

BALZAN SYMPOSIUM 2008

TRUTH IN SCIENCE, THE HUMANITIES
AND RELIGION

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PROCEEDINGS

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Session V: Theology – Religion

17 May 2008 – 2:00 p.m.

Chair:
Sergio Romano

Speakers:
Georges Cardinal Cottier OP *Faith and Truth*
Mohammed Arkoun *Violence, the Sacred, and the Regimes of Truth*
Geza Vermes *The Truth about the Historical Jesus*

Panel:
Jan Assmann; Brian Hebblethwaite

Sergio Romano:

The theme of this afternoon's session is theology and religion. We have been lucky to be able to call around this table people who, because of their personal and academic interests, are somewhat representative of great monotheistic confessions. The Catholic Church, represented by a cardinal; the Islamic world, represented by an islamologist. Reformed Christianity is represented by a scholar who is a minister of the Anglican Church, and we also have an Egyptologist who will perhaps talk to us about the relationship between Egyptian religion and monotheistic religions. The first speaker is Cardinal Cottier, who is from Geneva. He entered the Dominican order in 1945, was ordained in 1951 and became a professor in Geneva. In 1989, he was elected secretary of the International Theological Committee, and in 1990 he became Pontifical Theologian. As Titular Archbishop of Tullia he was created cardinal by Pope John Paul II in 2003.

Faith and Truth

Georges Cardinal Cottier OP:

I

Introduction

Christian conscience has an essential relationship with truth. Christian conscience is located in the extension of Israel's alliance, which is an alliance with the only God, namely the only true God, who has made Himself known to His people. Compared to Him, the gods of the other nations are but vain things, idols made by human hands: they are false gods. An intrinsic bond, or rather an identity, can be seen to exist between God and truth. God is truth.

It is God who, of His own free initiative, has made Himself known to us, who enlightens us about His mystery. The acceptance in us and by us of this light is faith.

This, in a few words, is the theme that I would like to develop.

The *Prologue* of the Gospel according to John

The *Prologue* of the Gospel according to John ends with the following: "No one has ever seen God; it is the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made Him known." (John 1:18).

No one has ever seen God. Sight is direct knowledge, immediate, face to face. Such a sight is not within the power of any human being, who is infinitely distant from God. What is hereby stated is the Transcendence of God. God is, for a limited spirit, inaccessible, incomprehensible, unnameable, not because He is without a Name, but because this name surpasses all other names. One cannot therefore get hold of this name, which calls for the religious silence of adoration. The affirmation of divine transcendence lies at the foundation of the whole process. Starting from this affirmation one may put the question, which shall be examined later on: can our reason know something about God?

Nevertheless, we do have access to the Inaccessible; we can, without in any way diminishing the first affirmation, pronounce the ineffable Name. This is what we do when we speak of the "only Son, who is close to the Father's heart".

In the *Prologue*, it is essentially a question of this "only Son"; He it is who leads the way, who is Himself the way (cf. John 14:6). He is presented from a dual point of view: that of divine eternity and that of the history of salvation.

Let us start from this second aspect: "for the Law was given through Moses, grace and truth have come through Jesus Christ" (John 1:17). This phrase marks a breakthrough. Moses, before receiving the law from God, had received the revelation of His name: "I am he who is." [others translate: "I am that I am"] (...) "This is what you

are to say to the Israelites, “I am” has sent me to you.” (Ex 3:14). Notice that, in the Gospel according to John, Jesus takes on himself this name: “I am”, “Ego eimi”.

Grace and truth mean achievement and fullness which are given through the Incarnation. Earlier on we had read: “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”. (John 1:14).

The Word – such is the name that the Gospel according to John gives to the only Son – is at the heart of history; the past is headed towards its coming; the present and the future live in the expectation of its final glorification, which shall also mark the end of history.

The Word

The Word, then, is the name of the only Son. Let us now consider the first aspect. In fact, from the start the *Prologue* has been telling us what is the identity of the Son.

In the beginning was the Word: the Word was with God and the Word was God (John 1:1).

The “beginning” (*archè*) establishes a parallel with the opening of *Genesis*. It refers to the origin, the eternal birth of the Son, before all time and before history.

The Latin *Verbum* is a translation of the Greek *logos* which itself corresponds to the Hebrew term meaning “word”. Both the First and the New Testament use the term “word” to tell us that God speaks to humankind. This divine word is effective and works in different ways. It is a creative word, so that the creature sings the glory of its Creator. Its interventions, due to the sovereign initiatives of the love He has for its People, mark the great moments of a history guided by its Providence. It speaks to us also through the prophets and ultimately through its Son (cf. Heb 1:1–2).

Let us note here that the meeting between the Word, such as it is understood in the Judaeo-Christian tradition, and Greek thought, in which the *logos* plays a central role, is at the heart of Western culture and, as we shall see, of any culture encountering Christianity. For its part, in fact, Greek thought will give the *logos* wide semantic developments. Referring at first to a pronounced word, an utterance, *logos* will then take on the meaning of inner word and later of reason, thought. The fecundity of the theme of *logos* in Greek philosophy is well-known. However, before dealing with this point, let us return to the *Prologue*.

Revelation

“The only Son (...) who has made Him known.” (John 1:18). We have at first focused on the statement: “The only Son” who is the “Word”. By naming him thus, it is true, the Gospel gives a foretaste of the nature of his action: He “who has made Him known”. This may equally well be translated as: “has told, has unveiled”. In other words: He has revealed Him, He has made Him manifest. The Son brings the revelation to its fullness.

“No one has ever seen God”: not because a possible meeting did not take place, but because no-one, that is to say, no created intelligence can see Him, is capable of seeing Him. Paul will make this explicit: he announces that “What no eye has seen and no ear has heard, what the mind of man cannot visualise”... this is what God has revealed. It must be borne in mind that Paul is here speaking of the “wisdom of God” which he contrasts with the “wisdom of the world” (cf. I Cor 1:17–2:16). Greek philosophy, for its part, is a quest for wisdom. The contrast highlighted here is one between two approaches to wisdom.

Revelation is not the result of human effort, it is not self-made revelation. It is a light received, a gift accepted; it takes its origin in a free initiative of God. Revelation makes manifest of God that which is inaccessible, it makes it known. That which is revealed and which, according to Christian faith, will be fully revealed after death, has therefore a special status in our mind. Our mind, which receives it and gives its adherence to it is not, however, on an equal footing with it. That which is revealed and to which the believer has access does not lose its transcendence – which would otherwise be the greatest distortion and the greatest imposture, but remains enveloped in mystery – a mystery which enlightens and pacifies, a matrix for reason. This is the locus, both of Christian mysticism and of Christian theology.

The mystery denotes the status which the object of revelation has in the mind of the believer. Nevertheless, such a status is temporary and will yield its place to the final one. The shroud enveloping the mystery will be torn apart and we shall be face to face with God. The First Epistle of John says: “My dear friends, we are already God’s children, but what we shall be in the future has not yet been revealed. We are well aware that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he really is.” (1 John 3:2).

Testimony

The only Son tells us of the mystery of the Father. He may do so because, being Himself close to the Father’s heart, He sees that which we cannot see by ourselves. Our access to mystery rests on the mediation of the incarnate Word.

Jesus Christ, who is Himself the object of the revelation, is the one who reveals. He is called by a term that makes this meaning explicit: “the faithful witness” (Rev 1:5).

In the transmission of revelation bearing witness plays a fundamental role.

Our intellect aspires to seeing its object unmediated; it aspires to evidence. There, it finds its perfection. In most cases the unmediated nature of evidence is not possible. Mediation is necessary. Reasoning reaches an apodictic conclusion when it shows the necessary tie linking this conclusion to principles immediately apparent in their evidence. Not every demonstration has this perfection, it is nevertheless possible to establish its degree of probability and the quality of a plausible hypothesis.

As a way of access to truth, testimony has a special nature. In fact, here someone else has seen on my behalf that which was not possible for me to see, someone else

knows and intends to share with me that which he knows, not by demonstrating it for me, but by personally making himself guarantor of that which he is announcing. He takes a personal stand, since he asks me to put my trust in him, to rely on his truthfulness, to believe in what he says.

A reasoning is false whenever an error creeps in; a testimony is false whenever the witness deceives me.

Before accepting such testimony it is thus appropriate to ask ourselves some honest questions. Is a witness credible, in his person, in his actions, in his behaviour? In other words, a witness must present his credentials. For my part, I have to ask: must I or can I believe the testimony that has been proffered? Credulousness is the precipitous fall for the acceptance of something which offends reason.

Having examined what is known of the witness and of his actions, an enquiry comes down to the following question: are the pieces of information and the intelligence collected sufficient in the eyes of reason? Is it reasonable to believe?

Credibility

The foregoing holds for any testimony, generally. But in the case of a revelation axed on divine realities, a new and essential consideration is essential.

Since it is a question of a purely human testimony, I can, by way of thought, put myself in the place of the witness: that which he has seen I could myself have seen, or another person could.

In the case of the revelation of mystery, which is by itself inaccessible to me, the only Son alone can reveal it to me, since He is close to the Father's heart. This means that He Himself, in that which constitutes his identity, is shrouded in mystery. Once again, this means not only that it would be reasonable, as in the case of testimony on purely human things, to put trust in Him, since He has a certain weight and plausibility and because He could by rights be verified by other means. Here testimony bears on "hidden things", supernatural things, so that the question becomes: is it reasonable to believe in supra-reasonable mysteries?

The issue of credibility has an existential value, since it concerns the meaning of destiny as far as its dimension of eternity. It is an issue that encompasses one totally. After inspecting its credentials, the mind can but better gauge the transcendence of mystery. Saint Paul speaks of foolishness (cf. 1 Cor 1:17 f.) – the foolishness of the initiatives of divine love. Pascal has admirably underlined this paradox: in the eyes of the nature of divine grace which impels us to believe, our religion is foolishness; in the eyes of the signs by means of which it shows its divine origin, it is wisdom.¹ Proof is human, faith is a gift of God.

It would be appropriate here to consider the distinction, introduced by a number of exegetes, between the Jesus of history and the Jesus of faith, a distinction which

¹Cf. Pascal, *Pensées et opuscules*, 587.

some have pushed as far as rupture and opposition. The meaning and the limit of such a distinction are discussed in the beautiful book by Joseph Ratzinger Pope Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth*.²

Let us content ourselves with noticing that this is an epistemological problem. The type of question that is asked of history or of the text is crucial in terms of the answer given. This has nothing to do with subjectivism, rather with an awareness that the question depends on a point of view and is not therefore exhaustive, and it is also a question of considering what Rudolf Bultmann has called pre-understanding.

Theological Thought

Credibility means the credentials presented by the message revealed in order to be judged acceptable by reason. Faith, which is a gift of God, opens up the understanding of the mystery. This is why the New Testament, when speaking of testimony, mentions the decisive role played by the testimony of the Holy Spirit, the foundation of certainty and enlightening. Faith makes knowledge possible, it has entered the mystery. This is what Jesus says to Philip: “Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father, so how can you say, “Show us the Father”? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me?” (John 14:9–10).

The link between seeing and believing is arresting. Faith, for all its obscurity, is knowledge. Far from demanding that reason be left by the wayside, faith is for knowledge a source of a new-found vitality, as expressed in Anselm’s well-known formula: *fides quaerens intellectum*. The mystery does not radically waylay reason. It is super-understanding, an excess of light with regard to its natural capacities.

Reason, reflecting upon itself, knows that it is not itself its own foundation but that it participates of a higher reason, which is reason in its fullest meaning – divine reason. It discovers at the same time its own limits and also an urge, a longing, which impels it to rejoin its origin. By virtue of this original kinship, and of the aspiration which is congenital to it, once it receives the revelation of the divine *logos* it finds itself stimulated; it is a new awakening. Hence Anselm’s second formula, complementing the first one: *intellectus quaerens fidem*.

Theology thus corresponds to a natural requirement of the believing intellect. It strives to penetrate, by means of the conceptual tools at its disposal, the intelligibility of the mystery, to discover its hidden harmonies, to illuminate with its superior light, and to unify its knowledge of the world, of humankind and its history.

Thus reason operates a two-way intervention relative to faith. Its intervention is required at the preparation stage: it is the gauging of credibility; the life of reason is directly stimulated by faith itself, attracted by the light of mystery: such is the *intellectus fidei*, i.e. theological thought.

²Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth*.

Truth

The believer gives his consent to God who leads into His mystery by means of revelation, he gives his consent to Him who is the first truth.

Faith is not a subjective feeling; it is acceptance of the first and founding truth.

Truth is understood first and foremost as the correspondence between reality and the idea that I have of it, since knowing is the becoming of the thing intentionally.

Knowledge is reached when, reality being perceived by understanding, I know at the same time the truth of that which I am affirming of it, namely the adherence of my judgement with the reality as it is known. Such is the meaning of the definition of truth, as adherence of the thing and of understanding: *adaequatio rei et intellectus*.

There exists therefore a constitutive kinship between understanding and reality. If the destiny of understanding and the aim of its activity is to know reality, this presupposes that reality responds to its expectation. Being is knowable.

Correspondence means conformity and that to which one conforms is essentially a rule. Knowledge is true when it corresponds to reality, in which it finds its measure. Our understanding is true when it is measured by things apprehended in different degrees of amplitude and depth. Capturing just one aspect is true only in so far as this measuring conformity takes place.

If things are capable of exercising this measuring function to such an extent that the understanding that knows becomes intentionally the thing known, this is because, as we have seen, being is knowable.

The Light of Being

Here, we are here touching on the second meaning of truth, which is in any case presupposed by the first. Truth designates now the being itself in so far as it confronts understanding as the measure to which it conforms.

This is why things, since they do not have their being from themselves, receive intelligibility, which is at one with their being, from the source of all intelligibility.

They receive from the divine intellect which conceives and creates them, their intelligible configuration. As their being is shared, so is their intelligibility. Therefore, if things measure our understanding, this is because they themselves, in so far as they are, are measured by the One who, being the first intellect, is the origin of all intelligibility.

