MONOTHEISM AND THE PARADOX OF INTOLERANCE:
THE REFUSAL TO DIVINIZE VICTIMS AND THE MOSAIC DISTINCTION

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In a shrinking and globalizing world, with many conflicts stemming from religious or ideological differences, how are we to regard monotheism’s potential for inspiring violent absolutism? Discussions of monotheism’s political consequences often emphasize either its “intolerance” of other gods and religions as a source of bigotry and conflict, on the one hand, or emphasize monotheism as a source of pacific, universalistic, transcendent tolerance on the other. But both approaches fail to give monotheism’s “intolerance” its due. I argue that monotheism’s intolerance opens up historic potentials that are both enlightening and dangerous: it dissolved the ancient link between God and the political sphere, helped us see past the distortions of divinized politics, and deepened concern for the victims of politics—while it nonetheless makes possible a uniquely absolutist, violence. By comparison, polytheistic “tolerance” does not necessarily make for a liberating vision of inclusion and diversity. To argue this, I construct an account of monotheism’s intolerance—as a “refusal to divinize victims” and a prohibition of representing the Absolute—and its relevance to pluralistic coexistence today. This includes critically
weaving together the mimetic theory of René Girard, the monotheistic scholarship of Jan Assmann et al, and the social theory of Chantal Mouffe, treating their ideas as mutually illuminating.
Dedicated to Cassie Haw and her divine, gracious (in)tolerance.
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ABBREVIATIONS

Jan Assmann

ATM  Akhenaten to Moses
GG   Of God and Gods
ME   Moses the Egyptian
MPC  “Monotheism and Its Political Consequences”
PM   The Price of Monotheism
CMA  “Cultural Memory and the Myth of the Axial Age”

Sigmund Freud

MM   Moses and Monotheism

René Girard

EC   Evolution and Conversion
ISS  I See Satan Fall Like Lightning
TH   Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World
TOB  The One By Whom Scandal Comes
VS   Violence and the Sacred
Robert Gnuse

NOG  No Other Gods

Chantal Mouffe

DP  The Democratic Paradox

AG  Agonistics

Wolfgang Palaver

RGMT René Girard’s Mimetic Theory

Mark Smith

GIT  God in Translation

EHG  The Early History of God

TOBM The Origins of Biblical Monotheism

Eric Voegelin

OH  Order and History, vol 1, Israel and Revelation

SPG  Science, Politics, and Gnosticism
CHAPTER 1:
INTRODUCTION

1.1 Religion and Violence: Monotheism and Its Political Consequences

Why have I chosen this problem of monotheism and intolerance, and how have others approached it? To answer, in this introduction I will 1) broach the monotheism-intolerance problem as a topic within the broader field of “religion and violence,” 2) introduce the paradox surrounding the concept of “intolerance,” and 3) introduce how I will use Girard and Assmann, who add novel insight to the monotheism discourse, to build an account of monotheism and intolerance useful to us today.

Religion today, far from being the opiate of the people, seems more like “the dynamite of the people,” as Jan Assmann notes. I refer to the topic of “religious violence,” which we can roughly define as violence or threats of violence justified in the name of religion. One could name examples in Islamic terrorism and ISIS’ caliphate, or white

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Christian terrorism in the US with the bombing of black churches or abortion clinics, KKK rallies, Buddhist violence against Muslim and Hindu Rohingya, and so on.\(^3\) Though it is difficult to distinguish the political from the religious factors in these conflicts, there remains a suspicion that at the heart of many such conflicts is the issue of “religious intolerance.” By this, I mean religious teachings and practices with an inflexible, closed-off disposition toward, or repression of, cultural and religious differences. Such intolerance is conspicuously associated with, for example, extreme applications of sharia law or Westboro Baptist hate speech in the United States. But it is also a crucial factor in the simmering nature of “culture war”: how much can a society have different values and respect for difference, and what should not be tolerated? At what point does legislation cross the line into intolerantly “legislating morality”?\(^4\)

But, while religion can often be accused of engendering particularly intolerant values in these conflicts, both liberalism and secularism too have endured much critique for harboring intolerance. When I refer to liberalism here (a topic to be addressed only in the last chapter), I use Chantal Mouffe’s definition: the traditions emphasizing the rule of law, tolerance, inclusion, defense of universal human rights, and respect of individual liberty.\(^4\) And by secularism I mean a species of liberalism which aims to construct a

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religiously “neutral” public space. Both of these traditions have endured criticism as being hypocritically intolerant. Far from a critique of hegemony (viz. a dominating enforcement of order through manipulating consent\(^5\)), they can become the new hegemony. I have in mind, for example, France’s controversial headscarf and burkini bans, and the accusation that this enforced neutrality is intolerant of religious and cultural differences. Or, in the United States, the political-cultural left has been increasingly critiqued as an intolerant “regime of tolerance” that silences its critics, sometimes even in violence and mobs.\(^6\) That liberalism can corrupt into the “terror of justice” has led some theologians to virtually abandon liberalism altogether, concluding that “justice is a bad idea”—with liberal justice being little more than partisanism in the cloak of pacific humanitarianism, diametrically opposed to grace and nonviolence.\(^7\) Whatever one makes of these critiques, it shows how

\(^{5}\) “Hegemony” for Mouffe use includes Antonio Gramsci’s notion of “cultural hegemony,” that goes deeper than simply a dominant “rule,” but the way by which a ruling class wins the consent of society through manipulating cultural symbols and values. See Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (New York: Verso, 1985).


\(^{7}\) See especially Stanley Hauerwas or any number of exponents of Radical Orthodoxy, like Daniel Bell or John Milbank. Bell refers to the “terror of justice” within the liberal state as well as the oppression of liberal capitalism.
not only religion but liberalism too can become intolerantly hegemonic and, in turn, perhaps too hastily abandoned.⁸

One of the oldest tropes in these intolerance discourses is that monotheism in particular harbors a special level of violent, religious intolerance. For monotheism does not only mean belief in one God, but “the belief in only One God.”⁹ As such, this entails the thought that other gods and religions are false, wrong, and even nonexistent. And, with such an all-encompassing conviction, and a seeming exclusion of the validity of other beliefs, we face what seems an intractable irrationality, dangerously prone to turn a sense of religious supremacy into political violence and suppression of difference. While monotheism can be construed as a bastion of universal tolerance—i.e. as inspiring a benevolence transcending partisanship, inspiring love of enemies—it can also be construed as purveying a religious superiority-complex at the root of manifold violences and exclusions. It can appear as an absolutist “political theology”—how we imagine political power relates to God¹⁰—that views the religious heathen as also a political enemy to be repelled or killed, or at least to be repressed into abiding by orthodoxy.

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⁸ William Cavanaugh is particularly known for this reversal of the special equation of religion with violence, concerning how the sacred has “migrated” into the political sphere in the form of “civil religion” (William Cavanaugh, The Myth of Religious Violence (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2012). One can also recall here the critiques of Talal Asad (Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, and Modernity [Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), concerning the constitutive power that nonetheless characterizes the supposedly religion-free, power-free discourse of secularism.


¹⁰ I refer to the species of “political theology” as debated between Carl Schmitt and Erik Peterson that is more akin to political science and the imaginary of sovereignty (Giorgio Agamben, The Kingdom and the Glory: For a Theological Genealogy of Economy and Government [Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011], 9). In this sense, the term refers to how political and religious symbols interpenetrate one another, asking whether or how “God participates in the powers that act in the cosmos.”
The most infamous examples of monotheistic intolerance come from its supposed historic birth itself, depicted in the Bible as an occasion for annihilation or repression of idolaters: the massacres after the Golden Calf, the mass impalements of idolaters, Moses’ command to murder any who incite idolatry (even one’s brothers), Phineas’ zealous murders, the Josuanic conquests, Elijah’s slaughter of Baal priests, the bloody reforms of Josiah, Ezra’s forced termination of marriages, the Maccabean mercilessness, Revelation’s fantasies of a bloodbath, and so on.11 Even if many of these scenes may never have happened, as many archaeologists and historians have suggested, Egyptologist Jan Assmann nonetheless urges, “it seems to me highly significant that the new religion attaches so much importance to violence in its narrative self-presentation. Violence belongs to what could be called the ‘core-semantics’ of monotheism. I do not state that monotheism is violent; merely that it dwells on scenes of violence in narrating its path to general realization.”12 Why this dwelling, and is it unique to monotheism?

Does the idea of monotheism, the exclusive worship of one god instead of a divine world, or the distinction between true and false in religion, in which there is one true god and the rest are false gods, imply or entail violence? Are violence and intolerance, rigor and

This concerns the type of divine analogue with political authority that Eusebius saw between Constantine, Christ, Augustus, Roman Peace, and Monarchy. Such political theology can overlap with, but is not the same as, confessional expressions of how faith calls believers to act politically.

Varro of the 1st century BCE situated “political” (or civic) theology in contrast with “natural” and “mythic” theologies. This triple classification operated as a framework for Augustine’s discussion of “political theology” in the sixth book of the City of God (GG 20). A foundational example of political theology occurs in Book L of Aristotle’s Metaphysics, which makes the One Unmoved Mover the basis of One Emperor (from Homer’s Iliad 2, 204): “the world must not be governed badly. ‘The rule of many is not good; let there be one sovereign’.”

11 Ex 32-34; Deut 13:6-10; Num 25; 1 Kings 18; 2 Kings 23:1-27; Ezra 9-10; 1 and 2 Maccabees; Revelation passim. GG 116; Jan Assmann, From Akhenaten to Moses: Ancient Egypt and Religious Change (hereafter ATM) (Cairo, Egypt: The American University in Cairo Press, 2016) 50.

zealotry the price that exclusive monotheism has had to pay for sticking to the notion of a very personal and passionate God while stressing the idea of Oneness?\textsuperscript{13}

Given the great anxieties about violence in a shrinking world, and the need for at least some level of tolerant, pluralistic coexistence, it is not unreasonable that some conclude monotheism only makes things worse.

The suspicion that monotheism presents a unique threat to coexistence has deep roots—a history we will briefly review at the beginning of chapter two. For now, we can simply note that the debate on whether or how to do away with monotheism’s intolerance has continued on into the modern era. David Hume was among those who suggested, in his ninth chapter of *The Natural History of Religion* (1757), that monotheism harbors a special violence in contrast with polytheism’s tolerance. Edward Gibbon regarded biblical monotheism’s triumph in the west as producing an intolerant and totalizing ethos, giving rise to fanaticism and violence (c1780).\textsuperscript{14} More recently Regina Schwarz’s *The Curse of Cain: The Violent Legacy of Monotheism* (1998) and Jonathan Kirsch’s *God Against the Gods: the History of the War Between Monotheism and Polytheism* (2004) have presented monotheism’s intolerance and exclusivism (its sense of the “scarcity” of truth) as incompatible with pluralistic coexistence.\textsuperscript{15} Monotheism “reduces all other gods to idols”

\textsuperscript{13} *GG* 109.


\textsuperscript{15} “If there is only one god, if there is only one right way to worship that god, then there is only one fitting punishment for failing to do so—death” (Jonathan Kirsch, *God Against the Gods: the History of War Between Monotheism and Polytheism* [New York: Penguin, 2005], 2). Gnuse catalogues numerous
and “all other worshippers to abominations,” salted for destruction. Others have identified in monotheistic religion the “vivisectionist impulse”—a fervor for finality, certitude, and the possession of ultimate truth, resulting in the urge to “other” and execute wrath on the supposed heathen. Steven Pinker’s *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined* (2011), recently used by the United Nations to structure its Human Security Report (2013), opens and frames his book around the symbolic violence of the Bible as “one long celebration of violence.” He argues society as a whole should shift from such religiously-founded superstition and intolerance to “modern principles” like “nonviolence and toleration,” and “Enlightenment rationality and cosmopolitanism.”

In sum, how are we to think about monotheism’s ostensible absolutism, its sense of unique superiority that chafes at tolerance, plurality, and diverse religions? The words


19 Pinker 11f, 17.
of Gandhi come to mind, “How can he who thinks he possesses absolute truth be fraternal?” Or Symmachus: “such a great secret is not attainable by a single path.”\textsuperscript{20} Or, the famous bumper sticker that aligns the symbols of major world religions to form the word, “Coexist.”\textsuperscript{21}

1.2 The Paradox of Intolerance

One could approach the terms “tolerance” and “intolerance” in many different ways. For this study, by “tolerance” I mean the aspiration for political “inclusion” without any exclusion—i.e. the exercise of social forms of association without violence, exclusion, or hegemony. Consider, for example, Rousseau’s aspiration for a politics of peaceful consent that, in Dumouchel’s characterization, “it was possible to find a form of association such that power would never be able to exercise its violence against those who were subject to it because, owing to their agreement, the strength that power uses against citizens is, by definition, not violence.”\textsuperscript{22} Tolerance, in this sense, is situated within the liberal social contract tradition, dating back at least to John Locke.\textsuperscript{23} Chantal Mouffe

\textsuperscript{20} Symmachus, \textit{Relatio} 3.10.

\textsuperscript{21} One could argue that “theology,” in general, has no causal relationship with violence whatsoever, for good or bad. Mark Smith cites one study wherein “forms of divinity” does not make the list of beliefs that propel groups toward conflict (\textit{GIT}, 26; Roy J. Eidelson and Judy I Eidelson, “Dangerous Ideas: Five Beliefs that Propel Groups Toward Conflict,” \textit{American Psychologist} 58 (2003), 182-192; Jack David Eller, \textit{Cruel Creeds, Virtuous Violence: Religious Violence Across Culture and History} (Amherst: Prometheus, 2010), 372).


\textsuperscript{23} See John Locke’s \textit{Letters Concerning Toleration} (c1690), and his later, anonymous \textit{Two Treatises of Government} (1689), especially the second treatise. See also Roger Williams, \textit{The Bloudy Tenent of Persecution for Cause of Conscience} (1644).
discusses this liberal tradition today as characterized by a rationalism that aims for a totally consensual political order without division, that excludes no one; tolerance in this sense means the overcoming of political divisions through rational procedures to attain a society beyond hegemony.²⁴

Intolerance, however, becomes a paradoxical concept when we consider it in a strictly grammatical sense. All societies necessarily exclude certain practices and crimes through taboos and laws. Even the note on Rousseau above admits that tolerance contains violence—but, through consent, it is supposedly cleansed of arbitrary despotism. But when we acknowledge that even tolerance contains violence, it clarifies how there is no such thing as a purely “tolerant” society, nor would we want one. Intolerance and exclusion are in fact constitutive of association and disassociation, of law and order. This inescapable feature of human association Chantal Mouffe terms “the political”—viz. that aspect of human association which inescapably involves decisions between conflicting alternatives.²⁵ This means that all associations, even supposedly inclusive ones, involve an us/them configuration. Even if social divisions were to be managed through very inclusive and tolerant governing strategies of deliberation and committees, these would still be expressions of a new power-relation, a new division, a new exclusion. “The political,” in this sense of the inescapability of hegemony and decision, is different from “politics,” by

²⁴ John Rawls, A Theory of Justice (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1971). In Rawls’ sense, the ideal of justice is perfectly “blind,” with our principles of equality considered from a position of unconditional equality (e.g. Rawls, 11).

