the Prophet’s lifetime; the period of Abu Bakr, the Prophet’s immediate successor; and the period of ‘Uthman ibn ‘Affan, the third Caliph after the Prophet’s demise.⁵⁷ Others hold that it was much more disperse and extended. However, according to Farid Esack, “the universal Muslim consensus today is that, in terms of content, the current version of the Qur’ān is the sole authentic one which was read during the time of the Prophet and was left with the community at the time of his departure from the world.”⁵⁸

1.2.1. Gathering the Qur’ān during the Prophet Muhammad’s Lifetime

As we have already seen, the Qur’ān was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad through the medium of the Angel Gabriel part by part. Muslim belief holds that the Qur’anic revelation ended with the death of the Prophet. As the instrument chosen by God, Muhammad added nothing to this revelation. “Muslims maintain that Muhammad always made a clear distinction between his own speech and that which he claimed to receive from God.”⁵⁹ After receiving the revelation in his heart, as the Qur’ān commands (5: 71; 7: 2; 15), the Prophet would memorize and then declare to his followers without adding to or decreasing it. There are several traditions indicating that in addition to instructing the companions to memorize the Qur’ān, the Prophet also instructed a number of scribes to write it down after every revelation.⁶⁰

⁵⁶ Madigan, *The Qur’ān’s Self-Image*, 23.

⁵⁷ Cf. Esack, *The Qur’an, A Short Introduction*, 78.

⁵⁸ Esack, *The Qur’an, A Short Introduction*, 78.

⁵⁹ Esack, *The Qur’an, A Short Introduction*, 43.

⁶⁰ Cf. Esack, *The Qur’an, A Short Introduction*, 81.

Farid Esack notes some important texts of the Qur'ān that serve as the basis for the central Muslim appreciation of this process of memorization, transmission, and transcription during the Prophet's lifetime:⁶¹

Move not thy tongue with it to hasten it; Ours it is to gather it, and to recite it. So, when We recite it, follow thou its recitation. Then Ours it is to explain it (Q 75:16-19).

... And hasten not with the Koran ere its revelation is accomplished unto thee; and say, 'O my Lord, increase me in knowledge' (Q 20:113).

We shall make thee recite, to forget not save what God wills; surely He knows what is spoken aloud and what is hidden (Q 87:6-7).

It is We who have sent down the Remembrance, and We watch over it (Q 15:9).

By sending down the above verses, God allayed Muhammad's anxiety to preserve as much as possible of the words recited by Gabriel. It was God's responsibility to ensure the wholeness of the revelation. It is God himself who secures the authenticity of the Qur'ān. In other words, based on the texts cited above, Muslims believe that "the Qur'ān was protected from any loss or addition in the Prophet's memory and in the subsequent process of transcribing it."⁶²

It would seem that at the earliest period the Qur'ān was only gathered in the Prophet's memory and that later different scribes copied his dictations. "The Muslim tradition is unanimously agreed that at least parts of the Qur'ān were written down, whether 'on palm leaves or flat stones or in the heart of men,' during the Prophet's own lifetime."⁶³ So, there were two modes of the preservation of the Qur'ān: memorizing and writing down on various materials. Hadiths give notice of a variety of numbers and

⁶¹ Cf. Esack, *The Qur'an, A Short Introduction*, 79-80.

⁶² Esack, *The Qur'an, A Short Introduction*, 80.

⁶³ Peters, *A Reader on Classical Islam*, 220.

companions' names that are said to have memorized the Qur'ān. The most often mentioned *qurra* (Qur'ān reciters) are Ubay ibn Ka'ab (d. 642), Mu'adz ibn Jabal (d. 639), Zayd ibn Thabit, and Abu Zayd al-Anshari (d. 636).⁶⁴ In addition to the different reports of the names of the Qur'ān reciters, historical tradition takes note of a variety of persons who are said to have done lettering of parts of the Qur'ān. Among the companions who used to write the Qur'anic revelation upon the instruction of the Prophet are the first caliphs: Abu Bakr, Umar, Uthman, and Ali ibn Abi Thalib; Mu'awiyah (d. 680), Ubay ibn Ka'ab, Zayd ibn Thabit, Abd Allah ibn Mas'ud, Abu Musa al-Asy'ari (d. 664).⁶⁵ These reports, at least, give a number of indications of the Qur'ān existing in a written form during the time of the Prophet even though "there was ... no material collection of revelation in one place or form."⁶⁶ In fact, "Muslims hold that the Qur'ān was written down in its entirety at the time of the Prophet's death."⁶⁷

1.2.2. The Initial Collation

"The story of the collection of the Qur'ān accepted by the Islamic tradition is found, with variations, in several early historical sources. It divides the process of establishing the consonantal text in two phases that are difficult to reconcile."⁶⁸ The first phase of the compilation and transcription of the Qur'ān took place during the Caliphate of Abu Bakr, the Prophet's first successor. It was reported that after the Battle of al-Yamama

⁶⁴ Cf. Taufik Adnan Amal, *Rekonstruksi Sejarah al-Quran*, Yogyakarta 2001, 130.

⁶⁵ Cf. Amal, *Rekonstruksi Sejarah al-Quran*, 131-132.

⁶⁶ Farid Esack, *The Qur'an, A Short Introduction*, 83.

⁶⁷ Farid Esack, *The Qur'an, A Short Introduction*, 82.

⁶⁸ Charles J. Adams, "Qur'ān, The Text and Its History", 162.

(633), Umar al-Khattab came to the Caliph Abu Bakr and urged him to take steps to preserve the Qur'ān material in his possession both in memory and in writing before more of it was lost. The story narrated by Zayd ibn Thābit, regarded as the pre-eminent scribe of revelation, can be found in a tradition contained in Burkhārī:

Zayd ibn Thabit said: Abu Bakr [Caliph 632-634 C.E.] sent for me at the time of the battle of al Yamama, and Umar ibn al-Khattab [Caliph 634-644 C.E.] was with him. Abu Bakr said: Umar has come to me and said:

“Death was rampant at the battle of al-Yamama and took with it many of the reciters of the Quran. I fear lest death in battle also overtake the reciters of the Quran in the provinces and so a large part of the Quran be lost. I think you should give orders to collect the Quran.”

“What,” I asked Umar, “do you wish to do something which the Prophet of God himself did not do?”

“By God,” replied Umar, “it would be a good deed.”

Umar did not leave off urging me until at length God opened my heart to this and I thought as Umar did.

Zayd continued: Abu Bakr said to me: “You are a young man, intelligent, and we see no fault in you; more, you have already written down the revelation for the Prophet of God, may God bless and save him. Therefore go and seek the Quran and collect it.”

By God, if he had ordered me to move a mountain, it would not have been harder for me than his order to collect the Quran. “What,” I asked, “will you do something which the Prophet of God himself, may God bless and save him, did not do?”

“By God,” replied Abu Bakr, “it would be a good deed.”

Umar did not leave off urging me until at length God opened my heart to this as He had opened the hearts of Abu Bakr and Umar.

Then I searched out and collected the parts of the Quran, whether they were written on palm leaves or flat stones or in the hearts of men. Thus I found the end of the “Sura of Repentance” (Quran 9:129-130), which I had been unable to find anywhere else, in the possession of Abu'l-Khuzayma al-Ansari. These were the verses “There came to you a Prophet from amongst yourselves. It grieves me that you sin ...” to the end.⁶⁹

Zayd ibn Thābit reportedly collected and wrote all the revelations down from both the oral and written sources on separate sheets or *suhuf* (lit. fragments of writing material such as paper, skin, papyrus, etc.) and brought them together to Abu Bakr. The collection of the sheets remained in the possession of Abu Bakr until his death and

⁶⁹ Quoted in Peters, *A Reader on Classical Islam*, 179-180.

immediately passed into the possession of Umar, the second caliph. Upon Umar's death it became the private property of Hafsa, the daughter of Umar, who was also a widow of the Prophet.

Although this story has been severely criticized and, therefore, "should perhaps be dismissed as not being credible at all, and the key to it may lie in the differing accounts of who should receive credit for first conceiving the all-important enterprise of collecting the Qur'anic text,"⁷⁰ The Muslim community holds that "the assembled and ordered text of the Qur'ān as we now possess it was the result of the cooperative work begun soon after the death of the Prophet."⁷¹ Farid Esack observes this point noting: "it is likely that Zayd was engaged in more than one process and in different periods: the first, during Abu Bakr's reign, when he had undertaken the material collection of the *suhuf*, and another, during the period of 'Uthman, when he undertook its arrangement and editing."⁷²

Anas ibn Malik said: Hudhayfa ibn al-Yaman accompanied Uthman [Caliph 644-656 C.E.] when he was preparing the army of Syria together with the army of Iraq to conquer Armenia and Azharbayjan. Hudhayfa was astonished by the differences in the (two armies') reading of the Qur'an, and said to Uthman, "O Commander of the Faithful, catch hold of this community before they begin to differ about their Book as do the Jews and the Christians."

Uthman sent to Hafsa to say, "Send us the leaves. We shall copy them in codices and return them to you."

Hafsa sent them to Uthman, who ordered Zayd ibn Thabit, Abdullah ibn al-Zubayr, Sa'id ibn al-As and Abd al-Rahman ibn al-Harith ibn Hisham to copy them into codices. Uthman said to the three of them who were of the tribe of the Quraysh, "If you differ from Zayd ibn Thabit on anything in the Quran, write it down according to the language of the Quraysh, for it is in their language that the Quran was revealed."

They did as he bade, and when they had copied the leaves into codices, Uthman returned the leaves to Hafsa. He sent copies of the codex which they made in all

⁷⁰ Adams, "Qur'ān, The Text and Its History", 162.

⁷¹ Peters, *A Reader on Classical Islam*, 179.

⁷² Esack, *The Qur'an, A Short Introduction*, 87.

directions and gave orders to burn every leaf and codex which differed from it.⁷³

The traditions surrounding the second phase of the story of the compilation of the Qur'ān is also criticized as being contradictory and inconclusive. Some traditions tell that Uthman merely copied the only *suhuf* collected during Abu Bakr's period that was in the possession of Hafsa and sent out to all the major provincial centers. Some give report that Uthman commissioned the process of the collecting, witnessing, and transcribing that had been carried out under his predecessor. Some accounts force these two incompatible notions together.⁷⁴ In spite of the difficulties with the traditional accounts, as Charles J. Adams observes, the Muslim community accepts the importance of the codex prepared under Uthman:

It established the basic consonantal form of the text that has endured to our day. Almost without exception Muslims consider that the Qur'ān we now possess goes back in its text and in the number and order of the chapters to the work of the commission that 'Uthmān appointed. Muslim orthodoxy holds further that 'Uthmān's Qur'ān contains all of the revelation delivered to the community faithfully preserved without change or variation of any kind and that the acceptance of the 'Uthmanic Qur'ān was all but universal from the day of its distribution.⁷⁵

1.2.3. The Qur'ān Becomes a Canon

The Qur'ān as canon is referred to as "*mushaf*" meaning the collected *suhuf*, compiled into a fixed order "between two covers." Even though substantially refusing the notion

⁷³ Quoted in Peters, *A Reader on Classical Islam*, 180.

⁷⁴ Cf. Madigan, *The Qur'ān's Self-Image*, 29-30.

⁷⁵ Adams, "Qur'ān, The Text and Its History", 163.

that the Qur'ān was entirely gathered during the time of the Prophet,⁷⁶ the Muslim community still acknowledges the existence of several variant codices, also called *mushaf*, during the process of Uthman's project to compile the Qur'ān, for example, the versions of Ubayy ibn Ka'b (d. 642), Abd Allah ibn Mas'ud (d. 653), Ali ibn Abi Talib (d. 661), Abu Musa al-Ash'ari (d. 662), and the Prophet's wife Aisha (d. 678). "Some of these codices seem to have been in use also well after the official canon was produced and up to well into the fourth Islamic century."⁷⁷ These extra-canonical versions, however, "never gained general approval and were viewed by Muslims as the personal copies of individuals worth retaining for their exegetical value."⁷⁸ Therefore, "without exception, Muslims regard the text in their possession today as going back to the Uthmanic recension without any change or variation of any kind. They believe this version, in turn, to be identical to the one recited and used during the Prophet's lifetime."⁷⁹

The Uthmanic *mushaf*, collected in order to unite the people on the basis of a single text, is only one side of the inseparable oral and written Qur'ān. Even though the Uthmanic *mushaf* remains the authoritative standard of the written Qur'ān throughout the Islamic centuries, it does not cancel out the oral tradition.

It seems to have been accepted from the outset that there could be various readings of the same divine text, whether because of dialectical differences among the first Arab Muslims or because even the Prophet is said to have recited the same passage in various forms at various times. The 'Uthmānic *mushaf* allowed for such variety in recitation, and Muslims saw this variety as a

⁷⁶ John Burton in his book, *The Collection of the Qur'an*, by emphasizing the internal contradiction of Muslim sources, arrives at a questioning of the entire Hadith literature upon which the history of the collection of the Qur'ān is based. He finally concludes his observations, writing: "What we have today in our hand is the *mushaf* of Muhammad." (John Burton, *The Collection of the Qur'an*, Cambridge 1977, 239-240.)

⁷⁷ Esack, *The Qur'an, A Short Introduction*, 93.

⁷⁸ Esack, *The Qur'an, A Short Introduction*, 93.

⁷⁹ Esack, *The Qur'an, A Short Introduction*, 98.

blessing, not a curse for the community. In this acceptance of divergent readings and recitative practices, they relied often for their proof-text upon the statement ascribed to Muhammad, that “the Qur’ān was sent down according to seven *ahruf* (lit. “letter”; usually taken as “dialects” or “modes”).”⁸⁰

Given the limitations of the Arabic script at the time, it should not be surprising, according to Madigan, if “both in the understanding of the Prophet and in the life of the Muslim community, written copies of the Qur’ān played a much less important role than one might at first expect.”⁸¹ Theologically, in the earliest Muslim sources and in particular the Qur’ān itself, the Qur’ān fundamentally is understood as “the Word of God” (*Kalām Allāh*) preserved in the eternal Book of God (*al-kitāb*), revealed orally and only written down for human use in earthly exemplars. The *mushaf* preserves the Word of God and, therefore, is important only insofar as it continues to function as “the servant of the Book’s orality.”⁸² In other words, the written codification of the authoritative text under Uthman⁸³ has an absolutely necessary role for the Islamic community because it preserves the living Word of God delivered to the Prophet.

Here, one last point remains to be appreciated concerning the formation of the Qur’anic text: does the Uthmanic *mushaf* contain all of the revelations sent down to Muhammad? How does the Islamic community understand the completeness of the written Qur’ān?

⁸⁰ Graham, “Qur’ān as Spoken Word, 34.

⁸¹ Madigan, *The Qur’ān’s Self-Image*, 42.

⁸² Madigan, *The Qur’ān’s Self-Image*, 40.

⁸³ Currently elsewhere in the Muslim world, with the exception of large parts of West and Central Africa, the reading of Hafs, which follows the reading of Asim, one of the seven variant reading of the same text (*ahruf*) – popularized during the reign of Egypt’s King Fu’ad (d. 1936) and first printed in 1925 – is virtually the only one known to Muslims. (Cf. Esack, *The Qur’an, A Short Introduction*, 97.)

According to John Burton, “it was held by the most influential commentators and by a majority of the legal scholars that the entire Qur’ān was never collected.”⁸⁴ There are, as Charles J. Adams observes, “three considerations that have been advanced to argue that portions of the Qur’ān may, indeed, have been lost.”⁸⁵ First, in view of the doubt that Muhammad experienced about what had happened to him in the early Qur’anic revelations, there could be an unknown number of revelations that he initially kept to himself before beginning to enter into his public ministry. Second, the Qur’ān itself mentions the possibility of revelations being forgotten (Q 87:6-7); at another place it even states that this has actually occurred: “And for whatever verse We abrogate or cast into oblivion, We bring a better or the like of it; knowest thou not that God is powerful over everything?” (Q 2:100). In fact, this Qur’ān’s affirmation of both the forgetting of revelations and their replacement is the basis for the well-known Islamic doctrine of abrogation (*naskh*).⁸⁶ Third, there is the fact that tradition also recounts stories of the loss of parts of the Qur’ān both during Muhammad’s lifetime and especially during Uthman’s process of gathering the text.

As we have seen previously, Muslims tenaciously hold the notion of divine providence in securing the authenticity of the Qur’ān. They believe that the Qur’ān was protected from any loss or interpolation both in the Prophet’s memory and in the process of transcribing it. Therefore, the Uthmanic canonical version for Muslims includes all the divine revelations received by the Prophet that should be incorporated

⁸⁴ John Burton, “Collection of the Qur’ān”, in Jane Dammen McAuliffe, ed., *Encyclopaedia of the Qur’ān*, Vol. 1, Leiden 2001, 351.

⁸⁵ Adams, “Qur’ān, The Text and Its History”, 165.

⁸⁶ For a fuller understanding of the abrogation doctrine, see John Burton, “Abrogation”, in Jane Dammen McAuliffe, ed., *Encyclopaedia of the Qur’ān*, Vol. 1, Leiden 2001, 11-19; Nasr Hamid Abu Zaid, *Tekstualitas Al-Qur’an, Kritik terhadap Ulumul Qur’an*, Yogyakarta 2002, 141-166; see also Esack, *The Qur’an, A Short Introduction*, 126-128.

in it, that is, the entire revelation that God did not will the Prophet to forget and which God did not abrogate. It could be that the Prophet forgot some of the revelations, albeit by the will of God. Nevertheless, Muslims are convinced the Qur'ān recited and used during the Prophet's lifetime—all of the knowledge and authority that God actually wills to communicate to a human being—is identically included in the *mushaf*. This conviction is supported by the fact that, according to Muslim tradition, “there was a strong culture of memorization of the Qur'an (*hifz*) during the Prophet's lifetime”⁸⁷ and “at the time when Zayd was active many companions of the Prophet who had committed portions of the revelation to memory were still alive.”⁸⁸ In the other words, as Charles J. Adams observes:

The 'Uthmanic version was prepared in an environment that would have invited criticism and revision if it had gone seriously astray. Since the historical sources do not reflect criticism of this kind or, indeed, great controversy of any kind arising over the 'Uthmanic Qur'ān, it may safely be concluded that the *textus receptus* is faithful to the revelation as it was known to those who personally had known the Prophet.⁸⁹

2. The Contents of the Qur'ān

The Qur'ān, which consists of 114 chapters, or *sūras*, each of which is further divided into a number of verses, or *āyāt*, contains many miscellaneous kinds of materials that range from narrative to prescriptions and prohibitions of a quasi-legal nature. It also contains exhortations to fear God. Although its content is not developed in a systematic way, it is, however, possible to extract some important major themes of the Qur'ān. It can be said that the Qur'ān has a great deal, though not exclusively, to say about the

⁸⁷ Esack, *The Qur'an, A Short Introduction*, 98.

⁸⁸ Adams, “Qur'ān, The Text and Its History”, 166.

⁸⁹ Adams, “Qur'ān, The Text and Its History”, 166.

relationship between God and humankind. The Qur'ān itself describes its contents when saying: "And We have sent down on thee the Book making clear everything, and as a guidance and a mercy, and as good tidings to those who surrender" (Q 16:91). The content of the Qur'ān is considered a message of God to humankind that is concerned with "the problem of the salvation of human beings."⁹⁰ In other words, "the Qur'ān's principal concern," as Charles J. Adams observes, "is the divine relationship with humanity; indeed, its very purpose is to summon mortals to recognize the sovereignty of God over their lives and to invite them to submit (do or make *islām*, "submission") to his will."⁹¹

On this point, Farid Esack notes, "the Qur'ān places an extraordinary emphasis on the binding relationship between faith (*iman*) and practice or what it describes as righteous deeds (*a'mal al-salihah*)."⁹² Furthermore, he says: "Belief in the existence of one transcendent Creator and the struggle to live with all the implications of that belief may be said to be at the core of the Qur'ān's message."⁹³ In accordance with Farid Esack, we shall appreciate the contents of the Qur'ān while being aware of the inseparable connection between belief and practice. In the context of our study, however, we shall limit ourselves to examine three major themes of faith: the existence of God, the vocation of human beings, and the Hereafter.

⁹⁰ From the semantic point of view, Toshihiko Izutsu observes, "the Koran Weltanschauung is capable to be represented as a system built on the principle of conceptual opposition." According to him, the first and most important opposition of the basic structure of the Qur'ān's philosophy is "the fundamental relation between God and man, *Allāh* and *insān*." In this context, Izutsu sees that the Qur'ān would have been "sent down" as God's answer to the problem of the salvation of human beings. (Toshihiko Izutsu, *God and Man in the Koran, Semantics of the Koranic Weltanschauung*, Tokyo 1964, 73-77.)

⁹¹ Adams, "Qur'ān, The Text and Its History", 170.

⁹² Esack, *The Qur'an, A Short Introduction*, 146.

⁹³ Esack, *The Qur'an, A Short Introduction*, 147.

2.1. The Existence of God

God, there is no god but He, the Living, the Everlasting. Slumber seizes Him not, neither sleep; to Him belongs all that is in the heavens and the earth. Who is there that shall intercede with Him save by His leave? He knows what lies before them and what is after them, and they comprehend not anything of His knowledge save such as He wills. His Throne comprises the heavens and earth; the preserving of them oppresses Him not; He is the All-high, the All-glorious. (Qur'ān 2: 256).

The fundamental doctrine of the Qur'ān is that "there is no god other than God." However, according to Gerhard Böwering, God "is not understood in Islam as an abstract absolute; rather God exists and is one: God is the only real supreme being whom all Muslims address and invoke by the name 'Allāh'."⁹⁴ The Qur'ān uses the word "*Allāh*"⁹⁵ approximately 2,500 times to refer to the Transcendent. In other words, as Louis Gardet observes, "all the Qur'anic affirmations relating to the existence of God, his transcendent perfections, or his ways of acting toward his creatures refer to *Allāh*, the word presented in Islam as the proper name of God."⁹⁶ "It is taken to belong to God alone in such a way that it cannot be applied to any other thing."⁹⁷ God is one, the unique sovereign of the heavens and the earth and the only ruler, "who has not taken to Him a son, and who has not any associate in the Kingdom, nor any protector out of humbleness" (Q 17:111).

⁹⁴ Gerhard Böwering, "God and his Attributes", in Jane Dammen McAuliffe, ed., *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān*, Vol. 2, Leiden-Boston 2002, 316.

⁹⁵ The origins of the word "*allāh*" are disputed. Some suggest that *Allāh* is derived from *ilāh*, a deity or god, with the addition of the definite article *al* - *Al-ilāh*, "the God." Some believe that it is from *lāh*, i.e. *Al-lāh*, "the secret one." Abū Hanīfah says that just as the essence of God is unchangeable, so is His name and that *Allāh* has ever been the name of the Eternal Being. Others have suggested that it may be an Arabic rendering of the Hebrew *el*, and the unused root *ūl*, "to be strong." (Thomas Patrick Hughes, *Dictionary of Islam*, Chicago 1994, 141.)

⁹⁶ Louis Gardet, "God in Islam", in Mircea Eliade, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, Vol. 6, New York 1987, 27.

⁹⁷ Böwering, "God and his Attributes", 319-320.

“In the Qur’ān the pure profession of God’s oneness is seen as innate and common to all humans. It cannot be altered because it has been rooted by God in their very nature as the primal religion on which God created all of humanity.”⁹⁸ “So set thy face to the religion, a man of pure faith – God’s original upon which He originated mankind. There is no changing God’s creation. That is the right religion” (Q 30:29). The true religion of God or the primal monotheism, according to the Qur’ān, is *al-hanīfiyya*. Although the presupposition is that all human beings have submitted primordially in the covenant that God made with us before creation (Q 7:172), Abraham is the first mentioned by name in the Qur’ān who submits. He was the first Muslim, the first to “submit” himself to the will of the One True God (Q 2:123-129). “No; Abraham in truth was not a Jew, neither a Christian; but he was a Muslim and one pure of faith; certainly he was never of the idolaters” (Q 3:60). It is precisely in Abraham’s footsteps as a *hanīf* that the Prophet Muhammad and Muslims are commanded to worship God (Q 2:129; 3:89). Belief in the uniqueness and absolute unicity of God is the pivot of Islamic monotheism and submission to his will the focus of the Muslim way of life. “Say: ‘He is God, One, God, the everlasting Refuge, who has not begotten, and has not been begotten, and equal to Him is not any one’” (Q 112:1-4).⁹⁹

In the Qur’ān, furthermore, God is described by His “most beautiful names” (*al-asmā’ al-husnā*, Q 7:179; 17:110; 20:8; 59:24) that are traditionally enumerated as 99

⁹⁸ Böwering, “God and his Attributes”, 329.

⁹⁹ Gerhard Böwering notes that there is some measure of development in the Qur’ānic idea of monotheism. He writes: “The explicit message of God’s oneness, the core of Islamic monotheism, however, increasingly became the focus as the Qur’ānic proclamation progressed throughout Muhammad’s prophetic career. This uncompromising monotheism, known in hadīth literature and scholastic discourse by the extra-qur’ānic term, *tawhīd*, the profession that God is one, stands in the mind of Muslims as the foremost symbol of the Islamic creed.” (Böwering, “God and his Attributes”, 328.)

in number to which is added as the highest name (*al-ism al-a'zam*), the supreme name of God, *Allāh*. In the Qur'ān, however, the most beautiful names are regarded simply as epithets, which describe God - who gave the revelations to the Prophet Muhammad - in rich facets of His being.¹⁰⁰ The most important characteristics that emerge from them are those of omnipotent creator, bountiful benefactor, and stern judge.

The apparently earliest passage of the Qur'ān proclaimed by the Prophet introduces God as creator (*khāliq*). "Recite: In the name of thy Lord who created" (Q 96:1). God is the creator of everything (Q 6:102; 13:16). He created the heavens and the earth in six days (Q 10:3) and what is between them (Q 55:10-14; 13:3; 24:44; 41:37). God creates what he wishes and gives existence by his words: "The only words We say to a thing, when We desire it, is that We say to it 'Be,' and it is" (Q 16:42). Everything therefore belongs to Him. The expression "His Throne comprises the heavens and earth; the preserving of them oppresses Him not," such as in the Throne verse cited above, symbolizes God's power and presence in all things. *Allāh* is the Creator who cares and nurtures. "The Creator is arguably the single most important subject of the Qur'an."¹⁰¹

God is not only the Creator, but also the bountiful Benefactor. The divine epithets that describe the depths of God's mercy and benevolence are *al-rahmān* and

¹⁰⁰ In his article of this point, Gerhard Böwering concludes that: "The divine names of the Qur'ān may best be understood as multifarious expressions in praise of God rather than as doctrinal expositions concerning the nature of God. They give expression to Muhammad's rich and multi-faceted perception of that ultimate reality which he personally experienced as the only God. This experience filled him with awe before the transcendent God, who could not be known in his very self, yet could be glorified in his names. Filled with knowledge of God as "the lord of the heavens and the earth." ..., the Prophet also was aware of God's nearness, nearer to a person than his own "jugular vein." This overpowering transcendence and intimate immanence of Allāh in Muhammad's religious experience was transformed in his qur'ānic proclamation into the praise of the most beautiful names. They are landmarks of his prayer rather than tenets of his theology." (Böwering, "God and his Attributes", 322.)