In God there is identity of being and intellect. He Himself is truth and the origin of all truth. By receiving from Him their being, the other beings participate, each in its own degree, of His truth, they are themselves intelligible, capable of being known by created intellects. Our intellect reaches the perfection of its act once it realises its correspondence with those known beings that are its measure. But these beings are a measure only by virtue of being themselves measured by the creative intellect.

Faith

Through revelation God communicates directly to reasonable creatures the truth that He Himself is. In order to speak Himself, through the prophets and through the Son, he uses our human language, but he does not go through the mediation of created things that allow us to know Him as their First Cause.

Faith is acceptance of the word of God, consent given to direct testimony of the first and original Truth introducing us into his mystery.

In so far as he is the Son of God, Jesus Christ, who by virtue of his humanness is the way, can say of Himself: “I am (...) Truth and Life”. (John 14:6). And further on we read: “And eternal life is this: to know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent” (John 17:3).

II

“The greatest of the Christian truths”, wrote Pascal, “is the love for truth”. This is an inspiring and awesome statement.

It is awesome when one thinks of the political use to which it may be put and to which it has in fact been put, as well as of the forms of intolerance and fanaticism for which it has been used as a pretext. The fact that such aberrations have often been used as an argument for a relativist position begs the question of its anthropological meaning. Can man be understood without a constitutive relation with the Absolute? The highest aspirations as well as the craziest adventures have their explanation in such a relation. Conversely, what is the properly human meaning of an existence enclosed in what is relative? Whenever we call on human dignity we are affirming the transcendence of the person in relation to the surrounding universe. This transcendence in its turn has its roots in the transcendent Absolute.

Revelation and Philosophical Thought

The encounter of Christianity and Greco-Roman culture was a major event having exemplary consequences. As a question of determining the ultimate end of existence, the opposition between Christian wisdom and pagan wisdom affirmed by Saint Paul is not called into doubt. However, at the same time, any compromise with idolatry being excluded, the predominant attitude is one of sympathy, being ready to accept any speck of truth, seeing it as a half-way stage on the way to encountering the fullness of truth. Christian theology, for its part, will make use of the resources of a highly advanced philosophical thought in order to move on with its own developments.

Such an approach does not depend on contingences, rather it rests on the conviction that grace does not so much destroy nature as lead it to its flourishing. It is in fact the same God who is at the origin of natural reason, which proceeds by means of its own ways and methods, and at the origin of revelation. By rights there cannot be opposition or conflict between natural truth and revealed truth.

This principle seems to have been belied by history more than once. In every case, so to speak, a lack of respect for an epistemological rule is observed; it is exactly the rule of respecting the sphere appropriate to each area of knowledge, while being aware of its specific nature and of the limits of its field of application.

Revealed truth sheds the supreme and the most comprehensible light. It is the principle of a unity of sapiential order. This means harmony, balance, integration, a respect for differences and articulations; it cannot replace those forms of knowledge which it unifies by acknowledging their specificity.

The theologian referring directly to revelation fails in his mission if he intervenes precipitously or if he insists on imposing conclusions while ignoring forms of mediation.

A long-lasting effort of research and exchange of opinions may well be necessary before agreement and synthesis are reached.

This is why, fundamentally, it seems to me that the problem can only find an answer at the epistemological level.

Truth and Violence

Fanaticism brings us to the question of the relationship between truth and violence. Does recourse to violence constitute a legitimate means of defending truth?

When Pope John Paul II invited Christians to ask forgiveness for errors which, in the course of the history of the Church, have constituted, instead of the expected testimony, a counter-testimony and scandals, he was guided by a conviction which is shared by the Church and which concerns its historical dimension: time is given to us not just so that we may personally proceed towards saintliness, but also so that the style and customs of the Christian community as such may be ever more in conformity with the requirements of the Gospel. This is only possible because we are made capable of conversion and of the “purification of memory”.³

This said, an ever more vigorously affirmed principle clarifies the question: the freedom of the act of faith. It is only freely that I give my consent to the first Truth, after loyally examining the credentials and under the spiritual movement of grace which never forces conscience. Personal engagement is part of the act of faith,

³See my *Mémoire et repentance*.

so that an adherence extracted by means of force or obtained as a result of threats, of psychological pressures or of corruption is not an adherence of faith.

A second principle intervenes, the principle of the evangelical distinction between the things of God and the things of Caesar (cf. Mt 22:21). This principle does not mean that the business of the secular city is no longer subject to regulation by objective moral law, as if to open the door to political amorality. It witnesses to the nature of evangelical law as the law of the Kingdom of God, which is distinct from the secular city. In other words, human destiny does not find its ultimate achievement in time, it is trans-historical it finds its achievement in eternity. A Christian is thus a member of two cities. The requirements of the city of God, although they have some effects, in terms of inspiration, on the management of human affairs, are transcendent in relation to those of the political realm. They are condensed in that charter that is the *Sermon on the Mount*. The better this essential distinction of the two orders is perceived, a distinction which is neither opposition nor separation, the more awareness one will gain of the fact that the affairs concerning the Christian community as such must be conducted in accordance with a way and a style which cannot be identified with methods having their legitimacy in terms of secular societies.

The Defence of Truth

This said, truth must be defended against all forms of lies and deception and, equally, against errors. It is legitimate that those who lack the resources of knowledge and culture be protected against specious discourse. Modern states have made us aware of the extent of ideological domination. The different forms of monopoly in advertising and propaganda which are characteristic of the media show that democratic societies themselves are not totally protected from pressures exerted on people's minds.

It can be seen that this question pertains essentially to the morality of the media and their conformity with the essence of the Christian message.

Vatican Council II has declared the liberating principle which must guide conduct in the defence of truth. Speaking of conscience, the *Dignitatis humanae*. *Declaration on religious freedom* (1965) states: "The truth cannot impose itself except by virtue of its own truth, as it makes its entrance into the mind at once quietly and with power."⁴

Trust in the force of truth is an eminent sign of faith. This force has found its most eloquent expression in the testimony of martyrs and of all those who have stood firm in the face of totalitarian persecutions. It is them, more than their executioners, that history remembers.

⁴http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651207_dignitatis-humanae_en.html, n.1.

Sergio Romano:

Cardinal Cottier gave us a quotation to the effect that truth does not impose itself by violence.

Violence is precisely the theme of Professor Mohammed Arkoun: violence, sacredness and truth. He was born in Algeria and has taught in different universities in France, in the United States, at the Pontifical Institute of Arab Studies in Rome, and was a Fellow at the Wissenschaftskolleg in Berlin. He is currently research director and member of the board at the Institute of Ismaili Studies.

Violence, the Sacred, and the Regimes of Truth

Mohammed Arkoun:

However, the number one obstacle to the search for light is quite probably the will to power, the desire to show off one's virtuoso abilities or to provide a shelter against too evident objections. Truth is a limit, a standard which is higher than individuals, most of whom harbour a secret animosity against its power.

André Lalande, *Vocabulaire technique et critique de la philosophie*, 'Préface' (Paris 1926)

I Introductory Remarks

The theme chosen for this symposium requires that we should go back to several traditions of belief, thought and knowledge. I am aiming at all forms of religious, cultural and scientific truth, not just at the doctrinal guardians of religious Truth supporting the orthodox faith, or their rivals who have since the Middle Ages opposed the postulates of classical metaphysical Truth. I am aiming also at those secularised citizens, men and women, who are regularly called on to vote and give to the democratic state the required legitimacy to exercise the monopoly of legal violence according to Max Weber's definition. This legitimacy covers all spheres of life: political, administrative, economic, cultural, educational and so on. Truth, called *alétheia* in Greek, meaning that which is not hidden and referring to the recurrent idea of 'unveiling', is present in all forms of religious thought, and reappears – with other tools for research and reflection – in modern thought. Here, God is one object of knowledge among others, a hypothesis which is no longer necessary to the learned, nor to politicians, nor even to free thinkers.

As a historian of Islamic thought, I have come across the issue of religious Truth with a capital 'T' in a confrontation with the scientific and philosophical truth in the classical phase of the history of Islamic thought (750–1300). Paradoxically, the fertile confrontations with thought from this distant age have come to an end with the triumph of repetitive traditionalist thought that remained indifferent if not hostile to the rise of modernity in Europe until the present day. This paradox has become a collective tragedy in the second half of the twentieth and at the beginning of the twenty-first century through the fundamentalist forms of religious 'truth'. Another paradox also emerged in Europe with Europe-wide wars between countries

which have contributed considerably to the enrichment of scientific revolutions, intellectual criticism and artistic creativity. Nazism, like Stalinist Communism, has indicated forms and contents of Truth which refer back to radical questions concerning the functioning of the human mind and, above all, reason in the most civilised and advanced contexts.

My ideas as a researcher and teacher have considerably benefited from rich, powerful, passionate and always instructive debates which have marked intellectual, scientific, cultural, artistic and political life in France during those exceptional years from 1960 to 1980. Innovative works have been published in several fields of knowledge and culture. Eminently instructive epistemological tensions have kept researchers and teachers spellbound, so much were the latter supposed to convey to their public new trends in meaning, new cognitive strategies. These subverted the thought and value systems that remained active, providing more fertile alternatives until the fall of the Berlin Wall. At the beginning of the 1990s, voices from the United States announced ‘the end of history’, pointing in fact to the era of a distinct polarisation of power, economy, free market expression of all forms, levels and modes of truth.

My obsession while writing my doctoral thesis in the 1960s was that of applying to Islamic studies¹ all the new methods and problematisation techniques introduced in history, sociology, anthropology, psychology, psychoanalysis, literary criticism, linguistics, semiotics, as well as semiology. This was before ‘the end of history’ and the triumphant theory of the ‘clash of civilisations’ lost their previous dynamic cross-disciplinary practice and returned to their fragmented specialist nature. History, in particular, disputed the field to linguistics and anthropology. The *Annales* school, installed in the new *Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences sociales* under the direction of Fernand Braudel, pursued with the help of talented and fertile minds the enlargement of the historian’s field of study. New explorations of as yet ignored territories became familiar under the aegis of the appropriate disciplines such as historical psychology, sociology, anthropology and even epistemology. These cognitive strategies helped to identify the important concept of ‘truth regimes’ for the first time. Jacques le Goff, Georges Duby and their disciples assigned to Medieval history new tasks defined as ‘the anthropology of the past and the archaeology of everyday life’. This programmatic expression was illustrated by countless works of quality not just about the European Middle Ages, but about all periods of history to our present time. Students took part in this revolution of mentalities and of thinking tools as they drew on promising intellectual and scientific responses and proceeded to reappraise all inherited certainties, values and knowledge, as evoked by the demonstrations of May 1968.

As a participant in this ebullient period I was too weighed down with developments in research and teaching in the wide field of societies and thought that were far behind the times. Such developments were closely linked to the cognitive, existential

¹The term then used in France was ‘islamology’, a term now made obsolete by the widespread academic use of the term ‘political sciences’ following the model and the geopolitical mapping of Good and Evil under the indisputable *Machtspolitik* of the United States.

and ideological treatment of what I have termed the ‘Qur’anic fact’ and the ‘Islamic fact’. I declined straightaway the umbrella term ‘Islam’ invoked by so many people of all origins and of all adherences, a term which has become dangerous even when used by researchers, essayists and teachers. In 2008 the manipulations of this term are even worse, as they carry with them all forms of Islamic radicalism and of those reactions which are supposed to eradicate it. Even at the Sorbonne I had to be careful with my teachers who kept themselves aloof from what they called ‘Parisian trends’, stigmatising the ephemeral nature of these ideological rumblings. I have, however, kept my freedom to choose each year the themes and the spirit of my lectures. I have inaugurated two fields of research and teaching to make room not so much for detailed knowledge accumulated in works on Christian, later secular, European societies, as on the methodological and epistemological debates separating different schools in each discipline. It was necessary to identify data which were specific to my research field: Islamic thought. This term, which I had to defend, was not self-evident, since each field of study was divided into specific disciplines such as theology, law, exegesis, philosophy and literature. In 1973 I outlined for the first time the tasks and the cognitive strategy of what I called ‘applied islamology’ as distinct, on one hand, from ‘classical islamology’ based on the philological study of the great ancient texts, and, on the other, from the political sciences that were then rapidly gaining ground.²

In my books, with provocative titles, I collected a number of articles published between 1970 and 2003 on two strategic fields in the history of Islamic thought: (1) the ‘Qur’anic fact’, and (2) the ‘Islamic fact’ considered at the different levels of the use of reason, always in confrontation with the primacy of the revealed data and of the contents of so-called orthodox faith. *Lectures du Coran* focuses on the linguistic and semiotic plurality of methods and approaches to deciphering Qur’anic discourse before imposing any theological or exegetical statement on it. It is a question of liberating the reading of the Qur’an as a text from all the presuppositions inherited from the traditional interpreting communities. The aim is to bypass the heresiographic hierarchy recognising only one orthodox community and rejecting all others as sects condemned to eternal punishment. I thereby opened in the field of Islamic study the domain, at the time seldom visited, of an ‘archaeology of knowledge’ and of a ‘sociology of failure or of success’ of works, authors and schools of thought. As it happens, the social frames of knowledge, which are subjected to regressive beliefs and conducts simultaneously advocated both by the post-colonial single-party states and by the Islamist opposition movements to which they have given rise, have rejected and continue to place obstacles in the way of all overtures put forward in my book *Pour une Critique de la Raison Islamique*. Even among the circles of researchers and teachers there are partisans of the islamisation of modernity, opposing everything that comes from what they call the ‘cultural aggression of the West (Westoxication)’. The sociology of failure becomes

²In 1982, I published my *Lectures du Coran*, in 1984 *Pour une Critique de la Raison islamique* and in 2002 *The Unthought in Contemporary Islamic Thought*.

paramount at all times and in all contexts where the triumph of the guardians of the orthodoxy of Islamic faith and Law is manifest.³

Each self-proclaimed orthodox community or politico-religious movement brandishes the flag of the authentically received, interpreted and lived Word of God, thus implying the damnation of all deviants or deniers. An example by a reputed historian, infuriating because of its dogmatic excesses, has recently been given in a book in Arabic by the Tunisian Mohammed Talbi.⁴ An analysis of the articulation of Truth in this book, helps us gauge the impact of uncritical religious belief on the system of the individual and collective subject in all contemporary so-called Islamic contexts. Everything confirms the intellectual, cultural and scientific relevance of the cognitive intervention strategy suggested in my publications, though it is very little known and understood, both in what I call the ‘societies of the Book’ and in those societies now dominated by the culture of unbelief.