²⁵ “The political’ refers to this dimension of antagonism which can take many forms and can emerge in diverse social relations. It is a dimension that can never be eradicated” (Chantal Mouffe, Agonistics: Thinking the World Politically [hereafter AG] [New York: Verso, 2013], 2, 3).
which Mouffe simply means the various practices and institutions which aim to organize human coexistence.\textsuperscript{26}

Seen in this sense, the dichotomous choice between inclusion or exclusion, tolerance or intolerance is a false one. Even inclusivity and tolerance eventually run into the paradox of intolerantly enforcing their range of acceptable difference. On such grounds, the critics of “democratic peace,” “liberal peace,” or “universal human rights,” have argued that these concepts paper over the West’s neo-liberal hegemony.\textsuperscript{27} That is, ideologies of “tolerance” often avoid saying what they do \textit{not} tolerate, what they exclude, and thus scandalize those repressed by this “regime of tolerance.” Ideologies which characterize themselves as champions of inclusion, humanitarianism, openness, peace, tolerance can be distorted by pretending to have escaped—by rhetorical evasion—the inescapability of exclusions. But in practice, even tolerance and inclusivity are constitutively “intolerant” and closed by grammatical necessity. If that is the case, the question then becomes not “whether or not to be intolerant,” which would be impossible, but \textit{how} to be intolerant—what to exclude and include, and how.

Applied to the problem of monotheism’s intolerance, the question becomes, what precisely does monotheism teach us to not tolerate, and how? What sort of political disposition towards difference and division does it imbue—in comparison with its

\textsuperscript{26} \textit{AG}, 130f.

\textsuperscript{27} E.g. Oliver Richmond, “A Post-Liberal Peace: Eirenism and the Everyday,” \textit{Review of International Studies} 35 (2009), 557-580. He writes, “The ‘liberal peace’ is undergoing a crisis of legitimacy at the level of the everyday in post-conflict environments. In many such environments; different groups often locally constituted perceive it to be ethically bankrupt, subject to double standards, coercive and conditional, acultural, unconcerned with social welfare, and unfeeling and insensitive towards its subjects. It is tied to Western and liberal conceptions of the state, to institutions, and not to the local” (557). Or also, the UNDHR appears less “universal” when considering the rejoinders in, for example, \textit{The Cairo Declaration of Human Rights}, which offers a Muslim account of rights.
alternatives in polytheism, henotheism, etc.? What did polytheism’s supposed inclusion exclude? Throughout my chapters I will argue that monotheism’s “intolerance” toward politically representing the Absolute—and in Christianity’s worshipping the excluded Christ as that Absolute—helps birth an enlightened intolerance of any absolutist politics. This means denying royalty of its divine aura, first in Israel, and slowly the rest of the world. In other words, the “intolerant” aspect of monotheism is indeed potentially dangerous in abetting a hegemonic universalism, but it is also precisely what helps us critique and relativize all Absolutes and divinized political powers. This intolerance bears striking resemblance to Mouffé’s agonistic pluralism, which refuses political representation of the Absolute. Such a pluralism means refusing to imagine all society under a totalized non-hegemonic Unity; it sees the inclusive question “can’t we just get along” as expressive of a mythic Unity that hides divisions within the status quo. Rather, a mature monotheism and pluralism, I will argue, means a more open-ended “can’t we just argue?”

And so, this dissertation does indeed offer something of an apologia for monotheism, that monotheism indeed has deep consequences in the way we perceive political division and tolerance, but not at all on the usual grounds of defending its pacific universalism and tolerance. Rather, I will attend closely to the complex origins of monotheism and its intolerance amidst the ancient world’s political theology. Arguing this requires comparison with the polytheistic world from which monotheism emerged,

revealing both increased potential dangers and liberations. This comparative work is particularly important in light of recent archaeological and biblical scholarship. Biblical scholar Robert Gnuse has argued that, stemming from a tidal shift in historical-critical scholarship in the last half century, biblical monotheism, far from being a sharp and simplistic break from ancient polytheism, has shown itself to be far more pagan and polytheistic in its genetic origins.\(^29\) Appreciating biblical monotheism’s unique breakthrough, amongst any more than a choir of co-religionists, requires more detailed comparative analysis of the ancient context than many theologians are willing or prepared to do.\(^30\) The simplistic common narrative of monotheism’s singular revelation to Abraham or Moses, unlike any God known, which thereafter improved the world with truth, needs to be reframed in light of a far more complex array of data—just to name a few: the varieties of monotheism in the ancient near east, the violent zeal and jingoism of politics that is embedded in monolatry, and the many national breakdowns that led Israel to its intriguing monotheistic breakthrough.

\(^{29}\) Robert Gnuse, *No Other Gods: Emergent Monotheism in Israel* (hereafter NOG) (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 15, 23, 270, 275ff, et passim. Even while carefully suggesting what in fact is ancient Judaism’s novel reconstrual of preexisting ideas (like divine intervention, a divine plan for people, social deities, social justice, exclusive veneration), he writes, “Contemporary authors need to relinquish the use of the word ‘unique’ when describing biblical thought, for that was the term truly overused by the past generation of biblical theologians…We should not search for the unique, but rather for how old ideas were transformed” (266, 271).


\(^{30}\) One can extend the critique to Christian theological method: “The obsession with discerning the uniqueness of the biblical text has served to isolate and recontextualize the Gospels, thus allowing for readings that promote standing ecclesiological interests. The assigned ‘sacred’ nature of the text in this way has served as a license, whether entirely or more subtly by degree, to segregate these texts from the ancient literary domain(s) of which they were indeed a part. Richard C. Miller, *Resurrection and Reception in Early Christianity* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 98ff.
Identifying the complexity and contingency at the roots of biblical monotheism does not at all mean giving up on theologically affirming it as “revelation.” It simply means carefully and situating it within the context of its birth and growth. It means analyzing how monotheism uniquely reconfigured many already-existing polytheistic political symbols and practices in new ways. It means asking what monotheism’s intolerance has done and can do to our world, for better and worse. This is all to ask, what has monotheism done to us in the big picture—in an evolutionary picture of the human species and civilization?

1.3 René Girard and Jan Assmann on Biblical Intolerance

The theories of René Girard and Jan Assmann offer provocative and insightful approaches to these questions while avoiding some of the pitfalls of simplistic apologia. They both analyze monotheism within the larger time line of human civilization and evolution, maintaining its epochal importance while not downplaying its dangers or its messy origins in polytheism. Let me briefly introduce them both here.

Jan Assmann argues that the most consequential feature of biblical monotheism is its “Mosaic distinction.” This is the distinction between true and false in religion. This distinction is “the idea of an exclusive and emphatic Truth that sets God apart from everything that is not God and therefore must not be worshipped, and that sets religion apart from what comes to be shunned as superstition, paganism, or heresy.”\textsuperscript{31} This distinction is “Mosaic” in that it is housed in the legend of Moses and his exodus from idolatrous, pagan injustice in Egypt. Such a distinction between true and false religions is

\textsuperscript{31} GG 3.
foreign to any previous religions and did not exist before Israel’s construction of it (with a not-exactly-relevant exception in Akhenaten’s Egyptian revolution around 1,350BCE). Assmann insists the historic impact of the Mosaic distinction cannot be overstated. More profoundly than any political upheaval, the Mosaic distinction has radically reshaped our world and cognition, marking “a civilizational achievement of the highest order.”32 Among its most consequential effects, he argues, is the novel distinction of religion from politics, which had heretofore been almost indistinguishably intertwined. The Mosaic distinction between true and false religion has penetrated the Western psyche now and is epistemologically impossible to escape, such that we cannot live in a spiritual space uncloven by the Mosaic distinction.33 In this sense, the Mosaic distinction must be seen as just as consequential as, if not more than, the “scientific intolerance” that birthed around Parmenides in Greece, with the principle of noncontradiction in logic—that knowledge of truth also includes knowledge of what is not true.34 While affirming the positive potentialities unleashed by the Mosaic distinction, Assmann asserts that the Mosaic distinction comes at a cost: it is “possible or even probable that the radical polarization of the world is connected with the Mosaic distinction between true and false religion.”35

32 “We are dealing with civilizational achievements of the highest order, and it has never occurred to me to demand that they be abandoned. I am advocating a return neither to myth nor to primary religion. Indeed, I am not advocating anything; my aim is rather to describe and understand” (Jan Assmann, The Price of Monotheism, trans. Robert Savage [hereafter PM] (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010], 13).

33 PM 1, 42.

34 PM 12-13.

35 MPC 154f.
And yet Assmann’s investigation of monotheistic “intolerance” is not a siding against it, or an assertion that monotheism is “essentially” violent. If anything, he asserts, “the atrocities of the twentieth century did not stem from but rather were directed against monotheism.”36 While he avoids simplistic declarations on monotheism’s pure “essence”—as if that were possible—he explores the “potentialities” that it has unleashed. What new ways of being, thinking, worshipping, imagining, and organizing society does this religious concept open up and close off? On the whole, for him, the Mosaic distinction’s making possible a liberating counter power to the political sphere is worth its dangerous cost. The Mosaic distinction should not be abolished. Its achievement comes with a price, even if worth it. The attempt to abolish the Mosaic distinction through emphasizing the “unity of all religions,” praising polytheistic tolerance, or downplaying the intolerance of monotheism, he rejects as misguided.37 Rather, we must sublimate this intolerance, through ongoing negotiation and reflection.

If Assmann suggests that monotheism draws a distinction between right and wrong religion René Girard’s mimetic theory argues for what exactly makes monotheism “right”: monotheism means an exodus from the myths that surround our scapegoating. Girard treats monotheism’s strict anti-idolatry as the refusal to divinize victims and a devictimization of God. By his theory, polytheistic archaic religions safeguarded societies by “containing”

36 GG 5.

37 He refers to this abolishing work as “part of the general humanist quest for overarching ideas that would help to destroy the boundaries between nations, confessions, religions, and classes and to ‘deconstruct’ ideological distinctions characterized by hatred, incomprehension, and persecution” (Jan Assmann, Moses the Egyptian [hereafter ME] [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997], 209).
violence in the double sense of contain: expressing and restraining violence. The numinous sacred at the roots of religion itself stems from early humanity’s experience and management of violence: gods were divinized scapegoats of group violence, misremembered in myths, creating a sacred pole against which they fear, unite, expel, and respect. But monotheism, Girard argues, emphatically places God on the side of scapegoats, robbing society of its ability to effectively unite around the sacred. As such, Girard rhymes with Assmann that monotheism potentially endangers the world by its slowly dissolving sacred social hierarchies, taboos, and sacrificial safeguards. Monotheism has changed our perception of myths, revealing the truth of the victims under them, secularizing the world. But it has also destabilized society, courting chaos in its dissolving the sacred’s containment of violence.

Leveraging Girard’s theory on the question of monotheistic intolerance is touchy, even radioactive. For, among his most controversial claims is that, regarding anthropological insight on violence, “the superiority of the Bible and the Gospels can be

38 Or, disorder is not merely a breakdown of order, but disorder is a constitutive of order. Order contains disorder—an insight Girard attributes this to Jean-Pierre Dupuy (René Girard, The One By Whom Scandal Comes [hereafter TOB] [East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 2014], 83). Archaic religion “humanizes violence; it protects man from his own violence by taking it out of his hands, transforming it into a transcendent and ever-present danger to be kept in check by the appropriate rites appropriately observed and by a modest and prudent demeanor” (René Girard, Violence and the Sacred [hereafter VS] trans. Patrick Gregory [Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press], 134).

39 TOB, 39.

40 “The more Christianity made its influence felt, I believe, the more widespread rivalry and internal mediation became” (TOB, 125). Or, as Ranieri summarizes, “where the scapegoating mechanism ceases to have its salutary effects there develops, then, a dual movement of escalating violence accompanied by an increasing sympathy for victims. This is precisely the paradox of modernity,” of which Christianity’s symbols sit at the root (John J. Ranieri, Disturbing Revelation: Leo Strauss, Eric Voegelin, and the Bible (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2009], 192).
demonstrated scientifically.”  

George Heyman retorts that this claim to the “defeat of violence is itself a form of violence.” That is, Girard’s mimetic theory would seem subject to the critique of absolutist monotheism and its incompatibility with pluralistic coexistence. Edward Schillebeeckx’s caution about religious violence comes to mind: the sense of the superiority of one’s religion is a root of violence. For Schillebeeckx, any “intolerance toward other religions and rejection of interreligious dialogue on an equal footing” is not liberating but betrays the true character of Christianity. Instead, he urges we must focus on whether our “professed relationship with the ultimate, the transcendent—the ‘mystery’—liberates or endangers humanity.”

Against such a claim, the paradox in Girard’s theory becomes pronounced: for he argues that the biblical inheritance both liberates and endangers humanity. Liberation endangers. Furthermore, he is excavating where exactly we got this antiethnocentric conviction that the sense of superiority is wrong. It is not a universal idea, but it comes from a contingent chain of events in Israel that has bequeathed us a paradox: the heart of this paradox, as I will argue, lies in the monotheistic intolerance of any representation of the Absolute. We remain ethnocentric if we fail to see how what a unique achievement

41 René Girard, Evolution and Conversion: Dialogues on the Origins of Culture [hereafter EC] [New York: Continuum, 2007], 210. Also, TOB, 37: “The superiority of the Bible cannot be defined in terms of race, people, or nation; it is not at all ethnocentric. Jewish and Christian communities were no more successful than other communities, on the whole, in resisting contagious violence…it operated only within recalcitrant minorities.”


antiethnocentrism is—and for Girard it is indeed a child of biblical revelation. A proper genealogy of intolerance, then, will ask about how and why we have come to think it is morally superior to oppose to any sense of superiority. This paradox, in turn, illuminates our current political dilemmas of how to rid ourselves of intolerance without becoming intolerant in turn.