¹⁰¹ Esack, *The Qur'an, A Short Introduction*, 147.

al-rahīm, both derived from the same root denoting mercy. It is interesting to note that all *sūrahs*, with one exception, *Sūrat al-Tawbah* (*Repentance*), commence with the formula known as the *basmalah*: “*bismi’llāhi ’l-rahmāni ’l-rahīm*” (“In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate”). “One aspect of the divine mercy frequently emphasized in the Qur’ān,” as Charles J. Adams notes, “is God’s communication with humanity,” that is, “through God’s numerous signs in creation and through the prophets who have been sent with guidance.”¹⁰² The beneficence of God is also described in the Qur’ān with other names: the benevolent (*al-latīf*, Q 67:13), the kind (*al-ra’ūf*, Q 2:143), the loving (*al-wadūd*, Q 85:14), the one who answers prayers (*al-mujīb*, cf. Q 11:64), the one who abounds with forgiveness as the forgiving (*al-ghāfir*, Q 7:152), the one who turns to humans with favor (*al-tawwāb*, Q 2:35) and ready to acknowledge their gratitude (*al-shakūr*, cf. Q 35:31).

In the Qur’ān, however, God is also “the most just of judges” (*ahkamū l-hākimīn*, Q 11:45; 95:8) and “the best of judges” (*khayru l-hākimīn*, Q 7:87; 10:109).¹⁰³ As stern *hākim*, God will render judgement between humanity on the day of resurrection. For individuals who do evil, refuse to feed the poor, oppress others, repudiate his prophets, ignore the revelations, or associate partners with God, judgement and a horrible punishment are sure to follow, while for his faithful servants there will be the reward of bliss. Nevertheless, as Gerhard Böwering observes, God is never called *al-’ādil*, (the just) in the Qur’ān. He comments:

This fact may be surprising because the Qur’ān depicts God sitting in judgement over humanity on the day of judgement at the end of the world, decreeing reward or appointing punishment, granting bliss or meeting out damnation (...). With the absolute authority of a monarch, God passes straight

¹⁰² Adams, “Qur’ān, The Text and Its History”, 171.

¹⁰³ Böwering, “God and his Attributes”, 321.

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¹⁰² Adams, “Qur’ān, The Text and Its History”, 171.

¹⁰³ Böwering, “God and his Attributes”, 321.

according to the Qur'ān, is none other than a summons to give one's self only to God, to do the will of God and to recognize the rights of the Creator over His creatures.

The Muslim's outward sign of submission is a formula of witnessing (*shahāda*) that has become the profession of faith of Islam: There is no god but The God, and Muhammad is the Messenger of God. This *shahāda* through which the Muslim faith defines itself is both a continuation and a purification of the *mīthāq*, the covenant made by God with the human race in pre-eternity (Q 7:172), recalled by former prophets and validated and ratified by the pre-Islamic monotheistic believers acknowledged in the Qur'ān. For Muslims, the profession of faith would not be valid without reference to the preaching of the Qur'ān proclaimed by the Prophet Muhammad.

Farid Esack, stressing the role Muhammad as the seal of the prophets, places the Qur'anic revelation in the history of God's revelations:

One of the fundamental doctrines of the Qur'an is that of the historical continuity of revelation whereby God sent a series of messengers to every nation in order to guide them to the path of righteousness. "And there is not a people but a warner had gone among them (35.24). This continuity of revelation, according to Muslim belief, culminated in the revelation of the Qur'an and Muhammad's prophethood. All of these Messengers came with an identical message (41.43) – that of submission to the will of God – and all of humankind are required to believe in the veracity of each one of them. "Verily those who deny God and his apostles by endeavouring to make a distinction between [belief in] God and [belief in] His apostles, and who say, 'We believe in the one but we deny the other', ... they are truly denying the truth" (4.150).¹⁰⁷

In the Qur'anic view, belief in God and in his messengers are two aspects of the one supreme religious act. In the Islamic tradition, *shahāda* is the first religious duty. There flows from this avowal of heart and tongue four other principal obligations for

¹⁰⁷ Esack, *The Qur'an, A Short Introduction*, 151.

all Muslims: formal and ritual prayer (*salāt*),¹⁰⁸ the payment of the welfare tax (*zakat*),¹⁰⁹ fasting during the lunar month of *Ramadān*,¹¹⁰ and if practical, at least one pilgrimage (*hajj*) to the *ka'bah*, “the house of God” in the city of Mecca.¹¹¹ Besides the five pillars of Islam, however, the bulk of the Qur’anic message “contains exhortations dealing with righteous guidance and the consequences of following or ignoring them.”¹¹²

It appears that the Qur’ān gives great emphasis to the divine omnipotence over human lives. “Say: Naught shall visit us but what God has prescribed for us” (Qur’ān 9: 51). Moreover, “Whomsoever God desires to guide, He expands his breast to Islam; whomsoever He desires to lead astray, He makes his breast narrow, tight, as if he were climbing to heaven. So God lays abomination upon those who believe not” (Q 6:125). Although laying great emphasis upon the doctrine of predestination (*taqdīr*), as Charles J. Adams observes, “the Qur’ān in general maintains the freedom of human will and, indeed, emphasizes the need for people to decide and commit themselves, positively or negatively, with respect to its teaching.”¹¹³ “The day every soul shall find what it has done of good brought forward, and what it has done of evil; it will wish if there were only a far space between it and that day” (Q 3:28). And again, “God created the heavens and the earth in truth, and that every soul may be recompensed for what it has

¹⁰⁸ “Recite what has been revealed to thee of the Book, and perform the prayer; prayer forbids indecency and dishonour. God’s remembrance is greater; and God knows the things you work” (Qur’ān 29:44).

¹⁰⁹ “The freewill offerings are for the poor and needy, those who work to collect them, those whose hearts are brought together, the ransoming of slaves, debtors, in God’s way, and the traveler; so God ordains; God is All-knowing, All-wise” (Qur’ān 9:60).

¹¹⁰ “O believers, prescribed for you is the Fast, even as it was prescribed for those that were before you – haply you will be godfearing – for days numbered” (Qur’ān 2:179).

¹¹¹ “It is the duty of all men towards God to come to the House a pilgrim, if he is able to make his way there” (Qur’ān 3:91).

¹¹² For a fuller detail of righteous conduct in the Qur’ān, see Esack, *The Qur’an, A Short Introduction*, 166-190.

¹¹³ Adams, “Qur’ān, The Text and Its History”, 172.

earned; they shall not be wronged” (Q 45:21). Ahmet T. Karamustafa sums up this argument with admirable clarity:

In summary, many would argue that the majority of the seemingly predestinarian verses in the Qur’ān are really expressive of God’s supreme sovereignty, that the emphasis is clearly not on predetermination of events but on God’s creative activity which continuously “measures out” his creation (God’s control of life and death, for instance, would be understood in this sense) or on his all-encompassing knowledge and will. From this interpretive perspective, the Qur’ānic insistence on God’s absolute sovereignty is not a description of a deterministic universe dominated by God but an urgent reminder that invites humanity to moral action. In contrast to the pre-Islamic understanding of human destiny, the God of the Qur’ān is not an impersonal Fate but a personal God who invites human beings to dynamic involvement in the world and who himself responds dynamically to human action.¹¹⁴

2.3. The Hereafter

When heaven is spit open, when the stars are scattered, when the seas swarm over, when the tombs are overthrown, then a soul shall know its works, the former and the latter. O Man! What deceived thee as to thy generous Lord who created thee and shaped thee and wrought thee in symmetry and composed thee after what form He would? No indeed; but you cry lies to the Doom; yet there are over you watchers noble, writers who know whatever you do. Surely the pious shall be in bliss, and the libertines shall be in a fiery furnace roasting therein on the Day of Doom, nor shall they ever be absent from it. And what shall teach thee what is the Day of Doom? Again, what shall teach thee what is the Day of Doom? A day when no soul shall possess aught to succour another soul; that day the Command shall belong unto God. (Qur’ān 82:1-19 [complete]).

One of the important themes of the Qur’anic teaching is the stress on the strict difference between this world (*al-dunya*) and the next (*al-ākhirah*). “Nay, but you prefer the present life; and the world to come is better, and more enduring” (Q 87:16-17). “This present life is naught but a diversion and a sport; surely the Last Abode is Life, did they but know” (Q 29:64). The terms *dunya* and *ākhirah*, as Farid Esack notes, “are

¹¹⁴ Ahmet T. Karamustafa, “Fate”, in Jane Dammen McAuliffe, ed., *Encyclopaedia of the Qur’ān*, Vol. 2, Leiden-Boston 2002, 188.

related both to time and space and to two moral alternatives; *dunya* is the geographical space and the present where humankind are meant to prepare for *akhirah*, yet this abode of preparation can also be good and fulfilling by itself.”¹¹⁵

In this context, the Qur’ān regards the worldly life of the human being as a journey towards hereafter. “Surely we belong to God, and to Him we return” (Q 2:151). This situation of returning to God requires a constant struggle (*jihād*) of preparation for the last day. For the one who does submit (*muslim*) by cultivating an undeviating association of love and worship of God as well as leading a life characterized by a great effort to fulfill His commandment, there awaits eternal reward in Paradise; for the disbeliever or infidel (*kāfir*), unending damnation in Hell. “The Qur’ān speaks repeatedly about the ultimate accountability of all human beings to God and insists that all of life and its affairs, having originated with God, are, in fact, in a continuous state of purposeful reversion to a just and merciful Creator, Sustainer, and Judge.”¹¹⁶

In the Qur’anic view, the ultimate accountability will happen on the Day of Resurrection (*yawm al-qiyāma*)¹¹⁷ that “the knowledge of it is only with God” (Q 33:63). The expression “when heaven is spit open, when the stars are scattered, when the seas swarm over, when the tombs are overthrown,” such as in the passage cited above, describes how on the Day of Resurrection tribulation, confusion, and collapse of the entire cosmos will abound, and civilization will reach its nadir. On that day, the dead shall be given life. “Surely He who quickens it is He who quickens the dead;

¹¹⁵ Esack, *The Qur’an, A Short Introduction*, 158.

¹¹⁶ Esack, *The Qur’an, A Short Introduction*, 158.

¹¹⁷ This term occurs no less than seventy times in the Qur’ān. Besides, there are other terms which the Qur’ān applies to the resurrection, like: *al-sa’a* (the hour), *al-yawm al-ākhir* (the last day), *yawm al-dīn* (the day of requital), *yawm al-faṣl* (the day of decision), *yawm al-hisāb* (the day of reckoning), *yawm al-fath* (the day of victory), *yawm al-talāq* (the day of gathering), *al-qari’ah* (the sudden calamity), *al-ghāsiyah* (the overshadowing event), *al-sakkha* (the deadening calamity), *al-haqqa* (the great truth), and *al-wāqi’a* (the great event). (Cf. Esack, *The Qur’an, A Short Introduction*, 159.)

surely He is powerful over everything” (Q 41:39). Each one individually, the living and the resurrected, shall be called before God’s throne to read from the book of the record of his or her deeds. “And on the day when the Hour is come, ... you shall be recompensed for that you were doing. This is Our Book, that speaks against you the truth; We have been registering all that you were doing” (Q 45:28). Finally, each soul shall be judged justly. “And We shall set up the just balances for the Resurrection Day, so that not one soul shall be wronged anything; even if it be the weight of one grain of mustard-seed We shall produce it, and sufficient are We for reckoners” (Q 21:48).

The Qur’ān is explicit about two alternatives for each person in the Hereafter: a Life of Pleasure in what is elsewhere called *jannah* (“the garden”) or *firdaws* (“the Garden of Eden”) or Paradise, or a Life of Torture in a fiery Gehenna or *jahannam* (Hell). The Qur’ān itself gives various descriptions of Paradise and of Hell, one of them being:

This is the similitude of Paradise which the godfearing have been promised: therein are rivers of water unstaling, rivers of milk unchanging in flavour, and rivers of wine—a delight to the drinkers, rivers, too, of honey purified; and therein for them is every fruit—and forgiveness from their Lord—Are they as he who dwells forever in the Fire, such as are given to drink boiling water, that tears their bowels asunder?” (Qur’ān 47:16).

What the true reality of Paradise and Hell will be, however, as the Qur’ān itself says, “No soul knows what comfort is laid up for them secretly, as a recompense for that they were doing” (Q 32:17). But, it seems certain for the Qur’ān that “upon that day the recourse shall be to thy Lord, ... upon that day faces shall be radiant, gazing upon their Lord; and upon that day faces shall be scowling, thou mightest think the Calamity has been wreaked on them” (Q 75:12.22-25).

In short, according to the Qur'ān itself, it is a guidance to the godfearing, those who believe in the mystery of God's existence, perform the prayer, and expend of that God has provided them; who believe in what has been sent down, and what has been sent down before, and have faith in the Hereafter (cf. Q 2:1-4).

3. The Central Role of the Qur'ān in Muslim Life

Muslims believe that the Qur'ān as the transcendent word of God is immutable and absolute. In the course of the development of Muslim theology, the majority of Sunni theologians even insisted that the Qur'ān is uncreated, existing eternally as the divine attribute of speech (*kalām Allāh*). They look upon speech as one of the essential attributes of God. It is a quality of God inherent in His nature. God is eternal with His speech. Since God is unchangeable, the Qur'ān, that is His speech, is uncreated and eternal. The doctrine of the uncreatedness of the Qur'ān, which sooner or later triumphed in the community and became the orthodox Muslim position in spite of some powerful opposition,¹¹⁸ as Charles J. Adams notes, is put concisely by al-Nasafi in his well-known creedal statement:

¹¹⁸ *Kalām*, in the sense of *kalām Allāh* the Speech (Word) of God, is found several times in the Qur'ān (for example, Qur'ān 2:75; 9:6; 48:15. God spoke to the Prophets (Q 2:253). He spoke clearly to Moses (4:164; 7:143). It was the Qur'ān that used the term *kalām Allāh* and attributed *kalām* to God. In other words, it is the Qur'ān that really equates itself with *kalām Allāh*. However, it is interesting that *kalām* is not found in the list of "the most beautiful names. Here, according to Gardet, arose the very controversial problem of the relationship of the Qur'ān and the Speech as a divine attribute. "This problem is directly linked to reflections and debates on the nature of the Qur'ān (created or uncreated)." In contrast with the orthodoxy, the Mu'tazilites, the pioneers of scholastic theology in Islam, argued that God created His speech in an earthly substrate and "denied that there was an uncreated Word subsisting in God. ... The Mu'tazilite theory of the created Qur'ān is based on the concept of word as speech, presuming articulation and movement, which would be incompatible with pure divine immutability." The Qur'ān "may be called the "Word of God" in that it expresses what God wishes to communicate to mankind; but this Word is created on the lips of the prophet or reciters, or on the pages where it is recorded." The divine word is created during the act of revelation. (See L. Gardet, "Kalām", in C. E. Bosworth et al., ed., *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, New edition, Vol. 4, Leiden 1978, 468-471.)

He (God) speaks with a kind of Speech which is one of His attributes, from all eternity, not of the genus of letters and sounds. It is an attribute incompatible with silence and defect. Allah speaks with this attribute, commanding, prohibiting, and narrating. The Qur'ān, the Speech of Allah, is uncreated and it is written in our volumes, preserved in our hearts, recited by our tongues, heard by our ears, [yet] is not a thing residing in them.¹¹⁹

According to Muslims, the Qur'ān is pure Divine Word. Insisting that the basic *élan* of the Qur'ān is moral, Fazlur Rahman developed an interesting position around this point. He insists that the Qur'ān as the moral law is immutable. He argues that:

It is God's 'Command', Man cannot make or unmake the Moral Law: he must submit himself to it, this submission to it being called *islām* and its implementation in life being called '*ibāda* or 'service to God'. ... The moral law and religious values are God's Command, and although they are not identical with God entirely, they are part of Him. The Qur'ān is, therefore, purely divine.¹²⁰

For Fazlur Rahman, God's revelation intends obedience rather than information. Rahman believes that "the Qur'ān is the divine response, through the Prophet's mind to the moral and social situation of the Prophet's Arabia, particularly the problems of the commercial Meccan society of his day."¹²¹ He affirms the ontological otherness and absolute authority of the Qur'ān as "*verbally revealed* [italics in original] and not merely in its 'meaning' and ideas."¹²² According to him, therefore, "man's duty is carefully to formulate this Law and to submit to it with all his physical, mental and spiritual faculties."¹²³

Besides the doctrine of the Qur'ān's eternity, there is another doctrine that has profoundly affected the life of the Muslim community and Islamic theology, that is, the

¹¹⁹ Quoted in Adams, "Qur'ān, The Text and Its History", 173-174.

¹²⁰ Fazlur Rahman, *Islam*, New York, 1966, 27-28.

¹²¹ Fazlur Rahman, *Islam and Modernity – Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition*, Chicago 1982, 5.

¹²² Rahman, *Islam*, 26.

¹²³ Rahman, *Islam*, 29.

doctrine of the miraculous nature of the Qur'ān (*i'jāz*). "Already in the time of the Prophet," according to tradition, "controversy over the Qur'ān developed among those who heard it, especially among the Quraysh tribe in Mecca, indicating that the recitation of its verses had an effect on those who heard it."¹²⁴ As we saw in the previous part, from the beginning of announcing his prophethood, Muhammad encountered strong and bitter hostility to his mission. One of the forms that this opposition took was to denounce the origin of his truthfulness. Against this opposition, according to the Qur'ān, God challenged the doubters to produce a discourse similar to it (Q 52:33-34; 17:88; 11:13, 10:38; 2:23-24). The Qur'ān itself noted that this challenge went unanswered and confidently declared that, "if men and jinn banded together to produce the like of this Koran, they would never produce its like, not though they backed one another" (Q 17:90). In the formation of Islamic theology, these challenge verses were taken as the basis of *i'jāz*, or "as theological warrants for the claim that the Qur'ān was a *mu'jiz(a)*, the technical term in Islamic theology for 'miracle'.¹²⁵

By the early part of the third century AH (ninth century CE), the word *i'jāz* had come to mean that quality of the Qur'ān that rendered people incapable of imitating the Book or any part thereof in content and form. By the latter part of that century, the word had become a technical term, and the numerous definitions applied to it after the tenth century have shown little divergence from the key concepts of the inimitability of the Qur'ān and the inability of human beings to match it even when challenged.¹²⁶

¹²⁴ Richard C. Martin, "Inimitability", in Jane Dammen McAuliffe, ed., *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān*, Vol. 2, Leiden-Boston 2002, 528.

¹²⁵ Martin, "Inimitability", 527.

¹²⁶ Issa J. Boullata, "I'jāz", in Mircea Eliade, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, Vol. 7, New York 1987, 87.

In fact, “the most widely accepted basis for the uniqueness of the Qur’an is its linguistic and aesthetic character.”¹²⁷ According to M. Ayoub, however, besides “its eloquence and rhetorical beauty, and the precision, economy, and subtlety of its style,” that can be meaningfully discussed only in Arabic, the language of the Qur’ān, there are other aspects of *i’jāz al-Qur’ān* as “the foretelling of future events” and “the revealing knowledge of the unknown.”¹²⁸

For Muslims the Qur’ān is the dynamic, explicit, complete guidance of God. It is God speaking, not merely to the Prophet Muhammad and his followers in seventh-century Arabia, but from all eternity to all humankind. For Muslim communities the earthly Qur’ān, whose original archetype is with God, is the divine word addressed to humanity. Muslims believe that it participates in history but at the same time transcends it. The Qur’ān that for the Muslim is “alive and has a quasi-human personality”¹²⁹ stands as the very transcendent focus of Muslim life: worship, piety, and faith.

3.1. The Qur’ān as the Recited Word of God

“Although the Qur’ān has had a rich and central role in the history of Muslim piety and faith as a ‘sacred book,’ it has always been preeminently an oral, not a written text.”¹³⁰

According to Islamic tradition, as we have already seen, the Qur’anic revelation as first given to Muhammad begins with “Recite (*iqra*) in the name of thy Lord who created.”

The Qur’anic revelations essentially were to be recited and proclaimed by the Prophet.

¹²⁷ Esack, *The Qur’an, A Short Introduction*, 104.

¹²⁸ Mahmoud Ayoub, *The Qur’an and Its Interpreters*, Vol. I, Albany 1984, 2.

¹²⁹ Esack, *The Qur’an, A Short Introduction*, 17.

¹³⁰ William A. Graham, “Orality”, in Jane Dammen McAuliffe, ed., *Encyclopaedia of the Qur’ān*, Vol. 3, Leiden 2003, 584.

We have also already seen that in early Islamic history the 'Qur'ān was transmitted first of all by recitation and memorization. In short, the Qur'ān was originally intended to be rehearsed and recited, first by the Prophet, then by the faithful.

In his observations, William Graham arrives at a strong conviction that the original meaning of the very word *qur'ān* testifies to this essential orality of the text from its beginning. According to him, the word *qur'ān* is a verbal noun form derived from the root *q-r-'*, "to recite, read aloud," that was probably influenced (not a direct borrowing) by the Syriac cognate word *qeryānā*, "oral reading," used by Syriac-speaking Christian communities specially for the oral liturgical reading from scripture and for the scripture passage that is read aloud in divine service.¹³¹ Here the point is not to polemicize against the divine origin of the Qur'ān – that the Prophet Muhammad was influenced by the Arab Christians or Jews; a formulation that Muslims rightly find offensive – but to "make it highly likely that *qur'ān* was understood by the Arabs to refer to texts intended for vocal proclamation, reading, and recitation such as Jews and Christians already practiced in the seventh-century Arabian milieu just as elsewhere."¹³² Moreover, still according to William Graham, the internal evidence of the Qur'anic text itself supports the conviction that the Qur'ān as divine word is meant to be recited or read *viva voce* and listened to with reverence. The recurring imperative "Qul!" ("Say!") that introduces well over three hundred Qur'anic passages is itself a striking reminder that these texts are intended to be recited aloud.¹³³

¹³¹ Cf. Graham, "The Earliest Meaning of 'Qur'ān'", 365.

¹³² William A. Graham, *Beyond the Written Word, Oral Aspect of Scripture in the History of Religion*, Cambridge 1987, 91.

¹³³ Cf. Graham, "The Earliest Meaning of 'Qur'ān'", 367.

In fact, the oral nature of the Qur'ān is especially noticeable in almost any segment of Muslim life through the centuries to the present moment. The Qur'ān as the recited Word of God, in William Graham's words, "has always been a striking element in both Muslim religious practice and even in daily life in Islamic societies, where the use of qur'ānic formulae has been a permeating reality of everyday speech, even down to small repeated phrases that have passed into everyday usage."¹³⁴

Perhaps the most clear and real expression of the Qur'ān as the recited Word of God is its central importance in the Muslim ritual and devotional life. In the formal worship of *salāt* and also in individual devotional and prayer life, no Muslim can function without being able to recite at least a certain amount of the Arabic Qur'ān. In other words, no *salāt* is valid without recitation of at least the Fātiḥah.¹³⁵ That is why for each Muslim it is necessary as a minimum to know the seven short Qur'ānic verses of the Fātiḥa, which play so important a role in acts of worship. This fact describes clearly: "It is the Qur'ān's character as revelation with *a particular form (nazm) intended for recitative use in worship* [italics in original] that distinguishes it from other texts."¹³⁶

The belief of the inimitability of the Qur'ān as recited word in worship requires a special attitude in dealing with it. As no one should touch the Qur'ān unless he is

¹³⁴ Graham, "Orality", 586.

¹³⁵ Fātiḥa is the first sūra, "The Opening," of the Qur'ān: "In the Name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate. Praise belongs to God, the Lord of all Being, the All-merciful, the All-Compassionate, the Master of the Day of Doom. Thee only we serve; to Thee alone we pray for succour. Guide us in the straight path, the path of those whom Thou hast blessed, not of those against whom Thou art wrathful, nor of those who are astray." Its seven brief verses stand at the head of the Qur'ānic text. "It is the one sūra that every Muslim must be able to recite by heart in order to perform the ritual prayer. As the primary prayer and scriptural formula in Muslim communal and personal life, the Fātiḥah is comparable to the *Shema* in the Jewish tradition and the *Paternoster* in the Christian. (See William A. Graham, "Fātiḥa", in Jane Dammen McAuliffe, ed., *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān*, Vol. 2, Leiden-Boston 2002, 188.)

¹³⁶ Graham, "The Earliest Meaning of 'Qur'ān'", 363.

pure, nor should anyone recite it unless he is in a state of ritual purity. In Mahmoud M. Ayoub's words, "before beginning to recite, he must clean his teeth and purify his mouth, for he will become the 'path' of the Qur'ān. The Qur'ān reciter must put on his best attire, as he would when standing before a king, for he is in fact speaking with God."¹³⁷

The Qur'anic revelations continue to be recited in the midst of the community. There is no more powerful symbol or evocation of the Islamic worldview than the divine recited words. In addition to the daily prayers, the Qur'ān or parts of it are recited on many different occasions: at birth in connection with the naming of a child, at the time of circumcision, at marriage and at funerals. The recitation of the Qur'ān plays an important role in the celebration of the great calendar feast days of the Muslim community such as *Īd al-Fitr* and *Īd al-Adhā*. Indeed, during the thirty days of the fast of Ramadān the nights are filled with the sound of Qur'ān recitation in the mosques. For a Muslim, if the vocation of life in this world is worship of God, so the most excellent form of worship is reciting the Qur'ān.

Recitation of the Qur'ān in Islamic contexts of prayer, liturgy, and public performance is designated by the Arabic terms *tilāwa* and *qirā'a*. *Tilāwa* is the more general term for Qur'ān recitation, and its root carries the double sense of "to recite" and "to follow". The word *qirā'a* is derived from *q-r'*, as we have seen above, that means, "to recite, read, proclaim." *Qirā'a*, like *qur'ān*, but even more emphatically, retains fundamentally the oral sense of its root verb. William Graham in his *Beyond the Written Word, Oral Aspect of Scripture in the History of Religion* notes that, as a technical term, *qirā'a* is used to refer both to the act of reciting aloud part or the whole

¹³⁷ Ayoub, "Qur'ān: Its Role in Muslim Piety", 178.

of the Qur'ān and to a particular reading of any word, phrase or passage in the Qur'ān according to one of the various traditions of oral text transmission.¹³⁸ In addition, as Graham observes, *Qirā'a* is also used to designate “an entire corpus or tradition of specific variant readings of the basic ‘Uthmānic consonantal text.”¹³⁹

As a formal Islamic “science” (*‘ilm*), *qirā'ah* encompasses both the study and transmission of the variant readings (*qirā'āt*) of the ‘Uthmānic consonantal text—the written *mushaf*—and also the actual art of oral recitation or cantillation, called *tajwīd* (“doing well by”, “rendering excellent” [the Qur'ān]), with its various traditions of vocal performance. As a joint science, the *‘ilm al-qirā'āt wal-tajwīd* represents the long Muslim tradition of qur'anic textual studies. These studies rely, to be sure, upon knowledge of various other sciences, from grammar (*nahw*) and philology (*luḡah*) to rhetoric (*balāghah*), orthography (*rasm*), and especially exegesis (*tafsīr*).¹⁴⁰

As indicated above, the study of the *qirā'āt* is inextricable from the science of *tajwīd*, the actual recitative practice or method of Qur'ān cantillation. It is the effort to conserve the living Word of God in the full beauty and range of meaning with which it was given to and faithfully transmitted by the Prophet. This is why, “besides the manuals on *tajwīd*, others sources contributing to the cognitive and intellectual understanding of the Qur'ān include phrase-by-phrase commentaries (*tafsīr*), biographies of the Prophet Muhammad (*sīrāt*), and descriptions of the specific occasions of revelation during Muhammad's mission (*asbāb al-nuzūl*).”¹⁴¹

In Islam, “the chanting or cantillation of the Qur'ān is viewed as a vocal form *sui generis*: its forms and possibilities come from the divine text itself, not from the minds or mouths of its human readers.”¹⁴² Here the Qur'ān recitation cannot be

¹³⁸ Cf. Graham, *Beyond the Written Word*, 97.