This is why I have continued to work for the enrichment and adaptation of my research programmes both in my writings and teaching as well as in public conferences throughout the world. I have tested the reception skills of my various audiences from Indonesia to Morocco, from Moscow to South Africa and from the whole of Europe to North America. I have looked for the most diverse and linguistically and culturally the most distant audiences in order to augment the concrete data without which applied islamology cannot exist. I have been pursuing this methodical search ever since 1965 to this very day. My participation in the present Symposium in Lugano is part of an observation and an experimentation which enrich and consolidate my cognitive strategy of intervention in research proper (a dialogue with my colleagues) and in sharing, through oral exchanges, the reliable results of critical knowledge.

II Religious Truth, Philosophical Truth, Scientific Truth and Common-Sense Truths

My doctoral thesis, devoted to Arab humanism from the fourth to the tenth century,⁵ has led me to question the various aspects of reason in Islamic contexts. This is why I returned to the issue of humanism in a second book 36 years later.⁶ In the programme and articles published earlier, I had concentrated especially on the so-called classical period of the thought and civilisation qualified as Islamic. The uses of reason in contemporary Islamic contexts (1945–2008) refer to areas

³Many such examples will be found in my latest book with its explicit title: *Pour sortir des clôtures dogmatiques*.

⁴*li-yatma'inna qalbî* [For the peace of my heart].

⁵First edition 1970; 3rd edition, 2005.

⁶*Humanisme et islam*.

little frequented by researchers, but which are nevertheless very fertile ground for the examination of issues regarding the reversibility of cultures and of civilisations, the regression of the status and of the products of reason in a phase of the general history of thought and of the sciences, which, in Europe at least, continues to favour the development of critical reason as a concept both innovative and liberating for the human condition.

This quick review of an intellectual itinerary clearly shows that the issue of truth underlies all ‘Combats et propositions’ evoked in the subtitle of a second book. This book was devoted to revisiting the humanist issue in its totality in contexts in which a militant fundamentalist version of Islam, today’s or yesteryear’s, is predominant. “All writing is an act of historical solidarity”, was the motto of Roland Barthes and of those linguists attached to the practice of what is called ‘discourse analysis’. Every definition, other critics say, is a takeover from reality and the appropriation of discourse to the aims of the will to power, often under the guise of the will to know the truth and to live according to its imperatives. Whoever says ‘power’ moves away from authority, nearing the constraints imposed by reason as categorical imperatives of intelligence, of morals, of the exercise of the monopoly of legal violence. Aware as I am of the slippery slope of all discourse towards power and violence, I use the term ‘propositions’ proffered for continuous debates within the community of researchers/thinkers, not just of the partisans of cold and factual erudition. If critical discourse articulated by reason is offered as a series of propositions to be debated with partners believing in this same self-control of reason, then it may be possible to work together to overcome the involution, the oblivion, the omissions and the drifting by the wayside to which any speculative activity is subject. Such considerations have given rise to my programme ‘of a reflective history of Islamic thought’ whose methodologies, developments, conceptualisations and rhetorical apparatus look for validation not only within the specific sphere of Islamic thought but also within closer cognate spheres (Jewish and Christian thought with their several ramifications in the history of monotheism, itself inseparable from its Mediterranean anthropological basis), and more distant ones (Chinese, Hindu, Buddhist and African thought and their respective anthropological bases).

III The Concept of Emerging Reason

The French historian Paul Veyne has recently published a book devoted to his colleague and close friend Michel Foucault.⁷ One may be surprised that he should have waited so long before sizing up the contribution and the personality of such a great spirit departed only too soon. One will be even more surprised at the subtitle which refers to the banality of the history of ideas, of which the methodological

⁷Veyne, *Foucault*.

shortcomings have rightly been stigmatised by the very same person who struggled most to get rid of the illusions of ‘historical-transcendental themes’ in order to let reflexive thought take root in concrete life situations of social actors of all times. When asked about this aspect, Veyne revealed that his subtitle had been ‘The Samurai and the goldfish’: two allusions too obscure for a title. Still, the goldfish refers to an episode in Foucault’s life when he was seven. As his mother was about to present him with a goldfish in a bowl, he asked the following, philosophically-charged question: “Mammy, what does a goldfish think?” Later Foucault would show that people turn around like goldfish in a bowl filled with pseudo-truths. He completely altered the approaches to truth in the thought systems inherited from the past. The concept of emerging reason became imperative in my mind during a long confrontation between the historical vicissitudes of reason in Islamic contexts after the installation of the Imperial Caliph State (661–1258) until the emergence of post-colonial states in the 1950s on the one hand, and the conquering, critical and reason-creating dynamism in Christian and later modern contexts in Europe on the other. The comparative study of the two destinies of the dialectic of the *logos* and of the *mythos* on the one hand, and of the Word of God and religious discourse on the other, enriches and radicalises considerably the critique of the works of reason, of the conditions of its successes and of the forces which make it regress until it is submerged by collective fantasies and the alienation of critical faculties.

In this constantly enlarged perspective, to speak of ‘post-modernity’, as it has been done in a fortunately fleeting fashion, means getting locked up in the purely European/Western track of reason. Emerging reason instead, as it is endlessly on the look-out in all cultures for novel challenges in human history, widens and multiplies its spheres of experience, the sources of its information and the rebuttals that come from all sides. In my talk I shall enlarge upon the new and liberating tasks of emerging reason by making use of the lessons of the ideological polarisation ‘Islam versus the West’. I shall examine this pair, which arose out of polemic and liberation wars, in the long, medium and short term. It will be seen that the issue of truth will move towards more radical questions, more restrictive critical imperatives as well as more humanistic forms of communication.

In all cultures, the quest for truth implies reason coming to terms with all the questions, all the methodologies, all the validation operations linked with the production of ‘sense’, which must always be distinguished from ‘that which makes sense’ in such and such discourse situations and not in other situations. ‘Sense’ can only be produced if one beware of facile slips towards dangerous ‘effects of sense’. In linguistic and semiotic analysis reference is also made to ‘the sense-destroying genesis’ and therefore to the destruction of the truth(s) conveyed by sense which may be nothing but an ‘effect of sense’ and therefore of the truth(s) which crumble(s) when put to the test by the discourse analyst. This is why substantial, intangible and eternal truths, constructed in the course of the Middle Ages through the postulates of the revealed Word or through the tools of Aristotelian logocentrism, prove to be fragile and unsustainable once they have been subjected to the deconstructions of all thought systems. Such ‘adventurous truths’ continue nonetheless to support the religious beliefs and metaphysical speculations of idealist

thought. It is true that such truths continue to have the function of refuge for all those who have no access to research and analytical tools used by the smaller research community. These functions of religious Truth are clearly illustrated by the resistance of Orthodox Christianity to the official atheism of the Soviet regime, by the angry reaction of so-called Muslim peoples against colonial regimes and the *Machtspolitik* of the Big Four, in particular in the Middle East after 1945. Judaism as well as Islam have continued to be used as a refuge, springboard and source of legitimization for the political actions and recurrent wars of the past 60 years. Buddhism and Hinduism are also not exempt from such functional degenerations of religious Truth which finds itself ever more involved in combat ideologies. Their expansion has come to corrupt great democracies like the United States since the attacks of 11/9/2001 and the reactions these have produced.

The same can be said for scientific truths validated by clinical trials, laboratory tests, mathematical calculations and all other forms and ways of experimenting. It is well known that in this area, too, there have been some spectacular distortions that have exposed even human dignity itself to the worst dangers. The few powers possessing the most advanced technology insist on the legitimacy of what they call 'clean' wars, that is to say without human losses, unlike the traditional Europe-wide wars. Weapons and the conditions in which they are used do not seem to be within the range of ethics committees in the life sciences. Such political practices, which are common since the frequent resort to terrorism, have devastating consequences for the responsibilities of science and of scientific reason cut off from ethics as well as from economic and financial reason.

The cognitive sciences have dealt an even more decisive blow to what we continue to call the truth: the good, the ugly, the beautiful. Jean-Pierre Changeux has recently produced a bulky volume comprising a synthesis of his research and theories since his *L'homme neuronal* (1983).⁸ He attempts to open up new pathways to the search for truth by moving from the molecule to the soul. We are confronted with data and fundamentals which are both more reassuring and more worrying, since the speculations and the abstract and fragile conceptual constructions are abandoned in order to establish the functions of language, of knowledge, of intelligibility, of judgement and of value on data arising from clinical observation. Under such conditions it may be worthwhile to consider the concept of 'intellectual adventures' in the sense of vagaries or adventurous coherences of reason. Maurice Merleau-Ponty had earlier examined 'the adventures of dialectics' both in philosophical terms (Hegel and Marx) and in terms of the ideological distortions of Leninism-Stalinism. Here, too, the writing of history has its dangerous excesses, comparable in all respects to those of the theologians interpreting so-called Holy Scriptures. We have seen the havoc wreaked by the positivist historicism of philosophies of history in the service of the will to power (cf. the recurrent debates on the 'clash of civilisations' and 'the end of history' immediately after the crumbling of the Soviet and Maoist enemy). As fundamental a discipline as philology has nurtured the arbitrariness of

⁸Changeux, *Du vrai, du beau, du bien*.

academic mandarins: I remember the ‘imperialist’ tendencies of linguistics in the 1960s at the Sorbonne under the pretext of leaving behind the crimes of philologism. These brief reminders show that history has always contributed to the construction of what each *épistémé* holds as true on the basis of representations, beliefs, definitions, collective images which place harmful limits on spirits, bodies, everyday relations, individual and collective conducts. Thus, ‘written history’ holds stakes in truth that do not always adequately encompass the truths of ‘history as it is lived’. The debates on the methodologies and epistemologies of each writing of history are concerned with this distance between, on the one hand, the reductions, the selections, the cutting up, the categorisations and the arbitrary interpretations of the historian and, on the other hand, the truths of life as it is experienced by each social actor and each collective subject.

After publishing my *Critique de la Raison Islamique* in 1984, I have constantly tried to make explicit the order of reasons and the concrete practical objectives – in particular in terms of the transmission of knowledge – on which this *Critique* is founded. It extends the field of historical investigation by introducing the sociology of the ‘thinkable’ and of the ‘unthinkable’, of the ‘thought-of and of the unthought-of in the logospheres’ which coexist in the same political and social space. The higher the number of controls exercised on the thinkable in a logosphere considered at any given historical moment, the wider the space and the number of unthinkables. The same is true of the pair thought-of/unthought-of. Thus the constructions, functions, circulation of ‘truths’ become complex and bear witness to the precariousness of each proclaimed truth. This terminology, which is ordinarily restricted to philosophical thought, has reached out in my writings to key disciplines needing deconstructing, reflexive, archaeological and cross-disciplinary analysis of all oral and written discourse, of all the corpora and anthologies, of all cultural codes, and of all semiological systems. By spurring the *Critique de la Raison Islamique* along such ambitious and complex paths within past and present Islamic contexts, I wanted and still want to inscribe ‘the Islamic archive’ – in the sense developed by Jacques Derrida – in the comparative history and anthropology of all systems of thought claimed by religious, national and community traditions.

In spite of my repeated explanations, a large number of my colleagues still introduce me as a Professor of Islamic thought, or, which is worse, as a Professor of Islam! At the Sorbonne, I found it difficult to persuade the academic authorities to name my chair ‘history of Islamic thought’, so ingrained was the current practice of favouring time-honoured designations such as the special fields of philosophy, theology, literature, law and so on. It is well known that in the Middle Ages such frontiers were not watertight, especially in that period that saw the emergence and expansion of what I called the ‘philosophical *adab*’.⁹ One of the most important challenges of truth in my struggles to illustrate and introduce a new outlook in Islamic studies, concerns precisely the issue of cutting up the great periods of history (periodisation) and the identification of objects of study validated and perpetuated by current

⁹Cf. my *Humanisme et Islam*.

academic courses for each period so determined. I shall not bring up again the passionate and often irritating as well as sterile debates of the 1970s concerning Orientalism. I shall simply touch upon the narrow-mindedness which still affects research, publications and teaching in the field uniformly designated by the umbrella term 'Islam' with a capital 'I'. Such narrow-mindedness is due first of all to a number of political, social and linguistic forces controlling the ideological manipulations of the Citadel of Islam since the days of independence acquired in the years 1945 to 1960. In the face of such internal upheavals in the vast field of Islam, political sciences as a subject has marginalised classical historicist studies in this field, while at the same time prolonging the ghettoisation of an object of knowledge which has always benefited belatedly from the new developments in the humanities and social sciences applied to Western societies.

It will be easily understood therefore why the challenges of truth in all writing in the field of the humanities and social sciences have informed all my initiatives to inscribe 'applied islamology' in what I call the 'Mediterranean geo-historical space'. Applied islamology is a new discipline differing from classical islamology and also from a way of writing specific to political sciences. It applies cognitive intervention strategies in the current scholarly and ideological debates between Islam, Christianity and Judaism after the appearance of the Qur'anic fact. Later on, starting from 1800 (Napoleon in Egypt, Great Britain in India and elsewhere), it applies these strategies in those debates concerning faith and reason, tradition and modernity, secularisation and religion, democracy, human rights and religion, development and under-development, terrorism/fundamentalism and Western values, and so on. Such an intervention strategy requires a radical critique of all forms of rationality, or rationalisation, which are the heritage of the long history of Islamic thought. However, care should be taken to confront them with those competing rationalities and rationalisations developed in the Mediterranean historical space. It is in such a space that supportive research surpassing all emotionally charged dialogues must finally examine the upstream and downstream of critical reason. The upstream is the intense, constant, instructive, creative, liberating dialectic, a dialectic which is above all comprehensive of the challenges of truth in historical praxis. The complexity and the fecundity of all that is left to re-examine in this upstream may be read in the following diagram:

$$[WG \rightarrow \rightarrow \leftarrow \leftarrow PD] \rightarrow \rightarrow \leftarrow \leftarrow [L \rightarrow \rightarrow \leftarrow \leftarrow M]$$

WG: Word of God; PD: Prophetic discourse; L: *Logos*; M: *Mythos*.