And so, while Girard’s theory has many shortcomings, I will not treat this paradox of “biblical superiority” as one of them. His weakness on the monotheism question is not in a failure to mute its tones of superiority, but simply his thin, underdemonstrated argument for it. That is, he seems to engage in what Gnuse calls an outdated presumption of biblical monotheism’s radical difference from its polytheistic world. Eric Gans likewise questions Girard’s sui generis account of divine monotheistic revelation: “nowhere, to my knowledge, does René reflect on what peculiarities in the ethical organization of the Hebrews made them, among all the peoples of the ancient world, the ‘chosen’ discoverers/inventors of monotheism.” Exploring those peculiarities, in contrast with the ancient world, is where my turning to monotheistic scholarship will come into play. In my building an account of monotheistic intolerance in comparison with its polytheistic context, I find common cause with Girard’s later in life wishes that he could set the biblical

44 René Girard, I See Satan Fall Like Lightning (hereafter ISS) (Orbis 2001), 165, 169.

45 Bruce Chilton argues that Girard declares the breakthrough impact of “biblical revelation”—and certainly monotheism—“with remarkably little argumentation” (Bruce Chilton, The Temple of Jesus: His Sacrificial Program Within a Cultural History of Sacrifice [University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992], 18).

 heritage within a larger time frame and global, interreligious context—or, as Raymund Schwager hoped, in relation to Axial Age theory. 47

+++ Using Girard and Assmann to draw up an account of monotheistic “intolerance” that appreciates its dangers, is a more nuanced approach than one might find in some peace studies- or “religion in public life” scholarship. I refer to methods that emphasize the “ambivalence” or “dual potential of religion.” 48 In this sense, religion can sometimes be good, tolerant, socially-upbuilding, pro-social, and pacific (in, say, Gandhi or Mother Teresa) and sometimes bad, intolerant, deleterious, and irrationally violent (as in religious terrorists). In such methods, it is only the corruption and distortions of otherwise good religion that court violence. 49 But if polytheistic religions “contain violence,” as Girard and

47 “I would like to rectify the perspective of my earlier books in regard to archaic religions. So I’m always rewriting the whole project within an expanded period” (EC 43). That aim was only partially fulfilled in Girard’s brief commentary on Hinduism. René Girard, Le Sacrifice (Paris: Bibliothèque Nationale de France, 2003). For Schwager on Axial thought, see Michael Kirwan, Girard and Theology (New York: T&T Clark, 2009), 40.

48 This ambivalence method is nonetheless important for thick, sociological description of religious actors, as one sees in, e.g. Scott Appleby, The Ambivalence of the Sacred (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1999). Appleby regards the sacred as connoting an irreducible, numinous “passion for the infinite…self-denial, sacrifice, zeal. It is ‘extremist’ (in my usage) when the dynamics of ‘othering’ and demonizing kick in, to a degree that the annihilation of the enemy is considered a religious obligation” (Scott Appleby, “Religious Violence: The Strong, the Weak, and the Pathological,” in The Oxford Handbook of Religion, Conflict, and Peacebuilding [Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press], 36). Thus, religious ambivalence means “the radical mystery of the numinous, can be a powerful source of nonviolent peacebuilding, compassion, and love of enemy” (36). Although Appleby devoted a section of his essay to Girard, his Otto-ian notions of “weak” and “strong” religion-violence connections do not attain to Girard’s radical ambivalence, of archaic religion doubly containing violence.

49 Atalia Omer appreciates Appleby’s liberal, phenomenological, non-reductive approach, while adding that it can wrongly presume that violent motifs of religious actors only constitute inauthentic or perverted interpretations of religion in their trying to recover “good religion.” This presumes too much, treating religion as an ahistoricized, universal moral good. It is religion as “private, autonomous, interiorized mode of being,” failing to include more complex definitions of “the sacred” (Atalia Omer, “Religious Peacebuilding: The Exotic, the Good, the Theatrical,” in Oxford Handbook of Religion and Peacebuilding, op cit; Atalia Omer, “Can a Critic Be a Caretaker?: Religion, Conflict, and Conflict Transformation,” JAR 79.2 (2011), 459-496, 482). I see Girard offering such a complex approach to the sacred, likewise adding that even “good religion” can also be socially corrosive.
Assmann argue, the question is much more complex. If monotheism, even in its best forms, robs us of some of the polytheism’s containment of violence, does it thereby “unleash” violence? Instead of a simple ambivalence—where good religious persons or theologies are presumed to make for pro-social results—Assmann and Girard suggest that even the “goods” or truths of biblical religion can be socially deleterious. Meanwhile, some of the seemingly archaic “bads” or falsehoods of religion—i.e. restrictive taboos, prohibitions, hierarchy, and sacrificial violence, etc.—can be respected as helpful, if dying, social safeguards that biblical religion is dissolving. In other words, we pay a price for enlightenment.

This more radically ambivalent hermeneutic of religion helps us read the deep-history of violence differently than the above monotheism-critics. For example, contrast Steven Pinker’s *Better Angels*, and its modernist optimism toward violence’s Enlightenment-inspired decline, with Girard’s ambivalence-laden apocalyptism that both the good and bad are escalating. Where Pinker sees in the Bible merely “one long celebration of violence,” Girard reads a slow exodus from violence; for Pinker, the Cross is a cliché mythological sanction of divine violence while for Girard it is a myth in reverse that dissolves the sacrificial impulse. Where Pinker sees modern, secular values, Girard sees a byproduct of Christianity. Indeed, theology is unavoidable even for secular accounts of violence, as it greatly affects one’s reading of the empirical “facts” of violence, its diminishments, and where to look for them.⁵⁰

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In sum, a theory which claims that monotheism has destabilized civilization by doing away with the deep connections between divinity, politics, and scapegoating broaches the intolerance problem in creative and novel ways. Attending to the radical ambivalence of monotheism’s political consequences moves us beyond the tired question of “does monotheism cause violence” or “is it intolerant,” and turns instead to a more nuanced analysis less biased with pro- or anti-religious sentiment. By using Girard and leading contemporary monotheistic scholarship I offer an account of monotheism that avoids unfounded emphases on biblical monotheism as some discontinuous break from the ancient near east. And yet, at the same time, I will show how it nonetheless bears revolutionary implications for the very fundamentals of politics, social theory, and tolerance today. This involves comparative-, social-theory, historical-critical, and evolutionary methods, while also ultimately attempting a confessional theology. I am, after all, simply asking if monotheism is worth believing in, and if so, how.

1.4 Chapter Outline

With this introduction as our first chapter, chapter two will introduce Girard’s complete theory with emphasis on his understanding of gods, “the victim mechanism,” and monotheism. This will elaborate on the content of his provocative monotheistic idea, its political and theological importance, and its underdevelopment. What does it mean that monotheism interrupts archaic polytheistic religion by dividing God from the victim? This

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51 H.A. Drake refers to “the increasingly sterile debate over the supposedly baleful effect of monotheistic intolerance” (Drake, “Monotheism and Violence,” op cit, 256).
invites us to venture out into other monotheistic scholarship, like Assmann’s and its Freudian roots.

Chapter three will begin the introduction to Assmann through material that is crucial to him and Girard: Freud’s *Moses and Monotheism*. This text stepped into a multi-century discourse that tried to do away with the monotheistic distinction between “Israel” vs. “Egypt.” But, contrary to simplistic readings of Freud as the enemy of religion, he ultimately defends monotheism and its intolerance as “progress in intellectuality.” (Though I will nonetheless critique his defense of monotheism as simplistic.) Freud’s ideas here set up much of Assmann’s topics: i.e. comparing monotheism in Akhenaten/Egypt and Moses/Israel, and theorizing monotheism’s relationship to politics and reenthronement of the slain alpha-father.

Chapter four will explore Assmann’s advances on Freud, in his constructing a more nuanced political theology of polytheism. Assmann’s political theology of polytheism helps us understand gods, land, and political sovereignty as also rooted in the “victim mechanism” as Girard puts it, including divine-kings and victim-gods. We will here categorize different kinds of religions and different kinds of violence, their “translatability” with other religions, including the “Axial Age” shift between primary and secondary religions. This will help put to rest naïve notions of polytheism’s putative “tolerance,” seeing it more subtly as a socio-political force that “contains” violence. This will involve a case study of ancient Egypt’s political theologies.

Chapter five explores Assmann’s political theology of monotheism and the Mosaic distinction, supplemented by other monotheism scholars. We dwell closely here on Israel’s political conditions of sovereignty, monolatry, and exile that help illuminate—as we saw
in Gans’ critique—the “peculiarities in the ethical organization of the Hebrews made them, among all the peoples of the ancient world, the ‘chosen’ discoverers/inventors of monotheism.” 52 We thus explore how monotheism could be composed of polytheistic building blocks—first in state-based religion and political symbols (like vassal treaties or covenants)—but transform among an exiled people into a division of God from political representation. Unique insights can be derived here when we consider this in relation to Girard’s division of God from scapegoating.

Chapter six pivots from what developments have been gained in conversation with Girard, Freud, and Assmann to ask, if monotheism means separating God from scapegoating, what can we say of Christ as the supreme scapegoat? Christianity would seem to regress from monotheism back into pagan religion and symbols. I use Girard and a mixture of New Testament scholarship to counter liberal versions of monotheism that presume to escape from symbols of violence, sacrifice, or pagan religion. Rather, Christianity entails a complex “exit from religion in the form of a demythified religion.” The “Kingdom of God” is not a vision of an exclusion-free or intolerance-free utopia; rather, it is founded upon an exclusion, like all kingdoms. But, in my ongoing theme, I consider how Christianity doesn’t escape but creatively reconfigures and inverts the political concepts of hegemony, exclusion, and intolerance. In Christianity’s attempt to navigate both paganism and enlightenment, its monotheism leavens thought with an eschatological patience and inclusivity that is not perfectly compatible with the political realm.

52 Gans, “René et moi,” 23.
Chapter seven will conclude my study by putting my account of monotheism into conversation with pluralistic social theory—particularly that of Chantal Mouffe. For her, liberalism’s ideals cannot be perfectly installed in this world without turning into a “liberal hegemony,” suggesting the need for agonistic pluralism. I will show how monotheism’s eschatological tension with the political realm resembles her idea of pluralism, wherein liberalism’s aversion to exclusion must live in constant tension with democracy’s necessary exclusions. For liberalism to not turn into yet another intolerant regime, it needs, in my glossing of her theory, an “intolerant” anti-idolatry: that is, the Absolute must remain uninstantiatable. I call this refusal “apophatic intolerance.” In Christian terms, this means the Absolute remains eschatological and yet is characterized by the victim.

Just as Assmann teaches a sublimation of the Mosaic distinction, we too must attempt to sublimate the “Liberal distinction” today—the emphatic push for human rights against despotism—without turning it into a “regime of tolerance.” As such, both monotheism and pluralism are open-ended processes that require patience in an ongoing, never-complete tension. For, the heavenly city, founded as it is on a slain lamb, cannot be politically instantiated, as the Constantinians tried, without contradicting it. And yet, we must live and act within the earthly city of exclusions, law, and the restraint of violence. This dissertation then hopes to draw up a nuanced understanding of “intolerance” wherein monotheism and pluralism provide a mutually beneficial conversation relevant to citizens of any city, theologically inclined or not.

With the above as this dissertation’s framework, I see this work as a contribution (1) to mimetic theory—a theory, stemming from Girard, on violence, scapegoating, and
the origins of religion in human evolution—by putting it into contact with a historically informed political theology of monotheism. While some scholarship, especially that of Wolfgang Palaver, has applied mimetic theory to a political theology of modernity, almost nothing has been written in mimetic theory concerning the ancient birth and growth of a political theology of monotheism within its polytheistic context.53

(2) This is a contribution to systematic theology in exploring the political theology surrounding the birth of monotheism. I show how Girard’s notion of the biblical separating and re-uniting God with the victimage mechanism strengthens an Augustinian two-city framework (as opposed to a Eusebian-Constantinian theo-politics). As such I outline the important similarities and differences between monotheism and cosmotheistic divine kingship. I show how such a two-cities politics is rooted in a Jewish monotheism that divides God from the cosmos and forecloses any absolute, immanent fusion of the political with the theological.

(3) This is a contribution to peace studies in that it demonstrates the critical importance of political theology in interpreting the peacebuilding problems of intolerance, pluralism, and liberalism today. Akin to monotheism’s anti-idolatry, liberalism and the tradition of human rights involves an “intolerance” that can become hegemonic. But with Mouffe I show how this intolerance should not be abolished but controlled by a mature agonistic pluralism. I show how monotheism’s refusal of a monopoly on the Absolute—

and Christianity’s identification of the Absolute with the victim—has a deep affinity with this agonistic pluralism oriented toward justice for the victims of oppression.

Overall my approach helps move beyond simplistic attacks on monotheism’s intolerance or defending its tolerance, or repeating such dichotomies with respect to liberalism’s potentially hubristic universalism.
CHAPTER 2:

GIRARD’S MIMETIC THEORY AND MONOTHEISM’S AMBIVALENT EFFECTS

René Girard conceives “divinity” as deeply related to the way human cultures since our origins have treated their victims and scapegoats. And he regards monotheism as a “refusal to divinize victims” and a “devictimization of God.” This means monotheism has radically affected the way divinity has been perceived and represented in human culture, politics, and mythology. This unique but opaque approach to monotheism can be understood only in reference to Girard’s entire theory of religion and its role in human evolution. His “mimetic theory” is generally agreed to have three main parts: 1) mimetic desire, the 2) victimimage-mechanism originating culture and religion, and 3) biblical revelation. To venture a quick summation of all three at once, we might say:

1) the way humans desire and scapegoat others has 2) benefitted our species’ evolution since our origins, but 3) this misapprehension is slowly being unveiled through a different relationship to divinity and the political, for better and worse.

Or, a shorter attempt: scapegoating evolved humanity, but with the advent of Judeo-Christian revelation, we need to learn to live without scapegoats. Surely, other formulations could work, but we have it there in brief, ready for elaboration.

In Lakatos’ terms, mimetic theory can be regarded as an entire research paradigm, in that its interdisciplinary form has spawned numerous research agendas in diverse
disciplines, ranging from neuro-science and political science, to theology and archaeology.\(^5^4\) This chapter will simply lay out this tripartite theory with emphasis on Girard’s idea of monotheism and its relevance to the noted intolerance problem. Thereafter, it can serve as a base theory for further critique and exploration. I have organized his theory in a slight deviation from the more familiar tripartite form above (which remains in the three *):

1. Mimesis (“misapprehension”\(^5^5\)):
   a. synchronically,* mimetic desire and rivalry,
   b. diachronically,* scapegoating as a mimetic, adaptive, evolutionary mechanism

2. Revelation* (“apprehension”):
   a. synchronically, the general potentiality of biblical symbols in siding with the victim. Girard’s idea of monotheism abides here.
   b. diachronically, revelation has courted both chaos and development in a history without gods.