¹³⁹ Graham, *Beyond the Written Word*, 97.

¹⁴⁰ Cf. Graham, *Beyond the Written Word*, 98.

¹⁴¹ Richard C. Martin, “Tilāwah”, in Mircea Eliade, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, Vol. 10, New York 1987, 528.

¹⁴² Graham, *Beyond the Written Word*, 101.

regarded as an empty verbal exercise, a cultural form without content. On the contrary, *tilāwa*, which has thus far been used synonymously with *qirā'a*, is viewed as:

... a meaningful speech act governed by rules that situate the speaker and the addressee within the sacred paradigm of God's address to humankind. ... The Qur'ān is enthusiastically held to be God's beneficent revelation to the Arabs in the seventh century and, through the Arabs and their language, to the rest of humankind. *Tilāwah* as an Islamic cultural framework embraces not only the sounds but also the cognitive processes of meaning and the emotional responses appropriate to this symbol of divine manifestation.¹⁴³

In sum, this oral-aural or reciting-listening aspect of the Qur'ān that lies at the root of its role in the religious life and practice of Muslims is an essential dimension of the structure of revelation itself. We can say, in William Graham's words, that the "miraculous and inimitable quality of the Qur'ān inheres not simply in its literal wording on a page, but even more so in its vocal rendering as divine speech."¹⁴⁴ It is the recited Word of God through which God continues to communicate with those who fear him and acknowledge His signs.

3.2. The Qur'ān as the Written Word of God

In the previous part we have observed that the Qur'ān, "the Word-made-text," has inseparable double dimensions, oral and written, that continue to function even though in the course of early Muslim history the totality of the revelation was declared, finished, and closed in the single compilation called *mushaf*. Muslims believe that, given its eternal, inimitable and miraculous nature, the whole Qur'ān, as well as every component of it contained in the *mushaf*, what Mohammed Arkoun calls "the Closed

¹⁴³ Martin, "Tilāwah", 529.

¹⁴⁴ Graham, *Beyond the Written Word*, 101.

Official Corpus,”¹⁴⁵ is sign of the presence of God in the world. “In Islam ... it is in the concrete text, the very words of the Qur’ān, that Muslims most directly experience God. Scripture for Muslims is itself the divine presence as well as the mediator of divine will and divine grace.”¹⁴⁶

In Islam, the significance of the written scriptural text is difficult to exaggerate. In fact, for Muslims, the written Qur’ān symbolizes or embodies religious and moral authority. Muslims believe that the Qur’ān possesses a supramundane authority and degree of holiness that no other texts command. Perhaps, in this case, the authoritative character of the Qur’ān is most vivid in moral and legal aspects of the life of Muslims in which it provides the basis of communal order. “In the broadest sense the whole of the Qur’ān is law for Muslims.”¹⁴⁷ More specifically, although it is not the only, as the written direct and unmediated Word of God, the Qur’ān is primary source and ultimate bases of *Shari’a* law.

In addition, the extraordinary sacrality of the Qur’ān is seen in almost every facet of its use in Muslim communal and personal life. In the Islamic tradition, it is interesting that there is an attention lavished upon the physical Qur’anic text, not only in the rigorous preservation of its Arabic language but also in its art of the entire surrounding culture. For Muslims, Arabic is the sacred language of Islam in the sense

¹⁴⁵ Mohammed Arkoun states that *mushaf*, the book composed of pages where the Qur’anic discourse is transcribed, is elevated to the status of a Closed Official Corpus according to procedures developed and supervised by scholars: “official because they resulted from a set of decisions taken by “authorities” recognized by the community; closed because nobody was permitted any longer to add or subtract a word, to modify a reading in the Corpus now declared authentic. Then, in the decisive, irreversible, historic event ... revelation came to be accessible to the faithful only on the basis of the Closed Official Corpus, more commonly called Holy Scripture or the Word of God.” (Mohammed Arkoun, *Rethinking Islam: Common Questions, Uncommon Answers*, edited and translated by Robert D. Lee, Boulder 1994, 33.)

¹⁴⁶ Graham, *Beyond the Written Word*, 87.

¹⁴⁷ Malise Ruthven, *Islam, A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford 1997, 75.

that it is an integral part of the Qur'anic revelation. "We have sent it down as an Arabic Koran; haply you will understand" (Q 12:2). Muslims believe, as Seyyed Hossein Nasr notes, that "God has chosen it [Arabic language] as His instrument of communication and He always chooses to 'speak' in a language which is primordial and which expresses the profoundest truths in the most concrete terms."¹⁴⁸ That is why Muslim tradition holds that "the formulae of the Quran read in prayers and acts of worship must be in the sacred language of Arabic which alone enables one to penetrate into the content and be transformed by the Divine presence and grace (*burakah*) of the Divine Book."¹⁴⁹ The Muslim attitude toward translation of the Qur'an may also be considered in this connection. Even though the vast majority of Muslims in the world are not arabophone, Muslim tradition holds that the Qur'an cannot be translated into any language especially for ritual: "they may convey its literal meaning, but they lack the divine aura of the original."¹⁵⁰ However, when translated by Muslims, the Arabic text is customarily still written or printed beside the translated text of the other language, "since the Arabic text alone is the speech of God *ipsissima verba*."¹⁵¹

The sensitivity toward sacredness of the Arabic Qur'an is also shown in how the Qur'an is handled.

Because the Qur'an is God's very Word and a graced gift for human guidance, the physical text itself is treated with respect and reverence. Its pages are carefully protected from any sort of dirt or damage. It should not, for example, ever be placed on the ground. Pious Muslims will perform mandated ablutions before handling the Qur'an and will avoid doing so if in an unavoidable state of ritual impurity (e.g., during menstruation or puerperium).¹⁵²

¹⁴⁸ Nasr, *Ideals and Realities of Islam*, 48.

¹⁴⁹ Nasr, *Ideals and Realities of Islam*, 44.

¹⁵⁰ Adams, "Qur'an, The Text and Its History", 174.

¹⁵¹ William A. Graham, "Scripture", in Mircea Eliade, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, Vol. 13, New York 1987, 143.

¹⁵² Jonathan Z. Smith, ed., *The Harpercollins Dictionary of Religion*, San Francisco 1995, 514.

Perhaps the major expression of the “*kitāb*-centeredness” of Islamic faith as a response to the Muslim apprehension of the Qur’ān as the written Word of God in Muslim religious life and culture is Muslim calligraphy art. The art of calligraphy developed at an early stage of Islamic history. “According to traditional accounts, certain fragments were committed to writing by some of the Companions of the Prophet on crude materials such as flat stones, veins of palm leaves, animal skins or ceramic shards.”¹⁵³ During the first three centuries of Islam, calligraphy underwent considerable development. Today it occupies the highest rank among the arts of Islam. In Islam, in fact, “where a considerable iconophobia has held sway in the public sphere, magnificent calligraphic renderings of the Qur’anic word have been not only the favorite expression of the art of the book but also the chief adornment of mosques and most other monuments.”¹⁵⁴

Especially, about the use of qur’anic calligraphy in epigraphy, Solange Ory notes that there are two functions of calligraphy: educational and ornamental.

It is educational because the choice of reproduced verses reminds the believers of the great truths of the Islamic faith; this choice is adapted to the type of education religious authorities want to further. It is ornament because it is linked to religious architecture where it constitutes one essential decorative element. The bands decorated with qur’anic verses surround the upper part of the walls of prayer rooms in mosques, *madrasas* and mausoleums, frame the *mihrābs*, crown the arcades of mosque courtyards and make the shafts of minarets more attractive; they generate the composition of stone rosettes that decorate some portals and, inscribed on funerary stelae, they accompany the faithful to the gates of the hereafter.¹⁵⁵

In Islam the calligraphy or the writing of the Qur’ān is considered as a sacred act. “In the eyes of a Muslim, qur’anic calligraphy is the visible form of the revealed

¹⁵³ Solange Ory, “Calligraphy”, in Jane Dammen McAuliffe, ed., *Encyclopaedia of the Qur’ān*, Vol. 1, Leiden 2001, 278.

¹⁵⁴ William A. Graham, “Scripture”, 137-138.

¹⁵⁵ Ory, “Calligraphy”, 284-285.

word, an achievement in which artists and faithful are united in their search for the unspeakable and the ineffable.”¹⁵⁶ That is why, perhaps, “according to the tradition of the Prophet,” as Annemarie Schimmel notes, “the calligrapher, who knows how to pen in beautiful letters the word of God or even a fragment of the Qur’ān, will certainly go to Paradise.”¹⁵⁷

Muslims believe that God continually ‘writes’ to determine obligations, punishments, entitlements, rewards, and the course of events; and to record all deeds and thoughts, both good and evil. For Muslims, The Qur’ān itself does not function only as the prayerbook and liturgical book of Islam but continues to function primarily as a source of dynamic guidance, in Mohammed Arkoun’s words, “to reveal meanings without reducing the mystery, the inexpressible character, of that which is revealed; to show without demonstrating and without short-circuiting the tools of knowledge.”¹⁵⁸ In the religious life and practice of Muslims the Qur’ān as the written Word of God is the symbol of the divine presence that has a power with an infinite capacity to signify things.¹⁵⁹

3.3. The Power of the Qur’ān in the Life of Muslims

For Muslims, the Qur’ān with two inseparable dimensions, written as well as oral, is the presence and accessibility of God’s very word in the created world. “Both the visual and the auditory senses take pleasure in the beauty of the ‘Noble Qur’ān’, which

¹⁵⁶ Ory, “Calligraphy”, 285.

¹⁵⁷ Annemarie Schimmel, “Islamic Calligraphy”, in Mircea Eliade, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, Vol. 3, New York 1987, 29.

¹⁵⁸ Arkoun, *Rethinking Islam*, 42.

¹⁵⁹ Cf. Arkoun, *Rethinking Islam*, 42.

is for Muslim eyes or ears, without question or limitation, 'the most beautiful of stories' (S 12,3)."¹⁶⁰ The power of the Qur'ān, however, does not lie only in that it expresses a historical fact or phenomenon. Indeed, many people who read the Qur'ān for the first time are struck by what appears as a kind of incoherence from the human point of view because its current arrangement is neither chronological nor thematic. It also does not have a clear narrative pattern where stories neatly unfold. According to the Muslim point of view, nevertheless, the power of the Qur'ān "lies in that it is a symbol whose meaning is valid always because it concerns not a particular fact in a particular time but truths which being in the very nature of things are perennial."¹⁶¹

For the believer, the Qur'ān, as the written and recited Word of God, lies beyond the horizon of chronological analysis. As the transcendent Word of God, it is infinite in meaning and significance for all times and places. In Islam, the Qur'ān itself is a phenomenon. Mahmoud M. Ayoub confidently states:

The Qur'ān is a unique phenomenon in religious history. It is a historical document reflecting the socioeconomic, religious, and political situation of seventh-century Arab society, but it is at the same time a book of guidance and a code of conduct for millions of men and women who live by its injunctions and find in it the meaning and fulfillment of their lives. For them, the Qur'ān is the eternal word of God which entered human time and history through revelation, a light illuminating the way of the faithful from this world to the next.¹⁶²

In fact, as Mahmoud Ayoub says, "The Qur'an has played two distinct but continuous roles in the lives of Muslims. It has been a guide along the weary way of

¹⁶⁰ Graham, *Beyond the Written Word*, 111.

¹⁶¹ Nasr, *Ideals and Realities of Islam*, 49.

¹⁶² Ayoub, "Qur'ān: Its Role in Muslim Piety", 176.

this life and into the next, a source of blessing and honor for its bearers here on earth and their intercessor with God on the day of judgement.”¹⁶³

As we have seen, the Qur’ān is essentially the divine aid to humanity in reaching its fulfilled existence. For Muslims, moreover, the Qur’ān is the right guide that indicates the straight path and accompanies them along the journey. By reciting the complete Qur’anic text over a period of days, weeks or months, it may be considered as a voyage through an endless world of meaning. Muslims believe that the most important purpose of this sacred journey in the world is to form one’s character and life according to the word of God, to achieve true righteousness (*taqwā*) in and with the Qur’ān.¹⁶⁴

Seyyed Hossein Nasr says that apart from its doctrinal and juridical content, the Qur’ān contains a quality which is “a divine magic” in the metaphysical sense and not literal. It possesses precisely a *barakah* or great grace that “provides food for the souls of men.”¹⁶⁵ Muslims believe that every portion, or even every verse, as well as the whole of the Qur’ān possesses a great power, which is associated with the presence of the Divine in the sacred language God has chosen to reveal His Word. In fact, people read and memorize it by heart; they chant and recite it from day to day in every aspect of life to obtain power and comfort. In addition to being the basic Muslim prayer, for example, the *Fātiha* for the Muslim is also a source of blessing. Muslims believe that through the *Fātiha* begun by the *basmala*, which according to tradition is the first drop from the Divine Pen, the divine joy and bliss enters into human life to bless and sanctify it. When a believer is in difficulty he reads certain verses of the Qur’ān that

¹⁶³ Ayoub, *The Qur’an and Its Interpreters*, 7-8.

¹⁶⁴ Cf. Ayoub, “Qur’ān: Its Role in Muslim Piety”, 178.

¹⁶⁵ Nasr, *Ideals and Realities of Islam*, 50-52.

pacify and tranquilize him, like the throne verse (Q 2:256) or the sura of sincere faith (Q 112). Indeed, the powerful verses of the Qur'ān, as Mahmoud Ayoub notes, "has been used in Muslim folklore to heal and to inflict harm, to cause strange natural occurrences, and even to charm snakes and find lost animals."¹⁶⁶ The Qur'ān also serves as a source of comfort and reassurance in the face of the unknown, both to the living as well as the dead because, as the sura *Yāsīn* says, "Is not He, who created the heavens and earth, ... Yes indeed; He is the All-creator, the All-knowing. His command, when He desires a thing, is to say to it 'Be,' and it is. So glory be to Him, in whose hand is the dominion of everything, and unto whom you shall be returned" (Q 36:81-83).

In Islam, the Qur'ān is regarded as the powerful symbol—perhaps one could even say sacrament—of God's presence. Indeed, as we have seen, its power is able to penetrate all aspects of daily life by re-forming and re-shaping the everyday life of the Muslim community physically as well as spiritually. It can even be said that for Muslims the Qur'ān is the mediator between God and man and vice versa. In other words, Muslims regard the Qur'ān as having a saving role that, according to Mahmoud Ayoub, may be seen in two different ways: "The first is through the interiorization of the Qur'an by the pious, and the second is through the direct intercession of the Qur'an with God on the day of resurrection on behalf of those who in this world had memorized it and lived by its precepts."¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁶ Ayoub, "Qur'ān: Its Role in Muslim Piety", 177.

¹⁶⁷ Ayoub, *The Qur'an and Its Interpreters*, 11.

4. Conclusion

For the Qur'ān itself, and consequently for the Muslims, the Qur'ān is the Word of God. Muslims believe that in essence there is only one eternal divine revelation, whose essential content is recorded in the heavenly well-guarded Tablet, reiterated by the prophets throughout the ages without any contribution of their own. Like all previous revelation, the Qur'ān sent down in clear Arabic to Muhammad, the last prophet and messenger of God, is rooted in the eternity of God. In Islam, however, the Qur'ān is qualified in form and content to be the end of the history of revelation because, unlike all others, it is intended for all peoples. It is the most perfect and ultimate form of divine speech addressed to humankind. According to the normative Muslim view, faithfully proclaimed and accurately recited by the Prophet in historical time, the Qur'ān was memorized and collected "between two covers" without undergoing alterations, deletions or additions. It was, then, recited and written with infinite care and high respect in continuous transmission from generation to generation. Today, as in the past, the Qur'ān is at the heart of Islamic religious and practical life. As a word from God, it is the foundation of the Muslim life. As the Word of God, it is a symbol of Divine presence in the midst of communities. As the written and recited Word of God, with its saving power, the Qur'ān provides the way to happiness in the present world and to fulfillment in the world beyond to all who care to read or recite it.

CHAPTER IV

COMPARATIVE CHRISTIAN REFLECTIONS:

JESUS CHRIST—THE INCARNATE WORD OF GOD

Obvious from the outset is that this is a study in comparative theology. It is based on the assumption that we can deepen and enrich the Christian understanding of the living God and his plan for salvation revealed in Jesus Christ within the vast context of religious plurality by using the insights of Muslim tradition as a resource. In a spirit of dynamic on-going understanding of Christian revelation increased by the living Church in different historical moments and in different cultural contexts and, at the same time, moving beyond openness to the religious dimension of the other believers, comparative theology attempts to faithfully provide an understanding of revelation and the content of faith in a way which meets the needs of our time and place so characterized by religious plurality. Therefore, in the previous chapters we have tried to describe – although with different approaches - both Christian and Islamic doctrine on revelation as each community respectively understands and lives it.

As part of the life of the Christian community, the living Church, our theological account begins with reflection upon the mystery of the Incarnation of the

Son of God in the vast context of revelation in the history of salvation. As we have seen in the second chapter, it is in the *kenosis* of the Son of God that the mystery of God's self-withdrawal in creation of the universe and God's self-absenting that opens to historical existence arrives at its ultimate and profound expression. In short, it is through Christ—the incarnate Word of God—that our understanding of the mystery of God, the created world, and human existence comes most clearly into view. It is obvious that comparative theology is not a relativism that demands that Christians abandon the mystery of Incarnation as the central point of reference for an understanding of revelation.

For comparative theology, however, faithfulness to the Christian tradition in an age of religious pluralism does not mean absolutism. God alone is the Absolute. Yet, convinced that the Church's understanding of the mystery of God revealed in Christ can never be exhausted, comparative theology believes that she can never *ipso facto* exclude the tradition of the religious other before she has ever heard it. Therefore, in the third chapter of the thesis, we tried objectively to recognize the Islamic doctrine on revelation. For the Qur'ān itself, and consequently for Muslims, the Qur'ān is the *kalām* of God. It is the Word of God *sent down* to the Prophet through the archangel Gabriel that contains the message by means of which the covenant between God and man can be kept and the entelechy of human existence fulfilled.

Now, in the present chapter, we are in position to enter actively and speculatively into the comparative reflections of Christian and Islamic doctrine on revelation. By analyzing without judgement or effort to prove something, we challenge ourselves to clarify our understanding of Christian revelation by the light of both the similarities and differences between the two doctrines on revelation. The reflections

focus especially on parallel doctrinal symbolism and on the theological implications of comparable structural elements between Christ and the Qur'ān in the theological function of the Word of God, the divine communication to human beings.

As a study in comparative theology, we hope to show that even such a modest comparison can open new ways to deepen the Christian faith in the incarnate Word of God and, at the same time, to go beyond tolerance, to respectfully appreciate Muslims' faith. Nevertheless, it should be noted that we do not intend to find something that is absolutely new. The purpose of this chapter and of the whole thesis is very simple. By attempting to do theology in its wider actual and historical context, by comparing and contrasting Christian doctrine with Islamic doctrine on revelation, we hope to set down the features that are specific to Christian revelation: both the identity of Christian revelation and its contribution to humanity in the pluralistic religious world.

1. Convergences and Divergences between Christian and Islamic Revelation

The concept of revelation is a most fundamental one in every religion, especially in Christianity and Islam. Generally speaking, revelation is a divine communication to human beings. The phenomenology of religion uses five different criteria of revelation:

1. Origin or author: God, spirits, ancestors, power (*mana*), forces; in every case the source of revelation is something supernatural or numinous.
2. Instrument or means: sacred signs in nature (the stars, animals, sacred places, or sacred times); dreams, visions, ecstasies; finally, words or sacred books.
3. Content or object: the didactic, helping, or punishing presence, will, being activity, or commission of the divinity.
4. Recipients or addressees: medicine men, sorcerers, sacrificing priests, shamans, soothsayers, mediators, prophets with a commission or information intended for individuals or groups, for a people or the entire race.

5. Effect and consequence for the recipient: personal instruction or persuasion, divine mission, service as oracle – all this through inspiration or, in the supreme case, through incarnation.¹

Phenomenologically, comparing and contrasting the above characteristics of revelation in both Christianity and Islam, it is immediately apparent that there is both convergence and divergence present. To articulate our theological reflections, it would be worthwhile to view these phenomenological similarities and differences in detail, yet in this part we shall concentrate on only three aspects of revelation: revealing subject, revealed object, and the manner of its revelation.

If it is true that God took on flesh in Jesus Christ, an adequate understanding of divine revelation should assume that human nature was respected in the process. According to Karl Rahner, man as subject, that is a transcendent, responsible and free being, is a being oriented towards God. "His orientation towards the absolute mystery always continues to be offered to him by this mystery as the ground and content of his being. ... At this point theology and anthropology necessarily become one."² If he is right, then, we should begin our reflections with human beings to whom revelation is addressed.

1. 1. Man in the Presence of Absolute Mystery

1.1.1. Transcendental Religious Experience

For much present thought, an essential part of being human is the existence of a subject of experience and action, a self, which is the heart of individuality. As personal being,

¹ Johannes Deninger, "Revelation", in Mircea Eliade, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, Vol. 12, New York 1987, 356.

every human individual has the capacity of reasoning in a distinct intellectuality and of choosing in a full moral freedom. Christian anthropology has developed the notion of “person” to express this character of the human being that renders us radically distinct from all the beings around us and confers on us a dignity and value in ourselves.

Realizing one of the signs of the times that people are especially conscious of their own dignity, Vatican Council II points out that the very fundamental expression of human dignity lies “in the search for the truth and for the genuine solution to the numerous problems which arise in the life of individuals from social relationships” (GS 16). In fact, the human condition is in reality characterized by misery, war, terrorism, oppression, poverty, vain striving, and dissatisfaction. In all life that is full of trouble and suffering, there arise the fundamental questions which have their common source in the quest for meaning which has always compelled the human heart. John Paul II sees the dynamism of the restless human heart as a journey:

In both East and West, we may trace a journey which has led humanity down the centuries to meet and engage truth more and more deeply. It is a journey which has unfolded – as it must – within the horizon of personal self-consciousness: the more human beings know reality and the world, the more they know themselves in their uniqueness, with the question of the meaning of things and of their very existence becoming ever more pressing.³

On the horizon of this essential human journey, there emerges one of the most enduring aspects of human life, what studies of the phenomenon of religion call religious experience. To describe this human experience of the ‘holy’ or the ‘sacred,’ Rudolf Otto, one of the most important phenomenologists, uses the Latin phrase: *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*. *Mysterium* indicates that the holy is something

² Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith, An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*, New York 1978, 2000², 44.

ultimately unexplained and incomprehensible. It emphasizes its 'otherness.' *Tremendum* indicates its overwhelming nature and the sense of awe that it induces. *Fascinans* indicates that it draws one to it in spite of oneself and in spite of the dread that it invokes.⁴

Of course, Otto's work is not satisfactory to all. Nevertheless, it remains true that Otto's basic description expresses exactly one of the universal and, at the same time, specific realities of human beings: man in the presence of absolute mystery. By adjusting Otto's description, Moojan Momen has attempted to formulate an account that includes all levels of religious experience. According to him, though religious experience is unique for each individual and community, there are features that are generally agreed upon:

1. It is a very intense, energizing experience. It feels important and demands respect and attention.
2. It is a liberating experience, in that it seems to free one from the demands of the physical world (but, in some, it may induce a sense of dependence on an 'other reality').
3. It brings peace, joy, exultation, even exhilaration, although this can, on occasion, be mingled with awe and even dread. Some may even report the feeling of being possessed by a spiritual power.
4. It seems to give one a feeling of having achieved insight or knowledge, although it is often difficult to specify the content of this knowledge (it is ineffable, incapable of being adequately expressed in words). It is often described as 'confirming,' in the sense of giving one the assurance that one's faith is true.
5. Time may appear to stop and space may seem to become distorted. It may seem that the experience occurs 'outside' time and space.
6. Many would say that for an experience to be truly religious, it should involve the whole person, lead to some element of personal transformation and result in some outward manifestation of the change in the terms of action. Some may report a feeling of having been summoned to a mission through this experience.⁵

³ John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio* (1998), no. 1.

⁴ Cf. Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, Harmondsworth 1959, London 1968², 12-41.

⁵ Moojan Momen, *The Phenomenon of Religion. A Thematic Approach*, Oxford 1999, 88-89.

In the history of world religions, this phenomenon is clear, especially in the life and work of the prophets. By speaking and acting in the same way as the prophets, especially John the Baptist, Jesus was understood to be a religious person by his contemporaries.⁶ In Islam, it is believed that Muhammad was a holy man. Of course, Christians consider Jesus, as Muslims regard Muhammad, more than simply a person who has a special religious experience. However, for the time being, it can be said that both the history of the Church and of Muslim Community are marked through and through by the fact of the religious experience of absolute mystery.

Man is oriented towards the unqualified mystery. However, this basic or original experience of transcendence wells up from the depths of human self in interaction with the world. To this point, Karl Rahner in his *Foundations of Christian Faith* writes, "what we are calling transcendental knowledge or experience of God is an *a posteriori* knowledge insofar as man's transcendental experience of his free subjectivity takes place only in his encounter with the world and especially with other people."⁷ As belonging to the world, the human being finds himself necessarily open to the world and others. Facing these, as a person, he exercises his freedom and is at once able to experience his own transcendence. In this very relation of dependency vis-à-vis the world, the human being discovers the meaning of his transcendence of that world: thanks to the human being and his ability to transform reality around him, something new is produced in that reality. Thus, the "human being can be characterized as a 'creator'."⁸

⁶ Mt 16,13-15, par.

⁷ Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 51-52.

⁸ Luis F. Ladaria, "Christian Anthropology", in René Latourelle and Rino Fisichella, ed., *Dictionary of Fundamental Theology*, New York 1994, 2000², 27.

In human beings' relation to the world, to which they themselves also belong, however, interpersonal encounter has specific meaning. Luis Ladaria writes:

Interpersonal communion is irreducibly distinct from all other relationships between human beings and the world around them. Only in another human being do we find the "fitting helpmate" of the ancient biblical wisdom. Only the human being is worthy of the human being. Solely in the exercise of his social dimensions—and, especially, in communion and interpersonal bestowal—can the human being be himself. ... In the encounter with our neighbor *qua* person, we find ourselves in confrontation with an absolute value not created by ourselves. Nor is it this other, any more than society as a whole, who, taken simply, is the foundation of the absolute value with which we find ourselves face to face: after all, our own personal being, too, is an absolute value vis-à-vis other persons. The interpersonal relation, then, also opens out upon the mystery of human beings' transcendence of their surroundings.⁹

The world and human beings show that they contain within themselves neither their first principle nor their final end, but rather that they participate in Being itself, which alone is without origin or end. Thus, in many and various ways, man can come to know that there exists a reality which is the first cause and final end of all things, a reality which we call "God"¹⁰ or Muslims call "Allāh".

