III. The Significance of History of Religions for the Christian-Muslim Dialogue

These two illustrations have not been picked up at random. Together, they constitute not only the common grounds between the three world religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, but equally the most important fields of contention between them. And of the three religions, Christianity and Islam are here perhaps the most involved. The work that awaits the historian of religions in these two areas will contribute decisively towards constructive dialogue between these religions in addition to re-establishing a very important segment of the religious history of the majority of mankind.

The Old Testament is not only Hebrew scripture (or the divine law revealed to Moses and the nationalist history of an extremely particularist people) nor only Christian scripture (or, according to the dominant Heilsgeschichte school, the inspired record of God’s saving acts in history culminating in the Incarnation). It is also Islamic scripture, inasmuch as it is the partial record of the history of prophecy, and hence of divine revelation. 32) Indubitably, every one of these religions can point to something in the Old Testament substantiating its claim. But the whole truth cannot be on the side of any. Furthermore no religion is, by definition, equipped to transcend its own categories so as to establish the historical truth of the whole which, as a religion, it interprets in its own way in order to suit its own purpose. Only the historian of religions measures to the task who would relate

the ideas of the Old Testament to the history of the Hebrews as ancient history has been able to reconstruct it, holding in *époque* both the Christian and the Islamic understanding of Hebrew scripture. But we may not make total abstraction of the Hebrew understanding because the Old Testament is, after all, a Hebrew scripture written in Hebrew by the Hebrews and for the Hebrews. The contents however are not strictly speaking all Hebrew materials. The ideological overtones of the scripture, namely, those set in the books of Genesis and Exodus, are Hebrew versions of Semitic themes which belong to all Semites. Islam is a Semitic religion whose formative years were spent in Arabia, the cradle of all things Semitic. It is natural that the Islamic version of these themes is another version of ideas which are much older than "J". The Islamic claim may not therefore be brushed aside as external to the matter in question. For just as Christianity is "a new Israel," Islam is "an other Israel" legitimately giving a version of Semitic origins which are as much, if not more, its own as that of the Hebrews.

Secondly, the examination by history of religions of the formative centuries of Christianity is equally involving for Islam. Islam is not a foreigner here. Islam is Christianity inasmuch as it is a moment in the developing Semitic consciousness of which the Hebrew, Judaic and Christian religions were other moments. That is why Islam rejected neither the Hebrew Prophets nor Jesus but, recognizing the divine status of their missions, reacted to the assertions of Jews and Christians regarding them. Although the Prophet Muhammad and his first Muslim followers were personally neither Jews nor Christians, yet their ideas were in every respect internal to the Jewish and Christian traditions, affirming, denying and in some cases transcending what Jews and Christians have held to be or not to be the faith of Adam, of Abraham, of Noah, of Jacob, of Moses and of Jesus. The "Christianity" which Islam is, therefore, is an alternative to Orthodox Christianity; but it is as much Christianity as Orthodox Christianity is. Neither is Islam's Christianity an alternative posed in abstracto, as a discursive contradiction or variation, but in concreto, a historical alternative. Islam too did not come about except "in the fulness of time" but this fulness consisted in the attempt by Orthodox Christianity to wipe out the Christian alternatives to itself. In the first century of Islam, the greatest majority of its adherents had been Christians in dis-