By dividing up Girard’s third idea of “revelation” into two parts, and recognizing the synchronic and diachronic aspects of his theory (terms not used by any mimetic theorists to my knowledge), his theory becomes more symmetrical and elegant. He has two main ideas, each thought in synchronic and diachronic ways. And, as I suggested in my Introduction, the second idea (revelation) is both what makes his theory famous, while also

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\(^5^5\) One should not place too much emphasis on my referring to mimesis here as a “misapprehension”—as Girard often discussed the positive value of mimesis, as I will note. I simply wish to emphasize an elegant “problem → solution” form.
being, in its logical rudiments, the very aspect that suffers from “remarkably little argumentation.” Isolating how this part of his theory is “synchronic” in nature, I mark off how this dissertation will not dwell on a diachronic history of Western Civilization and the Common Era (2b), which would distract us into a religious sociology of history, or some such discipline.

2.1 Mimesis and Divinizing Others (1a)

Girard’s first major idea concerns human desire and imitation, generally speaking. Developed initially through literary criticism, which then expanded into anthropology, psychology, and theology, his core claim builds on Aristotle’s observation: while humans have many instinctual desires, like hunger, we have compared to other species an elevated level of imitation grafted onto our instincts.56 We do not desire objects “directly” but we desire according to others, which he calls mimetic desire.57 Such desire means wanting things because we anticipate or see others desiring them. Our desire triangulates between our self, a model (who inspires our desire), and objects.58

56 “Imitation is natural to man from childhood, one of his advantages over the lower animals being this, that he is the most imitative creature in the world and learns at first by imitation” (“Poetics,” in The Basic Works of Aristotle, 1457 (1448b); 1458 (1448b); 1460 (1449b); TH 1).  


While mimesis can certainly lead to conflict with models, the pacific and beneficial mode of mimetic desire Girard terms “external mediation.” This means desiring a model, what they have, what they are; but social hierarchy, distance, death, or taboo keep our desire at a relatively safe distance. As such, there is no envy of, or conflict with, the model, but simply a source of inspiration and intuitively imbued lessons.\(^59\) Perhaps the model’s “object” is some virtue or some helpful skill.

But this desiring to be the model can be often felt as “lacking being.”\(^60\) Others always seem to have more being than we do. “The subject thus looks to that other person to inform him of what he should desire in order to acquire that being. If the model, who is apparently already endowed with superior being, desires some object, that object must surely be capable of conferring an even greater plentitude of being.”\(^61\) A chief temptation, then, especially when a model has what we cannot have, is to “make this distance evil and grasp toward its closure.”\(^62\) When social safeguards and taboos do not restrain such grasping, mimesis can intensify to “interior mediation,”\(^63\) to close this distance from the model. In this case the model becomes a rival and obstacle to be overcome. As such, any concern over a desired object begins to fade and a direct obsession with the model

\(^{59}\) *DDN* 9; *EC* 61.

\(^{60}\) This “lacking being” is akin to Sartre’s analysis in *Being and Nothingness*; Wolfgang Palaver, *René Girard’s Mimetic Theory* (hereafter *RGMT*) (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 2013), 74.

\(^{61}\) *VS* 146; *RGMT* 77.

\(^{62}\) *Skandalon* for Girard, as visible in the Gospels, means “that ridiculous reciprocal antagonism and resentment that everybody feels for each other, for the simple reason that our desires are sometimes frustrated” (*EC* 82).

\(^{63}\) *DDN* 9; *EC* 57
dominates, which leads to a conflictual snowball effect: the imitator seeks to take-over the being of the model, the model resists, which only confirms the desirability of their being, causing a reciprocally escalating resistance.\textsuperscript{64}

Mimesis can thus lead toward undifferentiation between subject and model: “eventually the subject will become the model of his model, just as the imitator will become the imitator of his imitator. One is always moving toward more symmetry, and thus always toward more conflict.”\textsuperscript{65} Without any safeguards and taboos, such acquisitive mimesis can infect an entire group: “if two persons are fighting over the same object, then this object seems more valuable to bystanders. Therefore, it tends to attract more and more people, and as it does so, its mimetic attractiveness keeps increasing.”\textsuperscript{66} All of this can be redirected into a unifying or reconciling mimesis of shared conflict against a scapegoat.\textsuperscript{67} One might see this, of course, in lynch mobs or any sort of group jeering and polarization, as we will discuss more in the next section.

While this cycle of safe-, to dangerous-, to reconciling-mimesis is a very common in human relations, Girard does not define conflict or aggression as “essential” to human

\textsuperscript{64} D\textsuperscript{D}N 12, 16, 18; E\textsuperscript{C} 57. Escalating in conflict, Girard calls this acquisitive mimesis V\textsuperscript{S} 187; T\textsuperscript{H} 26. Note how this acquisitive mimesis puts people into antagonism, whereas conflictual mimesis brings people together in a shared antagonism toward another.

Hobbes writes “if any two men desire the same thing, which nevertheless they cannot both enjoy, they become enemies; and in the way to their End.… [they] endeavor to destroy or subdue one another.” Hobbes, L\textit{eviathan} 87 (Ch 13) or 64, 10, 11, 28; René Girard, “Victims, Violence, and Christianity,” T\textit{he Month} 259, no. 1564 (1998): 132. Hobbes, \textit{The Elements of Law Natural and Politic}, part I, Human Nature; part 2, De Corpore Politico (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 59 (I.IX.21).

\textsuperscript{65} E\textsuperscript{C} 70, 57.

\textsuperscript{66} E\textsuperscript{C} 64.

\textsuperscript{67} E\textsuperscript{C} 66.
nature. Even if conflict might appear to arise “naturally,” this does not make it something we cannot resist in ourselves. Girard, speaking normatively, urges readers to resist rivalrous mimesis while also not regarding mimesis itself as “bad” or inherently violent. Rather, Wolfgang Palaver locates Girard in between the two poles of Aristotle and Aquinas’ optimistic *homo homini amicus* and Hobbes’ pessimistic *homo homini lupus*. The emulsifier between the two is Augustine’s nuance: humanity is “social by nature and quarrelsome by perversion.” We thus have here an emphasis on the “natural” human inclination toward peace and other-interest that, in practice, easily distorts into conflict.

*Homo reciprocus*, for Girard, means not only positive cooperation, but also the ability to escalate conflict reciprocally. Girard thus is keen on elaborating on desire’s pervasive penchant for rivalry, considering Rousseauian optimism as mislead.

Mimetic theory, then, is not only about desire. It is also a theory of conflict—that is, a hypothesis on what leads to conflict between humans and groups, and, in turn, on what can ameliorate it. Some conflict theories emphasize the roots of violence in ideology (e.g. Nazis were so violent because of their anti-Semitism), or *instrumentality with respect to*

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68 TH 197.


71 EC 14.

scarcity (e.g. violence is done to get land or resources),\textsuperscript{73} or fundamental difference (e.g. civilizations clash because of deep-seeded differences).\textsuperscript{74} These need not be seen as fundamentally opposed to the idea that mimetic desire leads us into conflict. Though mimetic theory would qualify each above theory, arguing that mimetic desire precedes our cognitive ideologies; our conflicts are exaggerated by, but not limited to, resource- or object scarcity; rather, conflict is about how human desire, objects, taboos, and relationships are configured. Furthermore, it is not only our differences but our convergence toward each other, our attractions toward a sameness that can court conflict.\textsuperscript{75} In sum, mimetic theory pays relatively stronger emphasis on how inter-group relationships and the contagiousness of desires can drive our conflicts.\textsuperscript{76}

We can also see here resonances in Georg Simmel’s and Sigmund Freud’s notions that sharing a common enemy brings us together, even if the glue is to collectively oppose one’s group to another by superficial, narcissistic “minor differences.”\textsuperscript{77} This has been

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\textsuperscript{73} “Land and resources”: Valentino, Benjamin, “Chapter 3,” in Final Solutions (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005).
\textsuperscript{74} See Samuel P. Huntington, Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996).
\textsuperscript{75} “It is not difference that dominates the world, but the obliteration of difference by mimetic reciprocity, which itself, being truly universal, shows the relativism of perpetual difference to be an illusion” (TOB, 15).
\textsuperscript{76} “One must never exclude the possibility of violence that has nothing to do with mimetic desire but simply with scarcity…. [though it can always] become impregnated with mimesis” (EC 74).
more recently explored in works like Hedges’ *War is a Force that Gives us Meaning*, or Michael Ignatieff’s observations that hatred of the enemy is the other side of self- and national-adulation. Selengut employs Girard’s theory to interpret the Israel/Palestine conflict and occupation, showing how the loss of a shared external enemy brought on paroxysms of internal violence. We also see parallels in Waller’s (inter alia) evolutionary reading of violence, in that cooperation and competition are not opposites, but two sides of the same coin. The interdisciplinary works employing mimetic theory toward conflict theory and peacebuilding is considerable.

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78 E.g. “Emotions stirred up within commonality are more violent than those aroused by pure and radical difference; The closer, the more hostile” (Ignatief, 47).


80 “Our desire for social dominance can have pro-social consequences as we realize that helping others creates friendships and coalitions that are useful in our struggle for power” (Waller, James E. “The Ordinariness of Extraordinary Evil: The Making of Perpetrators of Genocide and Mass Killing,” in *Ordinary People as Mass Murderers* Eds. Olaf Jensen and C.C.W. Szejnmann [London, UK: Palgrave, 2008], 154).


Girard regards desire in the modern era, amidst our dramatic social and political changes, as characterized by an increasing dissolution of differences, which is closing the distance between subjects and models. We can now become one another more than ever. The modern era is increasingly characterized by “interior mediation writ large,” wherein traditional social taboos, hierarchies, and restraints are being dissolved, and the world is, so to speak, wagering that positive mimesis will win out over conflictual mimesis.\(^{82}\)

Girard’s wariness on this modern wager is shared by Antje Vollmer’s *Heisser Frieden* (*Hot Peace*), who argues “modern equality is one of the major factors responsible for the increase in social violence.”\(^{83}\) The modern shift from monarchy into democratic equality will come with a cost: “Idolatry of the tyrant as mediator ‘is replaced by hatred of a hundred thousand rivals…democracy is one vast middle-class court where the courtiers are everywhere and the king is nowhere’—hence ‘men will become Gods for each other.’”\(^{84}\)

And yet, Girard’s proposal is not a return to conservative social stratifications or taboos on desire. Opposing modernity’s increasing equality is not only futile, but often immoral and can provoke more antagonism.\(^{85}\) Equally implausible is attempting to not

\(^{82}\) “External mediation in modern society has collapsed. People at the lowest social level desire what people at the highest level have” (*EC* 61f; *TOB* 15).

\(^{83}\) Antje Vollmer, *Heisser Frieden: Über Gewalt, Macht und das Gehimnis der Zivilisation* (Köln: Kiepenheuer and Witsch, 1995), 180; *RGMT* 62. Palaver sees here the influence of Alexis de Tocqueville in *Democracy in America*, “The same equality that allows every citizen to conceive these lofty hopes, renders all the citizens less able to realize them; it circumscribes their powers on every side, which it gives freer scope to their desires…They have swept away the privileges of some of their fellow-creatures which stood in their way, but they have opened the door to universal competition” (1:137-138; *DDN* 120; *RGMT* 61)

\(^{84}\) Scott Cowdell, *René Girard and Secular Modernity* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 2013), 25; *DDN* 119, original emphasis.

\(^{85}\) *VS* 88.
imitate anyone and instead root one’s self in one’s self.\textsuperscript{86} Such idolatry of the self, which becomes the fashion of nonconformity, is as futile as it is arrogant.\textsuperscript{87} Imitation is psychologically inescapable; we cannot simply “think” our way out of this; we must paradoxically choose our models wisely and imitate them.

So, while mimesis can be pacific, cooperative, and beneficial, it can also lead to a sort of grasping for the model, which can escalate into conflict. Girard’s “answer” to this problem is that we must begin to understand how our desires are not simply sincere and come “from our heart.” Failing to admit this, desire has a misperceived, “romantic,” and “lying” character about it, necessitating our maturation toward the “novelistic truth”\textsuperscript{88}— that others, in fact, suggest our desires to us. To recognize this distortion and self-opacity in one’s self is to reject the desire to become the model, accepting that the other is anterior to our self, and that there is no such thing as a self-made, self-complete person.\textsuperscript{89} Rather, we are much more permeable and inter-dividual than our typically modern notions of the autonomous-self lead us to think. We must embrace our “lack of being” without anxiety—seeing it as a good that keeps us oriented toward others and the Ultimate beyond ourselves. Hence Augustine’s famous embracing of his anxiety: our hearts are restless until they rest in God. “Idolatry,” in psychological terms, is the impatient failure to accept our lack of being. To grasp at one another and their objects is to ultimately divinize others or ourselves


\textsuperscript{87} \textit{DDN} 100.

\textsuperscript{88} \textit{DDN} 17.

\textsuperscript{89} \textit{DDN} 293, 305, 89, 101, 269, 272, 310. And yet this lie has its reasons: “The \textit{cogito [ergo sum]} is a sort of dam against the emergence of the modern problematic of the crowd” (\textit{EC} 148).
as suppliers of being. Nationalism, we could say, is collective idolatry—in positing a great
Unity over a society. Such metaphysical togetherness, as known in the state and its theo-
political symbols, will remain an overarching theme in this dissertation. National
monotheism (what we will explore as “henotheism”) is “idolatrous” in its reifying a Unity
that papers over divisions. And I will end this dissertation on how a mature monotheism
and pluralism negate and refuse to take any consolation in this false unity construct. This
negation, which involves reorientation of one’s mimetic desires, is what I mean by
apophatic intolerance.

Girard’s overall concept of mimesis, as well as its connection with conflict, stems
from a long tradition, from Plato to Aquinas to Kant.90 And while his concept of mimetic
desire has many contemporary parallels and confirmations in the behavioral sciences, it
also has some critics—which we will have to bypass here.91 In summary, this first part of
his theory concerns how we desire not just objects but others, how mimesis leans toward
divinizing the other or the self, and its relationship to rivalry and conflict. It is indeed a
crucial and inescapable driving force in human relations, for better and worse. All of this,

90 Aeschylus noted how mimetic group-hate and conflict draws us together in love (Aeschylus X.
Alcibiades, 133a). Plato understood how mirroring and imitation bodes the danger of conflict (Timaeus,
46a-c; Epigrams, 11; Sophist, 239d; Republic, III, 395e-396b; TH 15; Plato, The Republic, trans. Allan
David Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1991), 71 (393c); 74 (395c); 179-180 (500b-c). Aquinas reflected
upon the difference between healthy imitation and envy, as well as the role of imitation in conflict (Summa
McGraw-Hill, 1972), 43 (II-IIae 36.2); RGMT 93).

Others include Hobbes, Spinoza, Rousseau, Kant, Max Scheler, Georg Simmel, Adam Smith,
Walter Benjamin, and Auerbach (Palaver [2013], 101, 102, 107, 66, 109; EC 139-40, 42).