1.1.2. Man's Capacity for God

If it is our intention to discuss the gratuitous self-manifestation of God in Jesus Christ, we are not concerned primarily with phenomenological human experience of absolute mystery apart from the faith. It is true that we can distinguish religious experience from the experience of faith, as the distinction between natural knowledge of God and the knowledge of God in revelation. We are aiming, rather, at a more original unity between these two experiences and these two modes of knowledge in concrete human

⁹ Ladaria, "Christian Anthropology", 27.

¹⁰ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* I, 2, 3.

existence. In the concrete actualization of existence, indeed, there is no experience of God, which begins merely from human effort, as “there is no knowledge of God which is purely natural, since even theological knowledge is an activity of man which takes place in freedom.”¹¹

In the previous chapter, we have seen that the cosmos is the fundamental context of revelation. Creation is the invitation to know God. If it is true, we can securely say that from the beginning man has a desire for God, and at the same time, he is capable of knowing God.

From one single principle [God] not only created the whole human race so that they could occupy the entire earth, but he decreed the times and limits of their habitation. And he did this so that they might seek the deity and, by feeling their way towards him, succeed in finding him; and indeed he is not far from any of us, since it is in him that we live, and move, and exist, as indeed some of your own writers have said: We are all his children.¹²

From the beginning, throughout history down to the present day, men have given expression to their religious experience in their religious beliefs and behaviors—in their prayers, sacrifices, rituals, meditations and so forth. This is only possible because God, the source of all possibilities, chose to communicate himself and to share divine treasures, which totally transcend the understanding of the human mind.

Vatican Council I affirms this universal fact, declaring that, “Our holy mother, the Church, holds and teaches that God, the source and end of all things, can be known with certainty from the things that were created, through the natural light of human reason.”¹³ It is true that to recognize God requires knowledge. Here, however, knowledge should not be understood merely as conceptual knowledge, but rather

¹¹ Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 57.

¹² Ac 17, 26-28.

¹³ Vatican Council I, *Dei Filius* 2: Denz. 3004; ND 113.

knowledge to be practiced in life, to be understood by the heart, and to be realized in spirit. Christian doctrine holds that man's desire and capacity for God are written in the human heart because man is created by God and for God.

The idea that it is God who is the ground and purpose of human life is also not strange to Islam. "Surely we belong to God, and to Him we return" (Qur'ān 2:151). The Qur'ān affirms that God made all things good. In the Qur'ān God is described as a craftsman who molds and shapes the things of creation, finishing in six days and then ascending the throne to rest. From there He directs the affairs from the heaven to the earth and predicts the coming Day of Judgment, when all will be dissolved and return to him.¹⁴

In the Islamic view, man seems to be created by God as "another creature" (Qur'ān 23:14), which has a capacity beyond that of other creatures, who can for example teach all the names and ask all the angels to make obeisance.¹⁵ "Although according to the Qur'ān human beings are not explicitly created in the image of God, they still share crucial faculties with God."¹⁶ But the dignity of man, according to the Qur'ān, lies in the fact that God has taught him the Qur'ān and the Explanation.¹⁷ This fact, as each creative act, is an act of God's bounty, which should elicit gratitude and submission to the Lord of the Universe.

Grounded in his original nature, man is oriented to the Creator. On this point, Christian anthropology moves towards the same position as Islamic understanding.

¹⁴ Cf. Qur'ān 32:4-9.

¹⁵ Cf. Qur'ān 2:31-34.

¹⁶ Angelika Neuwirth, "Cosmology", in Jane Dammen McAuliffe, ed., *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān*, Vol.1, Leiden-Boston-Köln 2001, 449.

¹⁷ Cf. Qur'ān 55:2-4; see also Qur'ān 6:95-99; 30:20-25; 55:5-30.

Man is formed by the hand of God and receives life from the divine breath itself.¹⁸ Basic to the personality of each individual is the destiny of fellowship with God. But Christian doctrine goes beyond explicitly giving a special feature of man in his interrelated status before God that distinguishes him from other creatures. Man is capable of knowing and loving God, his Creator, because he is created "in the image of God" (Gn 1,27).¹⁹

Psalm 8, says of man, the child of Adam, "You have made him little less than a god, you have crowned him with glory and beauty, made him lord of the works of your hands, put all things under his feet" (vv.5-6). Based on the first creation story (Gn 1,26) and this Psalm 8, it can be said that human beings are called to share and exercise God's dominion over his creation. This ruling position among other creatures expresses our closeness to God. In the Christian view, it is true, as Wolfhart Pannenberg notes, that "the destiny of all of us as God's creatures is finally clear only from the New Testament message of Christ, which links the coming of the Son of God in the flesh to overcome sin and death with the matter of the goal of human life."²⁰ This will require a more detailed examination later. Until now, in contrast with the Islamic view, Christian anthropology understands that by his nature man is representative of God in his own rule over creation. This is the point of the statement that God made man in his own image and likeness. As the image of God, therefore, man is capable of coming to knowledge of the existence of a personal God. With this capacity, man would be able to welcome God's revelation.

¹⁸ Gn 2,7; cf. Qur'an 15:28-29; 32:4-9.

¹⁹ Vatican Council II, *Gaudium et Spes* 12.

1.1.3. Man's Existential Failure

Every person can in fact be addressed by God and become a dialogue partner with him. From the Christian view, human existence rests on the conviction that God does indeed speak to his human creatures and offers them abundant light on the meaning of their lives. The mysterious source of our being and of all creation has manifested himself as a loving Creator. A similar idea is also found in Islam. From the Qur'anic view, "the creation of nature - flora and fauna - appears as a starting point of the divine interaction with humans, a "sign" (*āya*) of divine omnipotence and an instigation for human gratefulness (*shukr*)."²¹

Christian teaching, as in Islam, holds that God transcends all creatures. Being a creature, man is radically different from and radically dependent on God. His limited human language cannot exhaust the mystery. Man must continually purify his language of everything that is limited, image-bound or imperfect, if he is not to confuse his image of God with his human representations. Moreover, in the condition of creature in which he finds himself, man experiences many difficulties in coming to know God by the light of reason alone.

On this point, Christian doctrine gives more stress to the imperfection of the human natural knowledge of God.

Though human reason is, strictly speaking, truly capable by its own natural power and light of attaining to a true and certain knowledge of the one personal God who watches over and governs the world by his providence, and of the natural law written in our hearts by the Creator; yet there are many obstacles which prevent reason from the effective and fruitful use of this inborn faculty. For the truths that refer to God and concern the relations between God and our human race wholly transcend the visible order of thing, and, if they are

²⁰ Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 2, Edinburgh 1991, 202.

²¹ Neuwirth, "Cosmology", 441.

translated into human action and influence it, they call self-surrender and abnegation. The human mind, in its turn, is hampered in the attaining of such truths, not only by the impact of the senses and the imagination, but also by disordered appetites which are the consequences of original sin. So it happens that people in such matters easily persuade themselves that what they would not like to be true is false or at least doubtful.²²

As we have seen in the second chapter, since the beginning of the world, by reason of man's sin, his pride, and the weakness of his heart, there is always a tendency to confuse the Creator of nature with nature itself.

The belief that Adam and Eve fell from a primordial state of unity with God is a doctrine of the Abrahamic faiths. In Islam, the sin of original man and woman was theirs alone and they, like all human beings, could return to a position of acceptance by submission (*islām*) to God. They slipped by Satan's prompting, a trial which every person must face and which only some are able to endure.²³ Islam gives a much more positive attitude towards human nature by considering human beings as God's vicegerents or viceroys (*khalīfa*) on earth.²⁴ "They have, however, an innate propensity to certain evil traits such as lust and greed, but they are commanded by God to oppose these tendencies within themselves, and the reward for success is paradise."²⁵

In classical orthodox Christian theology, by contrast, the nature of the human being is closely tied up with the doctrine of original sin.²⁶ After the sin of the original man and woman, the world was virtually inundated by sin. Vatican II describes precisely the fact of the whole of human history that is marked by the original fault freely committed by our first parents:

²² Pius XII, *Humani Generis* (1950), Denz. 3875; ND 144.

²³ Cf. Qur'ān 20: 115-123; 7: 19-21.

²⁴ Cf. Qur'ān 2:28; 6:165.

²⁵ Momen, *The Phenomenon of Religion*, 204-205; see also Qur'ān 3:11-15; 79:40.

²⁶ Council of Trent, Denz. 1513; ND 510.

Although he was made by God in a state of holiness, from the very onset of his history man abused his liberty at the urging of the Evil One. Man set himself against God and sought to attain his goal apart from God. Although they knew God, they did not glorify him as God, but their senseless minds were darkened, and they served the creature rather than the Creator (cf. Rm 1,21-25). What divine revelation makes known to us agrees with experience. Examining his heart, man finds that he has inclinations toward evil, too, and is engulfed by manifold ills which cannot come from his good Creator. Often refusing to acknowledge God as his beginning, man has disrupted also his proper relationship to his own ultimate goal as well as his whole relationship toward himself and others and all created things. Therefore, man is split within himself. As a result, all of human life, whether individual or collective, shows itself to be a dramatic struggle between good and evil, between light and darkness. Indeed, man finds that by himself he is incapable of battling the assaults of evil successfully, so that everyone feels as though he is bound by chains. But the Lord himself came to free and strengthen man, renewing him inwardly in the bondage of sin (cf. Jn 8,34). For sin has diminished man, blocking his path to fulfillment. The call to grandeur and the depths of misery, both of which are a part of human experience, find their ultimate and simultaneous explanation in the light of this revelation.²⁷

Even though human nature has not been totally corrupted, as the result of original sin, human nature is weakened in its powers, subject to ignorance, suffering, and the domination of death, and inclined to sin. The human will inevitably incline to evil and the human mind is estranged from knowledge and love of God. Human beings are involved in a world conquered by the powers of ignorance and passion, which past ages have bequeathed to them and from which they cannot escape.²⁸ “It is at this point that Christian belief asserts that there is an escape – not an escape made possible by human effort, but by the power of Divine love.”²⁹

²⁷ Vatican Council II, *Gaudium et Spes* 13.

²⁸ Cf. Rm 7,14-25.

²⁹ Keith Ward, *Religion and Revelation. A Theology of Revelation in the World's Religions*, Oxford 1994, 262.

1.2. The Subject of Revelation

1.2.1. Self-Revealing God

The idea that it is God who is the author of revelation is a convergent one for these two monotheistic religions. Revelation is understood as coming from God, in Muslim interpretation, strictly from God-Allāh, alone. The Qur'ān speaks of *wahy*, which is the very act of revelation by Allāh to the prophets. "Truly it is the revelation of the Lord of all Being, brought down by the Faithful Spirit upon thy heart, that thou mayest be one of the warners, in a clear, Arabic tongue" (Qur'ān 26:192-195). It is a central part of Islamic belief that God, the sole Creator of the heavens and the earth who revealed his guidance and his mercy to the prophets since the beginning of the world, "finally" sent down (*nuzūl*) his *kitāb* to the last prophet Muhammad.

Building on the Old Testament understanding of revelation, the New Testament and Christianity, since long before Muhammad's experience of revelation, sees and proclaims that God, the unknown, mysterious God, the Creator of the world, who has manifested himself in and through creation (Ac 17,23ff.; Rm 1,18ff.), revealed himself in and through the history of Israel and finally spoke to human beings in and through his Son, Jesus Christ (Heb 1,1 ff.). In the Old Testament, the terms: *glh* ("to uncover, unveil"),³⁰ *yd'* ("to proclaim, make oneself known"),³¹ and *nggd* ("to report, communicate")³² express clearly that the origin and author of revelation is no other than the hidden God. "All these contexts have this in common," as Johannes Deninger notes, "that God directs his word to human beings. For this reason, *dv'* can frequently

³⁰ 1 S 9,15; Ps 119,18.

³¹ Ex 6,2.

³² Gn 32,30; 41,25; Is 42,12; Jb 11,6.

be used for the decisive communication on God's part. God's word to Israel is his most precious gift; in it he communicates himself: 'I am the Lord' (Gn. 28:13; Ex. 6:2, 6:29) and 'there is no other' (Is. 45:5, Jl 2:27)."³³

The New Testament, as does the Old Testament, understands that God is the subject of revelation. However, the New Testament writers stress more personal, active and mysterious aspects of God's self-manifestation. Paul, for example, uses especially the words *apokaluptein* ("to uncover, unveil, remove from concealment"), *phaneroun* ("to make apparent or make manifest") and *gnôrizein* ("to make known") and *phôtizein* (to cast light on).³⁴ Paul's basic theme is the uncovering of the mystery (*mustèrion*) that has previously been hidden and is now made manifest (Ep 1,9; Col 1,26). God, in Christ and through Christ, manifests to the world his mystery of salvation. God is the truly active one in the process of revelation. The personal, active and mysterious aspects of God's self-communication appear definitively in the person of Jesus Christ. God is invisible and unknowable. In and through Jesus Christ, the Son of God who alone knows him, God the Father—known as the beginning and end of the universe, who directed and inspired the salvific history of Israel beginning with Abraham, Moses and the prophets—is made visible and understandable (Jn 1,14-18; 1 Jn 1,1 ff.).

Christianity differs completely from Judaism and Islam in its understanding that the person of Jesus Christ is "the image of the invisible God" (Col 1,15; 2 Co4, 4). Moreover, in the Christian view, Christ is not only God the revealer, but also God revealed. René Latourelle writes:

The true God whom He teaches is the God announced by Him and recognized in Him, so that in confessing the Son we confess also the Father. Christ is at

³³ Deninger, "Revelation", 359.

³⁴ René Latourelle, *Theology of Revelation*, New York 1987, 59.

once God who speaks and God who is spoken of, witness and object of testimony, author and object of revelation, He who reveals the mystery and the mystery itself in person.³⁵

There is a difference between Islam and Christianity concerning the nature of God who reveals himself in their respective doctrines on revelation. Muslims see Jesus as a great prophet, worthy of great honor. It is through him and through other prophets- -but in its definitive form through Muhammad--the one and only God reveals his decrees, his mysterious will, the announcement of judgement and his divine law. Christians, however, believe that Jesus is the manifestation of the life and love of God. In and through Christ, for Christians, God the Father has revealed himself and gives himself to man. God the Father has fully revealed his plan of salvation by sending his beloved Son, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit. "That in turn relates to a differing perception of the relation of God to the world – whether God remains the transcendent Will, ordering all things by sovereign power; or whether God shares in created being and raises it to participate in the Divine Life by the persuasive power of love."³⁶

1.2.2. The Motive and Finality of God's Self-Manifestation

Both Islam and Christianity affirm that God who reveals himself to human beings is the hidden, incomprehensible and transcendent God. The mystery of this Ultimate Reality whose nature is completely beyond and transcendent to this world remains an ineffable mystery even though it reveals itself to man, for Muslims by sending the Qur'ān down for Christians through the incarnation of the God's Son.

³⁵ Latourelle, *Theology of Revelation*, 368.

³⁶ Ward, *Religion and Revelation*, 188-189.

On this point, it is interesting to examine how the respective communities try to understand the intention of God's self-manifestation. Why does God, who transcends the world and, at the same time, is immanent in nature and in the human heart, communicate himself to human beings?

In the Muslim view, there is the one original will of God for salvation, which is intended for every nation. God makes the eternal covenant "between man and God by virtue of which man accepted the trust (*amānah*) of being an intelligent and free being with all the opportunities and dangers that such a responsibility implies."³⁷ God proposes to man, even before the beginning of historical time and the creation of the earth, this covenant that is symbolized physically by the stone of the Ka'ba.³⁸ In fact, the Qur'ān itself affirms that "God sent forth the Prophets, good tidings to bear and warning, and He sent down with them the Book with the truth" (Qur'ān 2:208). All God's messengers could sum up their proclamation in the words of the Qur'ān: "So set thy face to the religion, a man of pure faith – God's original upon which He originated mankind. There is no changing God's creation. That is the right religion; but most men know it not" (Qur'ān 30:29). Thus, "Muhammad did not really bring a new revelation. He repeated, corrected, and conformed revelations which had been given to every people in some way."³⁹

As we have seen in the previous chapter, however, though affirming the revelations or covenants given before the Qur'ān, Muslim doctrine sees the revelation

³⁷ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Ideals and Realities of Islam*, New Delhi 1979, 41.

³⁸ In Muslim tradition, it is recalled that Adam built the first Ka'ba at Mecca on the model of a heavenly prototype. However, it was no longer standing in Abraham's day as the resumption of Tha'alibi's narrative explains. On this site already hallowed by Adam, the patriarch Abraham on a visit to his son Ishmael in Mecca put down on God's command the foundation of the Sacred House as alluded to in the Qur'ān 2:122. (Cf. F. E. Peters, *A Reader on Classical Islam*, New Jersey 1994, 11-20.)

³⁹ Ward, *Religion and Revelation*, 186.

sent down to the Prophet Muhammad as superior to all others. In a Muslim view, by sending the Qur'ān down, God would like to make verification of what came before it. The Qur'ān "is not a tale forged, but a confirmation of what is before it, and a distinguishing of every thing, and a guidance, and a mercy to a people who believe" (Qur'ān 12:111). Muslims understand that unlike all previous scripture, it is intended for all peoples. Moreover, based on the Qur'ān, they believe that the content of the Qur'ān is so protected that its text can undergo no alterations, deletions or additions. Therefore, for Muslims, the Qur'ān sent down to the Prophet is qualified in form and content to be the final and perfect revelation that will bring humankind to salvation.

The idea that God's revelation is an essentially salvific operation is, of course, not new to Christianity. This intention appears first of all in the very fact of revelation. God, by revelation, comes to meet a creature, a sinful creature. Such a move on the part of God can only mean friendship and salvation. Indeed, it is a central part of Christian revelation that God manifests and communicates himself in order to snatch man away from the death of sin and give him the gift of eternal life.

In contrast to the Muslim view, by realizing the fact that the whole of human history is marked by the original fault, Christianity understands God's self-manifestation as a new, free and gratuitous activity of God in history. Christians know Christ as the source of grace in order to know Adam as the source of sin. The Spirit-Paraclete, sent by the risen Christ, came to convict the world concerning sin by revealing him who is its Redeemer.⁴⁰ Christians affirm that Jesus does not come only to fulfill the promises of the Old Testament, to teach a path of salvation, and to make present God's mercy. He is the Saviour of the world. He is the one who leads humans

out of evil to unity with God, precisely because God is active in him in a unique way to accomplish such liberation.

By manifesting himself, God wishes to make man capable of responding to him, knowing him, and loving him far beyond his own natural capacity. On this salvific intention of revelation, René Latourelle writes:

The revelation of the Incarnation shows us in Jesus Christ, Incarnate Word, the economy of love chosen by God to communicate this divine life. Revelation of our sonship shows us the nature of this communication: it is a certain extension of the life of the Divine Persons to human creation. God re-engenders His own Son in us and breathes His own Spirit into us. This elevation of mankind to the bosom and heart of God is essentially a mystery of salvation for the creature, for it makes creation share in the nature of God.⁴¹

In the last observation, we can say that the motive of God's self-manifestation should be founded in the nature of its source: God. Salvific revelation is a free act of divine sovereignty. It is a free initiative on the part of God and not the result of any previous request on the part of man. Man can neither expect nor demand it. In Islam, "revelation both emanates from God's mercy and leads back towards it."⁴² In Christianity, revelation is self-giving of God who is love (1 Jn 4,8.16). "For this is how God loved the world: he have gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life" (Jn 3,16). God, out of the abundance of his love, speaks to us as friend and draws us into the divine fellowship (*DV* 2). Christians believe that God's self-manifestation and self-communication has its origin in the unity of love within the Trinity. Revelation has its roots in the community of life of the Three Persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

⁴⁰ Cf. Jn 16,8.

⁴¹ Latourelle, *Theology of Revelation*, 439.

⁴² Daniel A. Madigan, *The Qur'an Self-Image, Writing and Authority in Islam's Scripture*, New Jersey 2001, 133.

1.3. The Object and Content of Revelation

1.3.1. The Deepest Truth about God

It is obvious that, in Islam, the only God who creates the heavens and the earth is the subject of revelation and the Qur'ān is the objectivity of revelation. For the Muslims, the Qur'ān is both the revelation of God sent down through the archangel Gabriel and the *kitāb* in which God's saving message to man is contained. This earthly Qur'ān is only the concrete revelation whose original archetype is with God in the Well-Guarded Tablet. The Qur'ān was sent in its entirety from the heavenly book above the seventh heaven down to the lowest heaven immediately above the earth. From this staging area Gabriel delivered bits and pieces of it to the Prophet Muhammad over a period of time in the human world. "Its sequences are relevant to human concerns, 'sent down' in relation to circumstance and need – as the whole idea of *sha'n al-nuzūl* or *asbāb al-nuzūl* (occasions of revelation) implies – and constituting, when interpreted, a source of guidance (*hudā*) in various contexts."⁴³

As we have seen in the previous chapter, the majority of Muslims hold the doctrines of the Qur'ān's eternalness and its uncreatedness. "The Qur'ān is coexistent with God throughout all of eternity, a truth beyond and prior to the whole of created being. That truth lives and is communicated in the scripture of the Muslim community; indeed, it is the awareness of its inexpressible divine nature which makes the Qur'ān

⁴³ Shabbir Akhtar, "An Islamic Model of Revelation", in *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, Vol.2: 1 (1991), 101.

the scripture.”⁴⁴ For Muslims the Qur’ān is the literal word of God from eternity to all humankind, “the eternal breaking through time; the knowable disclosed; the transcendent entering history and remaining here, available to mortals to handle and to appropriate; the divine become apparent.”⁴⁵ But the Qur’ān is not God because “there is not god but He, the All-mighty, the All-wise. It is He who sent down upon thee the Book” (Qur’ān 3:4-5). In order to maintain God’s unity, singularity and uniqueness, however, Muslims avoid going further to understand the nature of the Qur’ān, the uncreated word of God, as the source of God’s self-knowledge. To give allegiance to other goods or to put trust in other beings except God is *shirk* (idolatry), the greatest sin of Islam.

Based on revelation in the Old and New Testament, of course, the Christian faith confesses that God is one in nature, substance and essence. God is “the one, only Lord” whom Christian must love “with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind and with all your strength” (Mk 12,29-30). In the Christian view, it is the one God himself who is the subject and the object of revelation. “Before making known something, that is, his plan for salvation, God reveals someone, himself.”⁴⁶ God not only enters into history but, in order to manifest himself and to communicate his salvific plan, he also makes himself history. It is in and through Jesus of Nazareth—the Word made flesh—that God makes himself present to humanity. It is in and through Jesus Christ, the son of Mary and Joseph, that humanity was able to hear, see, watch and touch the living and loving God. In Christ, humankind has an event in which God

⁴⁴ Charles J. Adams, “Qur’ān, The Text and Its History”, in Mircea Eliade, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, Vol. 12, New York 1987, 174.

⁴⁵ Wilfred Cantwell Smith, “The True Meaning of Scripture: An Empirical Historian’s non-Reductionist Interpretation of the Qur’an”, in *International Journal of Middle Eastern Study* 11 (1980), 490.

makes himself known. Since God reveals nothing less than himself, there is a perfect identity between God the revealer and God the revealed, as the New Testament testifies.

The synoptic tradition describes primarily the economy of the historical manifestation of Christ. "He went around the whole of Galilee teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing all kinds of disease and illness among the people" (Mt 4,23). In and through Jesus Christ, the kingdom of God, whom he calls his "*Abba*," is present and at work. This mystery of the overall God's self-manifestation to humanity, for St. Paul, is no other than Jesus Christ with his unfathomable riches, his treasures of wisdom and knowledge. Concretely, the mystery of the word of God is Jesus Christ, the Son, who alone knows the Father and his secrets, and communicates this knowledge to whomever he will. For this reason St. John confesses Jesus Christ as the eternal word of God, not only the word who was "uncreated" or "co-eternal with God" but also "the Word who was God" (Jn 1,1).

Following the apostolic tradition, therefore, the Church confessed at the first ecumenical council at Nicea (325) that the son is "*homoousios* ("consubstantial") with God the Father, that is, one single God with him.⁴⁷ The second ecumenical council, held at Constantinople in 381, kept this expression in its formulation of the Nicene Creed and confessed that Jesus Christ is "the only-begotten Son of God, generated from the Father before all ages, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, one in being with the Father, through whom all things were made."⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Latourelle, *Theology of Revelation*, 458.

⁴⁷ Nicene Creed: Denz. 125; ND 7.

⁴⁸ Constantinopolitan Creed: Denz. 150; ND 12.

It is obvious that in Christianity the core of God's self-manifestation consists of the mystery of Jesus Christ. Christ's whole earthly life—his words and deeds, his silences and sufferings, indeed his manner of being and speaking—contains the fullness of God's revelation to the world. It is in and through the mysteries of Christ's person—from the incarnation to the paschal mystery, including death on the cross, the resurrection and the ascension—humankind can meet and enter into the mystery that is hidden in God, that is, the mystery of God's being itself. In short, the encounter with the mystery of God's self-manifestation in and through Christ leads man to an encounter with the heart of the mystery of the deepest truth about God. In Rahner's words, the three divine Persons as they are revealed and act in the history of salvation is the *immanent* Trinity because:

... In God's self-communication to his creation through grace and Incarnation God really gives himself, and really appears as he is in himself, then with regard to that aspect of the Trinity in the economy of salvation which is given in the history of God's self-revelation in the Old and New Testaments we can say: in both collective and individual history of salvation there appears in immediacy to us not some numinous powers or other which represent God, but there appears and is truly present the one God himself. In his absolute uniqueness, which ultimately nothing can take the place of or represent, he comes where we ourselves are, and where we receive him, this very God himself and as himself in the strict sense.⁴⁹

1.3.2. The Mystery of Man's Salvation

The finality of revelation is for the salvation of man. God, in a Christian view, does not reveal himself in order to satisfy the curiosity of man, but rather to save him. Rahner says, "the Trinity is a mystery of *salvation*, otherwise it would never have been

⁴⁹ Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 136.

revealed.”⁵⁰ In Islam, even though the term “salvation” in the common theological sense is not known, it can be said that, as Toshihiko Izutsu notes, “the Koranic thought as whole is concerned with the problem of salvation of human beings. If it were not for this problem, the Book would not have been ‘sent down’, as the Koran itself explicitly and repeatedly emphasizes.”⁵¹

In the Qur’ān, in fact, the term *salām*, verbal noun from *salima* “to be safe, uninjured”, is used as substantive in the meaning of “safety, salvation”, thence “peace” (in the sense of “quietness”), thence “salutation, greeting.” The word is of frequent occurrence in the Qur’ān. The oldest passage that contains it is the sura 97 where it is said of the *Laylat al-Kadr* (“the Night of Power”) when the Qur’ān is sent down, “Peace it is, till the rising of dawn” (Qur’ān 97:5). *Salām* means salvation in this world as well as in the next.⁵²

In Islam, as we have described in the beginning of this chapter, there is a much more positive attitude towards human nature. The original fall is the result of Satan’s first deception of humankind. It does not have the consequence of separation from God. “Humankind, the Qur’ānic word is *insān*, is forgetful, impulsive and in a sorry state, *fi khusrin* (Q 103:2). One has to endure hardships from which one would otherwise have remained exempt. One needs guidance, however, not redemption.”⁵³ Like the guidance given through the prophets before Muhammad, The Qur’ān is sent down in order to guide man to obtain salvation.