Downstream consists of the competitions, the confrontations, the wars, the different forms of violence, false knowledge, obscurantist and alienating beliefs, dogmatic certainties, rigid principles and definitions, desires, passions, emotions...in a word, everything that impels one to fritter away energy, work, resources, and universally esteemed positive effects brought about by men in society. Nowadays, in the more advanced democracies, the ethic of communication advocated by Jürgen Habermas as well as many other new contributions by countless thinkers, researchers, writers, are drowned in the ceaseless noise of the media, everyday concerns, the manipulation

of desires, the tyranny of emotions, the turmoil of people's mental universes, the conflicting claims from politics and trade unions... The transmission of knowledge, which is stored up in libraries, reaches only the ever-decreasing fringes of public opinion. This leaves very little time and attention for taking on problems afflicting deprived societies which are subjected to obeisance of the joint mandates of the current powers and so-called religious traditions. The pressure of institutional powerlessness, resignation, omissions and ignorance is the scourge of all contemporary societies, but in particular and more tragically of the more deprived and resourceless societies, once described as underdeveloped in the aftermath of their independence.

These brief remarks help us gauge the state of truth and of the truths in the many cultures which have long since been cohabiting in Euro-American societies. Many questions arise with regard to the political management of pluralism, diversity, identities, of vehemently proclaimed differences, without providing new citizens with the spaces and the cultural resources needed for critical self-evaluation. Semantic disorder, conceptual confusion, and indignation against racism and discrimination get the better once again of the search for clarity, for viable and emancipating values, for the legitimacy which would widen citizens' consensus. While trends towards withdrawal of communities into themselves are denounced, the educational system is not opened to subjects which would make room for the critical expression of deracinated collective memories. In the course of my career as a teacher and researcher I have done my best to open up spaces and ways of transmissions of knowledge and critical confrontations of identities which were affirmed but never truly considered. From Franco-Maghrebin historical developments I have drawn countless examples which support the confrontation of values, truths, the use of reason, overcoming false identities resting on communitarian or nationalist mytho-historiographies, but not even a few swallows make a summer.

I have never stopped reflecting or making others reflect on the travails of truth in its religious pathways and in its modern metamorphoses in Western Europe first, and outside Europe later. Marie-Dominique Chenu found himself in trouble with ecclesiastical hierarchy when he assigned to theology the leading task of 'the intelligence of faith subjected to the test of time' – that is to say to the constant rebuttals that lived history inflicts on the imaginary constructions of reality. Acknowledging that religious truth is a historical one has not been accepted unequivocally in Roman Catholic doctrinal teaching. Islamic thought ignores the historical nature of faith even more, in so much as it has cut itself off from theological and philosophical research since the turn between the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. This is a historical fact, throwing light on the relationship with truth in the monotheistic pathway after the subversive intervention of the modern epistemological gap. In the many interreligious and intercultural symposia that have taken place since Vatican II this decisive point has more often than not been passed in silence: preference is given to polite and 'tolerant' agreement concerning the articles of faith linked to the syncretic figure of Abraham.

After Marx, Nietzsche and Freud, Foucault has insisted on the necessity of subjecting reason to the tests of political practice and of the conducts of civil society in the face of the so-called rule-of-law state. All the same, it can be observed that

there is still a strong tendency everywhere to appeal to Enlightenment reason in order to stigmatise the barbarism of our times. In doing so, the illusion is kept that there exists a form of appeal considered *a priori* an intangible validation authority. Believers proceed in the same fashion by indefinitely commenting the eternal truths of the Holy Scriptures and of what goes under the name of ‘living tradition’. In the world-wide appeal to the Enlightenment, which is qualified as new, there is also a tendency to obliterate the teachings specific to the three great founding moments of modern intellectual history as a never-ending quest of the spirit. These moments are:

1. The Enlightenment as envisaged by Kant and eminent thinkers of the eighteenth century;
2. The same Enlightenment readopted and philosophically subverted by the three creative thinkers Marx, Nietzsche and Freud;
3. The great ongoing debates, in the humanities and the social sciences, since the end of colonial empires. There is no question that the sudden crumbling of communist ideology followed by the emergence of a new menace on 11/9/ 2001, has created a new gap, having a before and after in the history of advanced democracies facing the anger of peoples and societies formerly dispossessed of their own history;

All the same, intellectual subversion only concerns the fringe of researchers, thinkers, writers and artists in the West. The members of civil societies in the world’s richest countries remain imprisoned in their preferential claim of their consumerism. The historical misadventures of those peoples which are victims of the military and police regimes that have succeeded colonial power, do not inspire any political will aimed at humanising international law and the successful regulation of issues between states. We seem to be content with humanitarian aid, which is also controlled by standing regimes such as those in Sudan, Burma, Zimbabwe, and of course in Palestine. The initiative of allies invading Iraq to eliminate the tyrant has brought about the results we all know of. Whole nations find themselves therefore between the rock of the West and the hard place of predatory states that call themselves national states. They are thus victims of worse spoliations than those they suffered when the customary and cultural codes of traditional societies ruled the roost. Social and political sciences hardly ever consider the issues raised by such historical impasses; they do not even uncover the intellectual and juridical responsibilities of the great decision-makers with regard to the future of the planet. ‘Islam’ taken hostage by its own believers has become one of the sources of systemic violence propagating itself in the modern world.

Fertile areas for critical thought and the knowledge of contemporary societies have thus found themselves deserted, ignored, often – it is true – because they are inaccessible to researchers of any origin, including native ones. I am thinking for example of the cross-examination by colonisers and colonised peoples of the colonial adventure and of its perpetuation after the wave of independence proclamations. It is a question of abandoning conflicting, polemical and ideological confrontations with their recurrent eruptions of reciprocal condemnations. I am thinking of a ‘solidary writing of the history of colonisation’ where the two protagonists criss-cross their respective questionings, their subjectivities, the vision of their pasts, presents

and futures. The French and the Germans have set a trend in this respect by writing a history textbook used in schools and high schools in both countries. This opens up new and unexpected territories for discovery and the construction of novel truths about the productive conditions of human existence. Such an experience is valid for all countries adjacent to one another, all recurrent wars, all rigid borders, all mutually exclusive systems which to this day still control the setting up of social, state, inter-ethnic and international frontiers.

The work of decolonising minds makes sense both for the dominated and for the dominant powers; it should have started the very day after the independence ceremonies. Instead of this, new stratagems were devised to prolong dependency relationships by turning a blind eye to the behaviour of prevaricating states many of which can only be described as rogue states. Respectable democracies have come to terms with and continue to support such states which turn against their very own peoples. The *Machtpolitik* with regard to the former Third World has had heavy consequences for the destinies of people in Africa and Asia, but did not disturb the conscience of the defenders of human rights. The end of the Cold War has unleashed nationalist movements which had been muzzled up under the Soviet regime; it has fed the expansion of systemic violence on a world scale. The catastrophe of 11/9/2001 should not be understood exclusively as the unleashing of Islamist fanaticism. It highlights the tragedies produced everywhere by the arrogant and triumphant historical march of Western so-called values and the evident regressions of societies twice dispossessed: by the absence of politics from their national ‘elites’ and by all sorts of pressures by a West happy and proud to announce ‘the end of history’ and the ‘clash of civilisations’, legitimising a new discourse of double criteria after the crumbling of the Communist ideology.

The regression of societies subjected to the alienating distortions of an imagined, or even, in some circles, a ghostly Islam, poses with singular force the issue of the reversibility of the ‘values’ of civilisation. Although intellectually coarse and culturally very limited, the popular Islam of peasants and nomads before the 1950s had a feeling for human dignity, a respect for the person that uprooted, ideologised, migrant, alienated classes of post-colonial societies have lost. On this level of sociological, linguistic and historical analysis of non-Western societies, it may be worthwhile to test the operational and explicative range of what I call the anthropological triangle: ‘Violence, Sacred, Truth’.

IV The Anthropological Triangle

The works by René Girard on violence and the sacred are well known. In what follows Michel Serres presents a wide-ranging and original work since it finds an anthropo-philosophy haunted by the issue of the theological essence of Christianity as the only religion liberating humankind from the sacrificial ritual of the scapegoat victim. It will be seen that such a question is important in terms of the complexity of the issue of truth.

One day historians will ask you to explain the unexplainable: this formidable wave which engulfed our West during the twentieth century. [...] Such abominations are largely beyond the possibilities of historical explanation; in order to try to understand this incomprehensible, what is required is a tragic anthropology on the scale of your anthropology. One day we will understand that this century has extended on an inhumane and world scale your society and individual model. Once again, where does this violence come from? From miming, you said. [...] Now, when everybody desires the same thing, it is a war of everybody against everybody. We can only tell of this heinous jealousy of the same, which opposes doubles and twins transforming them into enemy brothers. Almost divinely performative, envy produces in front of it, indefinitely, its own images made in its image. The three Horaces resemble the Curiaces triplets; the Montagues imitate the Capulets, Saint George and Saint Michael mime the Dragon; the axis of Good acts symmetrically, according to the image, hardly inverted, of the axis of Evil.¹⁰

In other words, Girard assigns a shared substratum to every human culture: the cathartical lynching which is assuaging and welding the community together. However, he makes use of this anthropological hypothesis in order to give a 'scientific' basis to a theological assertion which has more to do with apologetics than with epistemological validation. It reduces the truth of humankind, of its hermeneutical adventures and of the objective world to Christianity alone, which makes an innocent of the victim and takes a radical stand against all forms of scapegoat sacrifices. It must also be added that there are other researchers, thinkers who have reactivated the Christian exception by a mix of anthropological culture, philosophical criticism and theological discourse, the epistemological status of which is still far removed from that of the humanities and social sciences. A well-known thesis is the one by Marcel Gauchet explaining Christianity as the only religion which has led, historically, to religion abandoning the stage in Western Europe. In the same perspective the Italian philosopher Gianni Vattimo writes:

This [*the history of salvation as a history of announcement*] may well be the nature of the Judeo-Christian message which is unique in the history of religions and which, aside from all imperialist or Eurocentric claims, gives it a reasonable claim to the status of universal religion.¹¹

It will be seen that none of the thinkers and researchers who have at length expressed their views on Judeo-Christianity have said anything about the example of Islam, which – it cannot be denied – has insistently, albeit at times polemically, remained within the long monotheistic tradition. I am thinking in particular of Paul Ricœur and Emmanuel Levinas. This weakens the scholarly thesis as much as the philosophical consistency of their reasoning. Such a shortcoming has led me to widen the anthropo-philosophical space of what I call critical and reflexive anthropo-history. Instead of taking as my starting point the pair violence/sacred alone, I have included truth as well, since the search for it, its postulates, its construction, its contents, its political, speculative and social functions are inseparable and in dialectic tension within the space of a triangle from which it is so difficult to break out, as we are

¹⁰Michel Serres, reply to René Girard, in: *Le Monde*, 16/12/2005.

¹¹Vattimo, *Après la chrétienté*, 49, 53.

trapped inside it in spite of the efforts made within the so-called neutral space of secularism.

I have chosen the whole of Sura 9 to show the theoretical pertinence and the informative riches of my heuristic hypothesis on the functioning of the anthropological triangle not only in the case of Islam but for all religions as well as for the modern spaces of secularism. Here I am quoting just two verses in order to make an outline of my approach which can be summarised by three infinitives: to transgress, to remove, to go past. These three verbs refer to spaces of reality, to cognitive strategies of intervention, to disciplinary fields and their methods and thinking tools which are used by emerging reason.

V Brief Illustrations¹²

I shall start from two brief quotations and two Qur'ânic verses to show the tribulations of truth in its diverse dimensions in the contemporary world.

The proclamation of 1/11/1954 assigned the high task of “restoring a sovereign, democratic and social Algerian State within the framework of Islamic principles” to the Algerian war of liberation. In 1959 colonial France at last considered promulgating a law prohibiting the repudiation of women and imposing a judicial procedure for divorce. The *Moujâhid* of 6/7/1955, the FLN daily, refused indignantly such an intrusion into the personal status of Muslims:

Thus, some Frenchmen, and what is more, Christians or Jews, as is the case, apparently, of Michel Debré [*the then Prime Minister*], have dared to deliberately undermine the Qur'an, which is by its very nature immutable, and to impose France's secular laws on Algeria's Muslims by the sword, and this in the most sacred subject-matter, namely, one's personal status.

Earlier, Bourguiba, who would go on to become the liberator of Tunisian women, had thus spoken in order to refute the arguments of a female militant against the wearing of the veil, in 1929:

As a result of the regime to which it is subject, Tunisia is fast moving headlong towards the degeneration of its personality [...] In order to fend off this danger, Tunisians must see to it that they safeguard their traditions, which are still the distinguishing traits and therefore the last defences of a national identity in jeopardy.

Here are the two verses which will serve as a basis for our work on the concept of anthropological triangle:

When the sacred months are over, kill the polytheists [*al-mushrikân*] wherever you may find them! Capture them, besiege them, ambush them! But if they come to God [*tâbû*] through prayer, by offering the prescribed alms, then let them walk freely, because God is all indulgence and all compassion. (9, 5)

¹²Cf. my *Pour sortir des clôtures dogmatiques*.