91 For psychological analysis of mimesis, see Jean-Michel Oughourlian, The Mimetic Brain trans
Trevor Merrill (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 2016) and Scott Garrels (ed), Mimesis
and Science (Michigan State University Press, 2011). For critique of Girard’s mimesis concept: see Bruce
Chilton, Jesus and His Context: Temple, Purity, and Restoration (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 1997) and
however, remains on a largely abstract, “synchronic” level; mimesis becomes “diachronic” as we consider how it may have evolved in the human species to its current, very pronounced level.

2.2 Mimesis Evolved: The Victimage Mechanism as a God-Machine and Basis of Culture (1b)

After Girard developed this synchronic concept of mimesis he put it into conversation with evolutionary theory and anthropology, contributing to theories on the origin of culture and religion. He argues that this concept of mimesis, when understood as a genetic and cultural mutation that grew extravagantly among humans over a long time, helps us understand how and why humans evolved with rituals, taboos, myths, and gods so intimately baked into our cultures. Mimesis helps us interpret not only conflict today, but it helps us understand numerous ethnographies of ancient cultures, blood sacrifices, and archaeologies of religion.92 This second part of his theory treats “the mimetic victimage mechanism” as the foundation of human culture, a generative mechanism by which proto-humanity crossed the threshold into humanity, distinguishing itself from the animals.93

While other animals have some minimal mimetic capacity, their pecking orders and dominance patterns generally keep them from imitating each other too much and

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92 A few examples of Girard’s cases: rituals among the Tibetan Jalno tribe, Kaingang Indians in Brazil, tribes of the Upper Nile (Nuers and the Dinka), Andaman Islanders, the Ifugao and Chukchi tribes, the Ceram Islanders, the Ngadju-Dayaks of Borneo; Tupinamba ritual cannibalism; Rwandan, Timmes, Nigerian, and Shilluk rituals of enthronement; Chinese sacrificial rites, bloodletting rituals, community stonings, ritual mock warfare, and so on.

93 EC 144f.
escalating into murder. But humans, on the other hand, are famously capable of imitating each other too much, of escalating beyond dominance patterns into murder, individually and on a group level. Where does this relative indifference to dominance patterns come from, and how is it that humans have been able to get along?

A common answer is that reason has kept violence at bay: instead of going to war, early humans made rational agreements to give up the possibility of violence in exchange for the state’s or tribe’s role in monopolizing violence, thus enacting “the social contract.” Being a rational animal gave rise to our being a political animal. Girard finds this too simplistic, insufficiently accounting for how and why reason, language, and cognition could manage violence before having experienced it. For him, instead, human culture and reason are both managers and byproducts of violence. Put differently, religion and sacrifice created humanity, not the other way around. He hypothesizes that wherever mimesis in the proto-human species escalated beyond its dominance patterns and pecking orders (being naturally selected by genetic mutations and its fitness value), such groups would have either destroyed themselves by imitating each other too much, or, stumbled upon a polarizing pattern: instead of an annihilating war of all against all, there mimetically formed a war of all against one. In cases where this pattern never consistently materialized, annihilation ran its course in time, and that group died off. Put differently, imagine a mob

94 TH 90.

95 “In order to have language, an embryonic form of culture is needed, some kind of cultural sheltering from violence. There must already be a non-linguistic solution to the problem of violence, which inevitably is a religious solution, and that is the result of the scapegoat mechanism…sacrificial rites and the immolation of victims come first and this is the origin of everything else, starting with language” (EC 124; TOB, 120).

96 EC 67; TOB 86f, 90.
converging upon a single victim, bringing order to disorder; and then imagine how this could have also brought early humans together. In this framework, mimetic conflicts are resolved through (pre-cognitive, pre-rational) mimetic attention upon a scapegoat, and everyone else’s joint attention on them. This directs all other potential rivalries onto one that is killed or expelled, ideally one from whom no vengeance can rebound.97

Girard argues that this pattern served as a generative, evolutionary mechanism whose mimetic problem is also its mimetic solution. This doubly useful feature makes for a feedback loop or “spiral loop”98 of natural selection over generations: with increases in mimetic desire comes increases in intellectual fitness, which also abets mimetic conflict, which also—if the group stumbled upon such a pattern—increases mimetic attention upon a victim. The latter of which can bring a relatively pacific end to mimetic violence in a way the old dominance patterns never could. The solution grows along with the problem. The very mimetic violence that appears as a sign of chaos is precisely where mimetic scapegoating comes to the rescue. As such, the scapegoat mechanism is a group fitness machine.99 This unconscious, serendipitous, evolving, and order-producing mechanism, over perhaps tens or hundreds of thousands of years,100 helped channel, protect, and thus

97 EC 65.
98 By feedback loop, it conceives of violent group events which are “catastrophic but also generative in that they would trigger the foundation mechanism and at each step provide for more rigorous prohibitions within the group, and for a more effective ritual canalization toward the outside” (TH 96; 84, 88). The higher the level of crisis, the higher the intellectual level of human groups (EC 111; TOB, 90).
99 EC 99.
100 EC 97, 105.
catapult human mimetic-intelligence and brain size into its current extreme disproportion compared with other species.\(^{101}\) The overall hypothesis is summarized here:

> From the moment when the pre-human creature, the human-to-be, passed over a certain threshold of mimetic contagion and the animal instinct of protection against violence collapsed (the *dominance patterns*), mimetic conflicts must have raged among humankind, but the raging of mimetic conflict quickly produced its own antidote by giving birth to the single victim mechanism, gods, and sacrificial rituals.\(^{102}\)

We have here, in other words, a sociological or naturalist account of religion—religion as not only about the quest for meaning or spirituality,\(^{103}\) but an unconscious social mechanism in human evolution, wherein genetic and cultural mutations are naturally selected in their coevolving around a mimetic-victimage dynamic. Let us define the key terms of this account: gods, myths, taboos, and sacrificial rituals.

### 2.2.1 Gods

By “gods” Girard means the divinized victim of group murder, reflected in the demonization and divinization of a victim of group violence (or a “scapegoat”).\(^{104}\) As is

\(^{101}\) He cites anthropologists and neuroscientists like Lewin, Foley, Tomasello, and Donald concerning human brain growth tripling in the last three million years, wildly outpacing other species’ rates and brain/body ratios, begging for explanations of some irregular, almost “artificial” or cultural nature (*TH* 84 88, 100; *EC* 105).

\(^{102}\) *ISS*, 94; *EC* 65; *TH*, 94.

\(^{103}\) Cowdell, *René Girard and Secular Modernity*, *op cit*, 59; René Girard, *Sacrifice*, *op cit*, 23; *TH* 13, 32.

\(^{104}\) *TH*, 81, 99. “When I say ‘god,’ I mean a sacred force that is believed to be outside the community and is powerful enough to punish as well as to protect it…the victim is always seen as the god or replaces it, since this victim brings back peace with his or her death.” (*EC* 119; 66). On the resurrection of the victim of disorder: *TOB*, 35.

This definition need not necessarily contradict more conventional philologies of god—like, “the luminous heaven of day” in Delubac’s etymology, or “to be first, to be powerful,” or that gods could have
often the case with group killings, a victim of the violence is often demonized—a projection of a group’s problems, chaos, or social crisis.\(^{105}\) But a victim is also retrospectively worshipped, divinized for how their death “solved” and calmed the crisis—and they continue to save in their “absence,” as we attend to their memory. For Girard, the “instinctual bond” forged in group violence, and its resolution in the expulsion, slowly birthed in the early human mind the capacity for transcendence: “even though the mechanism is totally endogenous, it is perceived as something external.”\(^{106}\) So, in the earliest stages of human evolution, “the sacred” or divinity is not “applied” to the victim, as if it already existed as a concept in the mind. Rather, the sacred is born in early, proto-human history through this traumatic, intensely contrastive experience between violence and peace, danger and tranquility, hinged upon the victim. Theologians like James Alison have seen in this an anthropological description of “original sin”: the birth of humanity’s unique consciousness itself coincides with mis-remembering our transference upon victims.\(^{107}\) The sacred as such “is the sum of human assumptions resulting from collective transferences focused on a reconciliatory victim at the conclusion of a mimetic crisis.”\(^{108}\) This “sacred” is early humanity externalizing its violence and learning to control it. This

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\(^{105}\) EC 226; GR 219.

\(^{106}\) EC 37, 81, 105f; TH 28.


\(^{108}\) TH 42. In the Bible, divinized human ancestors are also called “gods” (‘eolah) for example, in Isaiah 8:19; 29:4c; 1 Sam 28:13.
bequeaths to us the *mysterium, tremendum, et fascinas*, the sense of blessing and curse that surrounds “the sacred,” as well as the perceived “externality,” transcendence, or perpetual absence of the god.\(^{109}\)

Given this ambivalence, many of the gods have monstrous, hybridic forms, of being both similar and salutary to humans while different and evil: “The wrath exacted upon a double to expel them from the safety of the community imputes monstrous characteristics on this other.”\(^{110}\) From our perspective today, this transcendence seems “distorted,” superstitious, or idolatrous cognition, but it is *not* if we are comparing to some previously clear cognition. Rather, this is the *birth* of cognition. This early sacred “can be defined as the ‘social transcendence’ in Durkheim’s terms, or the idolatrous transcendence from the point of view of the Judeo-Christian perspective.”\(^{111}\) Numerous creation myths entail gods who were killed and dismembered, perhaps cannibalized, to create the world through their body parts. Girard regards these as distorted memories of *real*, historical events. Their bodies are mythologized as the source of their tribe, nation, land, and culture because their lynching truly did found and cohere the group order. Hence the foundations of Rome are laid on the carcass of Remus,\(^{112}\) the assassinated Krishna makes the world,

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\(^{109}\) Raymund Schwager, *Must There Be Scapegoats?* (New York: Herder and Herder, 2000), 19. Or, the sacred is “violence seen as something exterior to man and henceforth as a part of all the other outside forces that threaten mankind. Violence is the heart and secret soul of the sacred. We have yet to learn how man succeeds in positing his own violence as an independent being” (*VS* 31).

\(^{110}\) *EC* 115, 68.

\(^{111}\) *EC* 198. “An effective scapegoat is necessarily perceived as a divinity who came down incognito from heaven to visit the community. The mysterious visitor treats the people very harshly at first but ultimately rescues them from all harm. That is the reason archaic scapegoats are regarded as divine saviors, divine ancestors, or full-fledged divinities” (Girard, in Gianni Vattimo et al, *Christianity, Truth, and Weakening Faith: A Dialogue* [New York: Columbia University Press, 2010], 99).

Purusa is dismembered to create the universe,\textsuperscript{113} the cliff-thrown Tikarau of the Solomon Islands gives birth to the entire cultural order,\textsuperscript{114} Ninhursag creates “mankind out of clay and animates it with the blood of a slain god,” Omorka is cloven in half to make heaven and earth, the world is made of the body parts of P’an Ku, the Sumerian Lamga gods, or Kingu and Tiamat.\textsuperscript{115} Barbara Sproul, independent of Girard, calls this type of creation-from-a-body “typical.” Mircea Eliade points out several more examples in the Middle East and China.\textsuperscript{116} Thus Girard concludes: “Every time the scapegoat mechanism works, a new god emerges…all gods begin first by dying.”\textsuperscript{117}

2.2.2 Myths

“Myths” are the distorted retelling of real group-killings into a tolerable story, imputing guilt to the killed victim and innocence to the lynching group. They express the unanimity of a group’s expulsion, keeping the process from being unveiled of cognitive dissonance and thus rendered ineffective. “Myth is primarily the accusation of the victim

\textsuperscript{113} Rig Veda 10.90


presented as guilty.”

Myths, then, are both about forgetting and remembering. The components that Girard often finds at the basis of myths are: “(1) a crisis of undifferentiation (which corresponds to the orgiastic elements in rituals); (2) a victimary sign that singles out a villain; (3) an expulsion/killing of this villain (which is also represented as a hero because he/she eventually saves the community),” followed by the imposition of taboos and the offering of sacrifices. The logical inconsistencies apparent in so many myths, in spite of their diversity, Girard writes, “points to the presence of a common cause of logical distortion at the threshold of human culture. I believe this cause is the original founding murder, and myths do their best—unconsciously at first, and then more consciously—to erase the traces of scapegoating.” Some myths have existed for so long and been cleaned up for so many generations, that the original violence may be entirely washed out—leaving behind a story almost unrecognizable to the original event.

When we can today see the clear scapegoating in an old story—like in witch hunts or Jews poisoning medieval wells—and we thus can see it is a “myth,” this disrupts what would have been its original “fitness value” of maintaining group unanimity. But if a lynching could be misremembered in the palatable form of killers=innocent, killed=guilty, as myth does, this makes it no longer a “scapegoating” story, but a necessary and good expulsion. “Good” myths then will never show clear signs of a “scapegoating theme.”

118 EC 146, 159, 196, 68, 85.
119 EC 162; TH 142.
120 EC 163.
121 “[In Greek philosophy] gods must be neither criminals nor victims and, because [the gods] are not recognized as scapegoats, their acts of violence and criminality—the signs that point to them as victims—including the crisis itself, must be gradually eliminated” (Ranieri, op cit, 196).
Hiding this helps gain unanimous assent to the group’s “necessary” violence contained in the myth. As such, the memory and its repetition represent the community’s unanimity, its “cleansing,” its justice, its protection. “Archaic religions were based on a complete absence of criticism regarding this unanimity.” For Girard, mythical unity obscuring the marginalization of victims is the social function of “mythology”—*muthos* from the root *mu*, “to close” or “to keep secret.” In sum, the sacrificial mechanism safeguards humanity through misapprehension, as mediated by myths and their victims. This, of course, will remain crucial to our discussion of monotheism and the refusal to divinize victims.

2.2.3 Taboos and Rituals

“Taboos” or prohibitions are restraints of acquisitive gestures that would lead to any disorder or violence that resembles the originary crisis and murder. Taboos are born to fend off acquisitive mimesis, stopping actions which otherwise lead to the dangers of undifferentiation, mimetic escalation, and contagious chaos. Taboos dissimulate this suppression “beneath the major symbols of the sacred, such as contamination, pollution, etc.” “Rituals”—and most conspicuously sacrificial ones—are attempts to repeat the

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123 “*Muo* means to close one’s eyes or mouth, to mute the voice, or to remain mute…The literal meaning of Greek word for truth, *alethia*, is ‘to stop forgetting’ (Gil Bailie, *Violence Unveiled: Humanity at the Crossroads* [New York: Crossroad, 1996], 33). “Myth is thus the lie that hides the founding lynching, which speaks to us about the gods, but never about the victims that the gods used to be” (*BTE*, 22).

