5. OUR IMAGE OF ‘OTHERS’ AND OUR OWN IDENTITY

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Introduction

The Christian search for truth has taken place in a continuous dialectic curve of institutionalization and charismatic structuring, of catholicy and individuality, of the establishment of norms and the infringement of the law, of the axioms of religion preserved and passed on by teachers and of individually found truth through revelation. In each period of time and in each society varying accentuation in the process was important, the result of which was often a violent severance of the two poles: the clergy and charisma. Especially in the field of essential questions, such as the meaning of life, salvation and the legitimate conveyance of doctrine, it was surely an efficient method to label the representations of other denominations with recurring stereotypes and rhetoric, which make it seem justified to say that an image of the ‘other’ is being created. This process of creating an image of the ‘other’ in the light of a special epoch, the Middle Ages, will be shown later on.1

The Mechanism of Exclusion

Adhering to a faith is ultimately being convinced of a truth, which backs away from clear proof. One has to rely on plausibility’s, which are strengthened and justified through the very fact that others also use the same patterns. Rodney Stark has described the social process

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1 According to scientific conventions it is customary to fix the period of the Middle Ages to roughly 500–1500, the epoch between late Antiquity and modern times. The limits are still under discussion. The best-known alternative is the one by the Belgian professor of historical economics Henri Pirenne, who holds that the Middle Ages begin with the advent of the Islam in the seventh century. Others, like Ernst Troeltsch end the period with the Age of Reason. For the divergent proposals compare e.g. the survey of Markschies, 1995, 16ff. In this treatise the period is mainly restricted to the 11th–14th centuries.
coupled with religion which took place in the early church. He argues that those who refuse to believe in the religion that is held to be true are a threat to its plausibility. It raises constant doubts whether one’s own religion is the correct one, since so many others do not accept it. The more people are converted to one’s own religion, the more credible it seems to be, whatever its teachings are. This mechanism should be born in mind, when one pursues this line of thought, especially with respect to our image of the ‘other’. The exclusion of the ‘other’ must also expel one’s own doubts and substantiate that one’s own persuasion is the only true one.

As in the metaphysical way of thinking purely rational arguments were bound to fail. It looked more effective—since antiquity at the latest—to prove the verity of one’s own religion in an indirect way. First, the devotees of other denominations were slandered and their convictions were presented as distortions of the true faith, in order to make the superiority and truth of one’s own faith even more conspicuous. Representation of one sort or another, which was understandable to everybody and needed little or no thinking at all, served the purpose to ‘prove’ one’s own absolutism as being best of all.

Long before such representation got a visual form—which happened approximately since the eleventh century—literary motives came into being. Generally speaking, material representation was only acquired after lengthy battles during which the iconographic illustration of especially the Divine and the Holy was for a long time not only exposed to criticism from outsiders but also from inner circles within Christianity itself. A link between the opposition to iconography and the exclusion of the ‘other’ can e.g. be found with the anti-representation Paulicians, who were branded as heretics by the Byzantine-Orthodox church in the controversy about iconography (Frank, 2004). But which was the more important: their theological position—the rejection of any repre-

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2 Cf. Stark, 1997, especially 7–111. The rise of the Early Church, which may be called a success story, during which many people joined the new religion, was followed by a certain stagnation from the tenth century at the latest, during which the contact of the Christians with the adherents of a younger and more animated religion—the Islam—shook the plausibility of the Christians’ religion.

3 The last few decades the proofs for the existence of God have only survived in theology as historical objectives, cf. Ricken, 1999.

4 These are claims to absolutism which aim both at ‘the absolute’ (in fact God) and were presented in an absolute manner (that is with unrelenting harshness).