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Abstract – Sektion 6, Panel 4

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The organizers of this panel on comparative theology with focus on Islam have asked me to give you a specimen of my work in comparative theology. I happen to be engaged in a rather long research on the topic of the so-called "People of the Book" or, as I prefer to call them, the "Scripture People" in the Qur'an. During this research, I gradually found that the usual translation of the qur'anic term *ahl al-kitāb* and the connotations that go with this translation prevented me from finding a comparative theological access to the theological notion implied in this term. So I will have to start off with a first paragraph in which I criticize the usual translation of this term and its connotations. In the second paragraph I will shortly describe how my study of the third surah of the Qur'an, *Āl 'Imran*, and of the commentary by the Iranian scholar Muhammad Husayn al-Tabataba'i in his *al-Mizān fi Tafsīr al-Qur'ān* (published 1973) helped me to find a comparative theological access to this term.[1] When preparing for a lecture together with an Iranian scholar earlier this year, I noticed how certain theological expressions used by Tabataba'i not only reminded me of qur'anic notions but also of some basic theological notions that I had learnt long ago from Karl Barth. So the third and final paragraph will introduce this Swiss theologian and his famous critique of religion to you. I am quite aware that the combination of the Qur'an and Karl Barth might seem to be very strange since Barth is known as an exclusivist and his name is not well received among Christian theologians of religions. Yet I think that his famous *Religionskritik* that started in his commentary on Paul's letter to the Romans and culminated in his famous saying, *Religion ist Unglaube*, in the second half of the first part of his *Kirchliche Dogmatik* might well be the right key for Christians to understand what the Qur'an means by addressing Jews and Christians as

“Scripture People.” Qur’an and Barth: a very unlikely combination indeed. I do need to add that my work is far from finished and is waiting for criticism in its turn. But I have always liked the fact that comparative theology leads to these unlikely combinations and strange bedfellows. So here we go: first the term ahl al-kitāb, next a few examples from the third surah of the Qur’an, and finally Karl Barth and his Religionskritik.