⁵⁰ Karl Rahner, *The Trinity*, Einsiedeln 1967, New York 1997², 21.

⁵¹ Toshihiko Izutsu, *God and Man in the Koran, Semantic of the Koranic Weltanschauung*, Tokyo 1964, 75.

⁵² Cf. C. Van Arendonk, “Salām”, in C. E. Bosworth, al., ed., *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Vol. 8, Leiden 1995, 915.

⁵³ Anthony Hearle Johns, “Fall of Man”, in Jane Dammen McAuliffe, ed., *Encyclopaedia of the Qur’ān*, Vol. 2, Leiden-Boston 2002, 173.

The essence of the Qur'ān is a warning to submit (*aslāma*, whence the noun “submission,” *islām*) to the will of God. As *'abd*, slave or servant of God, according to the Qur'ān, man is called to be *muslim*, one who submits to God. Muslims believe that the revelation to the Prophet Muhammad provides the matrix for this Islamic life and so gives assurance that from within this life the faithful will gain salvation. The Qur'ān with two inseparable dimensions, oral as well as written, is primarily a guidance of religious and moral principles and exhortations. “In terms of content, the bulk of the Qur'anic message contains exhortations dealing with righteous conduct, and the consequences of following or ignoring them.”⁵⁴ If a human being accepts this guidance, he or she shall not go astray nor be unhappy and on the day of resurrection he or she will enter heaven.

However, it is also true that “Islam is a system of belief, ritual and law, and its legal system covers all spheres of life.”⁵⁵ Islam, as the Qur'ān teaches, is a religion to be practiced, and five obligations called the five Pillars are required of every Muslim. By fulfilling these obligations and remembering God often, the Muslim is assured of God's favor on the earth and at the judgement. On this point, in Islam, it seems that salvation, or better *salām*, is like an “auto-redemption.”⁵⁶

But those who believe, and do righteous deeds, those are the best of creatures; their recompense is with their Lord – Gardens of Eden, underneath which rivers

⁵⁴ Farid Esack, *The Qur'an, A Short Introduction*, Oxford 2002, 166.

⁵⁵ Ella Landau-Tasseron, “Jihād”, in Jane Dammen McAuliffe, ed., *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'an*, Vol. 3, Leiden-Boston 2003, 38.

⁵⁶ “Il ‘cammino della salvezza’, che vi conduce, è una condotta della vita nel segno della dedizione a Dio con l'indispensabile ricorso alla personale volontà di lottare per escludere dalla propria esistenza il ruolo delle passioni basse. Questo è in realtà il senso di un Islam massimalistico (*djihād*). Su questo piano si svolge l'autoredenzione dei credenti. L'autoredenzione, incentrata su una purificazione morale che termina con la rinuncia a se stessi, viene praticata con particolare energia dai *Sūfi*. Le loro pratiche e le loro idee producono anche altri punti d'incontro con il Cristianesimo, ma anche con il Buddhismo. La ‘meta della salvezza’ dell'Islam è la visione di Dio o quanto meno la sua soddisfazione. Questa meta viene spostata dai *Sūfi* ancor più avanti: è la *unio mystica* (*al-fanā' fillāh*).” (S. Balić, “Salvezza Islamica”, in *Islam, Cristianesimo, Ebraismo a confronto*, Casale Monferrato 1991, 647.)

flow, therein dwelling forever and ever. God is well-pleased with them, and they are well-pleased with Him; that is for him who fears his Lord" (Qur'ān 98:7-8).

In Islam, salvation is obtained by struggling on the part of God (*jihād*), that is, "to transform both one's self and society, ...that is simultaneously a struggle and praxis."⁵⁷ Muslims believe that this ceaseless struggle in the earthly journey towards God merits salvation because each soul will be rewarded for what it has done as is recorded in the heavenly *kitāb*. This auto-redemption, however, should be understood in the Islamic context of a binding relationship between practice or righteous deeds and faith, between *islām* and *īmān*—both trust in God's mercy and fear of the reality of the day of judgement.

Contrasted with Islamic theology, it is obvious that the word "salvation" is one of the most important words in Christian doctrine on revelation. God's self-manifestation in and through Jesus Christ, for Christians, is not only guidance to humankind to obtain salvation. It is salvation. In short, revelation is salvation.

In the second chapter, we have seen that Christian doctrine concerns itself first with revelation in the history of salvation, that is, the objective events in the history of salvation in which God intervened at opportune moments, chosen by him. From Abraham to Jesus Christ, as the Old and New Testaments testify, there are events where God manifests himself as an all-powerful and saving God. Within this series of the promise and fulfillment, however, there is only one plan of salvation that God intends for humankind, in fact, for all things. Christians consider the Christ-event as both fulfillment and fullness. "At many moments in the past and by many means, God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets; but in our time, the final days, he has

spoken to us in the person of his Son whom he appointed heir of all things and through whom he made the ages" (Heb 1,1-2).

Jesus is not communicating an objective set of doctrines but a presence of God. He mediates God and God's salvation both by his words and his deeds. Jesus is a preacher. In the same manner as the prophets and John the Baptist, Jesus preaches the good news of the Kingdom and the penance that leads to the Kingdom. What he holds out to people is not a static possession of God, but a way to the Father. Jesus is a teacher. Being different from the other teachers in Israel, his teaching has an absolutely unique character. He stands out by the wisdom of his teaching as well as by the authority of his person. He speaks with the authority of God, his Father. He is anointed with the Holy Spirit. In addition, Jesus heals, reconciles, casts out devils and raises the dead. He is invested with a unique and irrepressible power, which annihilates his adversary and renews everything, body and soul. Wherever Christ is, the power of salvation and life of the living God is at work.

Furthermore, "the coming of Christ inaugurates a new world, the world of grace; it effects a revolution, the revolution of salvation through the cross."⁵⁸ Jesus does not deny death, which is the concrete manifestation of humanity's sin and its alienation from God, but accepts the most extreme face of the unsafe human condition damaged by sin as the supreme expression of submission to God. It is because of Christ's obedience, his trust and his love as the Son, that "God raised him high, and gave him the name which is above all other names" (Ph 2,9). "God raised him from the dead and gave him glory" (1 P 1,21). The passage from Christ's death to his

⁵⁷ Esack, *The Qur'an, A Short Introduction*, 178.

⁵⁸ Latourelle, *Theology of Revelation*, 396.

resurrection reveals that man is not saved by his own efforts but by God's unconditional compassionate love.

The cross of Christ represents the extreme form of unreason and the most bewildering and illusory victory possible of the forces of evil over him who is life and power. But at the same time the cross is the revelation of a love that wins the day over evil, not by force or by love that overwhelms, but by an excess of love that consists in accepting death from the very hand of the beloved and enduring the punishment meant for the beloved, in the hope that rebellious love will become love again. The all-weakness of God then becomes the all-powerfulness of God. ...

Henceforth we are the children of God, and his Spirit dwells in us. But in order to alter our condition in this manner, God had to become one of us; without himself knowing sin, he had to cross the gulf of absence that had been opened up by human rejection and rebellion. *Only* the action of the Son of God with his two natures, divine and human, could assume such a mission. Christ is the only point of convergence in which all things are fulfilled, surpassed, abolished, and replaced by the *one* work that God accomplishes as a human being and that God alone, as a human being, can accomplish. The seriousness of the crucified Christ who has been delivered up for us must be matched by the seriousness of our love, which allows all rebellion, all rejection, to be melted down in the white heat of the Trinity's love.⁵⁹

Christians believe that the Christ-event, especially his death and resurrection, not only reveals the deepest mystery of the Trinity but also inaugurates the fullness of man's salvation. In and through Jesus Christ, man has been reconciled with God. "One man's offence brought condemnation on all humanity; and one man's good act has brought justification and life to all humanity. Just as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by one man's obedience are many to be made upright" (Rm 5, 18-19). In and through Jesus Christ, in addition, human beings have received "the power to become children of God" (Jn 1.12). "All who are guided by the Spirit of God are sons of God; for what you received was not the spirit of slavery to bring you back

⁵⁹ René Latourelle, "Moral Evil", in René Latourelle and Rino Fisichella, ed., *Dictionary of Fundamental Theology*, New York 1994, 2000², 730.

into fear; you receive the spirit of adoption, enabling us to cry out, *Abba, Father*" (Rm 8,14-15). God's self-manifestation and self-giving in and through Jesus Christ is both man's redemption-restoration and man's deification-reunification. "The Son of God became the son of man," using Athanasius' words in his *On the Incarnation*, "so that humans, the children of Adam, might become children of God ... shares in the life of God. ... He is Son of God by nature, we by grace."⁶⁰

Christians believe that it is through the power of the Holy Spirit received in the sacraments of Baptism and Confirmation that they are in contact with the risen Christ and, therefore, become both the children of God in the Son and the new creation in the Last Adam. Being Christian is a present reality of salvation. It is also both the early produce of and the promise of future salvation. "We were enslaved to the elemental principles of this world" (Ga 4,3), but "Christ set us free" (Ga 5,1). In this justified state, "the priority is indeed praxis, not argument, nor even the conviction that God is good. The priority is being a redeemed, liberated and liberating person."⁶¹ The possession of "the first-fruits of the Spirit" (Rm 8,23) means that by "realizing that as long as we are at home in the body we are exiled from the Lord" (2 Co 5,6) we become capable of discharging the new law of love (Rm 8,1-11). Salvation means at once to receive "the pledge of our inheritance" (Eph 1,14) and "the duty to battle against evil through manifold tribulations and even to suffer death" (GS 22). In the words of E. Schweizer:

The new creation of man by the Spirit is not a flight of faith into heaven or an abandonment of this imperfect world. On the contrary, the new creation means beginning to see the world as it is, suffering with it and taking its suffering to

⁶⁰ Quoted in Stephen J. Duffy, *The Dynamics of Grace: Perspectives in Theological Anthropology*, Minnesota 1993, 64.

⁶¹ Duffy, *The Dynamics of Grace*, 384.

heart. The work of the Spirit is to make us aware of our solidarity with the world.⁶²

“All the faithful of Christ, of whatever rank or status, are called to the fullness of the Christian life and to the perfection of charity” (LG 40), while awaiting in hope the grace of final perseverance and the recompense of God their Father for the good works accomplished with his grace in communion with Jesus.⁶³ Christians don't hope in justification, from the moment that they have received it, but in its full and definitive realization when Christ returns in glory (cf. Rm 8,23; 2 Co 1,22; 5,5; Ep 1,10.14). By responding freely to God's self-communication through his Son and in the Spirit, the Church, the community of the new creation, advances towards its final fulfillment, that is, sharing in the mystery of blessed communion with the Most Holy Trinity.

1.4. The Manner of Revelation

“It is only in Christian and Islamic 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.”⁶⁴

The fundamental difference between the two religions lies in the question of how Christianity and Islam respectively see this final divine communication to human beings. For Christianity, finality of revelation is given through the Incarnation of the Word of God among Jews 2000 years ago; for Islam, through the recitation of the Word of God to Arabic Muhammad 1400 years ago.

⁶² Edward Schweizer, *The Holy Spirit*, Philadelphia 1978, 109-110.

⁶³ Cf. Council of Trent (1547): Denz. 1576.

⁶⁴ Hans Zirker, “Revelation in History and Claims to Finality: Assumptions Underlying Fundamentalism in Christianity and Islam”, in *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 3: 2 (1992), 214.

In Islam, as we have already seen in the third chapter, there is theological divergence on the modes of revelation among Muslim authorities. The Qur'ān itself outlines three modes of revelation: by inspiration (*wahy*), from behind a veil and by sending of a messenger.⁶⁵ In the case of the Qur'ān, Muslims hold that it is a *malak* ("angel or heavenly messenger") that "have uttered the direct words of God into Muhammad's ear and/or heart while he was in a state of ecstasy so that he would later recall the exact words."⁶⁶ In other words, it is the angel - who is named Gabriel and identified with the Holy Spirit (*rūh al-qudus*)⁶⁷ - is the agent of revelation sent to Muhammad. Carefully maintaining the distance between God and mankind, the Islamic tradition holds that the almighty and wise God sent his authority and knowledge symbolically contained in the Qur'ān down orally to the Prophet through the medium of the Angel Gabriel.⁶⁸

According to Islamic tradition, this "descent" of the Qur'ān took place in three stages.⁶⁹ First, from God to the Heavenly Book to which the qur'anic terms "Essence of the book" (*umm al-kitāb*, Qur'ān 43:4), "hidden book" (*kitāb maknūn*, Qur'ān 56:78)

⁶⁵ Cf. Qur'ān 42:50-51.

⁶⁶ Esack, *The Qur'an, A Short Introduction*, 42.

⁶⁷ See Gisela Webb, "Angel", in Jane Dammen McAuliffe, ed., *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān*, Vol. 1, Leiden-Boston-Köln 2001, esp. 87-89; Sidney H. Griffith, "Holy Spirit", in Jane Dammen McAuliffe, ed., *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān*, Vol. 2, Leiden-Boston 2002, 442-444.

⁶⁸ However, as William Graham observes, it should be noted that "there are several indications that the relationship of the Prophet to the specifically Qur'ānic revelations was early understood in much more complex ways than was generally recognized later on. ... One particular aspect of this complexity is the traditional evidence that Muhammad received Qur'ānic revelation directly from God as well as through the medium of Gabriel. ... This is most evident in the traditions about the famous *mi'rāj*, or 'ascent [to Heaven]', which is mentioned in Sūrahs 81:19-25 and 53:1-12, 13-18. This was apparently a visionary experience, and it is linked traditionally with the *isrā'*, or 'night journey', referred to in Sūrah 17:1, and even on occasion with the story of the cleansing of Muhammad's heart by the angels. The idea of this journey, in which the Prophet is said to have met God face to face and even to have received revelation from Him, exists alongside the traditional tendency to view Gabriel as the sole medium of revelation to Muhammad. The question of the nature of the heavenly journey - i.e., whether it was corporeal or visionary - became a major issue in later theological discussion, principally with regard to the 'seeing of God' (*ru'yat Allāh*) by Muhammad on the *mi'rāj*." (William A. Graham, *Divine Word and Prophetic Word in Early Islam*, The Hague-Paris 1977, 26-28.)

and “guarded tablet” (*lawh mahfūz*, Qur’ān 85:22) collectively refer. Second, the Qur’ān was sent in its completeness from the Guarded Book above the seventh heaven down to the “Abode of Honour” (*bayt al-‘izzāh*) in the lowest heaven on the Night of Majesty (*laylat al-qadr*).⁷⁰ Third and final, from the Abode of Honour, Gabriel delivered bits and pieces of it as needed during the period of Muhammad’s prophethood. On this point, it should be noted that Muslims do not really speak of the “history of the Qur’ān.” The Qur’ān, for Muslims, is the uncreated Word of God whose nature is unfathomable and unknowable by human reason. Thus, it is easier to speak of the history of its revelation that the Prophet experienced and of the history of the written text, which we have already described in the previous chapter.

For Muslims, “the Qur’ān as the compilation of the “Speech of God” does not refer to a book inspired or influenced by God or written under the guidance of His Spirit: rather it is viewed as God’s direct speech.”⁷¹ Muslims believe that God spoke with his own voice in responding to the requirements of society over a period of twenty-three years through Gabriel who precisely and faithfully recited it in stages to the Prophet Muhammad who passively received and repeated it verbatim to his followers for recording. The Qur’ān was the speech of God without intervention or participation from Gabriel or Muhammad in the construction or arrangement. Because the Qur’ān is wholly divine, the process of Qur’anic revelation is always an exclusive divine activity.

Shabbir Akhtar in his article *An Islamic Model of Revelation* makes a central distinction between the *genesis* of scripture and its *interpretation*. Because it, with

⁶⁹ Cf. Esack, *The Qur’an, A Short Introduction*, 31-33.

⁷⁰ Cf. Qur’ān 97:1-5.

regard to the genesis of its claims, begins as well as ends within the territory of the divine intelligence, according to him, the Qur'ān, then, is from God and is not in any way co-authored. "The scripture simply passes through 'the Muhammad mind' much as a grain of corn will pass undigested through the body of a bird."⁷² Muslims strictly hold that "during the period of trance, then, the prophetic intelligence and volition are completely suspended, there is no conscious participation in authorship, no active recieption of the revealed literary materials. This doctrine is about the genesis of scripture, not its interpretation."⁷³

To a Muslim interpreter, still according to Shabbir Akhtar, the question of the nature of the prophetic experience is of no interest at all. He says, "What matter is that however *tanzīl* works, Muhammad has no active role in it that could compromise or attenuate the divine initiative, let alone seek to induce such initiative whether authentically or as a personal illusion."⁷⁴ "Muslims maintain that Muhammad always made a clear distinction between his own speech and that which he claimed to receive from God."⁷⁵ During his experience of qur'anic revelation, Muhammad was absolutely passive. But, "once the Prophet is in a normal state, he is simply an Arab reader, an active interpreter who discerns the full significance of the inspired utterances."⁷⁶ As God's chosen messenger, for Muslims, Muhammad is at once the recipient and the first and most authoritative interpreter of God's revelation. In fact, the Prophet has become the first Muslim among his community; and his response to the Qur'ān's message

⁷¹ Esack, *The Qur'an, A Short Introduction*, 31.

⁷² Akhtar, "An Islamic Model of Revelation", 96.

⁷³ Akhtar, "An Islamic Model of Revelation", 99.

⁷⁴ Akhtar, "An Islamic Model of Revelation", 103-104.

⁷⁵ Esack, *The Qur'an, A Short Introduction*, 43.

⁷⁶ Akhtar, "An Islamic Model of Revelation", 99.

becomes the model (*uswa*) for the believers. His *Hadīth* and *Sunnah*, his sayings and actions, are after the Qur'ān, the most important sources of the Islamic tradition.

We can equate Muhammad's role in Islamic revelation with the Virgin Mary's role in the economy of the Word as the Sacred Scriptures and Christian Tradition show and draw attention to it. Since he wished in his free and gracious love to effect the salvation of the world, "when the completion of the time came, God sent his Son, born of a woman... that we could receive adoption as sons" (Ga 4,4-5). He came down from heaven and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit from the Virgin Mary for us men, and for our salvation. Of course, for Christians, "there is only one God, and there is only one mediator between God and humanity, himself a human being, Christ Jesus, who offered himself as a ransom for all" (1 Tm 2,5-6). But Christians, especially Catholics, hail Mary as a "preeminent and singular member of the Church, and as its type and excellent exemplar in faith and charity" (LG 53).

In Christian revelation, as we have already examined above, everything is God coming first, everything is grace: the activity of God coming out of his mystery, the economy of the word, the message of salvation, the capacity of responding to this message and meeting God in faith. This activity of God, however, does not encroach upon human freedom. Man remains free to accept or deny this other freedom that is open to him. Revelation is an encounter, essentially interpersonal that presents always both the seriousness of choice and the invitation of the depth of communion. In this context, human response to God's loving word is "not submission to the arbitrary will of God, who is pleased to claim the homage of the human mind, but rather man's

recognition of God's plan of love and his free entry into that plan, it is an overture to divine friendship, inviting us to a share in God's own life."⁷⁷

Christians see that in Mary's life there was really and fully an encounter between God and man. Vatican II presents the dynamic dialogue in love in the whole life of Mary as follows:

Adorned from the first instant of her conception with the radiance of an entirely unique holiness, the Virgin Mary of Nazareth is greeted, on God's command, by an angel messenger as "full of grace" (cf. Lk 1:28), and to the heavenly messenger she replies: "Behold the handmaid of the Lord, be it done unto me according to thy word" (Lk 1:38). Thus Mary, a daughter of Adam, consenting to the divine Word, became the mother of Jesus, the one and the only Mediator. Embracing God's salvific will with a full heart and impeded by no sin, she devoted herself totally as a handmaid of the Lord to the person and work of her Son, under him and with him, by the grace of almighty God, serving the mystery of redemption. Rightly, therefore, the holy Fathers see her as used by God not merely in a passive way, but as freely cooperating in the work of human salvation through faith and obedience. ... Comparing Mary with Eve, they call Mary "the Mother of the living," and still more often they say: "death through Eve, life through Mary." (LG 56)

Being understood in the light of the great design of revelation in the history of salvation, for Christians, Mary's partnership has an utterly unique and central role for the genesis of the Word of God in the history. It is by her "fiat" to God's salvific will that the eternal Word of God became flesh and dwelled among us. It is by the participation of her, who is predestinated to be the mother of his Son, that God makes the Divine reality itself present in a particular historical form and in a particular historical individual. It is precisely in this respect in which Christian revelation differs much from the Islamic understanding of God's revelation, as Keith Ward notes:

The life of Jesus, for a fully incarnational form of Christian faith, is the self-expression of the Eternal in time. Here the form of Supreme Goodness is fully realized in the particular; revelation is primary a making-present of Supreme Being and Goodness in a person. This is not, as in Islam, the revelation of a set

⁷⁷ Latourelle, *Theology of Revelation*, 327.

of propositions, as though God were dictating laws or doctrines to be carefully written down.⁷⁸

From this fact, it also becomes clear that, for Christians, the maternal participation of Mary in no way obscures or diminishes the unique mediation of Christ, but rather shows his power. In and through the life of Mary, the Word of God, who before the ages was born of God the Father, has assumed a human nature as his own. It is in the mystery of the one person (*prosôpon*) of Jesus Christ, the God-man, the same perfect in divinity and perfect in humanity - without confusion (*asygchytôs*) and without division (*adiaretôs*),⁷⁹ Christians believe that the God who communicates himself and the man who accepts God's self-communication become irrevocably one.

In the second chapter we have already seen that the Sacred Scriptures testify that the mystery of God's self-communication to the world comes in the form of promise-fulfillment in Israel's history of salvation. In the Old Testament, God's action toward Israel in the course of its history is always understood as revelatory in the strict sense; it is already the word of God. But the precise content of this word becomes intelligible only through the word of the prophet who explains the presence and content of God's activity. In other words, God reveals himself through historical events; historical events as divinely interpreted by the prophets who are directed and illuminated by God's spirit. Revelation is incorporated in events of history. There is the complementary character of historical events and events of the word that makes revelation grow.

⁷⁸ Ward, *Religion and Revelation*, 193.

⁷⁹ Council of Chalcedon (451): Denz. 301-302; ND 614-615.

“The structure of revelation, in the New Testament, is not essentially different from that of the Old.”⁸⁰ What is unique and definitive in the New Testament is that the event and the word are found in the same person. God himself, in person, revealed himself concretely in Jesus Christ. “Christ is at once the event and the interpretation of the event.”⁸¹ The Incarnation is the way chosen by God to reveal himself and his plan of salvation. It means that all the resources of human nature are used by God to serve as the expression of the knowledge and love of the only true God. In fact, the whole of Christ’s human existence, his words and actions, are completely utilized to reveal the depths of the divine mystery and, at the same time, to bring into reality the mystery of man’s salvation. Of course, the Incarnation of the Word of God is one part of the total picture of God’s action in history of revelation. Based on the New Testament’s faith; however, Christians consider the Christ-event as the unsurpassable climax of all revelation. Karl Rahner explains this point clearly:

... The history of revelation has its absolute climax when God’s self-communication reaches its unsurpassable high point through the hypostatic union and in the incarnation of God in the created, spiritual reality of Jesus for his own sake, and hence for the sake of all of us. But this takes place in the incarnation of the Logos because here what is expressed and communicated, namely, God himself, and, secondly, the mode of expression, that is, the human reality of Christ in his life and in his final state, and, thirdly, the recipient Jesus in grace and in the vision of God, all three have become absolutely one. In Jesus, God’s communication to man in grace and at the same time its categorical self-interpretation in the corporeal, tangible and social dimension have reached their climax, have become revelation in an absolute sense. But this means that the event of Christ becomes for us the only really tangible caesura in the universal history of salvation and revelation, and it enables us to distinguish a particular and official history of revelation within the universal history of revelation before Christ.⁸²

⁸⁰ Latourelle, *Theology of revelation*, 349.

⁸¹ Latourelle, *Theology of revelation*, 364.

⁸² Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 174-175.

Christians hold that the God who is proclaimed as wholly transcendent in the Old Testament is experienced as the immanent and personal God in Christ. The immanence here in question is a superior one, qualitatively different from the indwelling of God's Spirit in the prophets. Jesus of Nazareth is not only the divine emissary inspired by the Spirit who comes to speak on God's behalf, rather he is the Christ consecrated with the Holy Spirit. Christ's entire life, from his birth to his death and resurrection, unfolds in the presence of the Spirit. By the power of the Holy Spirit who cooperates uninterruptedly, Jesus Christ does the Father's will with total obedience. We can say that if the prophets have the divine *pathos* by inspiration, Jesus Christ has it by nature. Indeed, he is the *pathos* of God. "No one has ever seen God; it is the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known" (Jn 1,18). And, at the same time, "the one who went down is none other than the one who went up above all the heavens to fill all things" (Ep 4,10). It is properly in the Incarnation of the Word of God from the annunciation to Easter that at once God's self-giving to humanity and man's response in obedience to it reaches its goal. We can say that Christians consider the event of God's Word becoming man as the "fullness of time." There will be no other full and complete word than this time when, as René Latourelle states:

He [God] unites hypostatically with human nature and makes known His plan of life through the words, actions, gestures, attitudes, the whole conduct of Christ. In Jesus Christ, the eternal and interior Word of God echoes without and makes Himself heard by man through the ways of flesh. Ever after, all knowledge of the true God, just like all true salvation, comes to us through Christ.⁸³

⁸³ Latourelle, *Theology of Revelation*, 369.

2. Specific Features of Christian Revelation

Christian faith, for circa two thousand years, has been predicated on the conviction that God gave a permanently valid revelation concerning himself in biblical times – the mystery of God’s self-manifestation and self-giving that deepened progressively with the patriarchs, Moses, and the prophets, until it reached its unsurpassable climax in Jesus Christ. Over the course of centuries, the Christian Church has been committed to this revealed mystery and has sought to propagate it, defend it and deepen it. It is approached differently in accordance with the respective context of the epoch where the Church lives and, therefore, is considered in varying theological understandings which correct and enrich each other. “The fact is that revelation is inexhaustibly rich, for it is at once and the same time action, history, knowledge, encounter, communion, transcendence and immanence, progress, economy, and definitive culmination.”⁸⁴

The mystery of God, insofar as it was definitively revealed in Jesus Christ, contains an “unfathomable treasure” (Ep 3,8) that surpasses and indeed transcends all theological formulations. However, it would be possible to construct a panorama of revelation theologies from any of several points of view. One of the most adequate treatments adapted to the theology of revelation in the last century is Avery Dulles’s *Models of Revelation*.⁸⁵ Adopting a perspective that is both diachronic and synchronic, he proposes five basic models of revelation. Each model highlights one or another aspect without, however, excluding the others. (a) The first model conceives of revelation as primarily a *doctrine* that is principally formulated in propositions that God

⁸⁴ René Latourelle, “Revelation”, in René Latourelle and Rino Fisichella, ed., *Dictionary of Fundamental Theology*, New York 1994, 2000², 929.