The Jews have said: 'Uzayr is son of God';
 The Christians have said: 'the Messiah is son of God';
 These are the words emanating from their lips, just like
 Those pronounced, before them, by the infidels.
 May God annihilate them!
 They are so far removed from Truth! (9, 30)

V-1 The Quotations

In spite of their antiquity, the two quotations continue in 2008 to call forth the same indignation, the same protestations and the same ignorance as when they were first enunciated. Arrogance and ignorance are not just on the part of the colonised; the coloniser is included, displaying the same degree of certitude impregnated with contempt for an obscurantist Islam, a magic mentality oblivious to the contributions of a civilisation of progress. It is the shock of ignorance, tied to unquestionable truths and moral values which are by far superior to those of the enemy. As I write this, the air in Paris is all aflame because of the boycotting of the *Salon des livres* book fair by Arab States and writers. The difference with the confrontations of the 1930s and 1940s, is that the participants are better aware of the history that separates them. But the arguments of the two protagonists obscure the references to this worn-out history served *ad nauseam* in the mytho-ideological versions of official historiography which are still a heavy burden on people's minds. It is a well-known fact that the French parliament has even recommended a form of history explicitly highlighting the advantages of civilisation. The indignation by the great professional historians in France has induced power to step back and to reaffirm the critical independence of historical research and teaching in general, also with regard to such serious confrontations as those arising from colonisation. In Algeria, apart from the repetition of the usual indignation, no need was felt for establishing a shared history of the colonial enterprise as such including colonial practice, starting from a self-critical examination of the two protagonists. Without this both will remain prisoners of official polemics and self-glorification. As a matter of fact, progress in this sense is extremely slow and tragically insufficient.

Therefore, several crucial questions are evaded by the more advanced democracies and post-colonial states which continue to use and abuse the denunciation of 'the cultural and human genocide' to deflect attention from their lack of political and intellectual legitimacy which is evident on both sides. What TRUTH should we look for when systemic political violence, long since denounced in anti-colonial struggles, arises again on a world scale, in civil wars breaking out in the majority of societies deprived of the freedoms and prosperity promised during and after their liberation wars? Social justice, dignity and liberty are on everybody's lips more than truth. This feeds of course on these basic needs of man in society. There can be no truth, nor political legitimacy, in places which see the triumph of systemic violence, of so much frustration and deprivation in populations where young people are more numerous than the over forties. Justice

itself cannot come to fruit without a durable peace culture which would put an end to the political programming of conflicts. Even more tragic and ravaging conflicts have been planned by the victors of the second Europe-wide war at a time when colonial empires were still prevalent.

The humanities and social sciences suggest advances towards multiple truths which can be made relatively objective and are respectable as such. Even when reliable truths are identified which should be binding for everybody, it is a persistent fact that political decision-makers do not even think about integrating them into historical action. The logic of political decision-making does not bow under the weight of either the truths purported by the experts, nor under that of ethical values celebrated in illusory or openly deceptive rhetoric, or even less that of the suffering of the defeated. Let us consider the imposing and masterly work of Paul Ricœur, author of, among many other great titles, *Soi même comme un autre*. No sooner had he died than his rich, generous and fertile thought was buried under an avalanche of tragic news, of books and words without a future, linked as they are to mundane polemics and passions.

I could not claim such levels of interest for my own works on the *Critique de la Raison Islamique*. During his life, Paul Ricœur could rely on a wide public in the West reading and commenting his writings. A critical researcher-cum-thinker exploring the extensive field of Islam cannot aspire to such a wide public. After concentrating its efforts on the fight against the communist camp, the West has turned the eradication of Islamist terrorism into a new priority. Nonetheless, the historical road taken by the so-called Muslim world is very different from that of the Soviet Union since the October revolution. The history of colonisation, written single-handedly by capitalist Europe, relieved by the United States after 1945, has been erased from memories reduced to silence – hateful or painful memories, depending on who is speaking. Subsequently the construction of the European Union has opened up avenues for action and hope which have favoured the oblivion of an outcome that was tragic for all protagonists. There are, however, countless truths to be discovered in order to appease so many tragedies which the people concerned passed by in silence.

The nature of these historical truths is such that they have curbed the strategies of geopolitical control of the whole burning region of the Middle East. By deliberately ignoring them, the two protagonists, ‘Islam versus the West’, have enabled the growth of resentment, mistrust, rejection, the desire for revenge which have led to the tragedy of 11/9/2001 and its aftermath, which was even more dramatic than its previous trials.¹³ There is the question of an internal and an external genesis of the recourse to terrorism which should be elucidated as an objective search for truth. I am referring to a search for truth in order to justify the cathartic function of history as an example of what is true and fair.

Before 11/9/2001 there was an objective alliance between national states which ‘nationalize’ Islam from within, and some powers exploiting the mobilising force

¹³For more discussions on this subject, cf. my considerations and analyses in *De Manhattan à Bagdad*.

of radical Islamism in order to extend a better control over future geopolitical and economic divisions of the world. Those who analyse such strategies content themselves with describing such strategic manipulations and gauging their respective chances of failure or success. They hardly ever worry about the disastrous effects of a permanent *Machtpolitik* in the intellectual, scientific, cultural and moral field, in societies tested both by national states unconcerned with their legitimacy and the public good, and by powers supporting or quashing, as the case may be, the murderous violence of subversive movements without viable political programmes.

This is the triumph of a discourse applying double standards: on one hand it calls for compliance with human rights and democratic values while at the same time it perverts or even annihilates the work required by free thought to protect and enrich the critical quest for truth which is inseparable from the quest for meaning, justice and legitimacy in any human society. In this field too, the humanities and the social sciences rely on affidavits in the absence of elementary freedoms, on the cultural, moral and scientific regressions in contemporary Islamic contexts, without elucidating the historical genesis and the ideological, institutional, political, and social factors which have led to the flight of the elites, to resignation and to a feeling of humiliation among people, as well as to the anger of those who no longer wait in this world and decide to join the cohorts of martyrs. There is a need for a great book on the political and psychosocial genesis of the mythology of the martyr since the wars of liberation. All over the former Third World free course has been given to populist religiosity, to regressive ideologies, and to systemic political violence in the sense that it combines internal and external factors. The irresistible expansion of the culture of religious non-belief replaced by the cult of consumerism, of spectacle and profit in the West, has its counterpart within the protagonist 'Islam' in the form of an increase of religiosity bringing salvation, nostalgia for a past grandeur long since forgotten, an uncertain and confused wait for a concrete emancipation at last freed from a dangerous messianic hope. In the current phase of a generalised crisis of reason and of a quest for foundations or for an authority protecting truth, sense and legitimacy which have universal and not just national or community range, a quest for a more reliable truth is simulated by finding refuge in the description and deconstruction of ideological or purely imaginary regimes of conflicting 'truths' who continue to offer the basis for the current wars.

In order to open up new fields of investigation, let us remember some of the tensions having educational import between theology and philosophy. This reminder is necessary as theology, which is extremely marginalised, continues to consider possible ways of renewing itself by turning for help, like philosophy, to new questions, methodologies and conceptualisations not just in the humanities and social sciences, but also in the revolutionary progress of the life sciences. I would stress the fact that such a theology, open to the great epistemological debate in the neurosciences, life sciences, the status of the foetus and of the virtual human person, not to mention the recent debates unleashed by history, linguistics and anthropology, is practised within Christianity (Protestantism and Catholicism), in a more limited fashion within Judaism, and very exceptionally within Islam. This means that the medieval concept of 'true religion', to the exclusion of all others,

continues to prevail in inter-religious dialogues and more dogmatically in the ritualistic expressions of religious belief. In spite of its important overtures to other religions after Vatican II, Catholic doctrine continues to defend the idea of a hierarchy of religions in relation with their respective truth regimes. One should get rid of all obsession with truth, knowing that the most ancient truths, the most rooted and most recurrent ones in societies (I am thinking of the current vogue for religions), are nothing but beliefs which are victorious while eliminating other established, concurrent or new beliefs.

The critical activity of reason in its different fields (in terms of religious, theological, philosophical, political, economic, dialectic, juridical, and ethical reason) does not aim so much at discriminating the rational from the irrational, the imaginary or the ideological within each historical path linked to each logosphere; it must move across all frontiers in order to explore and compare the whole of thought and belief systems which base themselves on the Truth or truths which have not moved across the test of comparison and of confrontation; not just with the universal, always invoked though never realised, but with that ‘which can be made universal’ in such a way that it maintains everywhere the dynamic processes of dialectics, of confrontation and of validation. Monotheist religions which during the Middle Ages experienced a demanding confrontation with philosophical reason continue to mistrust a philosophical attitude and above all to exclude each other from the status of ‘true religion’ as a candidate for the universal. What has been called the return to religion in the West exacerbates the quest for identity and the claims of a right to differ by widening the mutual exclusions nourished over the centuries by the three monotheist versions of election, of the Alliance, of the privilege conferred by the role of unique possessor of the true revelation of the Word of God. Modern reason introduced an alternative to such exclusionism: it subjects to its critical scrutiny all truth regimes, but it tends to monopolise the production of a universal truth equally shared by human beings. From thence derives the expansion of the culture of non-belief which refers back both to the relativity and the contingency of any truth, and to categorical imperatives for all production, reception and practice of truth.

In all the cases in which truth is invoked or questioned, a major debate is created which may even turn into conflict. All true knowledge or values cannot but be conflictual. The priority given by Kant to the preliminary study of ‘the conditions that make a pure reason and a practical reason possible’ while always aiming at consensual truth, maintains a certain methodological usefulness but it does not put an end to conflictual truth regimes. It is well known that Marx produced a critique of political economy which was extended, completed and made more profound by Nietzsche in his genealogy of values. The first critique was appropriated and obliterated by the so-called proletarian revolution; the second was ill-understood, abandoned and above all diverted from its philosophical ambitions by the return of belief and non-belief systems under the sign of empiricism, of individualistic pragmatism, of savage liberalism, of the marketing of culture and thought, of the World Trade Organisation... A significant initiative – in terms of new conditions in which to exercise critical thought – has just been taken by the newspaper *Le Monde*,

which has been republishing the great classical works of philosophy, at prices within the reach of the wider public that had been kept on the margins of the debate on the liberating intellectual and artistic combats even in those societies where all children have access to schooling and all citizens have, in principle, the right to knowledge and culture. This is a gauge of the persistence of obstacles in the way of the production and advances of truth in human societies where the weight of the social construction of truth is still predominant.

A problem arises here, highlighted by political scientists speaking of the end of Western monopoly to direct the forces that produce human history. This consideration replaces the theory of 'the end of history' announced by Francis Fukuyama at the same time as the 'clash of civilisations' at the beginning of the 1990s. If the rise of India and China is the harbinger of a multipolar world in the area of production and of economic and monetary exchanges, the functions of reason and of humanistic culture oriented towards a more effective and widespread emancipation of the human condition, do not follow the pace and the effectiveness required by the entry into competition of cultures that are separated by wide gaps or can even be considered regressive if compared to the spectacular advances in scientific research and technological innovation. Without a doubt such advances produce 'disposable thought' in societies of consumerism, of spectacle, of huge profits and social exclusion. Such a situation increases the intellectual, scientific, cultural and spiritual responsibilities of a West whose supremacy since the nineteenth century has to a great extent contributed to the deprivation of the rest of the world in crucial areas where the majority social actors are not enjoying the full and guaranteed status of democratic citizenship.

I shall now go back to the example of Islam. I have been wondering for a long time about the forces of dislocation operating on cultural traditions under the colonial domination. Only fragments of modernity were made accessible to a minority of the happy few, while the majority of the population had to survive with local, limited and outdated values and collective memories. Oral cultures expressed in local dialects, ritualistic Islam mixed with archaic beliefs were offering very limited useful knowledge which could help to cope with the historical challenges of modernity. This cultural, social and intellectual gap generated the inevitable 'nationalist' ideology which led to the wars for liberation. These wars hastened the disintegration of the traditional archaic society, while the so-called historical leaders who conducted the wars were as ignorant of what should be the political future of the societies as the large majority of militants enrolled in the struggle. They were equally cut off from the collective memories with their respective temporalities; they shared the same ignorance of the conditions required by that high task of 'restoring a sovereign, democratic and social Algerian State within the framework of Islamic principles'. This holds true for many other countries, too. We know how the 'principles of Islam' tuned out to political slogans were used by fundamentalist defenders of the Islamic Muslim polity. They recovered the authentic 'Medina Model' as opposed to the reliable alternative to the 'Western Model'.

The party states that took over from colonial regimes have all improvised 're-personalisation' policies (communitarianisms and a quest for 'murderous identities') which have made the regression process worse. They created a crisis of values, and what's more, of functions of free critical reason. The civil wars still

devastating so many peoples started the day after independence proclamations and are still rife in several countries to this very day. I shall say in lapidary fashion that the catastrophe of 11/9/2001 must be thought of in the perspective of a ‘greater reason’ taking on itself the onus of its omissions, its abdication of responsibility, its choices of violent domination and exploitation in Europe; its oblivion, its breaches, its considerable delays, its mytho-ideological wanderings around the world at large twice dispossessed between 1800 and 2008: dispossession by colonisation, and afterwards, from 1945 to 2008, by national ‘elites’ which have ‘monopolised the exercise of legal violence’ according to the general definition of the state by Max Weber.

What must one understand by ‘greater reason’? Greater than which other reasons serving as the basis for systems of thought and civilisation, ‘values’ in bloody competition since 1945? I have often referred to ‘emerging reason’ also, to name all “the fights engaged in by the spirit for the spirit with the resources of the spirit”¹⁴ in all known traditions of thought, restored more or less adequately by historians and identified by anthropologists throughout the world. Although European erudition has accumulated an impressive production on non-Western cultures, there is still much to do in order to create conditions for mutual creativity, for the interpenetration of systems of thought and the works of culture and civilisation. As a result of migratory fluxes throughout the world, the construction in the European Union of a space of new citizenship, we are entering the historical phase of overstepping and transgressing frontiers which are jealously guarded by sovereign states and clerics busying themselves with the cult of ‘true’ religions as well as identities closed by virtue of their self-celebration. It will be necessary to leave behind very quickly the traps and prisons of *Jihād versus McWorld*, as in the book title by Benjamin Barber.

V-2 The Two Verses

How should one read these two verses? There are several reading protocols of the great founding textcorpora of religions. I cannot go into details here.¹⁵ I shall mention the reading protocol of the believer, the philological and historicist reading, the literal or esoteric reading, the grammatical and lexicographical reading, and the theological

¹⁴This phrase is the translation of a celebrated confession by ‘Abd-al-Qâdir al-Jîlânî, hanbalite mystical theologian who became one of the greatest saints of Islam (d. 561/1166). In Arabic, he uses the term *haqq*, a concept expressed in the Qur’an and notably enriched by the great mystics of the classical period. *Haqq* refers at the same time to truth, justice, what is right, the actually real. Here is the quotation, deserving a long commentary, on the truth experienced, interiorised in the personal experience of the divine: *Nâza‘tu-l-Haqqa bi-l-Haqqi li-l-Haqqi*. I translate ‘*haqq*’ by ‘spirit’ because the search for the *haqq* in the mystic engages all the faculties of the spirit, reason, intelligence, memory, imagination and capacity to contemplate the imaginary. Important elaborations on the purport of *Haqq* can be seen in the work of the same author entitled: *al-ghunya li-tâlibi tariq al-Haqq*, Cairo 1304.