124 *VS*, 13, 16, 19-21; *TH*, 10, 13, 17.
cathartic effect of the originally spontaneous murder through a controlled re-sparking of a mini-crisis and resolution. Taboos and rituals are basically what one must do and not do to protect the community—and their instictual necessity are even more basic to the sacred than symbols, words, myths, and gods.

Taboos and rituals are two sides of the same coin. Both mean that a group’s members must, “(1) not to repeat any action association with the crisis, to abstain from all mimicry, from all contact with the former antagonists, from any acquisitive gesture toward objects that have stood as causes or pretexts for rivalry. (2) To reproduce, on the contrary, the miraculous event that put an end to the crisis, to immolate new victims substituted for the original victim in circumstances as close as possible to the original experience.”

Taboos and rituals thus give boundary and form to the sacred: “The sacred is violence, but if religious man worships violence it is only insofar as the worship of violence is supposed to bring peace.” If these archaic religious institutions contain violence, it is because their ordering contains the violence of disorder. There is ultimately no antinomy in human evolution between order and chaos, regularity and upheaval; the two are both aspects of humanity’s adaptive mechanism. The most obvious examples would be ritualized

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125 EC 169; TH 19f.
127 EC 28, 103.
128 VS 32.
129 Girard suggests this insight is not his, but as old as the pre-Socratics. See, for example, Anaximander: “The source from which existing things derive their existence is also that to which they return at their destruction, according to necessity; for they give justice and make reparation to one another for their injustice, according to the arrangement of Time” (TOB, 15; Kathleen Freeman, Ancilla to the Pre-
warfare, mock warfare, contest or duel, regularized raiding, or, simply, immolation of a
human or animal victim. In each case, the point is to repeat, in a controlled way, the
founding chaos and resolution that brought the group together. “Ritual is an effort to repeat
the scapegoat mechanism.”

Blood sacrifice is the ritual repetition of an originally spontaneous murder, its
conditions, and its resolution through immolating a replacement victim. Girard thus
argues that the fitness value of sacrifice explains why we find that virtually all primitive
religions seem to have practiced some form of sacrifice. We can see why the gods
“required” sacrifices to be offered in their memory: the original victim continues to “exist”
in their absence because they indeed continue to save as we obey their command to offer
further sacrifices in their memory. The acquiring of humans during raids or wars, to later
be sacrificed, or the replacement of such sacrifices with animals, or the group taunting and
killing of animals we see in Çatalhöyük’s archaeological record, finds its explanation in

*Socratic Philosophers: A Complete Translations of the Fragments in Diels, Fragmente der Vorsokratiker
(Cambridge, MS: Harvard University Press, 1962), 19). Or also the logos of Heraclitus, that strife and
polemos creates all. This is not to endorse strife, but an analysis of the constitutive relationship between
strife and human culture, which “isn’t acceptable from either the Christian or the pre-Socratic point of
view” (TOB, 99).

130 EC 70, 169.

131 “This victim is no longer presumed responsible for the crisis, but it is both a real new victim
that has to be killed and a symbol of the proto-event; it is the first symbolic sign ever invented by these
hominids. It is the first moment in which something stands for something else. It is the ur-symbol. And in
order to deal with the cognitive complexity of this handling of an emerging symbolic sphere, a larger size
of brain was then required, and the scapegoat mechanism acted as a form of evolutionary pressure, as an
element of natural selection” (EC 107).

132 On this point I see a great lack of substantiation, as the hunter-gatherer record of sacrifice is
unclear to me. Girard admitted that Walter Burkert hunting hypothesis (that hunting, not group lynching of
other humans, gave birth to sacrifice) to be somewhat consonant with his theory in light of evidence of
animal-scapegoating in Çatalhöyük’s artwork. See René Girard, “Animal Scapegoating at Çatalhöyük,” in
Pierpaolo Antonello and Paul Gifford, eds., How We Became Human: Mimetic Theory and the Science of
the fitness of this mechanism. In sum, it is not that religion causes violence or scapegoating. Rather, “religion itself is produced by the scapegoat mechanism,” which from the earliest stages in human evolution, contained violence, in the double sense of restrain and express.

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The rudiments of political order derive from this distinction in the scapegoat and thus similarly contain violence. We will eventually talk about the “Mosaic” distinction, in its division of true and false religion; but there is here in mimetic theory a distinction that would have preceded monotheism by tens of thousands of years, a distinction crucial to all human order. Palaver writes:

The scapegoat mechanism produces cultural and social differentiations... The victim’s death is the decisive moment... The same is true of moral distinctions. During the crisis there was no good and bad, not truth and falsity. The scapegoat mechanism clarifies this uncertainty: the victim is guilty; the others are innocent. All social distinctions such as ranks, hierarchy... are based on this elementary differentiation.135

The tragic decisiveness around which politics hinges is an echo of the fundamental decision on the victim. The victim and enemy both mark the boundary of the political community.136


134 EC 108.


136 “De-cision,” with its etymology in “cutting off,” perhaps even slitting the throat of the victim, is intricately tied with the victim. Decision is not based on law but creates law from the state of exception...
Political kingship—and here is a central topic for the coming chapters—is yet again a byproduct of the victim mechanism. Examining the sacrificial rituals that surround enthronement, Girard argues, “political power first arose...[from] prisoners who were ‘treated like kings’ over long periods right up to the day of their sacrifice.” That is, prisoners captured for a later sacrifice endured group ridicule or violence during their holding, but they also enjoyed the community’s protection and taboo: they were not to be killed outside the confines of ritual.

The rules of what we call ‘royal enthronement’ are those of sacrifice; they attempt to make the king a victim capable of channeling mimetic antagonism. One indication of this is that in many societies the inauguration of a king is accompanied by collective threats against him, and these are required by ritual just as are the expressions of submission and adoration that follow him...The king is at first nothing but a victim with a suspended sentence, and this demonstrates that the victim is made responsible for the transformation that moves the community from mimetic violence to the order of ritual.

This all suggests sovereignty, monarchy, and political authority are not the intentional, rational creation of humans entering the social contract. Why would


138 This bears an intriguing resemblance to Giorgio Agamben’s excavation of the homo sacer, though the pattern is inverted: the cursed and hallowed oath breaker can be killed with impunity but not sacrificed (Giorgio Agamben, Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life [Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998], 2, 72).

139 TH, 52.
aggressively egalitarian hunter-gatherers—our earliest and oldest form of human order, among whom the dictum “those who exalt themselves will be humbled” seems to have been violently enforced 140—ever have opted for a king? The answer is that the earliest political communities did not choose rulers; they mobbed scapegoats and ritually selected victims. The more attention these victims successfully polarized onto themselves, the longer their wait for immolation. And the longer the wait, the more they morphed into monarchs. 141 The useful, protective value of this for group fitness was selected over the course of time, during which the time between consecration and immolation would have increased, and the throne thus emerged from the altar. 142 This pattern eventually evolved so far from its roots that we eventually came to regard, as we tend to now, a king, president, or government as a “natural,” rational, common-sense development of “leadership” in human culture. 143


142 TH, 57, 52; Brian Collins, The Head Beneath the Altar: Hindu Mythology and the Critique of Sacrifice (Michigan State University Press, 2014), 135; 89.

Insofar as this is true, the Israelite notion of a “Messiah,” rooted in the Davidic dynasty, should not be exempt here. The familiar etymology of “anointed one,” (of which anointed *to rule* was surely a root meaning), should include in its deep genes the scapegoat-king pattern.⁴⁴ Even the very notion of such an “anointing,” to mimetic theory ears, echoes of a consecration to be sacrificed. James Williams, for example, notes how the “anointed” King Saul bears “obvious traces of a scapegoat king,” being the target of violence but also enjoying sacred protection, in that he could not be killed without incurring great guilt.⁴⁵ In any case, Girard’s overarching point is to penetrate how monarchy contains group violence in more ways than rational or strong “leadership,” but also as its polarizing scapegoat.

As our coming chapters will dwell in Egypt, I briefly note how this scapegoat framework offers new ways to interpret the famous pharaonic monarchy. An intense cultural feedback loop, likely intensified by the Nile’s bounty, appears to have accelerated ancient Egypt’s transition from tribal scapegoat into a state monarch. Commanding extravagant devotion and totalizing organizing powers, the moment many pharaohs were born, people were preparing for their deaths. This transformation was much less severe in less bounteous lands; we see much more hybridic, less galvanized kinds of scapegoat-kings in Sudan even in the 20th century. There, “kings” were targets for threats or killing

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if they failed to stop blight or other problems; on the other hand, if warring with nearby tribes monopolized the group attention, then the king became an uninteresting marginal figure. The ancient pharaonic office was comparatively far more intensified and singular in form—with the staggering pyramids as just one testament to ancient Egypt’s near-complete transformation of the victim into the sovereign. More on this in chapter three.

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By Girard’s reading, numerous anatomical and cultural features can be understood as byproducts of the accelerated “artificial selection” that the victim mechanism wrought on human- and cultural- evolution. Our omnivorous digestive tract, our birth canal, our brain/cranium size, our recessed incisors are all clues for consideration. Sacrifice’s growing importance gave birth to animal domestication, which otherwise had no immediate fitness value in contrast with the economics of hunting and gathering. And it was only the growing importance of sacrificial sites that would have brought on human settlement; we did not settle first and then invent religion, as Marx and the old Neolithic Revolution theory had it. Cognition, language, symbols, and reason itself are also

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147 Girard makes an underdeveloped if fascinating observation that societies that never abandoned human sacrifice also never domesticated animals, like pre-Colombian Mexico. *EC 117; TOB*, 88f; David Carrasco, *City of Sacrifice: The Aztec Empire and the Role of Violence in Civilization* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1999).


understood as not vaguely emergent faculties of human evolution but as contingently constructed in the context of this victim mechanism. Language emerges from its precognitive matrix with its first index as the dangerous experience of a murder and its victim. Religion, contra cognitive theories of religion, was not the superstitious distortion of a previously clear cognition. Rather, cognition owes its blurry birth to the leaven of an exogenous “sacred.”

In summary, this second aspect of mimetic theory argues sacrifice domesticated humanity and the gods really did create humanity—not the other way around. Religion “containing violence” operated at the generative core of human evolution. Primitive myths, religions, and taboos ought not be dismissed as mere superstitions, fables, or failed-science; rather, they are protective. It would take us too far afield to contextualize the anthropological tradition into which Girard here has entered, as would detailing the recent archaeological, anthropological, and psychological developments. This part of Girard’s

150 EC 37, 105f: “In order to have a symbol, you must have totality...One needs a center of signification, and the scapegoated victim provides this center.”


152 EC 72; 125.

153 The analysis of gods as products of immanent historical events emerges at least as early as Euhemerism, from the 4th century BCE philosopher, Euhemeris of Messene. The method is visible in Greek philosophers like Xenophanes, who spoke of projecting ourselves onto divinity. Plato too explicitly deals with murder in the making of a god (Phaedrus 229b-d). The Euhemeristic method became useful in early Christian apologetics. Tertullian, for example, argued that the gods were in fact misrepresented humans (Tertullian, Apologeticus, 10, frag 3, regarding Saturn as a man).

In a different register, the Orphics saw murder as the veiled basis of cultic sacrifice, and thereby are among the few groups who did not offer sacrifice in the classical era, seeing meat as an estrangement from the gods, searching for a time before murderous sacrifice began (Daniel Ulucci, The Christian Rejection of Animal Sacrifice [Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2011], 61, n163, citing Detienne).
theory most resembles a falsifiable scientific hypothesis, but it can be read in a strict or loose way. In the strict sense, this is indeed an archaeological hypothesis on what exactly facilitated human origins—from sacrifice preceding settlement to the exact functioning of our brain, etc. A considerable set of articles and monographs in recent years have worked on this,\footnote{154} much of which can be corroborated in non-“Girardian” research.\footnote{155} Notably, Girard refused to give his hypothesis any specific dating, other than referencing the importance of the Paleolithic danger of wielding stones with \textit{Homo habilis} 1.8mya. By that time, there must have developed at least some amount of fear and taboos regarding the excesses of internecine violence, given the gained abilities of stone-wielding—and he leaves it vaguely at that.\footnote{156}

But, taken in a loose sense, his scapegoat-foundation idea simply serves to locate mimesis, violence management, and religion as \textit{prior} to reason. In political terms, Kant saw this as a fundamental question: whether a rational social contract came first, and power

\footnote{\text{Xenophon also seems to understand sacrifice as preceding domestication: “The art of animal husbandry is linked to farming so that we may be able to please the gods by sacrificing and so that we can use them ourselves” (Xenophon \textit{Qec} 5.3; Uluc 323). Besides the tradition of demystifying gods and myth, a more modern anthropological tradition into which Girard entered begins at least with Montaigne’s essay on cannibalism, and more famously through works like W. Robertson Smith, Durkheim, Frazer, Radcliffe-Brown, Malinowski, Mauss, Hubert, to name just a few. The latter, for example, suggested that a paradox of crime and murder sit at the basis of immolative sacrifice. In the modern era the concept receives attention in Antoine Banier (c1730) and works like \textit{Bulfinch's Mythology} (c1867) or John Fiske, \textit{Myths and Mythmakers} (1887).}}


\footnote{156 \text{EC 113.}}
followed, or whether power came first and laws and rationality followed.\textsuperscript{157} Even if Kant saw it as dangerous to unearth an answer, Girard affirms the latter: that religion, taboo, and law all served to channel and restrain violence—even while thereby abetting it. Reason didn’t corrupt into religion; rather, reason grows \textit{from} this originary matrix. In this view, civilization is not the problem, \textit{pace} Rousseau; it is a symptom. Reason alone cannot be the answer to violence, as reason itself is a \textit{symptom} of the sacred’s containing violence that was crucial to our evolution.\textsuperscript{158} Nor even is the problem “competition,” against which one should champion rational “cooperation.” Rather, both competition and cooperation are two sides of the same mimetic coin. When framed in this way, mimetic theory is less an exotic hypothesis about some precise origin, but an exploration of how human association is marked by something of an originary division: the formation of a “we” has long been constitutively linked with the formation of a “they,” sedimented into human culture through various manifestations of the victim mechanism. Far from arguing this as the essence of humanity, his theory is precisely an attempt to historicize and \textit{denaturalize} scapegoating—attempting to outline this pattern as a contingent chain of events that didn’t have to emerge in human evolution the way it did.

In the loosest possible sense, his theory simply urges us to see how religion, as a fundamental cultural feature, was interwoven with, indeed generative of, our biological

\textsuperscript{157} \textit{RGMT} 275; Immanuel Kant, \textit{Metaphysics of Morals}, trans Mary J. Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 95.