⁸⁵ Avery Dulles, *Models of Revelation*, New York 1983.

through the Church offers us for acceptance by faith. The truth of the teaching is held to be recognizable by external signs. (b) In the second model, revelation is conceived as *historical activity* on the part of God. The great events of the history of salvation, which culminate in the death and resurrection of Jesus and which make it possible to interpret past and future history, calls for a response of indestructible hope in the God who both promises and keeps his pledge of salvation as the Bible and church teaching witness. (c) According to the third model, revelation is first and foremost a privileged *inner experience* of grace or communion with God. This interior experience of grace and direct encounter with God is considered as a channel of salvation and eternal life. (d) In the fourth model, revelation is conceived as a *dialectical presence*. The transcendent God is he who comes forth to address human beings, who then recognize his presence in faith. The incarnate Word of God simultaneously reveals and hides this God's self-manifestation. (e) According to a fifth model, revelation takes place as an expansion of consciousness or shift of perspective in the human person's ultimate horizon. It is a *new awareness*, which human beings acquire when confronted with God who is mysteriously present as the transcendent dimension of human engagement in the movements of secular history.

Avery Dulles endeavors to save the values of each of these models. By comparing them, he arrives at a conviction that "the concepts of revelation implied in the five models are not totally disparate."⁸⁶ It is possible to propose a common definition that would be acceptable to many adherents of each model: "Revelation is God's free action whereby he communicates saving truth to created minds, especially through Jesus Christ as accepted by the apostolic Church and attested by the Bible and

by the continuing community of believers.”⁸⁷ Although each model and in fact even each theologian places the emphasis quite differently from one another, all seemingly agree that revelation is supremely, or even exclusively, given in Christ. He is the single central symbol that unsurpassably mediates the true meaning of God’s essence and of human existence.

The special identification of revelation with Christ is almost a commonplace among modern theologians. Vatican II articulated this widespread consensus, declaring that Jesus Christ is “both the mediator and the fullness of all revelation” (DV 2). He is God’s fulfillment of the totally free and gratuitous self-manifestation and self-giving to humanity. It is Christ, the Incarnate Word, “who assumes everything, gives everything a new place, interprets everything, and decodes everything,”⁸⁸ who provides the valid approach to revelation.

On the one hand, by comparing the Christian and Islamic doctrine on revelation, as we have already done, this unqualified centrality of Christ, who is God revealing, God revealed, and the sign of revelation becomes more obvious. On the other hand, by contrasting Jesus Christ with the Qur’ān on the basis of their roles in their respective traditions as the Word of God, we are *more* aware of the very identity of Christian revelation.

Thus, we shall now systematically highlight the features which are specific to Christian revelation based on its similarities and differences with Islamic revelation. However, we shall not start from zero. As a study in comparative theology, our scope is to *re-think* and *re-formulate* the Christian understanding of the identity of Christian

⁸⁶ Dulles, *Models of Revelation*, 117.

⁸⁷ Dulles, *Models of Revelation*, 117.

revelation as far the Christian Church and theology down through the centuries has reflected it. For the basis of these observations, we are indebted to René Latourelle's admirable article on "revelation".⁸⁹ By starting from the unqualified centrality of Christ as well as using a totalizing approach to Christian revelation, in our view, Latourelle identifies successfully the "uniqueness" of Christian revelation. Without pretending to exhaust all aspects of the unfathomable riches of Christian revelation, in this part we shall focus on the most specific aspects of Christian revelation, which contrast and differ significantly from the Islamic ones.

2.1. Incarnational Principle

The most specific feature of Christian revelation is that this revelation comes through the Incarnation of the Son of God in the midst of men. It is not God's appearance under a human form as the patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac and Jacob) experienced it. It is not divine disclosure through direct historical events, as though God were causing water, earth, or wind to act in extra-ordinary ways as the Israelites conducted by Moses considered it. It is not a prophetic experience of listening to the Word of God through a particular intimacy with God or through the inspiration of God's Spirit. It is also not, as in Muhammad's experience, the sending of a messenger to reveal, with God's permission, what God wills. It is rather that the Word of God became flesh, became man (Jn 1,14). "God not only enters into history but, in order to manifest himself, he

⁸⁸ Latourelle, "Revelation", 930.

⁸⁹ René Latourelle, "Revelation", in René Latourelle and Rino Fisichella, ed., *Dictionary of Fundamental Theology*, New York 1994, 2000², 929.

takes to himself what is most unlike him: the body and flesh of human beings, with all the perils and limitations of language, culture, and institutions.”⁹⁰

According to Scripture, in its concrete form, the Incarnation is the Word of God in a historical and particular person, Jesus Christ. How can the eternal and immutable Word become a historical and particular man? Here Christians face a most difficult question parallel to that in which the Muslims have difficulty explaining the *genesis* of the Qur’ān. However, as the process of Qur’anic revelation is, for Muslims, always an exclusively divine activity, we can also similarly say in the words of Rahner:

The mystery of the Incarnation must be in God himself, and precisely in the fact that, although he is immutable in and of *himself*, he himself can become something in another. ... Moreover, this possibility is not to be understood as a sign that he is in need of something, but rather as the height of perfection. This perfection would be less perfect if he could not become less than he is and always remains.⁹¹

Christian theology always holds that God is wholly-otherness (*totaliter aliter*) and ever-greatness (*semper maior*). The mystery remains a mystery even though it reveals itself to man. Christ is both the revealing mystery and the revealed mystery (*DV* 2 and 4). Jesus Christ not only brings revelation. He is the revelation, the epiphany of God. In Christ, the eternal life that was in God “has been revealed to us” (1 Jn 1,2). In other words, for a fully incarnational form of Christian faith, the life of Jesus is the self-expression of the Eternal in space and time. But in claiming this, we should not understand that “Jesus expresses all there is to be expressed of God; otherwise the rest of creation would be superfluous.”⁹² In the second chapter, we have tried to understand Jesus’ place in the great design of revelation in the history of salvation. After many

⁹⁰ Latourelle, “Revelation”, 932.

⁹¹ Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 221-222.

⁹² Ward, *Religion and Revelation*, 194.

moments in the past and by many means in human history, at a very particular and unrepeatably point of Jewish history, Jesus lived out his ministry, proclaiming the imminence of God's Kingdom and manifesting the incomprehensible mystery of God, the Father's unconditional compassionate love. In and through him, in fact, the form of Supreme Being and Goodness is fully realized in the particular, in a person. If one understands incarnation as a particular act of God in and through a person who is essentially part of a long historical process, then one can see much more easily Jesus as the Word of God, as the unique way through which God expresses himself to men. Thanks to the sign which is Christ's humanity, the apostles were able to hear, see, and touch the Word of Life (1 Jn 1,1). The Incarnation is the decisive and unrepeatably way in which "God is with us to free us from the darkness of sin and death, and to raise us up to life eternal" (DV 4). For Christians, Keith Ward writes:

[The incarnational claim] is that at a particular, limited point of time and space, the Divine Life transforms a particular human life by uniting it to itself. The particular is taken into God, as a foreshadowing of the destiny that awaits all finite things. As Athanasius puts it, 'He, indeed, assumed humanity that we might become God. He manifested Himself by means of a body in order that we might perceive the Mind of the unseen Father.' Such a manifestation shows the ultimate goal of human life and begins the process of realizing that goal in others by uniting them to the life of the Eternal Word, who fully assumed humanity in Jesus. [...]

It is not that Jesus, considered in the abstract as a person of such-and-such intelligence, moral character, and temperament, is intrinsically superior on some common qualitative scale to any other human being who ever has lived or who ever will live. It is rather that God is manifesting the Divine Being decisively in this one historical life; so that this life becomes forever the image of God, as a historically purposing and redemptive power and value.⁹³

Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Word, is neither a myth nor any sort of abstract notion. Biblical and Christian traditions show that one and the same Jesus Christ is both God and man. With regard to the immutability of God it must be said that the divine

life is inexhaustible and without limit, so much so that God has no need whatever for creatures. But this immutability of the living God is not opposed to his supreme liberty, something that the event of the Incarnation clearly demonstrates. The human and divine natures are united in one Divine Person so as to remain exactly that which they are, namely, Divine and human natures with distinct and perfect activities of their own. "Just as the Incarnation of the Word does not change the divine nature, in the same way the divinity of Jesus Christ does not change or dissolve human nature but rather makes it more itself and perfects it in its original condition of creaturehood."⁹⁴ Thanks to the Incarnation, which is the revelation par excellence of God's love – the absolute and immutable God freely and uniquely becomes just one human person -- man may be made more human and may participate in the Divine Life.

"The Incarnation, in its concrete form, is the revelation of God himself in person."⁹⁵ On this point, Latourelle sees that there are numerous implications of the incarnational principle for the understanding of revelation.

- a. First of all, it is necessary to stress the point that Christ's role as revealer results directly from the incarnation. Revelation and incarnation alike are part of the one mystery of the elevation of human nature and human language. "Incarnation" emphasizes the Son's assumption of flesh in a hypostatic union; "revelation" emphasizes the manifestation of God in the way provided by flesh and language. But incarnation, like revelation, is the self-manifestation and self-giving of God. In revealing himself God gives himself, and in giving himself through the incarnation God reveals himself.
- b. Second, if God truly "humanizes" himself in the incarnation, it follows that all the dimensions of the human are assumed and used to express this absolute person. Not only the words of Christ and his preaching, but also his actions, the example he gives, his attitudes, his behavior toward the lowly, the poor, the marginalized, all those whom others ignore, scorn, or reject, as well also his passion and death, in short, his entire existence – all this is the means by which

⁹³ Ward, *Religion and Revelation*, 194-195.

⁹⁴ International Theological Commission, "Theology, Christology, Anthropology", in Rev. Michael Sharkey, ed., *Texts and Documents 1969-1985*, San Francisco, 1989, 215.

⁹⁵ Latourelle, "Revelation", 933.

he reveals to us his own mystery, the mystery of the life of the Trinity, and our mystery as God's children. Christ involves his whole being in the work of revealing the Father and his love. We must say, therefore, that the love of Christ is God's love made visible and that the words and actions of Christ are the human words and actions of God.

- c. Extending the application of this incarnation principle, we can say that by becoming incarnate the Word of God assumes the various cultures of the human race in order to proclaim Christian salvation to each people and to bring these cultures to their completion. Furthermore, although it is true that Christ belonged to a particular culture, nonetheless, by reason of his transcendence as the Absolute, he saves all cultures, including his own, from their deviations and offscourings, purifies them, rectifies them, elevates and completes them.
- d. We will understand better the meaning of this incarnational economy if we note that what Christ comes to reveal to all human beings, namely, their status as children of God, means a *new way of life*, a *praxis*. But if this new way of life were revealed solely through oral teaching, the revelation would have been ineffective and without any real influence. God had to "illustrate" this new way of life *by living it*. That is why Christ, who within the Trinity is the Son of the Father, came among human beings to reveal to them their status as God's children and to do so by himself living as a child of God. It is through listening to Christ and contemplating him, through watching him act, that our status as God's children is revealed to us and we learn how God loves his Son and all other human beings, his adopted children.⁹⁶

2.2. Principle of Historicity

Christian revelation is first and foremost incarnational. In and through Jesus of Nazareth God was revealing himself decisively to human beings and acting uniquely and historically to forgive sin and inaugurate a new human community, the Kingdom of Love. By unequivocally centering its doctrine on one historical figure, it is obvious that Christian revelation is specified by a feature that Latourelle calls "organic connection between revelation and history."⁹⁷ Contrasted with other religions that, of course, are historical in a very general sense of the word, Latourelle sees Christian revelation as special in the sense that

⁹⁶ Latourelle, "Revelation", 933.

It not only exists in history and has its own history: it also develops through historical events, the deeper meaning of which is made known by authoritative witnesses, and it reaches its full form in a supreme event, namely, the incarnation of the Son of God, an event that takes place at a chronologically defined point and in a particular situation and context within universal history.⁹⁸

Christians see time as having been linear and historical before Christ, with the history of God's relationship to humanity evolving through events that have happened and through a succession of major and minor prophets portrayed in the Old Testament. When Christ comes into the world, this relationship between God and humanity – what we call salvation history – is now fixed and constant. The revelation of Christ has established it for all time. “Only in him is there salvation; for of all the names in the world given to men, this is the only one by which we can be saved” (Ac 4,12).

The idea that humanity's relationship with God was evolving in history but afterwards it is fixed, however, exists also in Islam. The Qur'ān portrays an evolving relationship between God and humanity through the medium of a series of prophets. Muhammad himself is announced as one of the line of prophets stretching back to Adam and reaching forward through Abraham and Moses, David and Solomon, until it reached Jesus. “Muhammad is not the father of any one of your men, but the Messenger of God, and the Seal of the Prophets; God has knowledge of everything” (Qur'ān 33:40). According to Muslims, thus, the Qur'ān sent down to the Prophet Muhammad becomes the final revelation from God and the relationship between God and humankind ceases to progress any further until the Day of Judgement. Moreover, Muslims believe that “as the divine word addressed to humankind, the Qur'an

⁹⁷ Latourelle, “Revelation”, 930.

⁹⁸ Latourelle, “Revelation”, 931.

participates in our history but at the same time transcends it.”⁹⁹ Although Muslims have great regard for the transcendence and uncreatedness of the Qur’ān, however, since maintaining the absolute oneness of God, they strictly never consider it as “God”. The Qur’ān is, for Muslims, the Word of God, the divine guidance, but it is not God.

Christian faith, by contrast, goes further by believing that God indeed intervenes in history and even becomes temporal for our sake. “The God of Christian revelation is not simply a God of the cosmos but a God of unexpected interventions and interruptions into human history: a God who comes, intervenes, acts, saves.”¹⁰⁰ Regarding the interventions and interruptions of God in history, we neither say nor predict anything. Since “at many moments in the past and by many means, God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets”, and since “in our time, the final days, He has spoken to us in the person of His Son” (Heb 1,1-2), all depends on His free and gratuitous decision. Thanks to the Incarnation, which is the decisive opportune moment chosen by Him, God truly and sacramentally reveals himself in and through *verba et gesta* of Christ. For the Christian, Jesus does not belong in the group of the prophets but is a unique and particular figure in God’s plan, the Son of God promised from the beginning and whose redemptive death required no sequel. Indeed, for Christians, Christ is “the image of the unseen God, the first-born of all creation and the first-born from the dead” (Col 1,15.18). In him, on the one hand, Christians experience the self-manifestation of the promising God in freedom. On the other hand, it is through Christ that humanity can direct its openness to the future God in freedom. In fact, as *Gaudium et Spes* says, “Christ, the final Adam, by the revelation of the mystery of the Father and

⁹⁹ Mahmoud Ayoub, *The Qur'an and Its Interpreters*, New York 1984, 1.

¹⁰⁰ Latourelle, “Revelation”, 931.

his love, fully reveals man to man himself and makes his 'supreme calling clear' (no. 22).

In the second part we have already examined the unique and central place of the Christ event in the great pictures of God's action in history, the mystery that is specified by a dialectical series of promises and their fulfillment. The Old and New Testaments are none other than interpretative reflections written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit regarding the interventions of the God of the promise. Holy Scripture is the testimony of God's faithfulness to his promises that "leads to hope of a still more decisive fulfillment and thus constitutes a kind of staging place in the continuous movement of history toward its ultimate goal."¹⁰¹ In other words, biblical revelation is the interpretation of the "experience of history as an opening of events to an always new future bearing a universal meaning for the events that take place in time."¹⁰² Being different from Islamic revelation that seemingly attaches little importance to an historical experience of God's mystery in the mode of a promise of future fulfillment, it would not be possible to speak of Christian revelation "apart from a series of events located in time and in a particular cultural setting, and apart from a series of mediators who act in God's name to make known the 'meaning' of this history as it moves toward its definitive completion in Jesus Christ."¹⁰³

Moreover, unlike the Muslim faith that, in general, does not really speak of the history of the Qur'ān or of the history of God,¹⁰⁴ on the basis of God's identification of himself with time in the Incarnation of His Son, Christian faith seeks to reflect on the

¹⁰¹ Latourelle, "Revelation", 932.

¹⁰² John F. Haught, *Mystery and Promise, A Theology of Revelation*, Minnesota 1993, 169.

¹⁰³ Latourelle, "Revelation", 931.

¹⁰⁴ Cf. Esack, *The Qur'an, A Short Introduction*, 31.

historicity of God. "Since God has become temporal, he has the capacity to become temporal."¹⁰⁵ Beyond the two extremes which, on the one hand, holds the opinion that God cannot in any way be influenced by the world (Deism or weak form of theism) and, on the other hand, considers God in need of the world to realize himself (Hegelianism or process theology), Christian theology, as John O'Donnell observes, believes that "God's being is not static."¹⁰⁶ Rather, God is "so dynamic, fruitful and altruistic" that God's Being "opens out toward the world."¹⁰⁷ God's historicity or God's capacity to become temporal, which can be understood only in Trinitarian terms, is "the ground for his history with the world, which reaches its climax in the Christ-event."¹⁰⁸

2.3. Principle of "Economy"

In connection with the principle of historicity, we should speak about another principle, namely, that of economy that distinguishes between Christian and Islamic revelation. Since revelation has taken the form, above all, of promise and fulfillment, God's self-manifestation and self communication presents itself to humanity not "as an isolated mystery" but, using Latourelle's words:

As a far-reaching 'economy', i.e. as an infinitely wise plan which God unveils and brings to fruition in ways for which he has provided. This economy, which arises from the Father's initiative, enters into history and has its culmination in Jesus Christ, who is the fullness of revelation: it then continues on, under the action of the Holy Spirit, in the ecclesial community, through tradition and Scripture and under the sign of expectation of the eschatological consummation.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁵ John O'Donnell, "History IV: Historicity of Revelation", in René Latourelle – Rino Fisichella, ed., *Dictionary of Fundamental Theology*, New York 1994, 2000², 444.

¹⁰⁶ O'Donnell, "History IV: Historicity of Revelation", 444.

¹⁰⁷ O'Donnell, "History IV: Historicity of Revelation", 445.

¹⁰⁸ O'Donnell, "History IV: Historicity of Revelation", 444-445.

¹⁰⁹ Latourelle, "Revelation", 934.

In this economy, even though there is a series of events and their interpretations in the history of revelation, there is only one Word of God. It is through His Word that God progressively introduces man to the knowledge and experience of his intimate being. If the Word made flesh is the fullness of revelation, then revelation in the Old Testament has its special function that Latourelle names the "threefold function of preparation, prophecy and prefiguration."¹¹⁰

All that precedes him is a *preparation* for his coming: preparation of a family according to the flesh, preparation of a social setting, preparation of a language as his means of expression, preparation of institutions (covenant, Law, Temple, sacrifices, etc.) and great events (exodus, conquest, monarchy, exile, restoration), all of which turned the appearance of Christ on the scene into a revelation in a particular situation, a 'contextualized' revelation. Second, the Old Testament as a whole is a *prophecy* of the Christ-event, i.e. it is an adumbration of the eschatological event, an adumbration that takes form over the centuries and arouses expectation and desire of the event itself, unforeseeable and unparalleled though this is in its concrete details. Only when the event comes to pass does the prophecy acquire its full meaning and force. Finally, the Old Testament *prefigures* the eschaton, i.e. represents it symbolically; in this representation the ancient reality (events, institutions, persons) retains its status as historical fact, but at the same time it is enlarged, left behind, and transcended by the presence of Christ among us, our Emmanuel.¹¹¹

It is not possible to understand the New Testament apart from the Old Testament. But at the same time, when the Old Testament is understood in the light of the Christ-event, it takes on a new and full meaning. For when the Word becomes flesh and is present among us, all newness is given to us. The event fulfills and surpasses the expectation. In this economy there is *continuity* and at the same time *discontinuity* and *progression* between the Old and New Testament. Christ whose historical event was prepared and perpetuated through the centuries is the key to the interpretation of the period preceding and following his coming.

¹¹⁰ Latourelle, "Revelation", 934.

Unlike the Qur'ān, which is in effect understood by Muslims as the only valid Scripture regarding the previous scriptures, Jesus Christ came not to abrogate the previous revelation, but, by his teaching and way of acting, to give it a new and definitive form, by which the goal of the revelation is fully realized. "Do not imagine that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets. I have come not to abolish but to complete them. In truth I tell you, till heaven and earth disappear, not one dot, not one little stroke, is to disappear from the Law until all its purpose is achieved" (Mt 5,17-18).

In the time of the Church, likewise, revelation that was prepared at many moments in the past and by many means, and in the end-time was fully given by the extraordinary intervention of the Incarnate Word, spreads through societies and across time. Under the guaranteeing and universalizing action of the Holy Spirit, the transmission of revelation is safeguarded by a set of charisms within the Church: "the charism of tradition's apostolic origin, the charism of scriptural inspiration, and the charism of infallibility entrusted to the Church's teaching office."¹¹² In accord with God's most wise design and in order to ensure its faithful transmission, the Sacred Tradition, Sacred Scripture and the teaching authority of the Church "are so linked and joined together that one cannot stand without the other, and that all together and each in its own way under the action of the one Holy Spirit contribute effectively to the salvation of souls" (*DV* chap. 2). "Just as Christ directs the constitutive phase of

¹¹¹ Latourelle, "Revelation", 934.

¹¹² Latourelle, "Revelation", 935.

revelation, so the Spirit of Christ directs the phase of its spread through the centuries.”¹¹³

There can be no doubt that the revelation historically given in Jesus Christ is the decisive revelation. Because Christ is God-among-us as Word of God, God has given and communicated himself wholly. In Christ, God’s dialogue with humanity as much as man’s dialogue with God has reached its climax now and today. This fact is what feeds our faith, our hope, and our love. “But this decisive characteristic of historical revelation does not exclude hope and the expectation of the glorious Christ at the Parousia. The fulfillment which Christ embodies includes both an *already* and a *not yet*.”¹¹⁴ In the single economy of the mystery of God’s promising future, on the one hand, Christ has already come, died and risen for our sake; but on the other, we do not yet fully share his glory. Yet even though the full revelation of God has already occurred in Jesus, it remains for us gradually to grasp its full significance over the course of the centuries. If we have faith and hope for the glorious manifestation of Christ, it is not because we hope something apart from revelation given in Jesus Christ. “Christian hope can have no other ultimate object than God, who is manifested to us in Christ.”¹¹⁵ In short, “Jesus as definitive presence of salvation, and in this sense as eschatological event, has opened us a hope of the last things; and these, as well, are definitively concentrated in him by whom, in the Spirit, we have access to the Father.”¹¹⁶

¹¹³ Latourelle, “Revelation”, 935.

¹¹⁴ Latourelle, “Revelation”, 940.

¹¹⁵ Luis F. Ladaria, “Eschatology”, in René Latourelle – Rino Fisichella, ed., *Dictionary of Fundamental Theology*, New York 1994, 2000², 273.

2.4. Revelation and The Trinity

In the final observation, it becomes obvious that we cannot speak about Christian revelation and its specific features apart from the Christian notion of God, the Trinity, or the triadic loving community. This notion, which completely distinguishes Christian and Islamic revelation suggests, "God is not one absolutely undifferentiated unity, the One beyond all distinctions."¹¹⁷ It is One God in three Persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Christian revelation is the mystery of God's self-coming to humanity. It has its source from God's eternal dynamic triadic Being. As we have already touched upon before, God has the capacity to become temporal. Indeed, according to John O'Donnell, God's historicity is the ground for his history with the world. On this point, observing Jüngel and Balthasar's idea, O'Donnell writes:

Jüngel speaks of God's being as a triple coming. God comes from himself (Father), God comes to himself (Son), and God comes as God (Holy Spirit). There is a movement in God, from the Father to the Son in the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the guarantee of the unity of Trinitarian love and of its infinite fullness. The love of the Father for the Son and the Son's response to the Father is so rich that it contains the quality of being ever greater, ever new, ever young. Balthasar speaks in similar terms, using the category of event to explain the dynamic character of God's eternal being. For Balthasar, God's being is the event of the Father's self-donation and the Son's obedient response, which contains an overflowing fruitfulness that is the Holy Spirit. For all these authors the event that God is, is so dynamic, fruitful, and altruistic that it opens out toward the world. God's being is a being of ecstatic movement. The Holy Spirit both completes the circle of love and is the infinite fruitfulness of love for the world and so can be described as the ecstasy of God. God's love is not retained for himself but is a free gift for the world.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁶ Ladaria, "Eschatology", 274.

¹¹⁷ Ward, *Religion and Revelation*, 200.

¹¹⁸ O'Donnell, "History IV: Historicity of Revelation", 445.

Christian revelation is a love story that comes from the Father through the Son in the Holy Spirit for the sake of human salvation. Vatican II also considers revelation in terms of a trinitarian event; an event that is out of the abundance of God's love, unfolding in history and reaching toward beatific fellowship. "In his goodness and wisdom God chose to reveal himself and to make known to us the hidden purpose of his will (cf. Eph 1,9) by which through Christ, the Word made flesh, man might in the Holy Spirit have access to the Father and come to share in the divine nature (cf. Eph 2,18; 2 Pt 1,4)" (DV 2).

Revelation is the work of the entire Trinity. The Father reveals himself to the human race and draws it to himself by the joint action of the Son and the Spirit. How can the two ways of self-communication through the Son and the Spirit be understood as moments, innerly related to each other, yet distinct from one another, of the one self-communication of God? In his book *The Trinity*, Karl Rahner endeavors to answer this problem. He supposes that:

When God freely steps outside of himself in *self-communication* (not merely through creation, positing other realities which are not himself), it is and must be the Son who appears historically in the flesh as man. And it is and must be the Spirit who brings about the acceptance by the world (as creation) in faith, hope and love of this self-communication.¹¹⁹

Rahner explains that the concept of the self-communication of God reveals to us a fourfold group of aspects: a) Origin-Future, b) History-Transcendence, c) Invitation-Acceptance, and d) Knowledge-Love. From these aspects, however, there are two and only two basic manners of God's self-communication, which are distinct and condition each other: self-communication as truth and as love.¹²⁰ He writes:

¹¹⁹ Karl Rahner, *The Trinity*, 86.

¹²⁰ Cf. Rahner, *The Trinity*, 88-98.

The divine self-communication possesses two basic modalities: self-communication as truth and as love. ... This self-communication, insofar as it occurs as 'truth,' happens in history; and that insofar as it happens as love, it opens this history in transcendence towards the absolute future. ... History as concrete, in which the irrevocability of the divine self-communication is made apparent, and transcendence towards the absolute future, are opposites, and as such they keep the one divine self-communication separated in their modalities. But this historic manifestation as truth can be perceived only in the horizon of transcendence towards God's absolute future; this absolute is irrevocably promised as love by the fact that this promise is established in concrete history (of the 'absolute bringer of salvation'). Insofar as these two statements are true, the two modalities of divine self-communication are not separated, nor are they tied together simply by divine decree. They constitute the one divine self-communication which assumes the form of truth in history, of origin and offer, of love in transcendence towards the freely accepted absolute future.¹²¹

In more simple words, because revelation has its roots in the single communion of life of the three Persons, so, there is only one self-manifestation in history in which "each of the persons acts according to effects which correspond in a mysterious way to what Father, Son, and Spirit respectively are within the Trinity."¹²² The Father takes the initiative. The proper revelation of God's love is that the Father sends the Son into the world that we might have life through him (cf. 1 Jn 4,9-10; Jn 3,16). It is also the Father who draws human beings to the Son through an interior attraction of heart (cf. Jn 6,44). The Son who is already the eternal Word of the Father makes known God's love to men. He is the supreme revelation of the Father to human beings and initiates them into their life as the children of the Father (cf. Jn 6,38-40). If the Son lays out the objective reality of salvation and revelation, the Spirit inspires and interiorizes it. As the Spirit of truth, he is to teach and to remind us of everything the Son has said (cf. Jn 14,26).