¹⁵Cf. my *Pour sortir des clôtures dogmatiques*.

or juridical reading. Each of these protocols leads to more or less reductive ‘truth regimes’, to partial or even false knowledge, to anachronistic projections on fragments which are decontextualised and totally indifferent to the writing conditions of critical history, to synchronic and diachronic linguistics, to the movement from oral culture to written culture, from the first enunciation by the mediator Mohammed Ibn ‘Abdallah called God’s prophet or Messenger, in the enunciation that he has passed on.

Such ignorance, such omissions, such manipulations which are shared by interpreting communities subjected to the traditional theology of Revelation are undertaken and scrutinised by the reading protocol appropriate to ‘emerging reason’. The complexity of this protocol shall appear in the advances of analysis and critique.

Read in their literal meanings, the verses 9,5 and 9,30 will delight all those who reduce Islam to the conquering religion holding people prisoner in the dilemma: conversion or death. It is a solid base for all islamophobes, today’s and yesterday’s. Nowadays peaceful believers are embarrassed by the explicit appeal to kill all polytheists refusing conversion to the ‘true religion’. Since they cannot deny the evidence of the commandment, many avoid citing such an injunction, especially when it is known that medieval commentators call it with pious zeal “the verse of the sabre (*ayat al-sayf*)”. On the other hand, fundamentalists renew the call of this verse with the zeal of the ancients, and brandish it with fervour in order to legitimise the ‘just war’ (*jihad*) against the known ‘aggressors’ of Islam. They torture the text and appeal to pacifist verses to demonstrate that Islam is a religion of peace and tolerance. The just war is a canonical obligation for believers only in the case of legitimate defence or of breach of alliance between clans and tribes. This breach is precisely what the Sura denounces from the start of the first verse: “Allah and his messenger disengage themselves from a pact not observed by their partners” (*bara’atun*), which is what opens up the possibility of a return to hostilities.

The philological and historicist protocol spends more time on the history of words, the etymologies, the influences and the transformations of meanings. It will signal false meanings, the misinterpretations of the literalist who totally ignores the dangers of anachronisms. It will disdain the fantastic interpretations resting on legends or mythological tales which were reported as historically true. Philology has long since been the queen of the disciplines used in the historico-critical method and the critical editions of ancient texts. A typology of the protocols can thus be drawn up to mark the sudden changes and the new contributions of that which is practised under the name of discourse criticism in its different written enunciations or articulations, without going by the way of oral expression.

Whether it be the Bible, the Gospels or the Qur’an, when reading a verse or of a longer textual unit three levels of contextualisation must be kept in mind: (1) the ‘discourse situation’ of the first oral enunciation; (2) the immediate textual context where the verse or fragment has been inserted; (3) the context incorporating the Fixed Official Corpus: the whole of the tales, the fragments and large units collected and divided up in the volume called Bible, Gospel or Qur’an. A large number of problems can now be detected which were ignored for centuries by all the reading protocols mentioned above.

I shall not follow all these stages in such a brief contribution: it is essential that the reader’s attention should focus on the great truth challenges present in each

protocol. In the case of the Qur'an, it is certain that the stationalisation of Islam and the appearance of opposition movements such as the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) in Algeria, the Taliban in Afghanistan, Hizbollah in the Lebanon, Hamas in Palestine... have seen a moving away from an exegesis, framed within a long repetitive tradition, to a 'savage' exegesis escaping all control and clinging to militant pressures entirely devoted to the imperatives of combat ideology. For example, in verse 9, 30 mention is made of a certain 'Uzayr recognised as son of God by the Jews. The ancient exegetes had the merit of questioning the identity of this 'Uzayr. Tabarî stresses that it is unusual for Jews to express such a belief. Modern erudition suggests that 'Uzayr was in fact the High Priest Ezra, who had contributed to the reconstruction of the Temple after the return from Babylon to Jerusalem. This historical curiosity no longer haunts the vast majority of Muslims since any historical reading of the verses questions the orthodox representation of a Word of God descending on earth and communicated word by word by the prophet. Here again is a very illuminating example of the conflicts of truths with regard to names, roles, events, or polemical positions which have been turned into untouchable dogmas.

Let us add a few remarks on the meaning of the links between the two quotations with regard to contemporary actors and the uses made of the Qur'anic text. Firstly, let us comment on the links between the two quotations and the appeal or absence of appeal to the 'immutable Qur'an'. The outraged text of the *al-Mujâhid* newspaper puts the stress on the scandal of *Christians* claiming the authority, under the colonial regime, to modify measures of the Divine Law concerning the status of women. Bourguiba links the emancipation of women (these are the 1930s) to the danger of degeneration of Tunisian personality. Women are the certain and faithful guardians of customs perpetuating the distinguishing traits of national identity. The immediate emotional adherence to this vocabulary of 'values' erases in people's minds the violence implicitly experienced by women without ever making it explicitly known until very recent times. Moreover, the evocation of the endangering of national identity by the colonial occupier evokes the need for a close combat, without making clear what price was to be paid over time in order to maintain an archaic and backward patriarchal regime after the liberation and installation of a national state. Family law and succession law continue to be in force in several countries, thanks to the undisputable argument that human legislation cannot alter explicit orders of the Word of God. I know no Muslim jurist who would open up the ways of a theology establishing the cognitive status of Qur'anic discourse as a whole. Personally I have been doing this since the 1970s, though my intervention was closely linked to that of non-Muslim orientalis. In this way the structure of shared image of Muslim belief fixed since the fourth/tenth centuries continues to control and curb all initiatives of intellectual and cultural liberation by opening, as I have done, the site of a critique of juridical reason in contemporary Islam.¹⁶

Critical thought, both political and juridical, is blocked at the same time by traditional jurists, guardians of the Sunni and Shia orthodoxies and also by the post-colonial states which stationalised religion by the bureaucratisation of the control of theology,

¹⁶Cf. my *Humanisme et Islam*.

politics and law. The quotation of one verse or authentic *hadith* is enough to stop all free debate on issues concerning personal status (*ahwal shaksiyya*). In other words, the activity of critical scientific reason is under the strict dominance of a shared image of belief. Everyday social and political discourse suffer under the perverse and often paralysing effects of the emotional register of belief combined with that of a vehement nationalism continuously set aflame by the intolerable arbitrary politics of ‘the West’ in the whole of the geopolitical space renamed the ‘Greater Middle East’ under the reign of the Bush administration. Thus, the explosive and perverse combination of the political and of the religious mental universe has considerably enlarged the fields of taboo subjects and vocabulary within the whole of what is wrongly called the ‘Muslim world’. The issue of truth is the first great taboo, since there is no truth that can be articulated in the Qur’an or enunciated by the human spirit without validating it through Qur’anic and prophetic teaching. This, at least, is the received belief concerning the Word of God as consigned in the corpus called *Mushaf*.

Sergio Romano:

Thank you very much, Professor Arkoun, you have very effectively conveyed your message. So far I have not mentioned the Jewish religion. Let me just invite Geza Vermes, who has crossed the border between two religions. He was born in Hungary. He became a Catholic priest and then he joined the Jewish faith, becoming one of the greatest scholars in the field of Early Christian religious studies, including the study of the Dead Sea Scrolls. He is a Fellow of the British Academy and of the European Academy of Arts, Science and Humanities.

Geza Vermes:

Thank you, Mr Chairman. I think I ought to preface my talk by saying that my religious odyssey, or the absence of it, has nothing to do with the paper that I am going to read. It will be simple, down-to-earth, and something in the real world.

The Truth About the Historical Jesus

Geza Vermes:

There are two kinds of TRUTH about Jesus Christ. The first is the *Gospel truth*. Its veracity is vouchsafed by faith. In the believer’s eyes no contradictions do, or even can, exist in the divinely inspired Gospels. Appearances to the contrary should be ignored or reconciled. For instance the Gospel of John gives a historically acceptable account of the condemnation of Jesus: he was arrested a day before Passover and, without the mention of a Passover meal and a formal Jewish court process, he was

brought before Pilate, accused of being a revolutionary and sentenced to crucifixion. In the other Gospels, in a historically unlikely fashion, the arrest of Jesus followed by a trial by the Jewish Sanhedrin on the charge of blasphemy, took place after the Passover meal (the Last Supper), and Jesus was pronounced guilty on the night of the feast itself. Yet, no believing Christian asks how the supreme tribunal of Judaea could try a capital case during one of the major festivals, or more simply, how the two stories hang together.

The second kind of truth is less certain than faith and is approximated since the age of the Enlightenment by means of ‘scientific’ historical inquiry. This quest strives to discover the TRUTH, but succeeds to retrieve only morsels of it. The historian’s task is to assemble a monumental jigsaw puzzle of which many parts are still missing. My catching title promises more than anyone can deliver. A more modest ‘Towards the truth about the historical Jesus’ would be closer to what will follow.

Until the mid-eighteenth century *Gospel truth* wholly dominated the Christian world and it has continued to do so in conservative ecclesiastical circles up to the present day. The certainty did not result from the blinding effect faith exerted on the historical evidence. As early as the second century, divergences among the New Testament records were noted by perspicacious Church fathers and a deliberate attempt was made to harmonize them, producing the so-called *Diatessaron*, the four Gospels in one, but after some initial success the innovation failed and the traditional four Gospels survived. Thus later Church fathers were perfectly aware that the two genealogies of Jesus in Matthew and in Luke were incompatible, but they launched the seemingly brilliant idea that Matthew traced the ancestry of Jesus through Joseph, while Luke did so through Mary. They turned a blind eye to the fact that among Jews a genealogy was expected to follow the male line.

Quest for the human figure of Jesus began with Samuel Reimarus (1694–1768) in mid-eighteenth century and has characterized academic Gospel criticism up to the present day. For the first two hundred years it was essentially a German academic pursuit, though from the late nineteenth century onwards with a smattering of British, French and American contributions. It aimed at the rediscovery of the *historical Jesus* and sought to distinguish him from the *Christ of faith*. Its initial stage ended with the anticlimactic *Geschichte des Leben Jesu Forschung* (*Quest of the Historical Jesus*) by Albert Schweitzer (1875–1965), who in 1906 qualified the whole process far too subjective to be worthy of continuation. According to Schweitzer, each scholar produced a Jesus in his own image and resemblance.

From the 1920s to the 1950s historical Jesus research became rather unfashionable under the influence of the great German scholar, Rudolf Bultmann and his new literary-critical school of *Formgeschichte* or form criticism. In 1926, he advanced the memorable statement which de facto excommunicated Life of Jesus inquiry in the wide academic circles over which he ruled: “We can know almost nothing about the life and personality of Jesus since the early Christian sources show no interest in either”.¹ For Bultmann the setting of the Gospel message was not the life of Jesus; the evangelists were catering for the needs of the nascent church. After

¹Bultmann, *Jesus and the Word*, 14.

a thirty year long silence, the historical interest was slowly rekindled in Germany; it was short-lived and without noteworthy results.

In the 1970s, for the first time in two centuries, the main scene of activity left Germany. It first moved to England, the first three main contributions were produced in Oxford, and soon after to the United States. The principal emphasis lay, not on the Hellenistic background of the early church as in form criticism, but on the Jewishness of Jesus in the wake of the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, the renewal of research in postbiblical Judaism and in the first century AD Jewish historian Flavius Josephus. The trend is clearly shown by the new titles: *Jesus the Jew* (1973), *Jesus and Judaism* (1985), *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (1991); *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus* (1991–2001) and *Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews: A Jewish Life and the Emergence of Christianity* (1999). While in the scholarly field the Jewish Jesus had become the dominant figure for all researchers, with or without religious belief, for the numerous Roman Catholic practitioners of the quest, the whole issue was put back in the melting pot in 2007 by His Holiness Benedict XVI. In a best-selling book, *Jesus of Nazareth*, published under the alias of Joseph Ratzinger, the Pope declares that the Gospels' Christ of faith *is* the historical Jesus, thus turning the clock back by several centuries. Pope Benedict bravely invites fellow scholars to contradict him if they so feel inclined, but the big question is whether Catholic biblical experts will have the courage to join Ratzinger's independent critics.

Now let's face the main issue. The student investigating the problem of the Historical Jesus is confronted with a concatenation of difficulties. Everybody except the desperately naive knows that the Gospel sources are not strictly historical and postdate the events by decades. The earlier letters of St Paul won't help as their author never knew, or showed interest in, the Jesus of flesh and blood. The four Gospels written some fifteen to fifty-five years after Paul, in the form of biographies, formulate Jesus' teaching adapted for the needs of the early church. Moreover, their readers had a Greek linguistic, and a Graeco-Roman cultural background, yet they were to receive a Jewish religious message originally formulated in Aramaic. We are facing, as I will show, the *traduttore traditore* syndrome. Finally let's not overlook the subjective element. Believing Christian scholars will be pre-conditioned by their faith and will suspect non-believers of harbouring anti-Christian vested interest. In the circumstances, it is hard for someone who is not influenced by faith to proceed and, what is more, appear to proceed without fear or favour, *sine ira et studio*. O Tacitus, please help!

The historical Jesus can be retrieved only within the context of first century Galilean Judaism. The Gospel image must therefore be inserted into the historical canvas of first century AD Palestine with the help of the works of Flavius Josephus, the Dead Sea Scrolls and early rabbinic literature. It must be borne in mind that Galilee in the age of the New Testament was a relatively independent territory ruled between 4 BC and AD 39 by Antipas, one of Herod's sons. For instance, in the Galilean tetrarchy, unlike in Judaea directly administered by a Roman governor, the tribute collected by the publicans or tax officials went to Antipas, and not to Augustus or Tiberius. Rome's military presence was not directly felt. The centurion,

mentioned in the Gospel, was no doubt a veteran settled in Capernaum, and not the commander of a local garrison.