\textsuperscript{158} Key peace studies literature has anthropologically framed this problem as “Rousseau vs. Hobbes,” and I see Girard’s work as helping mediate between the two. See Oliver Ramsbotham, Tom Woodhouse, Hugh Miall, \textit{Contemporary Conflict Resolution} 3\textsuperscript{rd} edition (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2011), 95, 335f.
and psychological structure from our origins—for better and worse. This means coming to grips with the fact that humanity, as the great anthropologist Roy Rappaport argues, evolved from our proto-human condition through the mediation of religion. This offers all the more reason to take stock of the radical religious changes from poly- to monotheism in the Common Era, as matters of evolutionary significance. Crucial to the monotheism question, here, is how the political order is a byproduct and expression of the victim mechanism. The polytheistic religions that grew among ancient empires and city-states contained this violence. This archaic sacred—in its gods, taboos, and rituals—constituted the ancient political context from which biblical monotheism grew and critiqued. Here we have something like a schematic “political theology of polytheism” from which his understanding of biblical revelation and monotheism, we will see, breaks.

2.3 Biblical Revelation (2a)

If mimesis and its victim-image-safeguard are so thoroughly wrought with misapprehension, how could one ever step outside of it to have offered the above analyses? Girard’s answer is that the biblical tradition has made this possible, even if in an “indirect and unperceived” way. When compared and contrasted with other myths, tribal religions, and the entire polytheistic framework, the biblical tradition for Girard, starting with its monotheism, advances us beyond the misapprehension of early religion.

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160 TH 138, 161.
Girard argues that the biblical tradition not only birthed a unique sensitivity to victims, but also *epistemologically made possible* anthropological knowledge of the founding principle of human culture, theorized above as the victimage mechanism.\textsuperscript{161} The Bible does not just offer just some supernatural idea for those who assent; it demythologizes myth and teaches anthropological insight, promising “to teach us the most about the origin and operation in human societies of what the Gospels call earthly powers.”\textsuperscript{162} So the above ability to analyze the victimary foundations of culture and see scapegoating more clearly, he insists, is not his insight, nor of the passive accruements of “reason” over time. He is simply representing in modern anthropological terms what the biblical tradition has called “revelation,” which he defines as “the true *representation* of what had never been completely represented or what had been falsely represented,”\textsuperscript{163} namely the scapegoating mechanism as summarized above. This revealing of the mechanisms of human culture has, in his analysis, begun to subvert the protective sacred and has, perhaps more than any factor in history, dramatically shaped the world since.

But as I outlined at the beginning, one can divide up this third and final part of his theory into two parts: 1) his general (synchronic) theory of the biblical symbols leads him to suggest 2) that the biblical tradition has had a (diachronic) sociological effect on society and the dissolution of the protective sacred over the last two millennia. This dissertation

\textsuperscript{161} Fleming, op cit, 114.

\textsuperscript{162} *TOB*, 40.

\textsuperscript{163} As such, the NT “spells out everything we need to reject our own mythic view of ourselves, our belief in our own innocence” (*ISS* 137, 127). Or, “revelation is the reproduction of the victimary mechanism by showing the truth, knowing that the victim is innocent and that everything is based on mimetism.” *EC* 205.
concerns that first, synchronic concept: his reading of the Bible’s symbols and monotheism, and their revelatory value compared with other religious/mythological symbols. After reviewing that, I followed with a review of his diachronic reading of biblical revelation and how he reads the Common Era in light of this theory.

2.3.1 Biblical Monotheism and Siding with Victims

Girard’s most commonly known concept of biblical revelation is that the Bible, in contradistinction to the mythology and polytheism of its context, uniquely takes the side of the victims, defending their innocence. In itself, this is not entirely controversial; Max Weber famously noted the unique attention the Tanakh devotes to victims (e.g. in his comparison of Tammuz with Deutero-Isaiah and a “fundamental change of meaning” therein).164 Simone Weil also wrote on the tendency for the bible to side with victims.165

Unlike Girard’s expansive walk through great literature or a meticulous survey of ethnography and human evolution, he argues for the uniqueness of biblical revelation of the victim mechanism, however, mostly through a fairly limited set of myths compared with biblical myths, as follows. Regular mythologies of a divinized scapegoat, he writes, might take a form like Oedipus, who would have originally been some historic lynchee who was demonized for his crimes (like incest and murder) and later divinized, resultant of his being victimized. But, compare Oedipus with its literary cousin, Genesis’ Joseph. In

164 Max Weber, *Ancient Judaism* (New York: Free Press, 1967), 174, 19-22, 86; 475-7; 492-5; Fleming 124. Weber, for example, discusses Tammuz and a guiltless martyrdom vs. the dying and rising vegetation gods trope..

Oedipus, the “message is that the plague will be cured if and when the Thebans expel from their midst the right victim, the individual about whom they can all agree that he is the one who brought them the plague.” By contrast, Joseph is not divinized but humanized; the accusations against him turn out to be false, his being scapegoated was the effect of jealousy and resentment. The story does not make him a god-scapegoat but insists on his innocence. “The point that rehabilitating the victim has a desacralizing effect is well demonstrated by the story of Joseph, who ends up having no demoniac or divine aspects but simply being human.”

Girard sees this theme strewn throughout the Bible, where the point is not so much historical referentiality of its myths as to how they contrast with other myths. The Bible may entail a mythical form, but with a reversal of the mythical relationship to the victim; as such, the Bible offers us myth in reverse, or a “founding murder in reverse.” He sees in the biblical tradition an “attempt to get back to origins and look once again at constitutive acts of transference so as to discredit and annul them—so as to contradict and demystify the myths.” The Bible teaches us to sympathize with Abel, laying blame on Cainite culture, “showing that this culture is completely based upon the unjust murder of Abel. The story of Romulus and Remus does not lay blame upon the city of Rome since


167 TH 152.

168 “The story doesn’t have to be referential to be true. It is true in so far as it is the denial of the myths” (EC 200).

169 BTE, xv.

170 TH 153; EC 141.
the murder of Remus is presented to us as being justified.” And the Bible extends this violence-demystification as a running theme, exonerating victims from Abel onward. The Psalms are “the first document written largely from the perspective of the victim,” often of one being hemmed in by enemies. Job defends the afflicted against group accusations. Isaiah’s Suffering Servant centers on the one afflicted by a mob; the Prophets are always siding with the victims or the poor. In Esther, it is not the persecuted Jews but the powerful oppressors who are killed, just as the Flood is a survival of the persecuted, while the world of violence drowns. The supposed antipathy toward sacrifice in many prophets bespeaks their awareness of the faultiness of the whole system down to its foundation in the victim.

The Gospels all hinge upon a founding murder, Christ’s unjust lynching, crystallized in the observation “he was hated without reason.” The Passion is, in Girard’s analysis, the first historic identification of the “unconscious” as woven into a social matrix of misapprehension (and not the sense of the unconscious as an individualistic depth as

171 René Girard, Girard Reader (hereafter GR) ed. James G. Williams (New York: Crossroad, 1996), 153. In contrast with a similar myth, “The murder of Remus appears as an action that was perhaps to be regretted but was justified by the victim’s transgression” (TH, 146). And while Romulus became a High priest who incarnates Roman power, Cain is not divinized.

172 TH 149, 147.

173 E.g. “I hear the whispering of many—terror all around!—as they scheme together against me, as they plot to take my life” (Ps 31:13).

174 TH 143.

175 Girard may overemphasize the prophets’ anti-sacrificial message. One can argue most prophets condemned the misuse of sacrifice, to the neglect of ethics, but did not condemn sacrifice itself. E.g. Daniel Ulucci, The Christian Rejection of Animal Sacrifice, op cit.

176 John 15:25; Ps 35:19; TH, 238; Girard, The Scapegoat, op cit, 114.
one finds in Jung): forgive them, Father, for they know not what they do.\textsuperscript{177} In each case, a chief theme is “God taking the side of the victim,” or stories written from “the perspective of the victim,” emphasizing the humanness and innocence of scapegoats in contradistinction with myth taking the side of the victimizer. One often finds this crucial refrain in Girard as to what constitutes this revelation:

> in biblical texts, victims are innocent and collective violence is to blame. In myths, the victims are to blame and communities are always innocent… In revealing their innocence, the Judeo-Christian tradition desacralizes scapegoats and brings the age of myth to a close.\textsuperscript{178}

The Passion “fully represents the mimetic mechanism, and thus it can reveal its nature, by the sheer fact that it always sees the essential point: the innocence of the scapegoat victim.”\textsuperscript{179} By contrast, the mythic process requires a unanimous guilt upon the scapegoat, lest they fail to polarize violence.\textsuperscript{180}

While the above might seem a mere bias for his native religion, Girard suggests he is simply developing upon the insights of the biblical tradition’s self-proclaimed enemy, Friedrich Nietzsche. Nietzsche, by Girard’s lights, is the first to clearly point out that, while the Christ-story appears in the structure of myth—e.g. the story of a killed and resurrected god like “Dionysius,” who Nietzsche treats as a metonymy for all mythology—it radically

\textsuperscript{177} Girard, \textit{The Scapegoat}, 110-11. “Father forgive them because they don’t know what they are doing” (Lk 23:34) is taken to be the first exposition of the collective unconscious, echoed in Acts 3:17 “I know brothers, that you acted in ignorance, just as your leaders did.”

\textsuperscript{178} \textit{TOB}, 35, 39

\textsuperscript{179} \textit{EC} 208, 209, 160, 83; \textit{TOB}, 39. Also: “Some myths do, of course, downplay the guilt of victims; but not one of them incriminates the persecuting community” (\textit{TOB}, 37).

\textsuperscript{180} \textit{TOB}, 39.
diverges on its internal content. This similarity is what allows us to see their difference: the Gospels’ emphasizing the innocence of the suffering victim corrupts the strength and stability of the sacred. Nietzsche writes,

Dionysus versus the “Crucified”: there you have the antithesis. It is not a difference in regard to their martyrdom—it is a difference in the meaning of it. Life itself, its eternal fruitfulness and recurrence creates torment, destruction, the will to annihilation. In the other case, suffering—the “Crucified as the innocent one”—counts as an objection to this life, as a formula for its condemnation…Dionysus cut to pieces is a promise of life: it will be eternally reborn and return again from destruction.  

Drawing from Nietzsche’s comparative mythology, then, Girard insists he is not merely plying a biblical bias, but, “I am just repeating here what Nietzsche said, although I am doing it in reverse.” Nietzsche, Girard insists, has read the biblical symbols rightly; he has uttered “the most important thing said in theology since the time of St. Paul”—that “in myth the victim is always expelled and killed justly…whereas the community bears no blame” and that the bible inverts this.

If Nietzsche is in error, it is rather on his seeing ressentiment as the source of this biblical disposition toward victims. Nietzsche thought that the Jewish/Christian inspiration was simply the vengeful jealousy of the weak toward strong winners—and so they valorized and sanctified their weakness as holy, in revenge against the strong in a “slave morality.” Girard differs: the biblical siding with victims comes from a great courage to


182 EC 197.

183 Girard, in Gianni Vattimo, op cit, 67.
contradict the world’s unjust persecutions; resentment is merely an illegitimate heir, not
the father of the biblical tradition.\textsuperscript{184} Nietzsche’s praise of Dionysius, rather, gives into the
mob mentality, taking sides with the persecutors.\textsuperscript{185} Nietzsche wants to stand on the side
of “strength,” “life,” and affirm that the sacrifices of society are not to be lamented—they
are to be embraced for the sake of the whole, for the sake of life. Thus, we can hear some
of Caiaphas’ logic, that “it is better that one man be sacrificed than the whole town erupt
in violence”:\textsuperscript{186}

Through Christianity, the individual was made so important, so
absolute, that he could no longer be sacrificed: but the species
endures only through human sacrifice...If one regards individuals
as equals, one calls the species into question, one encourages a way
of life that leads to the ruin of the species...The species requires that
the ill-constituted, weak, degenerate, perish: but it was precisely to
them that Christianity turned as a conserving force.\textsuperscript{186}

The “ruin of the species,” Girard would say, is another word for the biblical symbol
of the apocalypse. Biblical revelation has caused elevated levels of victim-sensitivity to
seep into the drinking water of civilization, for better and worse.\textsuperscript{187} With this epitomized
in the Passion, the mechanism that evolved and organized humanity since its origins can
no longer successfully contain chaos, “for no one can imagine that the Jesus portrayed in
the Gospels might be guilty.”\textsuperscript{188} This is unveils a fundamental aspect of human culture:

\textsuperscript{184} René Girard, trans Yvonne Freccero, \textit{Job: The Victim of His People} (Redwood City, CA:

\textsuperscript{185} \textit{EC} 197.

\textsuperscript{186} Friedrich Nietzsche, \textit{The Will to Power}, §246; \textit{Antichrist} § 2.

\textsuperscript{187} Girard thus affirms Nietzsche’s assessment that “the ‘sword’ that Jesus said he brought [is] the
sword destructive of human culture” (\textit{GR} 254).

\textsuperscript{188} \textit{EC} 261.
“Christianity is essentially the cultural and moral acknowledgement of the sacrificial origins of our culture and our society.”

2.3.2 Polytheism and Monotheism

My summary started with the Bible’s attention to victims in general, but quickly—through Nietzsche—turned to emphasize Christianity and the cross. Rightly so, as it is where Girard’s theory most naturally centers its biblical commentary, given the crucifixion’s explicit representation of a mimetic snowballing into murder. But if we drill deeper here, Girard’s logical bedrock of the biblical tradition is not just a general siding with victims, but the epochal shift from polytheism to monotheism. This shift means, for Girard, an affirmation of the old dictum, “truth comes from the Jews.” In that shift, the gods of the victimage mechanism are critically engaged—and we thus arrive at the core concern of this dissertation’s topic. If polytheism was a byproduct of the victimary mechanism, monotheism means the “devictimizing” of God.” Monotheism means anthropological critique of mimetic contagion as much as metaphysical critique. Its refusal of idolatry means no longer turning victims into divinities or divinity into a victim, but proclaiming a God who is not a product of scapegoating:

189 EC 12. Similarly, see Agamben’s recent Pilate and Jesus (Stanford University Press, 2015). There the Passion’s juridical form—where there is a “sentence without a judgment”—inspires not an affirmation of Roman justice but a radical “undecidability.” Likewise, Girard saw in the gospels “a very un-Roman sense of legal apparatus in the service not of justice but of injustice, systematically warped by distortions of persecution” (Girard, The Scapegoat, 202, 201; GR 18, 282; René Girard, “The Logic of the Undecidable: An Interview with Thomas F. Bertonneau,” Paroles Gelées 5 (1987): 20.