The once-for-all event of the incarnation becomes contemporaneous through the Holy Spirit by which human beings are enabled to share God's life. Since God

¹²¹ Rahner, *The Trinity*, 98.

¹²² Latourelle, "Revelation", 947.

the Father reveals himself in history through his Son and in grace through the Holy Spirit, we see that the structure of the revelation-event is trinitarian. And since God corresponds to himself in the act of revelation, it follows that God's own being is from eternity trinitarian. Hence it is clear that a theological analysis of the act of God's self-revelation leads us to the heart of the mystery of the Trinity.¹²³

3. The Incarnate Word: Fulfillment of the Future Promise in Self-Emptying Love

(Some Theological-pastoral Consequences and Implications)

The conviction that the transcendent mystery is revealed to humankind is not unique to Christianity and biblical religions. In fact, peoples of other times and places in this world have also experienced the breach of transcendent mystery into their lives. They have associated with it, talked about it, and worshipped it through many diverse oral and symbolic designations. Religion in its entirety can be viewed liberally as the admission of a divine mystery. Indeed, most of religions in this pluralistic world claim that it is divine revelation at the core of their faith. In our context of study, Islam, for example, believes that the Qur'ān is Allāh's revelation brought by the Angel Gabriel, received by the Prophet Muhammad, and intended for all humanity.

In the third chapter we have already come to an appreciation of this Islamic doctrine on revelation as Muslims understand and live it. This does not mean that we receive or refuse all or a part of it. In short, the scope of this study is not to say that the Islamic doctrine is true or false, nor to search for the meaning or place of Islamic revelation in the context of the history of Christian revelation. This matter does not lie within our competence. In the religious plurality of the world today, moreover, such

¹²³ John O'Donnell, "Trinity and Revelation", in René Latourelle and Rino Fisichella, ed., *Dictionary of Fundamental Theology*, New York 1994, 2000², 1132.

judgmental comparisons would be meaningless and arrogant. However, in fact, contrasting and comparing the two doctrines, we can say that although both have some common themes (for example: the existence of God, the vocation of man, eschatology), Islamic alleged revelation disagrees with our Christian revelation. "Muslim and Christian theologians disagree on their basic source of truth, on what they accept as Divine revelation; and there seems to be no way of resolving such fundamental disagreements, at least in this life."¹²⁴ Based on these disagreements, if it is true that there is diversity of revelations, it is also true that they cannot all be right. At the moment, without giving in to relativism, we can only say that we are before a "mystery" of religious pluralism, "a fate allowed by God, a fate whose meaning we don't yet understand."¹²⁵ Being faced with this mystery, perhaps, a wise and smart attitude might be precisely to keep this wider religious world before us considering it "not simply a deviation, but a positive expression of the spiritual riches given by God to the nations (cf. *Ad Gentes*, 11)."¹²⁶

Based on this positive openness to the mystery of the future, comparative theology takes *seriously* the *differences* of other religious traditions as insight for examining our Christian understanding of revelation. It is clear that respectfully acknowledging the Islamic doctrine on revelation, which we have been endeavoring to do, does not require that we restrain the Christian intuition of something unique, decisive, and unsurpassable in the Christ of faith. Having avoided the connotation of superiority to other faiths, we have been attempting to rethink the Christian understanding of God's self-manifestation in Christ. In fact, the specific features of

¹²⁴ Ward, *Religion and Revelation*, 7.

¹²⁵ Claude Geffré, "Christian Faith and Religious Pluralism," in *Theology Digest* 38: 1 (1991), 16.

Christian revelation become distinctive to us when we view them in the wider context of other kinds of religious awareness. Rethinking the features of Christian revelation in the light of the insight of Islamic revelation, we arrive at two inseparable fundamental themes of the mystery of God's self-manifestation in history: the mystery of the fulfillment of God's promise and an image of God's self-emptying. These two inseparable manifestations reach their decisive and definitive expression in and through the person of Jesus Christ. "If there is anything decisive for faith in Christian revelation, it is the unsurpassably self-sacrificing character of the God who becomes manifest in Christ."¹²⁷

Understood in the setting of God's historical covenant with Israel and even of God's universal covenant in creation (both, in fact, are mysteries of God's faithfulness and humanity's refusal), Jesus' whole life is a re-creation of the covenant between God and man. He is God's definitive offer of unconditional love and man's response to that offer.

Jesus is the Covenant in his person; that is, he is not only God's self-communication to us (identification), but also the complete human response taken on our behalf (representation). Having assumed our nature--God's union and communication with us--he, as one of us now, represents us to God--our union with God. He is the fulfillment of God's intentionality for creation: God's final and unambiguous self-communication to humankind.¹²⁸

It is properly the unsurpassable event of God's self-manifestation in Christ that uniquely specifies Christian revelation and distinctly distinguishes it from Islamic and other revelations. Christians believe that it is in the Incarnation, especially in the mystery of Christ's cross and resurrection, that God reveals himself and manifests his

¹²⁶ Claude Geffré, "Christian Faith and Religious Pluralism," 16.

¹²⁷ Haught, *Mystery and Promise*, 81-82.

¹²⁸ Fuellenbach, *The Kingdom of God*, 214.

self-emptying love that is the source of eternal life. For the Christian the mystery of a crucified Christ, which is to the Jews an obstacle, to the gentiles foolishness and to Muslims idolatry, is the power of God, the wisdom of God, and the love of God (cf. 1 Co 1,23-24).

Of course, Christians may be boastful because of this amazing grace of God. Indeed, it is very reasonable to proclaim the greatness of the Lord and to rejoice in God our Saviour (cf. the *magnificat*; Lk 1,46-55). However, we should not be arrogant or superior before others because, as Saint Paul says, "If anyone wants to boast, let him boast of the Lord" (1 Co 1,31; cf. Jr 9,22-23). We must realize that what is really unsurpassable in Christianity is the mystery of God's self-manifestation in Jesus Christ, and not our religion or our understanding that speak of this mystery.¹²⁹

In this study, however, we, the Church, can go further and rethink not only the specific features of Christian revelation but of how we can comprehend fully and live sincerely our Christian faith in God the Father who restores the universe by a redemptive activity in the divine Son Jesus Christ, and definitively sanctifies it by the eschatological gift of the divine Spirit.

3.1. The Christ of Vision, the Church, and the Mystery of the Coming Kingdom

Jesus the Christ, in Christianity, is the primary *sacrament* of human encounter with the coming Mystery of the Kingdom. As we have observed in the previous chapter, the Kingdom is central to Jesus. "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is close at hand. Repent, and believe the gospel" (Mk 1,14-15; cf. Mt 4,17; Lk 4,43). He

¹²⁹ Cf. Haught, *Mystery and Promise*, 74.

proclaims good news of the God who comes to us from the realm of the future. Before the unsatisfied human longing of absolute mystery on the one hand, and its existential failure on the other, Jesus reveals an unusual image, a fatherly face of God who comes in unconditional love and infinite forgiveness, not in anger and wrath. "This God is the source of endless surprise, holding out the vision of a realm of fulfillment and joy far surpassing all present anticipations. ... The promising mystery holds out a new vision of creation's possibilities and thereby sabotages our instincts for securing our existence only in the predictability of natural recurrences."¹³⁰

This announcement of Jesus, that the Kingdom is now at hand, when placed within the context of biblical expectation that runs from Abraham through the prophets, is indeed remarkable and dramatic. The absolute and unsurpassable future promised by God from the beginning is now entering into our life in a decisive way. In his person as well as in his vivid images of the Kingdom, Jesus sacramentalizes the compassionate God whose promise is coming to fulfillment. He realized this Kingdom of *shalom* in and through himself. When John the Baptist sent his disciples to ask him if he were the one who was to come, Jesus answered, "Go back and tell John what you hear and see; the blind see again, and the lame walk, those suffering from virulent skin-diseases are cleaned, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised to life and the good news is proclaimed to the poor; and blessed is anyone who does not find me a cause of falling" (Mt 11,2-6). Christians believe that the sacramental form in which mystery and promise are made flesh is preeminently the compassionate person of Jesus of Nazareth. "The one

¹³⁰ Haight, *Mystery and Promise*, 86.

who announced the breaking in of the Good News of God's reign turns out to be, in his very own person, the incarnation of God's promise."¹³¹

But where did this revolutionary vision of Jesus originate? As we have examined in the second chapter, this vision came from his own unique experience of sacred mystery, namely, his personal experience of God as *Abba*, which Jesus received and expressed in his prayer. "I bless you, Father, Lord of heaven and of earth, for hiding these from the learned and the clever and revealing them to little children. ... Everything has been entrusted to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, just as no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him' (Mt 11,25-27). The idea of God as Father, however, is not foreign to the Jewish biblical tradition. For Israel, "God is Father both in sense of being creator of all things and in special sense of calling Israel, especially through its designated kings, into a special personal relation of filial love."¹³² Having roots in and, at the same time, transforming the traditional image of God as Father, Jesus proclaimed God no longer as a personification but as a person. Jesus showed that God the Father is the one who sent him to make known His compassionate love. "No one has ever seen God; it is the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known" (Jn 1,18). The ultimate character of mystery for Jesus, and consequently for Christians, is nothing other than the most intimate and inclusive love, a consciousness of God as "Abba".¹³³ "The point of our dwelling on Jesus as the Christ, then, is to bring us to a clear sense of the meaning of the mystery of God revealed in him. Perhaps nowhere

¹³¹ Haught, *Mystery and Promise*, 106.

¹³² Ward, *Religion and Revelation*, 202.

¹³³ Cf. Haught, *Mystery and Promise*, 121.

does the character of this promising mystery present itself more graciously, extravagantly, and surprisingly than in Jesus' exhortation to think of God as 'Abba'.¹³⁴

Here, we should note that Jesus' vision of the Kingdom of the Father remains strictly related to the earth and the mundane. The filial relation with the God who is coming requires close connection to nature, to time and place, and to the need for action here and now. It seeks the establishment of God's Kingdom on earth as well as in heaven. In fact, in the Gospels, Jesus is represented as both a man of prayer who also taught his disciples to pray and an active man who went through towns and villages manifesting the compassionate God and eliminating human suffering.

In Jesus' vision, the time is always ripe for the coming of the Kingdom. Now and today is the fullness of time when the Kingdom that stands for the reign of justice, peace and joy is realized. An invitation to a *metanoia*, a transformation of lives based on God's unconditional love, is a call that cannot be delayed. "Once the hand is laid on the plough, no one who looks back is fit for the kingdom of God" (Lk 9,62). Here Jesus' proclamation seemed to be a bit impatient. If it were true, however, it should be understood as an impatience born of his exceptional compassion for the poor, the captives, the abandoned, the sick and the sinner and not out of a will to control the mystery of the future.¹³⁵ "In fact, the empathy evident in Jesus' life, action, and teaching does, after all, require at its root a profound religious patience with respect to our social, political, and economic schemas."¹³⁶

In the final analysis, we can say that Jesus embodied in his person the Kingdom of God. "The balance of sacramentality, mystical openness to the future as God's

¹³⁴ Haught, *Mystery and Promise*, 121.

¹³⁵ Cf. Haught, *Mystery and Promise*, 116.

future, silent waiting, and vigorous action ensures the revelatory power and religious integrity of his gospel of hope.”¹³⁷ In his life Jesus represented the Kingdom as present now, not as utopia for the end of the world, and offered a vision of a future completeness. But, dramatically, it was precisely his total dedication to the Coming God, his Abba, and to his mission, that brought him to his death on the cross. Jesus’ death was a consequence of his all-inclusive vision of the world’s future. Nonetheless, the vision still lives on in the Spirit. The cross is followed by resurrection which is the future entering the present. The cross of Christ, in the light of the resurrection, is the climax of God’s self-revelation in the history of humanity. In short, “the essential content of revelation is nothing other than the kenosis of God that opens up the future to an all-inclusive vision promised in the resurrection.”¹³⁸

Resurrection means that Jesus who was crucified, dead and buried now lives. It means that Jesus still is and always will be present to us, the Church, no less than to his disciples gathered in Jerusalem and Galilee after his death on the cross. The life including his vision that he has now of us in the Spirit is our access to the ultimate mystery he called “Abba” (Rm 8,15; Gal 4,6). While still emanating from the context of the Old Testament’s hope in God’s promises, the life of the Church is a new way of life based on and having power from Jesus’ life, death and resurrection which is the future entering the present. The Church, thus, is the communion of those who have been called to follow the new way toward the eternal promise by reference to the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

¹³⁶ Haught, *Mystery and Promise*, 116.

¹³⁷ Haught, *Mystery and Promise*, 117.

¹³⁸ Haught, *Mystery and Promise*, 123.

And because the Church is founded by Jesus and has the apostles' experience and testimony of the living crucified Jesus as her foundation of faith, we can say that:

The Church's existence, then, remains essential to revelation as the sign or "sacrament" of God's fidelity to the promise first given to Abraham and ratified in Jesus' being raised up to new life. And our participation in the life of the Church provides a special (though not exclusive) access to revelation. Through participation in the life of the Church, its liturgy, sacraments, teachings, and praxis, we are enabled to situate ourselves within the revelatory vision of Christ with its promise for the liberation of the whole of history and creation.¹³⁹

In this context, this is exactly the statement of the Second Vatican Council with regard to the sacramentality of the Church. As Christ is the sacrament of God, so the Church is seen also as sacrament of the human encounter with the coming Mystery of the Kingdom (cf. *LG* 1). But, here, sacrament should be understood fully in the wider context of the mystery of the coming kingdom. Jesus' revelatory power and his religious integrity of the gospel of hope were valid because they were ensured by the balance of his sacramentality, mystical directness to the future as God's future, silent waiting, and dynamic action. Likewise, the life of the Church will be an authentic sign and instrument of revelation if we keep our sacramentality in mutual tension and relation with the other three of what John Haught calls the "four ways of entry into mystery."¹⁴⁰ mystical, silent and active ways. Without contemplative openness to the future as God's future, sacramentality will become idolatry. Without silently allowing the mystery to be itself, our inadequate symbolic representations will become verbiage and misleading image. Without concrete action to change the social world, the sacrificial practices will degenerate into empty ritualism.

¹³⁹ Haught, *Mystery and Promise*, 127.

¹⁴⁰ Haught, *Mystery and Promise*, 76-80.

The Church's belonging to the revelatory mystery is both a gracious gift and invitation to communicate it. The gift is accepted precisely by carrying out the task entailed by it. "The communication of revelation means that those who communicate and proclaim salvation are at the same time the living witnesses of a faith that has first enlightened and transformed their own lives."¹⁴¹ "Those who let the Kingdom into their life by becoming children of God will have to show the presence of the Kingdom by working to make all human beings their brothers and sisters."¹⁴² Before humanity's deepest desire for the transcendent mystery on the one hand, and its continuous struggle of life against sin and its consequences on the other, the Church's existence serves primarily to make it possible for humanity to look forward to God's promises in a new way every day.

3.2. The Kenotic Christ, the Church, and the Religiously Pluralistic World

"The content and substance of revelation is always mystery, and for biblical faith, this elusive but endlessly fulfilling mystery comes to us in the shape of an unfathomable future that promises complete revelation."¹⁴³ We believe that the content and substance of revelation is no other than the mystery of Jesus Christ. He is God with us who through his words and deeds, his signs and wonders, and especially through his death and glorious resurrection from the dead and final sending of the Spirit of truth overcomes sin and death, and opens us to the coming eschatological future of life

¹⁴¹ Latourelle, "Revelation", 948.

¹⁴² John Fuellenbach, *The Kingdom of God. The Message of Jesus Today*, New York 1995, 1998³, 100.

¹⁴³ Haught, *Mystery and Promise*, 134.

eternal (cf. *DV* 2-4). In other words, it is the Word made flesh that sets us free and at the same time becomes the basis and power of our hope in the future.

As we have seen previously, by viewing it in the context of a vast array of religions and especially by contrasting it with Islamic doctrine on revelation where the Qur'ān is considered to have a pre-existent heavenly original of which the earthly Qur'ān is merely a copy, it becomes clear to us that the Christian doctrine on revelation has as its very heart the notion of the Incarnation: the Word was with God in the beginning, became flesh, and lived among us to make known God the Father (cf. Jn 1,1-18).

In its focus on Jesus Christ as the revelation of God, Christianity claims that the ultimate mystery of reality becomes incarnate in the life of a particular human being at a particular time in the history of the world. In Christianity, a major feature of the sacred is its paradoxical identification with the mundane. The infinite mystery takes on the definiteness of finitude as its mode of actual existence. The eternal identifies with the temporal and perishable. God, in other words, appears to Christian faith as a self-emptying mystery. The mystery becomes definite by limiting itself. In the Christian story, the inexhaustible depth of reality surfaces as a person like us—Jesus of Nazareth—who suffers crucifixion and death.¹⁴⁴

In the entire New Testament, one potentially fruitful and provocative expression of Christ's *kenosis* in emptying himself of his divine glory is the early Christian hymn quoted in Philippians (2,6-11).

Make your own the mind of Christ Jesus: Who, being in the form of God did not count equality with God something to be grasped. But he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, becoming as human beings are; and being in every way like a human being, he was humbler yet, even to accepting death, death on a cross. And for this God raised him high, and gave him the name which is above all other names; so that *all beings* in the heavens, on earth and in the underworld, *should bend the knee* at the name of Jesus and that *every tongue should acknowledge* Jesus Christ as Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

¹⁴⁴ Haight, *Mystery and Promise*, 58.

The hymn echoes what Christians have believed about the person of Jesus Christ since the beginning of the Church, “that this scandalously particular One intimates authentic humanity and God’ relationship to us, that ‘God’ and ‘world’ are interwoven.”¹⁴⁵ In his article, *The Emptying Christ*, David Hadley Jensen tries to explain this Christ *kenosis* by assuming the Pauline *continuity* approach between the divine and human dimension of Jesus Christ.

According to him, on the one hand, “to claim Christ as incarnate is to claim that the man Jesus embodies in the flesh the closest possible identification with the human Other, without the surrender of his own self-identity.”¹⁴⁶ In fact, the Gospels testify how Jesus not only crosses boundaries and builds bridges in relationship with the other, but he went further by emptying himself on behalf of the other. He heals someone who is possessed by a demon without looking at his origin (Mr 5,1-20). In his conversation with the Samaritan woman, Jesus remains within his Jewish tradition but refuses to be blinded by it (Jn 4,1-42). In addition, Jesus breaks bread with those tax collectors, prostitutes and sinners whom society rejects (Mt 9,9-13 and par). He does something basically as person-to-person. On the basis of his vision that God’s creative nearness penetrates the whole of life, he is able to approach others without treating them differently, being fearful, or humiliating others. “His life is thus marked by a relinquishing of self-privilege in relation to marginalized human Others.”¹⁴⁷

This relinquishing or divestment, however, “does not imply the surrender of the self or the abject debasement of one’s subjectivity, but the relinquishing of any claims

¹⁴⁵ David Hadley Jensen, “The Emptying Christ, A Christological Approach to Interfaith Dialogue,” in *Journal of Studies in Interreligious Dialogue* 11:1 (2001), 7.

¹⁴⁶ Jensen, “The Emptying Christ”, 9.

¹⁴⁷ Jensen, “The Emptying Christ,” 9.

to privilege and superiority by the individual self.”¹⁴⁸ Only by emptying one’s self and taking seriously the differences between human beings, will the door to mutual relationship with others be opened. Combining the reflections on the Christ-hymn with Levinas’ relational anthropology, Jensen reaches a conclusion:

Kenosis suggests a dynamic of efflux and return, a recognition of the concrete Other without the surrender of one’s self-identity. Jesus Christ is the Human One insofar as he ‘incarnates’ this dynamic in his life, even unto his death upon a cross. For Christians, Jesus Christ is the embodiment of authentic humanity, which emerges *in* and *with* distinct human others. Jesus Christ’s selfhood, in other words, becomes more fully delineated the more he identifies himself with others, the more he recognizes the claims of others upon him. Viewed through this relational lens, the ‘humanity’ of Christ emerges as a consequence of Christ’s identification with and responsibility for the Other. *Kenosis*, in other words, conveys the most intimate level of interhuman relations, the full humanity of Christ’s incarnation.¹⁴⁹

Besides the assertion of Christ’s full humanity, the Christian claim of Incarnation also always suggests the divine dimension of Jesus Christ and its relation to the world. Jensen explains this point within a broader perspective, viewing it as something that has resonance with all of creation. As we have already seen in the second chapter of this study, the Christian theology of creation understands creation as the fundamental context of revelation. God is God, and not the world. The world is the world, and not God. But the world is because God empties himself and allows the world, the other that is not God, to be. Moreover, the world remains only because of God’s self-emptying and love. Jensen writes,

One way of expressing the originative and sustaining dynamic of creation is with the language of *kenosis*, of God’s close identification with the Other (the world) without the obliteration of that beloved Other. To be *for* another ... is to give *of* oneself. The most intimate identification would be the *emptying* or

¹⁴⁸ Jensen, “The Emptying Christ,” 9.

¹⁴⁹ Jensen, “The Emptying Christ,” 10.

aspiration of Godself in the world, a creative *kenosis* that does not deplete God, but fulfills the relationship between creation and creator.¹⁵⁰

For Christians, the relationship between God and the world and humanity as part of it is embodied most distinctively in the person Jesus Christ.

The One who represents the fulfillment of human relationship-Jesus Christ-offers a fleeting glimpse of God's relationship to us. God's gift on behalf of the Other (creation) is rendered concrete in Christ's openness to the human other. Christ's *kenosis* thus represents not only the enflowerment of authentic humanity, but also a hint of God's identification and concern with what is other than God. It is precisely *because* Christ embodies the human condition and the possibilities for authentic relationship so completely, that he might be said to intimate God-with-us.¹⁵¹

It should be noted that in terms of Paul no explicit formulation of the pre-existent Christ appears.¹⁵² The Philippian hymn simply ties together the Christ-event and the inauguration of God's Kingdom. Christ Jesus is the one sent by God, and this connection intimates a divine *kenosis*.

In the New Testament, the expression of the divinity of Christ that connotes Christ's pre-existence appears just after Paul chronologically. The Epistle to the Hebrews (1,1-4) straightforwardly proclaims that God speaks directly to us through the eternal Son who is active in creation. "If the activity of God that calls the world into being is the same as that which communicates to us in the life and ministry of Christ, then both creation and redemption are mysteries of divine revelation or divine self-communication. It is one and the same Son who is mediator of both. Hence both are

¹⁵⁰ Jensen, "The Emptying Christ," 12.

¹⁵¹ Jensen, "The Emptying Christ," 13.

¹⁵² For a discussion of the idea of pre-existence in the Pauline Christology see Robin Scroggs, *Christology in Paul and John, The Reality and Revelation of God*, Philadelphia 1988; James D. G. Dunn, *Christology in the Making, An Inquiry into the Origins of the Doctrine of the Incarnation*, London 1980, 1989², see also R. G. Hamerton-Kelly, *Pre-existence, Wisdom, and the Son of Man, A Study of the Idea of Pre-existence in the New Testament*, Cambridge 1973.

intimately related as mystery of salvation.”¹⁵³ Jesus Christ is the Saviour sent from God whose existence antedates his appearance on earth. John describes the earthly appearance in terms of a descending-ascending. Christ is the Word sent down to earth by God to reveal the hidden designs of God and to be witness to all that he has seen and heard from the Father himself (cf. Jn 1,1-18). After finishing his task, the Son of Man is lifted up, at one and the same time on the cross and back into the glory of the Father (cf. Jn 3,13-21). It is only through the lifting up on the cross that the Son of God is lifted up to heaven and will draw all people to himself (cf. Jn 12,32).

The cross is the pivot upon which Christ embodies both authentic humanity and a glimpse of God’s intimation to humanity. “The crucifixion is both the *consequence* of Christ’s self-emptying and the most prominent example of that *kenosis*.”¹⁵⁴ For Christians, the cross is the culmination of God’s self-emptying. Here God’s very nature is revealed most aptly: unconditional and compassionate love. “So it is proof of God’s own love for us, that Christ died for us while we were still sinners” (Rm 5,8). It is the unfathomable and empathetic love of God, who did not spare God’s only Son but gave him up for the sake of all of us so that we may have life and have it in abundance (cf. Rm 8,32; Jn 10,10). The kenotic Christ is the “the disclosure of the self-humbling of God and with it the promise of ultimate reconciliation and unity that arises out of the unbrokenness of the love that gives itself away completely and by doing so manifests itself as the ground of all life and relationship.”¹⁵⁵ Christian faith believes that the present realization and the futurity of the mystery of the Kingdom is grounded in God’s humble self-emptying in this crucified man.

¹⁵³ Zachary Hayes, *The Gift of Being, A Theology of Creation*, Minnesota 2001, 37.

¹⁵⁴ Jensen, “The Emptying Christ,” 14.

From this, it is obvious that the faith of the Church in the cross does not lead to passivity in the face of the world colored by sin, suffering and death. On the contrary, the crucified Christ should be the example for Christian life. The Gospels demand that we daily take the cross upon ourselves, for this constitutes the imitation of Christ who was crucified out of weakness but lived by the power of God (cf. Lk 9,23; 2 Co 13,4). "If one is to follow Christ, one must submit oneself to a circle wider than the self, relativize one's own privilege for the sake of others, live in community on behalf of others, and ... at least be willing to suffer precisely because one has emptied oneself of privilege."¹⁵⁶ The God who identifies himself with the Crucified is the most essential motivation for the Church to give distinctive but concrete answers to many of the fundamental questions that trouble human existence (cf. *NA* 1). "The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ" (*GS* 1). At the same time, for Christians, the kenotic Christ is the power to endure with patience everything negative and to overcome it actively in a spirit of comprehensive human solidarity together with the whole of humanity.

Humanity's search for deeper self-understanding, and also its approach to the world through a commitment to justice, freedom, and peace, can find no greater degree of justification and encouragement than is provided by the God of the crucified. To be sure, even religion, Christianity, the Church, and theology are not immune to ideologization and self-idolatry; perversion of them is, in fact, the worst kind possible (*corruptio optimi pessima*; the example of religious wars). But no divine being in the various world religions is as inherently resistant as the God of crucified love to being misused for pseudo-legitimation of the church as an end in itself or of some position of power. He is not a God for ceremonial occasions who floats triumphally above the world in radiance and glory. He is the God of everyday life and its small, or sometimes large, sufferings and joys. Therefore one can concur with the following words of the

¹⁵⁵ Haight, *Mystery and Promise*, 125.