Against this background what kind of picture of Jesus emerges from the Gospels? That of a rural holy man, initially a follower of the movement of repentance launched by another holy man, John the Baptist. In the hamlets and villages, rather than in the cities, of Lower Galilee and the lakeside, Jesus set out to preach the coming of the kingdom of God within the life time of his generation, and outlined the religious duties his simple listeners were to perform to prepare themselves for the great event. An eloquent popular preacher, Jesus manifested his spiritual power by exorcisms and healing. His audience remarked that “he taught with authority”, namely, curing the sick and liberating the possessed, and “not as the scribes” who could only quote the Bible to prove their sayings. His cures consisted in faith-healing: they required trust on the part of the sick. He invited them to believe in his healing power as man of God. Indeed, he went so far as to identify this faith as the cause of the recovery: “Your faith has made you well”, he reassured a sick woman (Mk 5:34).

In behaving as he did, Jesus conformed to a pattern of charismatic behaviour attested among Jews throughout the ages and down to his own time. The biblical prophets Elisha, Elijah and Isaiah are credited with miraculous healings and resuscitations. Similar phenomena are ascribed in rabbinic literature to holy men living in the age close to the New Testament. Honi in the first century BC and the Galilean Hanina ben Dosa in the first century AD were renowned for their miraculous rain-making power; Hanina’s fame also comprised healing, including healing from a distance like Jesus, and general wonderworking. Flavius Josephus (AD 37-c. 100) reports not only on thaumaturgists of Old Testament vintage, like the prophet Elisha, but explicitly mentions Honi whose wondrous intervention ended a disastrous drought shortly before Pompey’s capture of Jerusalem in 63 BC. He also refers to Jesus in the days of Pontius Pilate (AD 26–36) and calls him a “wise man and performer of astonishing or paradoxical deeds”. The reliability of Josephus’ notice about Jesus² was rejected by many in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, but it has been judged partly genuine and partly falsified by the majority of more recent critics. The Jesus portrait of Josephus, drawn by an uninvolved witness, stands half-way between the fully sympathetic picture of early Christianity and the wholly antipathetic image of the magician of Talmudic and post-Talmudic Jewish literature. “Wise man” and “performer of paradoxical deeds” are genuinely Josephan phrases which no Christian interpolator would have found potent enough to describe the divinised Christ of the later church.

The contour of the historical Jesus, lifted from the Synoptic Gospels, suggests a magnetic prophetic figure who was convinced that the aim of his mission was to bring his repentant Jewish followers into God’s new realm. This kingdom of heaven was foreseen in many of Jesus’ parables as the outcome of a quiet and imperceptible change rather than a cataclysmic transformation in the not too distant future.

²Flavius Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* (commonly abbreviated as Ant.), 18: 63–64.

It would seem that according to the evangelists Jesus considered himself, and his well-disposed contemporaries depicted him, along such prophetic-charismatic lines. Jesus for example explains his rejection by his family and fellow citizens of Nazareth by the well-known saying that at home no one is recognized as a prophet. He was also regularly alluded to by non-local contemporaries as the great prophet from Nazareth. In the anecdote of Caesarea Philippi, Peter's answer to Jesus' question, "Who do men say that I am?", follows a similar turn. Jesus, Peter said, was believed to be a prophet, or the returning Elijah or John the Baptist revived. But when pressed to reveal what the circle of disciples thought of Jesus, Peter confessed, according to Mark, that he was the Messiah, or, according to Matthew, the Messiah, with the added synonym, "the Son of the living God". The latter phrase was understood in Gentile-Christian theology as a move towards the recognition of the divine status of Jesus.

In the course of my research which led to the writing of *Jesus the Jew*, it was impossible not to notice that church tradition tended to attribute the maximum of significance to the honorific titles applied to Jesus by the evangelists. I decided therefore to set up a quasi scientific experiment. I said to myself: Let's try to establish the correlation between the features of the Jesus portrait of the Gospels and meaning of the designations such as 'Messiah', 'Lord', and 'Son of God' in the mind of the contemporaries of Jesus. To achieve this, we must forget the Greek understanding of the terms by the Gentile readers of the Gospel; get rid of 2000 years of superimposed Christian interpretation of the New Testament, and switch instead the searchlight on Jesus' Aramaic-speaking Jewish audience on the shore of the Lake of Galilee. What was the original meaning of the message and what did the original addressees make of it?

To start with 'the Messiah', the Greek *Christos*, if a pollster had interrogated the men in the street in Palestine two millennia ago, asking for a definition of 'Messiah', he would have heard people mumbling about the greatest Jewish king, who would defeat the Romans, while the more religiously minded would have added that the Messiah would be just and holy, and would subject all the nations to Israel and to God. In more peripheral circles, such as the Dead Sea sect, several Messiahs were expected, one royal, one priestly, and possibly one prophetic. But even the don't knows would have had an idea about the messianic age, filled chock-a-block with miraculous events. According to the words put into the mouth of Jesus, this would be the time when "The blind receive their sight, and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear ..." (Mt 11:5). Did Jesus present himself or did the evangelists portray him as a warlike royal pretender? The answer must be no. Jesus always forbade his disciples to proclaim him the Messiah, and when confronted with the question, "Are you the Christ?", his regular reply was evasively negative: "That's what *you* call me", he kept on saying, not I. By contrast, the non-belligose wonderworking figure standing in the shadow of the messianic age fits him perfectly. It tallies with the picture of the Galilean healer, exorcist and preacher so prominent in the Gospels of Mark, Matthew and Luke. In his answer to the question of John the Baptist whether he was the one who was to come, Jesus simply pointed to the events surrounding him: the blind see, the deaf hear, the lame walk, the lepers are healed (Mt 11: Lk 7:22).

The title ‘Lord’, *Kyrios* in Greek, carried high associations in the first century. It pointed to the emperor, the Lord Caesar, whose Latin epithet was divine as in *divus Augustus*. In turn among Greek-speaking Jews, whose Bible the early church appropriated, *Kyrios* (Lord) was the regular substitute for the Hebrew four-lettered sacred and secret name of God. Quite naturally, in the Gospel read in the Greek churches the Lord Christ (*Kyrios Christos*), promptly acquired divine flavour. By contrast, in Jewish circles, with an infinite gap between the divine and the human reality, such a combination was well-nigh inconceivable. Beside Caesar and God, what other meanings did the title ‘Lord’ possess? What did the Galileans imply when they address Jesus as ‘Lord’ or *Mar* in Aramaic? The title, reminiscent of ‘Sir’ in English, could refer to a variety of persons: to a secular dignitary, to the head of the family, to an authoritative teacher, to a prophet and to a miracle worker. The last three nuances perfectly suit the Jesus portrait of the Synoptic Gospels.

Finally the appellation ‘Son of God’, the title in the Hellenistic world of the deified Roman emperor and synonymous with God in early Christianity, is nowhere attested in that sense in Judaism. It is, however, capable of carrying at least five other meanings. It can designate an angel in the superhuman world. In the terrestrial domain, each Jew was entitled to call himself ‘son of God’. But the term underwent a series of restrictive interpretations. In the post-exilic age only the Jews whose heart was circumcised and filled with holy spirit were allotted that name. Also both the Bible and the Dead Sea Scrolls assign filial status to the Messiah, metaphorically the son of the living God. Moreover, some charismatic contemporaries of Jesus were referred to as sons of God. For example, Honi, who managed to produce rain by pestering God, was compared to a son importuning his long-suffering and loving father. Finally, there is the image of the divine voice from heaven proclaiming someone the ‘son of God’. This is reported about the Galilean Hanina ben Dosa. When he had put an end to a persisting drought that threatened the survival of the nation, a divine testimony was heard proclaiming: “The whole world is sustained by Hanina, *my son*.” This episode closely resembles the heavenly utterance recorded about Jesus at the moment of his baptism: “You are my beloved son in whom I am well pleased” (Mk 1:11). Both sayings indicate that in Jewish parlance ‘son of God’ implies divine favour rather than the sharing of the divine nature.

To recapitulate, the philological, literary and historical analysis of the Semitic meaning of Jesus’ titles corroborates his image as it emerges from the Synoptic Gospels. Hence the only reasonable conclusion to draw from a combined study of the Gospel picture and the honorific titles is that the historical Jesus was a Galilean charismatic whose aim was to conduct his repentant Palestinian Jewish contemporaries into the spiritual realm called the kingdom of God through preaching, healing and exorcizing. Traditional Christianity does not stop at this portrait of the human Jesus, but overlays it with the majestic image of the Christ of faith arising from the mystical meditations of Paul and John and the Hellenistic philosophy of the Greek Church Fathers.

Time constraints preclude the presentation of a methodology that would enable the scholar to sketch Jesus’ authentic Gospel. We may deal with it in the forthcoming discussion. In a nutshell, Jesus’ preaching was centred on God, the heavenly Father, on the dignity of all human beings as children of God, on life turned into worship

by total trust, on an overwhelming sense of urgency to do one's duty without procrastination, on the sanctification of the here and now, and above all, on the love of God through the love of one's neighbour.

To conclude, because of the cross, the task of Jesus remained unfinished. Yet despite the apparent failure of his mission, his magnetic impact was so profound that, instead of abandoning the cause, his disciples began to look forward to his imminent second coming. When by the mid-second century Jesus failed to return, Jewish Christianity progressively faded away, while St Paul's Gentile church survived and after Constantine set out to flourish ... albeit in an alien form that would have nonplussed Jesus the Jew.

Panel and General Discussion

Sergio Romano:

Thank you very much, Professor Vermes, for this fascinating historical analysis. We should begin the discussion with Professor Jan Assmann, a German Egyptologist. He has taught at Munich, Heidelberg, Paris, Göttingen, at the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes in Paris and a number of American universities. He is at present pursuing excavations on the western bank of the Nile at Thebes.

Jan Assmann:

Being an Egyptologist, I look at these theological questions from the outside and, I must confess, from a very distant and rather secular standpoint. I would like to start with reading to you a passage from Moses Mendelssohn's book on Jerusalem and religious power published in 1783, 225 years ago. There he writes:

I believe that Judaism knows nothing of revered religion in the sense in which it is taken by Christians. The Israelites have a divine legislation: laws, commandments, statutes, rules of life, instruction in the will of God, and lessons how to conduct themselves in order to attain both temporal and spiritual happiness: those laws, commandments etc., were revealed to them through Moses, in a miraculous and supernatural manner, but no dogmas, no saving truths, no general self-evident propositions. Those the Lord always reveals to us, the same as to the rest of mankind, by nature, and by events, but never in spoken or written words.

And then he continues, distinguishing between three types of truth. First,

Religious dogmas and propositions of immutable truths of God, of his government, of providence, without which men can neither be enlightened nor happy. These were not forced on the belief of the people, by threats of eternal or temporary punishment, but, suitably to the nature and evidence of immutable truths, recommended for rational consideration. They needed not to be suggested by direct revelation, or promulgated by words or writing, which are understood only in this or that place, at this or that time. The Supreme Being revealed them all to all rational beings by events and by ideas, and inscribed them in their soul, in a character legible and intelligible at all times, and in all places.

Secondly,

Historical truths, or accounts of occurrences of the primitive world, especially memoirs of the lives of the first ancestors of the nation; of the covenant which God entered into with them, and his frequent promise to make their descendants a nation dedicated to himself.

These “historical truths” – though this corresponds of course to what Professor Vermes calls ‘Gospel truth’ and not historical truth –

contain the groundwork of the national union, and, as historical truths, they cannot, according to their nature, be received otherwise than on trust; authority alone gives them the necessary evidence.

So, this corresponds to ‘Gospel truth’, but Moses Mendelssohn calls them ‘historical truths’ because of their relationship to time. Thirdly,

Laws, judgments, commandments, rules of life which were to be peculiar to the Jewish nation, and by observing which, it was to arrive at national, as well as every single member thereof, at individual happiness. The lawgiver was God himself; God, not in his revelations as Creator and Preserver of the universe, but God as Lord Protector and ally of their forefathers, as the liberator, founder, and leader, as the king and ruler of that people.

These laws were revealed, that is, they were made known by the Lord, by words and in writing. Still, only the most essential part thereof was entrusted to letters; and without the unwritten laws, without explanations, limitations and more particularly definitions, even these written laws are mostly unintelligible, and must become so in the course of time, since neither any words nor written characters, whatever retain their meaning unaltered, for the natural age of man.

So, Mendelssohn reserves the concept of revelation and historical truths to the last type of truth: the specific rules of Jewish life. Besides the irreducible plurality of truth, like this one, the truth of concrete religions, there is one general human religion based on the natural revelation of immutable truth common to all rational beings. Mendelssohn invites us to distinguish between, on one hand, local truths that assert their binding authority within the confines of a given concrete religion where they achieve the status of revelation, and, on the other hand, universal truths, which are never revealed, let alone written down, but only adumbrated and to be aimed at in discursive approximation. Last but not least, Mendelssohn arrives at a kind of cultural or religious relativism, stressing that religions only exist in the plural, without, however, giving up the idea of universal truth altogether by distinguishing two levels of truth and by assigning the concept of revelation to the lower level of local truth. I think that this two-level theory of truth is a good example of what Dominique Schnapper has called ‘relative relativism’, liberating us from the pitfalls of absolute relativism.

Now I would like to comment on the paper of Professor Vermes. I totally agree that distinguishing between truth of faith and historical truth is a good thing, and I also subscribe to Professor Vermes’ construction of what can be confirmed as historical truth by a contextual approach, taking the Koran and Talmudic authors as well as Josephus into account. What I would like to comment upon is the meaning and genesis of the concept of truth, of faith – *Glaubenswahrheit* in German – and the concept of faith – *Glaube*, *foi*, faith or belief, *pistis* in Greek and *emouna* in Hebrew – in general.

What does ‘faith’ mean? As an Egyptologist, my first step in such matters is always to try to translate those words into Egyptian. In the case of faith, this attempt is doomed to failure. There is nothing, either in mythology or the lexicon, which has any relationship to what we understand by ‘faith’. In biblical mythology, the paragon of faith is Abraham. He is the archetype of a believer. The act of believing requires a kind of paradoxical trust, a confidence against evidence. What does Abraham believe? Certainly not that God exists. This he knows for sure. And there’s nothing contra-evidential about that. What he believes is the truth of God’s promise to make him the ancestor of a great nation, and, as a first step in this direction, that Sara will give birth to a son. We must distinguish between existential or ontological truths and promissory or futurological truths. Ontological truths – ‘to be or not to be’ – are the object of knowledge. Promissory truths are the object of faith. The promise made to Abraham is indeed contra-evidential, since Sara is 80 or 90 years of age. It is verging on the absurd, so as to make one laugh. Therefore the son will be called Yitzhak, meaning ‘he laughed’. Sara laughed, but Abraham believed. And he continued to do so even when God ordered what Abraham could not but understand as the sacrifice of this same son. Faith, therefore, is linked to the future, to a promise to be fulfilled in the future. The truth of faith does not concern the past – for instance, the life of Jesus – but the future. What could this mean in the case of Jesus? Did he make any promises? Is there something contra-evidential which excludes knowing and requires believing? Of course. But in Jesus’s case, two answers are possible: one of an ontological, and several others of a promissory character, relating to the future. The ontological answer is that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of God. The promissory answer is that the Kingdom of God will come and that we will be delivered of our sins and will be resurrected from death when that kingdom comes. Faith does not relate to the past. The thesis that the historical Jesus is the Jesus of the Gospel does not really hit the point. It refers to the future. And since this promissory character and the futurological turn seems alien to ancient Egyptian religion and to every other so-called pagan religion, there’s nothing into which the words *emouna* or *pistis* could be translated. The turn towards the future seems to be the hallmark of biblical monotheism and its elaborations into Christianity and Islam. There is an eschatological and at times even apocalyptic element inherent in the concept of faith and the related concept of truth. And this may be also the reason why this concept is potentially dangerous, destructive and violent.

Sergio Romano:

I would like to introduce Dr Brian Hebblethwaite, who has taught philosophy of religion at the Faculty of Divinity at Cambridge University, and is a Life Fellow of Queen’s College there after having served as Canon Theologian of Leicester Cathedral.

Brian Hebblethwaite:

I should like to begin by making some remarks from the perspective of our theology and religion group about all our discussions so far in these two days. In the first

place, I think that most of us have agreed that our very different truth claims in our very varied domains are aimed at truth, at stating and acting on how things are in our very different areas of concern while acknowledging our very partial and limited success in getting at the truth. But the point I want to raise is, that all these areas of concern are interconnected. The physical universe, with which cosmologists, physicists and mathematicians are concerned, has evolved conditions hospitable to and productive of the life forms with which the biologists are concerned, and biological evolution has come up, here on earth, with consciousness, mind, personality, freedom, creativity and culture, with all of which the humanities are concerned. Among these products of cosmic and biological evolution are all the art forms – literature, painting, sculpture, architecture and music, which even Nietzsche, following Schopenhauer, called an *opus metaphysicum*. Science, philosophy and religion, including religious experience, are themselves aspects of what has eventually emerged from cosmic and biological evolution. And we in philosophical theology find ourselves pressing the question: “What does it tell us about reality, about the universe, that it has it in it to come up with all this?” The religions, as you know, have views about that matter.

Now, of course we shall be told that in theology and religion, we are hopelessly divided amongst ourselves, we Christians, Jews and Muslims in the traditions of Semitic origin, to say nothing of the Eastern and Far Eastern religions. Consensus is even more difficult in religion than in the subject areas already covered in this symposium – though we have seen many examples of disagreement between the philosophers, between the mathematicians and the philosophers, between the scientists and cosmologists, and between them and the philosophers too. And the historians don’t appear to agree with each other either. We’ve also heard about our ignorance – ignorance about dark matter or energy. Even Jean-Pierre Changeux began by saying we don’t know much about how the brain has come up with consciousness, though he went on to tell us an awful lot about it, and I must say I think I learned more in those forty minutes than I’ve learned in any forty minutes previously in my life. We also heard about our still being in Plato’s cave, and about the inexpressibility of truth. So it should not surprise you that theologians talk about the incomprehensibility of God, or that people of faith admit with St Paul that “now, we see in a glass darkly”. We people of religion are accused of being dogmatic. That’s not how I understand the exploratory and self-critical character of philosophical theology, and to my mind the most dogmatic views come from those who would restrict attention to the measurable, like Kelvin did, to the material or to the contingent. And the most dogmatic of all are those who accuse all religion and theology of being mumbo-jumbo.

Simon Blackburn mentioned Pilate’s question, “What is truth?”. Taken in isolation, that question certainly deserves Blackburn’s response. It depends on what you’re talking about. But in its context, it was an ironic, sceptical politician’s refusal to take seriously the claim of Jesus to have come to bear witness to the truth, presumably the truth about God and God’s purpose for mankind. And that leaves me to echo what Professor Assmann has just said about truth and religion not being simply about how things are or were, but about how they were meant to be and how they

will be. The eschatological dimension is central, certainly, to the religions of Semitic origin. I can't resist just saying – this is very naughty – that I look forward to meeting up with Simon Blackburn in the afterlife and telling him “I told you so”, but I think that just goes to show I'm not very far on the path of virtue, and no doubt we'll have better things to think and talk about.

Anyway, I think it's quite implausible to dismiss all theology as mumbo-jumbo. There is a lot of mumbo-jumbo about in religion and theology, but that's true of philosophy too. But it is certainly not true of the great medieval theologians like Maimonides or Thomas Aquinas, so I'm going to defend St Thomas about the sun and the earth or the time of ensoulment. And it's certainly not true, just to mention one or two names, of Joseph Butler in the eighteenth century, of John Henry Newman in the nineteenth century, or of William Temple, Karl Rahner, Alvin Plantinga and William Alston, to name but a few, in the twentieth century. These thinkers speak to us out of living traditions of faith, but what I want to stress is that these traditions, including their revelation claims, are not necessarily just authoritarian systems. They are all, including their revelation claims, open to rational scrutiny and defence. And there are traditions which, among other things, offer wide-ranging worldviews which, to my mind, make better sense of all aspects of our extraordinary universe than those that restrict themselves to certain aspects of the universe, the more easily measurable ones, for instance. I think it's a mistake to think of the religions as just authoritarian. After all, when it was said that Jesus spoke with authority and not as the scribes, that is because of what he said and how he said it, and how it came home to them. And that's true, I think, of the Bible. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, in his writings on the Bible, said that the Bible speaks to us when it *finds* me, he said; when it speaks to the heart and the mind; not quoting some isolated text or whatever, but when the central message finds me and grabs me. That's the sense of authority that I think we need in religion.

Just the briefest of brief comments on my colleagues' presentations in this group. The Cardinal, of course, speaks out of a long, wide-ranging tradition of Christian faith, a tradition that includes the major figures of St Thomas, Newman and Rahner, and he takes seriously, as they did, the revelation claims of Christianity. But he also spoke, as the present Pope and his predecessor have done, of faith and reason. And I repeat, the openness of faith traditions, including their revelation claims, to rational scrutiny is something we should all be prepared to consider, both from within and from without the faith communities, in dialogue. Now I'm not well-placed to comment on the history or theology of Islam, though I have read and profited from the comparative theology of writers such as Kenneth Cracknell and Keith Ward, who've shown something of what can come out of interfaith dialogue between Christians and Muslims. Professor Arkoun mentioned this morning the question of Sharia law, and he will know that the Archbishop of Canterbury in my country got into some hot water recently by suggesting to a group of lawyers that English law should make room for elements of Sharia law. That's another example of interfaith dialogue. And I think there's a lot going for looking for commonalities or complementarities or possibilities of working and living together from the different faith communities in our multi-faith societies of today.

As for the question of violence, I'm very glad to hear what the Cardinal and Professor Arkoun said about that. I think of Archbishop Desmond Tutu and his Truth and Reconciliation Committee in South Africa as a wonderful example of how the question of truth in religion can operate – the very reverse of violence.

To Geza Vermes and his fascinating work on the historical Jesus, let me make just one or two comments about faith and history. Historical judgments on religious matters are of course heavily conditioned by the historian's own religious or non-religious perspectives. I can't resist telling you a story of the nineteenth and twentieth-century historian, T.R. Glover. Two fellows of his Cambridge college met at the college gate. One said to the other "Have you seen Glover's autobiography?" The other replied "I didn't know Glover had written an autobiography. What's it called?" "It's called *The Jesus of History*", the other replied. Attempts to recover the historical Jesus notoriously reflect the writer's own position. I much admire E.P. Sanders's book on the historical Jesus. His perspective is that of a not unsympathetic non-believer. I much admire Geza Vermes's writings on this theme. His perspective is that of a Jewish historian, and it probably gets closer to the facts than Sanders's work. But Christian historians are bound to read the Gospel records differently, coming as they do from participation in the faith community that goes back to Christ crucified and risen. And as I've been stressing – and this is what I want to leave you with, really – the beliefs summarized in the Christian creeds are all subject to rational scrutiny; scrutiny that must take into account what purports to be background knowledge.

Take the question of the resurrection of Jesus, about which Geza Vermes has recently written a book. Obviously, a purely secular historian is not going to give credibility to the resurrection narratives in the Gospels. I'm not going to go all the way with the Oxford philosopher of religion, Richard Swinburne, who in his book on the resurrection of Jesus Christ claims that, given belief in God, and given belief in the incarnation, the resurrection of Jesus has a probability according to Bayes's Theorem of 0.97 – I think that was his figure. Swinburne may be wrong about this, but even his writings on the philosophy of religion are not mumbo-jumbo.

Sergio Romano:

We have custodians of temples and custodians of time. I am the custodian of time. Can you please raise your hand if you want to ask a question.

Comment (Simon Blackburn):

Apropos of meeting Brian Hebblethwaite in the afterlife, I'd just like to comment that there's a nice remark by C.D. Broad, an English philosopher, in one of his books. He is talking about life after death, and he finishes by saying "On this matter, as on so many others, we can only wait and see; or alternatively, which is no less likely, wait and not see".

Question:

Professor Vermes, concerning George Lamsa's English translations from the Aramaic of the Peshitta which he did about 35 years ago: yet we hardly hear of that. Do you know anything about its influence?

Geza Vermes:

I don't think that much has been said about that book, which is naturally totally subjective. Any study of any Aramaic translation of the Gospels will have to decide, first of all, which kind of Aramaic dialect applies. And on this there is no agreement among experts. I myself think that the only kind of Aramaic dialect that would be suitable for any kind of interpretation would be the Galilean dialect of Aramaic, of which we have some sources belonging to a period which is several centuries after the time of Jesus. So it will become very, very subjective, and very, very relative. I don't think anybody will get very far along those lines.

Question:

Professor Vermes, I know of a book explaining Jesus in relation to the Zealots. I don't know if that was the theory of Samuel Brandon. How does it fit with your findings? And also I would like to ask Professor Arkoun a question about violence. I found information that at least one intellectual in the Nazi period, I don't recall his name, decided that Jesus was a Jew but not psychologically so, in order to justify the repression of the Jews. This points to the repression of the Jewish mentality by the Nazi regime. Maybe you have something to say about the difference of this repression, which is purely based on race, and the repression of a mentality that took place then and might take place in our time too.

Geza Vermes:

Of course Jesus and the Zealots is a question that has been debated after Brandon and Hyam Maccoby and some other recent scholars. I myself believe that it's completely mistaken and misunderstood. I don't believe that Jesus was animated by political considerations. And with the exception of one or two sayings that have crept into the Gospels, and with the exception of the possible political significance of the fact that one of the apostles was referred to as 'the Zealot', we have really nothing to go on. It would seem that Jesus was essentially non-political, and that his concept of the kingdom of God was not one that would be achieved by the force of arms.

Mohammed Arkoun:

There are lots of texts which have been published to legitimize these unacceptable policies. Let me just say that the idea that Jesus is not a true Jew is one of those collective inventions, which evolves in the social imagination and might find supporters. You can find any such ideas in all societies as there are always racist people who tend to cast other people out. So we need to be aware of all this, but it's quite a different thing to try and explain these ideas.

Question:

Let me just ask Professor Assmann: the fact that you don't hold the distinction between faith and hope for truth is valid, is this absence of distinction misleading? You seem to confuse faith with hope, whereas they are two well diversified dimensions.

Jan Assmann:

Of course, hope and faith are two different phenomena, as St Paul already distinguished them, and both relate to the future, to a promise, to fulfillment to be trusted in, and trust relates to the authority in which the trust is posed. We spoke of this authority. The German word *Verheissung* is much stronger than 'promise' in English. But promise is a performative speech act, and performative speech acts require the authority of the speaker. And so the highest authority of course is God, or the Son of God, and speaking with authority means being in a position to make a very great promise, which of course is the object both of faith and of hope. So I cannot see the difference between trust and faith. It relates to the authority and to the performative reality of the promise.

Georges Cardinal Cottier:

Let me just refer to the words of Dr Hebblethwaite about the interpretation of the holy texts. For believers and non-believers, there are some biases that we need to consider. An absolutely unbiased and scientific positivist look is not something you can actually have. There are very interesting points in the words of Professor Vermes, but there are several questions raised here. If Christ has been embodied, then He has taken on a new language and new shape. Let me address another question: what is the relationship among cultures when we are facing the problem of tradition, for instance? There are very interesting points of view about the truth in Islam and about the transfer of knowledge in the Arab world. The holy texts should be framed within the historical context as well as in the context of the communities. Dr Hebblethwaite has really highlighted a very important topic there.

Geza Vermes:

This is a half-serious question to Cardinal Cottier. Am I right in remembering that, in your paper, the word 'Jesus' has never appeared?

Georges Cardinal Cottier:

I have just mentioned Jesus Christ twice. But in my paper I started with commenting a text which was actually not about Him, as I started from the Gospel of John.

Sergio Romano:

I think we ought to thank the participants at the roundtable and the main speakers, because we have been given a lot of food for thought and we ought to be very grateful to you all.