¹⁵⁶ Jensen, "The Emptying Christ," 15.

theologian D. Sölle: "The most accurate interpretation of human existence ... is the Cross of Christ. Although Christianity's claim to absoluteness is also implicit in this proposition, it is no longer something asserted and demanded in an authoritarian way."¹⁵⁷

In the special context of our study, furthermore, it also becomes clear that faith in the crucified Christ does not too lead to suspicious pessimism in the face of the world that is colored by the phenomenon of religious pluralism which has pervaded the history of humanity from the beginning to the present day. On the contrary, the Christian belief in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ challenges us to remain open to the mystery that the created world is and can yet become, including the mystery of religious plurality. In fact, in the context of our understanding of the revelation of mystery as the humility and self-abandonment of God, as John Haught observes, religious pluralism is not "a problem to be solved in spite of our Christocentrism" but "a direct expression and consequence thereof."¹⁵⁸ He writes:

Given the extravagance of God as manifested in the evolving universe at large, it would indeed be surprising if there were not also a splendid variety in the religious unfolding of the cosmos as well. Nothing would be more out of character with mystery, with nature and its evolution, or with history and selfhood, than a drab homogeneity in any phase of cosmic emergence. And religions, we have to remember, are part of this cosmic emergence. In God's letting-be of the world by humble self-limitation, there is established the probability that there will be a plurality of (relative) paths toward the one Absolute. Each one of these paths is unique, and it would be unfruitful to measure them as though only one of them is in full possession of the truth and is thereby clearly superior to the others.¹⁵⁹

If it is true that religious pluralism is an implication of the mystery of the humility of God, based on the image of God' self-emptying in Christ, we should interpret and deal with religious plurality. If our Lord Jesus Christ, who despite being

¹⁵⁷ Walter Kern, "Paschal Mystery I: Suffering and Death", in René Latourelle and Rino Fisichella, ed., *Dictionary of Fundamental Theology*, New York 1994, 2000², 768.

¹⁵⁸ Haught, *Mystery and Promise*, 81.

rich, became poor for our sake that we might become rich through his poverty (cf. 2 Co 8,9), there is no other requirement of our authentic Christian faith other than to become poor so that we, too, might be more able to enrich and be enriched by others. Saint Paul urges the Christians at Philippi to “make your own the mind of Christ Jesus.” There is an inextricably bond between *confessing* Christ as the One sent from God and *following* Christ who proves himself a neighbour to the other. In a pluralistic world, following the kenotic Christ means to both radically answer to the other’s need and, at the same time, to be open to all facets of his existence including the religious dimension which constitutes the ground of one’s orientation in the world.

The crucified Christ is the sacrament of a God who renounces omnipotence in order to ‘let us be.’ This Christian image of God’s humility and ‘letting be’ can also be our guide when we encounter other religions. We too can adopt an attitude of letting them be. Indeed this is the model for all human conversation. Adopting a tolerant and humble approach in inter-religious conversation is our own way of sacramentally representing the God revealed in Christ. Faith in revelation is at heart a commitment to imitating the self-absenting God who lets the world be, in order that it may flourish in rich and luxuriant spontaneity and variety. That the world of religion also manifests this florescent diversity should not surprise us. Instead, it can be another of many reasons we have for rejoicing in the extravagance of the mystery revealed in biblical religion as the one who makes and keeps promises.¹⁶⁰

4. Conclusion

In this chapter we have continually spoken of the Christ-event as the fulfillment of God’s revelation (cf. *DV* 2). Because God has manifested himself completely in his Son, for Christians, there can be no subsequent revelation (cf. *DV* 4). Indeed, the Church claims that it is through God’s self-revelation in Jesus Christ that other

¹⁵⁹ Haught, *Mystery and Promise*, 81.

¹⁶⁰ Haught, *Mystery and Promise*, 81-82.

religious truth “can be known with ease, with solid certitude and with no trace of error” (DV 6).

In the wider context of religious plurality, where all deal with the fundamental questions (What is the true Supreme Value? What is human destiny? What is the proper way to it?) Christians can surely make their contribution by witnessing that God is saving unconditional love, that the human goal is filial union with God, and that the way to the goal is one of participating in the Divine love itself. From the Christian point of view, these truths that are distinctly and definitively revealed to us in and through Jesus Christ are final. In other words, Christians can intelligibly claim that Jesus Christ is the final revelation - not in the sense that there is nothing left to understand of God, humanity and the relation of both - but in the sense that it is in the Incarnate Word that Christians understand the truth of God as saving compassionate love. It is in the kenotic Christ that Christians understand their essential status as children of God. It is in the risen Christ that Christians understand the way of sacrificing love to inherit eternal life.

Contrasting it with Islamic revelation, which calls for a return to the simplicity of belief in one transcendent Creator by submitting oneself to the will of Allāh contained in the Qur’ān and the law of Shari’a to obtain life in Paradise (*jannah*) at the Day of Resurrection, we are more aware of the unfathomable mystery that comes to us. God communicates himself to us not only by speaking his promising words, nor only by sending his guidance down, but first and foremost by coming himself among us. If there is anything amazing but scandalous for faith in Christian revelation, it is the mystery of the Incarnation: the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We can truly believe in God the Creator who creates the world by “letting be,” takes care of it by his

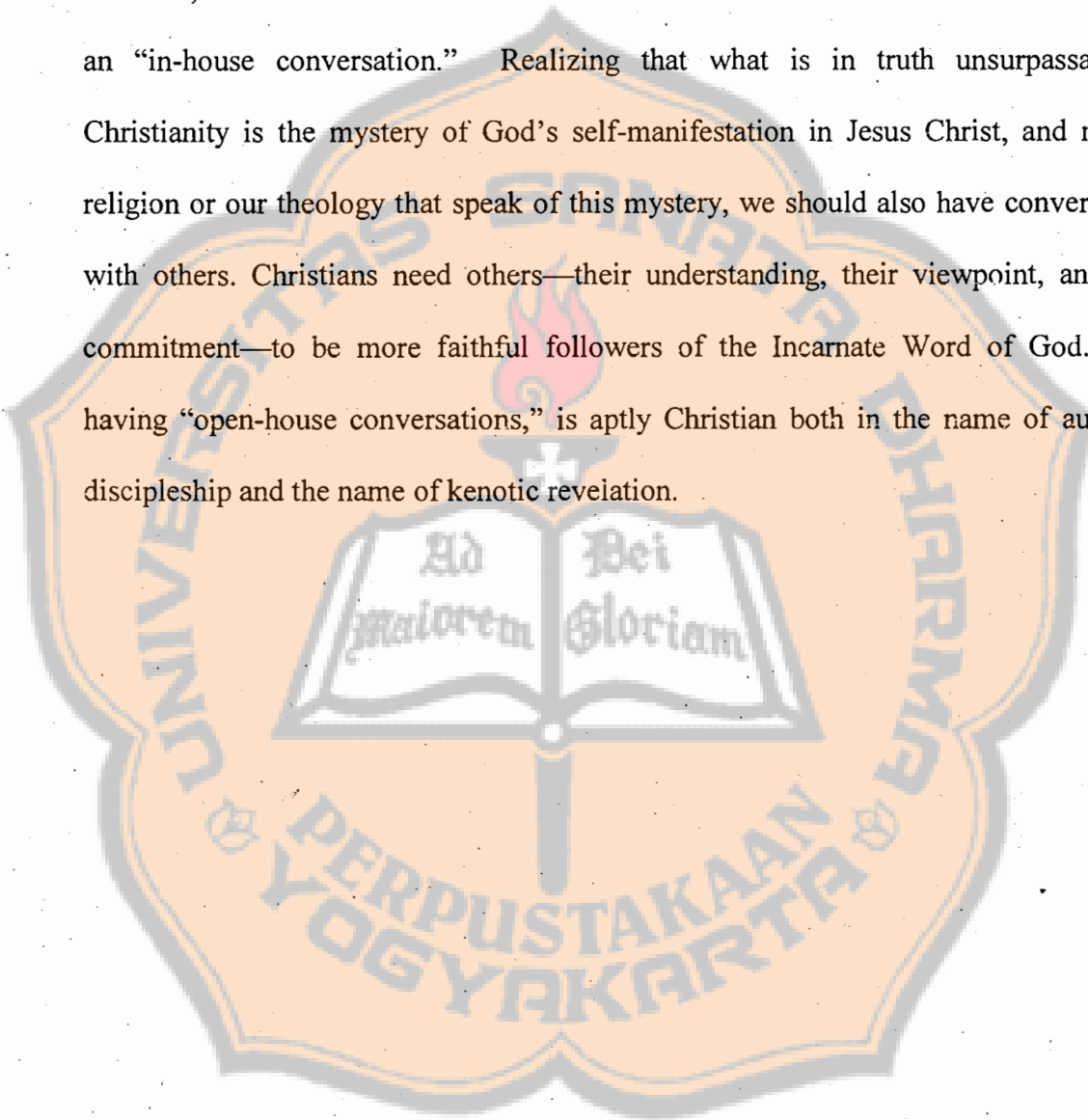
mysterious divine saving activity, and loves his creatures unconditionally, because God makes his reality itself present in the person of Jesus who empties himself on behalf of the others and opens up the possibilities for the future. We can really realize our personal relationship with God the Father, for Jesus Christ who is close to the Father's heart witnesses it to us by his life totally oriented to God, *Abba*. We can confidently hope to participate in the trinitarian loving communion, since the Holy Spirit who guided Jesus to total love of the Father on the cross and raised him up from death sets us free in Christ so that we can cry out *Abba*, Father. "And if we are children then we are heirs, heirs of God and joint-heirs with Christ, provided that we share his suffering, so as to share his glory" (Rm 8,17).

How rich and deep the wisdom and the knowledge of God! We cannot reach to the root of his decisions or his ways. *Who has ever known the mind of the Lord? Who has ever been his advisor? Who has given anything to him, so that his presents come only as a debt returned?* Everything there is comes from him and is caused by him and exists from him. To him be glory for ever! Amen (Rm 11,33-36).

Nonetheless it must be equally stressed that precisely because of the richness and the deepness, Christ's mystery interiorized and universalized by the Holy Spirit can never be grasped once and for all in its totality. Our words and images are not descriptive of the great reality that awaits us. It is always grasped in an incomplete way. In addition, as a consequence of its historicity, "revelation never comes to us in a pure, unadulterated way but is always embodied in some historical form. The truth that Jesus Christ is, is expressed in the conceptual patterns of a given culture with all their richness and with all their limitations."¹⁶¹

¹⁶¹ O'Donnell, "History IV: Historicity of Revelation," 445.

As a consequence, the Church should have a conversation with tradition. By entering into conversation with the past, Christians get in touch with the unsurpassable source of their faith and renders that source actual for intelligible belief and tangible for the deep longing of persons today. In the context of a religiously pluralistic world, however, this faithfulness to the Christian tradition does not mean that we can only do an “in-house conversation.” Realizing that what is in truth unsurpassable in Christianity is the mystery of God’s self-manifestation in Jesus Christ, and not our religion or our theology that speak of this mystery, we should also have conversations with others. Christians need others—their understanding, their viewpoint, and their commitment—to be more faithful followers of the Incarnate Word of God. Thus, having “open-house conversations,” is aptly Christian both in the name of authentic discipleship and the name of kenotic revelation.



GENERAL CONCLUSION:

PUTTING COMPARATIVE THEOLOGY INTO PERSPECTIVE

Based on the conviction that we will come to embrace our own cherished beliefs at a deeper level by exploring the truths of Christianity in dialogue with the teachings and traditions of other religious believers, this dissertation aims to explore our understanding of Christian revelation by re-thinking it in the light of the Islamic teaching of revelation. We, thus, not only deepen our Christian faith but also gain a profound appreciation of the faith of our Muslim neighbors. Moreover, as an experimental work of comparative theology, this dissertation also intends to contribute to comparative theology. So, at the end of our study in comparative theology on the doctrine of revelation in Christianity and in Islam, we intend, first, to give an overview of the work and, second, to reflect on comparative theology as an alternative means of seeking an open theology in the context of religious plurality. In this general conclusion we shall examine the constructive nature of comparative theology and some essential aspects that should be maintained when doing theology comparatively.

1. An Overview

Before going into the comparative Christian reflections that constitute the center of our dissertation, we have independently attempted to present some of the most essential aspects of both the Christian and Islamic understandings of God's revelation. In

accordance with the nature of this study, as stated in the general introduction, we have, first, examined the Christian doctrine on revelation. Our treatment of the personal and historical perspective on revelation as treated in Vatican II's *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation* has shown how the mystery of God's self-revelation in Christianity has its origin in the living and loving God, is manifested in human history especially in Israel's history of salvation, and has its culmination in the Incarnation of God's Word, Jesus Christ.

Based on this solid doctrine on revelation of the Second Vatican Council, which expanded Vatican I's view of revelation in primarily propositional terms, we have attempted to describe a comprehensive Christian understanding of God's revelation. While it is true that through revelation God communicated a body of truths, revelation is first and foremost God's *self*-manifestation to humanity. Revelation is a personal way of God revealing himself through the history of salvation. Using the analogy of The Word, the most frequent and the most significant expression of divine communication in the Sacred Scriptures, Christians understand revelation as God's words, dialogue and friendly conversation with human beings. It is the extraordinary encounter of the living God with his creatures through the mediation of Moses and the prophets, and then through the person of Jesus Christ.

In fact, for us, Jesus Christ is the Word of God. He is the Word that was spoken within God and has now been made flesh in order to invite human beings to the mystery of communion with him. The man Jesus—his life, his teachings about God's coming Kingdom, his healing compassion, his words of encouragement, his fidelity, his death and resurrection to new life—manifests God's promising mystery that encompasses the world. It is in the person of Christ that Christians experience and think

of the promising mystery, the God who is experienced as most intimately personal and so addressed by Jesus as *Abba*. Understood in the wider context of *the great design of revelation in the history of salvation*, the God that Christians associate with Jesus is the same one who spoke in promise to Abraham, Moses, and the prophets. Indeed, by identifying the God manifested in the Christ-event with the God revealed as the one who makes and keeps promises in the Old Testament, Christians can speak about the fulfillment and fullness of God's self-manifestation. In and through Christ, the economy of an infinitely wise salvific plan, which God unveils and brings to realization in ways for which he has provided, is fulfilled and, at the same time, the foundational revelation reaches its highest peak and acquires its definitive nature.

A reading of the first two chapters of our study makes it obvious that we have taken much time and space to provide the solid but extensive theological-doctrinal understanding of Christian revelation. With such a treatment we have entered into the recognition of the Islamic doctrine on revelation without the surrender of our self-identity and, moreover, we have had a secure basis for our comparative Christian reflections. Otherwise, our reflections would have run the risk of hesitancy of faith or even relativism.

In the third chapter we have then examined the Islamic doctrine on revelation. Here our concern has been to understand revelation as Muslims believe and live it. At the core of Muslim faith the Qur'ān received by the Prophet Muhammad is believed as revelation. Based on this Qur'ān sent down, according to Islamic doctrine, revelation has already begun in the beginning. God taught Adam all the names so that he knew the unseen things of the heavens and the earth. One of the fundamental doctrines of the Qur'ān is that of the historical continuity of revelation in the sense that God sent a

series of messengers to every nation with an identical message: that of submission to the will of the one transcendent God. This continuity of revelation – but not development -- according to Muslim belief, culminated in the revelation of the Qur'ān and Muhammad's prophethood. For the Qur'ān itself, and consequently for the Muslims, the Qur'ān is the Word of God. It is the most perfect and final form of divine speech addressed to humankind. Today, as in the past, the Qur'ān is the foundation of Muslim life. It is a symbol of the Divine presence in the midst of communities. For Muslims, the Qur'ān provides the way to pleasure in the present world and in the hereafter to all who care to read or recite it.

Right from the beginning this work has been a study in comparative theology. As yet, however, the first three chapters of our dissertation have not appeared to have a comparative nature. The main focus of our expositions has been to describe belief and understanding of revelation in the respective community. By taking into consideration each doctrine in its own context, we have tried to bring out the main theological lines and the core doctrinal-spiritual principles of the Christian and Islamic faith regarding God's revelation to humanity. This is done with the aim of excluding the sort of intolerant subjectivity that would have vitiated our study.

After having responsibly examined our Christian understanding of God's self-manifestation in its core Christological centrality and then having respectfully exposed ourselves to the Muslim teachings that are sometimes strange, unsettling, and even a bit disturbing, we have a firm and crucial foundation for what is dealt with in the *active* and *speculative* phases. Chapter Four of the dissertation constituted the central phase of our doing theology comparatively. In this last chapter we have identified the similarities and differences between the Christian and Islamic doctrines of revelation.

As an exercise in comparative theology based on convergences and divergences, we have not, however, let ourselves succumb to the temptation of distorting both the Christian and Islamic understandings of revelation in order to achieve an artificial harmony between the two faiths which is required by the assertion that all religions actually reflect the same transcendent reality. Nor have we attempted to show that Islam has nothing to do with Christian revelation or that Muslims are really talking about Christ and thus are anonymous Christians.¹

By resisting the temptation to reduce each faith to its least common denominator, in this comparative phase we have seriously tried to recognize and respect the differences that distinguish one faith from another. As a Christian reflection, however, we have gone further in order to explore the truths of Christian revelation in dialogue with the Muslim version of Qur'anic revelation. In these comparative Christian reflections, in fact, we have come to embrace our cherished beliefs in new ways. As a result of seriously considering the convergences and divergences between Christian and Islamic doctrines of revelation, we have been able to see more profoundly that the most decisive thing for our faith in Christian revelation is the unsurpassably self-emptying character of the God who becomes manifest in Christ.

Jesus Christ is the Word of God made flesh. He is the Son of God present among us and the one in whom the unfathomable mystery of God's love for humanity is given its exhaustive expression. He is not only the Revealer of God's gratuitous and

¹ Here it appears that this study in comparative theology is not another candidate for a theology of religions. On the contrary, this study constitutes a critique of and, at the same time, an alternative to all the candidates for an adequate theology of religions: exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism. For a detailed critical analysis of the theology of religions see James L. Fredericks, *Faith among Faiths, Christian Theology and Non-Christian Religions*, New York 1999, and also Yohanes Berchmans Prasetyantha, *Comparative Theology: A Perspective Toward A Post-Conciliar Theology in the Context of Religious Plurality*, Roma 2002.

free love but also God's revealed Love itself. He is not only the Guidance to salvation but also the Salvation itself. He is not only the Opener of the promising mystery of the future but also the Future itself. Nonetheless, it must be stressed that all of that happens in and through God's embodiment of self-emptying humility and powerlessness.

In the emptying-Christ, the total sovereignty and gratuitousness of God's revelation is realized. "Human beings can only regard it as folly and madness that God should reveal the dimensions of his divine love to humankind (and invite them to share in it) through an economy containing the *cross*."² Yet, it is appropriate that in this mystery of the freedom, extravagance, and unexpectedness of God's compassionate love the mystery of the human person acquires its source of light and the future of humanity gets its horizon. It is not the human person who sets parameters for God's action. Rather it is God in his freedom and mercy who becomes the measure for human beings and invites them to the obedience of faith.

The mission of the Church, for that reason, is to keep open and proclaim to the world this limitlessness of the horizon of God's future manifested in the kenotic Christ. As a part of humanity, however, the Church, too, stands continually under the measure of the divine kenotic love. It means that the Church constantly needs correction, evaluation, and reformation from the wider vision contained in the revelation to which she witnesses. In other words,

It is part of the Church's mission, therefore, to be critical of all political, cultural, and psychological constraints, including the ones imbedded in its own figure, that prevent the breaking in of the promise of God's future made manifest especially in Jesus the Christ. It is required to carry a judgment against the "world," understood as the product of our excessively narrow and non-inclusive efforts to secure our existence. In order to do so effectively, however,

² René Latourelle, "Revelation", in René Latourelle and Rino Fisichella, ed., *Dictionary of Fundamental Theology*, New York 1994, 2000², 936.

it must begin with a critique of its own non-inclusiveness. [...] The Church can truly sacramentalize the mystery of promise, the person of Christ, and the reality of God only to the extent that it, too, exists as an embodiment of self-emptying humility and defenselessness.³

2. Comparative Theology: A Search For An Open Theology

This work from the beginning has been for us a real search – a search to gain a better understanding of Christian revelation and to live it in a way that is true to what is most basic and most unique about it in the religiously pluralistic world. In fact, the comparative Christian reflections in this work have led to the conclusion that the very heart of Christian revelation is the mystery of Christ's Salvific self-emptying love which has its source in the mystery of the trinitarian living and loving communion. Based on this conviction, then, we have suggested that it is the *kenotic incarnational* focus of Christian revelation that can serve to uphold Christian identity without jeopardizing the possibilities for authentic interreligious conversation.

The Christian core belief of the unsurpassability of the mystery of God's self-manifestation in Christ should challenge the Church to more profoundly immerse herself into its unfathomable richness and deepness. Christian awareness of the historicity of revelation as well as of the historicity of humanity should challenge Christians to have constant conversation with Christian traditions. Christian understanding of the kenotic revelation, which unveils for us not only the mystery of God but also the mystery of *others*, should challenge us to enter creatively into conversation with others in all facets of their existence. All this implies that while remaining open to the promising mystery of the future that always comes in a new way,

³ John F. Haught, *Mystery and Promise, A Theology of Revelation*, Minnesota 1993, 137.

theology, which is faith seeking understanding, should be an open conversation with legitimate diversity of theological approach over the course of the history of Christianity (in fact there is not an absolute theological system). On the other hand, theology, which constitutes an intrinsic part of faith itself, should be an open conversation with different religious traditions that in reality touch the lives of Christian believers and the Church as a whole and in fact pervade the history of humanity.

The nature of Christian revelation itself implies that theology should be an open theology. Yet, one may ask, does there properly exist an open theology that combines both “in house” and “open house” conversation at once? Until now, it has been difficult to answer this question positively. Perhaps it is unnecessary to answer it. Today, however, commitment to Christian revelation to which our obedience of faith is given, and honesty to our historical and actual situation require that we look for new ways to be open and to respond to the diversity of religions. An endeavor to reach an open theology is an urgent need that must be done without further delay.

Here it is worthwhile to propose comparative theology as an alternative for our search towards an open theology. As has been obvious from the outset, the present study in comparative theology began with our act of hope that we can embrace a better understanding of Christian revelation by comparing it with the Muslim understanding of Qur’anic revelation. As a search for an adequate Christian theology in the context of religious plurality, in the very process of our study we were trying to maintain a balance or “tension” between faithfulness to the Christian tradition and openness to the Muslim tradition. In fact, using our *a posteriori* knowledge and appreciation of Muslim beliefs of the Qur’ān as revelation, we had the insight to re-think and deepen our

understanding of God's self-manifestation especially in Jesus Christ. Moreover, *unexpectedly* but *happily* we found that it is God's self-emptying love in the crucified but risen Christ which constitutes, for Christians, the universal criterion in regard to salvation and revelation and, at the same time, the deepest aspiration in encountering others.

By doing this work we are more certain that comparative theology is an appropriately constructive Christian theology for use in dealing with the challenges posed by other religious believers "not as a threat, but as a blessing in the deepest sense of the word."⁴ Our conclusion is that the best way for Christians to be faithful to the unsurpassable origin of Christian faith and at the same time to respond creatively to the fact of religious diversity today lies in doing theology comparatively.

Comparative Theology is first of all a *practice* or *process*, not a theory.⁵ It is not a theoretical approach to religious plurality and, therefore, does not think of religious diversity as a theoretical problem to be solved. On the contrary, Comparative Theology begins with taking and accepting religious diversity seriously. Beyond tolerance, with a new awareness that religious plurality is a direct expression of the humility of God, we go further to respond innovatively to the enormous opportunity that religious plurality offers to Christianity to think about our own religious tradition in new ways.

Yet, as a process, before we can fully deepen the truths of Christianity and, at the same time, understand the role of our religion in the history of the world's many religions, we must first have a solid understanding of Christian tradition and the demands it places on us. Only then are we ready to learn about the truths of other

⁴ Fredericks, *Faith among Faiths*, 9.

⁵ Cf. Fredericks, *Faith among Faiths*, 9.

religious believers on their own terms. It appears that Comparative Theology combines the study of other religions and a commitment to discovering more about the meaning of Christian faith. These two aspects of Comparative Theology form one of the most specific characters of a process, namely, *tension*, in the deepest sense of the word.⁶ In doing theology comparatively, on the one hand, there will always be a faithfulness to the Christian tradition and a longing to assist Christians in deepening their own faith more fully in the context of religious plurality. On the other hand, there must be openness to or, even, a sense of the allure of the truths of other religious believers. Keeping this tension in process, Comparative Theology will be able to avoid both the problem of relativism and absolutism.

This tension suggests that Christians should remain rooted in their own religious tradition. But, it does not mean that we close ourselves off from others. On the contrary, “remaining rooted” means we continue to proclaim the unsurpassability of Christian revelation while at the same time fully opening ourselves to an ever deeper sense of mystery. Our religious and doctrinal language, including our Christological categories, is never adequately representative of mystery and is also always conditioned by historical relativity. Openness to the insights of the truths of other religions is an art of an indispensable disposition for opening our lives to the always-coming God.

Openness to other religious traditions means seriously respecting the truths of other religions, that is, seeing other religious traditions on their own terms, not as Christians want these religions to be in order to conform with Christian doctrine or theological presuppositions. Of course, an encounter in depth with other religious traditions can be terrifying, confusing, or even scandalizing. However, it is proper that

⁶ Cf. Fredericks, *Faith among Faiths*, 169.

this difference can stimulate us to look into our own religious tradition with new questions, new viewpoints, and new insights. Comparative Theology goes “beyond tolerance to a point where the differences between religions are seen as valuable opportunities for deepening our own religious commitments in conversation with other religious believers.”⁷

Of course, Christians can learn much about other religions by reading books. In doing theology comparatively, however, we intend to learn not only *about* but also *from* others. So, James Fredericks is correct when he suggests that to respond to religious diversity by doing theology comparatively, we should begin to cultivate friendships with our other religious neighbors.⁸ In interreligious friendships, all religions, including Christianity, exist not in books but in the actual lives of the respective believers.

In interreligious friendships, truths foreign to my own religious convictions become living realities and real possibilities for shaping my religious beliefs and giving new direction to my religious life. Such friendships provide a helpful context for confronting one’s fear of the stranger and thus offer a good way to begin to do theology comparatively. Truths from outside my tradition become theological resources that empower my own religious quest to discover the deeps of my own tradition. [...] In an interreligious friendship, differences in belief are never abstract. Real religious practitioners have made really different commitments with serious implications for life. To be able to differ honestly with another human being on matters of ultimate importance must be counted an achievement. Friendship makes that achievement all the more impressive. In order to do theology comparatively, Christians will do well to develop deep and abiding friendships with their non-Christian neighbors as a useful way to disagree with honesty and depth.⁹

In addition, based on the experience of doing the present study in comparative theology, we suggest that interreligious friendships will help us to resist the tendency to

⁷ Fredericks, *Faith among Faiths*, 172.

⁸ Cf. Fredericks, *Faith among Faiths*, 173.

⁹ Fredericks, *Faith among Faiths*, 176-177.

misunderstand other religious traditions in our terms. In doing theology comparatively, we are interested in studying other religions on their own terms. We can acceptably understand the realities of another religion - such as its followers understand them - if our friends correct our understanding of them or when they share them with us. After having the same understanding of other religions, we can continue our process of our *act of hope* that Christianity's encounter with other religions can lead to a profound transformation in ourselves as an always-new community of hope.

The goal of Comparative Theology is the same as the goal of the Church that is herself ever in need of conversion. As a faith seeking understanding, comparative theology is a way to plunge more deeply into the unsurpassable mystery of God's self-giving in Christ. As an intrinsic part of life in the Christian community, comparative theology functions to facilitate the encounter with the Christ of promise especially in the context of religious plurality. By cultivating interreligious friendships with our other religious neighbors and taking all the facets of their existence seriously, we execute our participation in the Divine Love itself – the Trinitarian, unconditional love manifested to us in the life and death on the cross of Jesus of Nazareth.

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