191 EC 199.
For the first time in human history the divine and collective violence are separated from one another. The refusal to deify victims is inseparable from another aspect of the biblical revelation, the most important of all: the deity is no longer victimized... ...What characterizes the biblical tradition is above all the discovery of a divine reality that no longer belongs to the sphere of the collective idols of violence... The [sacred] stems from the deceptive unanimity of persecution. In the Bible, by contrast, the confusion of the victimization process and the divine is dissolved and gives way to an absolute separation of the two... Monotheism is both the cause and the consequence of this revolution.192

The movement from polytheism to monotheism is thus framed not only as a moral choice to side with the victim but a change in how divinity is perceived, enacted, and represented in relation to the political realm. Whereas divinity in a polytheistic framework had been formerly perceived as embedded within the socio-political order through the god-once-victim, divinity in monotheism is conceived as discontinuous with, transcending, or incompatible with the political order. We thus encounter in monotheism ultimately a desacralization of the traditional political order, an epochal shift in religio-political arrangements.193 As we will find with Assmann in chapter 3, this monotheism does not simply suggest an enlarged, political henotheism of the empire. Rather, we are encountering an entirely different genus of religion and divinity in the evolution of humanity.

This shift from gods to God—from archaic religion to biblical monotheism—is for Girard a movement from “the sacred to the holy.” Unlike the old sacred, the new face of

192 ISS, 106-7, 121; EC 199f, 204.
193 “The sacred quality of social order becomes questionable where God is understood as transcending creation... Christianity continues the inheritance of Israel in radically de-divinizing social order.” Ranieri, op cit, 218, citing Voegelin, OH.
the divine is “holy,”[194] entirely unlike anything we can imagine, for our imagination itself was forged in a distorted framework. This epochal shift is perhaps still only in the early, experimental stages of change. For, on the evolutionary scale, monotheism has only existed for a fraction of time compared to the longer “sacrificial safeguards” of archaic religion. Given the longer evolutionary predominance of the latter, it may be impossible to imagine peace without some originary exclusion, some founding victim, or a founding violence. And yet the biblical notion of God without the sacred, or a divinity without victimization, or a politics without a scapegoat, involves contemplating a type of peace that surpasses our current abilities in comprehension.[195]

One rightly asks of such a grand theory Eric Gans’ question: where does this supposed monotheistic break from polytheism come from, and how did it happen? Girard’s theory can admit that monotheism did not establish itself one fell swoop starting at Moses. While he calls the Bible one long “exodus from violence,” this is a slow process with regressions and advances; and thus the Bible ought to be regarded as a mixed text, grown from polytheistic soil. Thus, the Bible is full of blurry overlaps in this transition—e.g. polytheistic names for God, like Elojim, and residues of the violent, archaic sacred, even if these are “vestiges without a future.”[196] Thus the revelation unfolds in two stages. “First of all, there is a shift from myth to the Bible, where, as I said, God is devictimized and the

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[194] EC, 198, 218: “The ‘transient’ God these thinkers are talking about is the gradual transformation of the sacred into the holy. The God of the Bible is at first the God of the sacred, and then more and more the God of the holy, foreign to all violence, the God of the Gospels.”


[196] ISS 119; TH 157. A thin but suggestive gesture from Girard recognizes the shift from plural elojim—the “original sacrificial victims”—to a singular Yahweh, which even disappears in the NT under a Christ-universalism (EC 226f).
victims are dedivinized; then you have the full evangelical revelation. God experiences the role of the victim, but this time deliberately, in order to free man from his violence…”

Thus, Girard’s monotheism involves a complex dynamic of separation and unification. On the one hand, the emphasis on a total dialectic break of “God” from any hint of violence or scapegoating, treating the false sacred as an idolatrous projection of human violence. But on the other hand, he sees in Christ a more complex, if pagan seeming notion of God as the divine victim. But this is again something like a myth in reverse, wherein Christ’s divinity is not the byproduct of scapegoating: “If Christ had in fact been divinized as the result of a violent act of sacralization, then the witnesses to the Resurrection would have been a mob howling for him to be put to death, and not the few individuals who proclaimed his innocence.” This subtlety, stemming from the minority community proclaiming Christ risen, is what keeps Girard from seeing Christianity’s divine victim as reversion into pagan polytheism. At issue here is less metaphysical oneness and more a division from the falsehood of the victimage mechanism. We will return to this complex issue in chapter five, after having more closely analyzed Israelite monotheism.

Girard can admit that the Bible may even involve more representation of violence, compared to ancient near eastern literature. His answer is largely that violence is being

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197 ISS 106-7, 121; EC 199f, 204.
198 TOB, 39.
exorcised from the archaic sacred, and we should not be tempted into polytheism’s seeming tolerance.\textsuperscript{199} The world polytheism paints

\begin{quote}
... appears superficially more harmonious than ours because ruptures in the harmony are generally resolved by triggering a single victim mechanism and the emergence of a new god, who prevents the victim from appearing as a victim… [Polytheism appears to us as] a playful fantasy of which an overly serious monotheism, not playful at all, tries to deprive us. In reality, however, the primitive and pagan gods are not play; they are mournful and destructive.\textsuperscript{200}
\end{quote}

In following chapters I will draw upon monotheistic scholarship to sift and supplement Girard’s conceptualization of monotheism, seeing as it suffers from “remarkably little argumentation.” His demonstration of the biblical breakthrough is mostly limited to a few cases of comparative mythology and is not conversant with ancient near east scholarship. This invites more detailed examination, in the coming chapters, of the birth, growth, and political meanings of monotheism in the Ancient Near East (ANE).

\section*{2.4 History Deprived of Gods (2b)}

To complete our summary of Girard’s theory, he interprets the biblical reconfiguration of our relationship to victimage as unleashing powerful social forces, for good and bad, in the flow of world events.\textsuperscript{201}

\begin{quote}
By revealing the founding murder, Christianity destroyed the ignorance and superstition that are indispensable to such
\end{quote}

\begin{flushleft}

\textsuperscript{200} ISS, 106-7, 121; \textit{EC} 199f, 204.

\end{flushleft}
religions...Our civilization is the most creative and powerful ever known, but also the most fragile and threatened because it no longer has the safety rails of archaic religion.\(^{202}\)

The dramatic socio-political changes since the birth of biblical religion, the accelerations of the modern era, and even the growth of atheism, he regards as mostly byproducts of biblical revelation.\(^ {203}\) Tribal religion, and archaic religion as compacted with the state, used to “contain” violence in the sense that St. Paul terms the *katéchon*: the powers that contain violence through their false transcendence. With false transcendence on the wane, and the loss of scapegoats as safeguards, the secularized *katéchon* of today make up somewhat for the loss of what safeguards religion used to mediate\(^ {204}\)—these are forces like democratic ideology and institutions, technology, mass media, market society, the objectification of individual relationships.\(^ {205}\) But even these restraints cannot hold indefinitely. Everything is accelerating and increasing. The bads of antagonistic violence

\(^{202}\) *BTE*, xiii, 15, 47; *EC* 219. Fleming sees “the eclipse of the sacred” as linked with “the constantly eroded salvific power of ritual, the generalized crisis of authority (‘legitimation crisis’), and the loosening of legal constraints characteristic of modernity and late modernity” (Fleming 141).

\(^{203}\) Though, this does not exclude from his theory other material causes, like the technological accelerations and discoveries of the 15th century onward (*EC* 246; Pedro Augustín Díaz Arenas, *Relaciones Internacionales de Dominación* [Bogotá: Universidad Nacional de Colombia, 1998], 12).

\(^{204}\) “In our society religion has been completely subsumed by economics, but precisely because economics springs from a religious matrix…It is nothing but the secularized form of religious ritual. …Trade was [originally] an offering to the foreigner, in order to placate the foreign god, who was seen as a possible threat” (*EC* 248).

\(^{205}\) *EC* 13; *TOB*, 97f. Cowdell (*op cit*) has a large section on *katéchon*, as does Wolfgang Palaver, “Hobbes and the Katéchon: The Secularization of Sacrificial Christianity,” *Contagion* 2 (1995), 57-74. Agamben reads *katéchon* in relationship to 2 Thessalonians 2: “the mystery of *anomia*,” or lawlessness: “The *katéchon* is therefore the force—the Roman Empire as well as every constituted authority—that clashes with and hides *katargesis*, the state of tendential lawlessness that characterizes the messianic, and in this sense delays unveiling the ‘mystery of lawlessness.’ The unveiling of this mystery entails bringing to light the inoperativity of the law and the substantial illegitimacy of each and every power in messianic time” (Agamben, *The Time that Remains, op cit*, 111).
and the race to rechannel and manage mimetic rivalry are not only on the increase; but increasing in tandem also are the goods of victim-awareness and the resolve to save.\footnote{BTE 131. Dumouchel adds that these changes stem not only from the spread of biblical ideas, but of \textit{practices} like unconditional charity and forgiveness: while benevolent, they undercut the traditional safeguards of reciprocal solidarity and the duty to vengeance (Paul Dumouchel, \textit{The Barren Sacrifice}, xxvii).}

We have already noted above, with Nietzsche, that revelation of the scapegoat mechanism involves potential “apocalyptic” consequences in Girard’s theory—that “this biblical change of perspective has undermined the pagan ways of containing violence forever.”\footnote{Palaver, “The Ambiguous Cachet of Victimhood,” 72} By apocalypse he does not mean predicting a divine intervention at the end of the world. Quite the opposite: humanity has been deprived of its ancient religious safeguards and a sense of divine, retributive management. The subsequent cultural decay and increases of violence will be our own violence, not “God’s”\footnote{BTE, x; EC, 112.}—for which we must learn to take responsibility or suffer the consequences.

Post-revelation, the world is now perilously experimenting with how to live without gods, as monotheism has blocked our ability to make new ones. Nietzsche lamented this: “almost 2,000 years, and not a single new god!”\footnote{Nietzsche, \textit{The Antichrist}, § 19—for they have “contradicted their instincts.”} To link the biblical heritage with such desacralization lends a unique view to the “recession of the sacred” or the “loss of transcendence”\footnote{Jan Assmann, “Cultural Memory and the Myth of the Axial Age,” (hereafter CMA) in Bellah, Robert N. and Joas, Hans, \textit{The Axial Age and Its Consequences} (Cumberland, US: Harvard University Press, 2012), 371. See also Robert Bellah, “Religious Evolution,” \textit{American Sociological Review} 29 (1964): 358-374. Also, Charles Taylor, \textit{A Secular Age} (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).} so often attributed to the modern Zeitgeist. It is to acknowledge, with Max Weber, Eric Auerbach, Marcel Gauchet, and Hans Blumenberg,
among others, how the biblical tradition secularizes; it may lead to the experience of the absence of god, for the archaic sacred is being dissolved. Girard writes,

Christianity seems to be dying together with the religions it extinguishes, because, in sacrificial terms, it is perceived as one mythical religion among others. Christianity is not only one of the destroyed religions but it is the destroyer of all religions. The death of God is a Christian phenomenon. In its modern sense, atheism is a Christian invention.

Christianity’s secularizing nature leads Dumouchel to quip that, for Girard, “Christianity is a religion that should not exist.” It is as though Christianity is incompatible with human culture because it problematizes the basic connective principle of culture, religion, and togetherness: the scapegoat. And yet the “sacrificial misreading” of historical Christianity, what we call Constantinianism or Christendom, enabled it “to build a culture which somewhat resembled ancient cultures,” and thereby assume the ancient role of containing violence. This sacrificialization of Christianity helped slow the Gospels’ dissolution of cultures and differences. But with the decline of sacrificial Christendom

Cowardell, 12. “Togetherness and personal security are typically rooted in a violent compact and its mythico-ritual reinforcement, so that the price of liberation for a future of genuine humanity and self-determination is the risk of isolation, exposure, and emotional flatness. This is because the false sacred has been punctured. Disenchantment is thus the price of Christian maturity and closeness to God…” (Cowardell, 13, 179).

EC 257.


Palaver, “Hobbes and the Katéchon,” 62. Hobbes saw the Roman Church as “no other than the Ghost of the deceased Roman Empire, sitting crowned upon the grave thereof.” After the Reformation struck the unanimity of this rule, “Hobbes, therefore, had to find a secular institution that could at least
today, we enter a further stage of accelerated, globalized secularization and the dissolution of cultures.\footnote{216}{For me globalization is mainly the abolition not only of sacrifice, properly speaking, but also of the entire sacrificial order: it is the encompassing spread of Christian ethics and epistemology in relation to every sphere of human activity” \textit{(EC 245)}.}

But modernity’s problem is not merely the existential malaise of divine absence, but a political problem of our ability to authoritatively, legally contain violence. One Girardian exegete, Gil Bailie, elaborates on the forces behind such a decline in “legitimate” violence and the societal convulsions that accompany it:

In a world where the difference between holy violence and evil violence still existed, violence could still effectively end violence. Increasingly today violence destroys the moral legitimacy that was once its chief by-product. In other words, societies are slipping deeper into violence, not because it is now more powerful, but because, however physically powerful it is, violence has been shorn of much of its once shimmering moral and religious prestige.\footnote{217}{Bailie 72-73; 64; 53, emphasis added.}

The legitimacy of “official” violence is necessary for politics to do its stabilizing work; and it is suffering from the onslaught of biblical symbols.\footnote{218}{One might ask of Baillie’s and Girard’s remarks how exactly, quantitatively, we are slipping “deeper into violence.” This kind of dramatic rhetoric is rarely demonstrated in hard data in Girardian literature compared with, say, peace studies literature—which often sees a quantitative decline in overall violence, even with its dissemination into smaller, interminable conflicts: E.g. Lotta Themnér and Peter Wallensteen, “Armed Conflicts, 1946-2012,” \textit{Journal of Peace Research} 50(4): 2013, 509-521.}

The growing awareness that what used to be “good violence” might really be persecution sometimes today takes the form of “political correctness.” Girard takes this to locally secure peace and tranquility. He proposed the secular state as a creator of peace” \textit{(Palaver, “Hobbes and the Kàtêchon,” 67)}
be an offspring of the biblical siding with victims. Far from being finished with absolutes, the concern for victims has become the new absolute; “it is the absolute. One will never see anyone attacking it.”219 But siding with the victims against the persecutors can lead to a new form of persecution of persecutors. Defense of victims can disorder society partly because it does not necessarily have to arise in conjunction with forgiveness, mercy, and love of enemies. “One can persecute today only in the name of being against persecutors.”220

If scapegoating was an archaic god-machine, monotheism hobbles its double transference of awe and hatred, divinization and demonization—reducing its abilities to only the latter. Now we remain capable “of hating our victims; we are no longer capable of worshipping them.”221 Wolfgang Palaver writes of this problem, “taking the side of the victim…was the origin of our modern concern for human dignity and our eagerness to overcome all forms of victimization…but it has also enabled human beings to increase tremendously violence and destruction.”222 Instead of this concern for dignity simply improving the world, it “may indirectly worsen the relationship between antagonists.”223

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219 EC 258.

220 EC, 258. “Never before in history have people spent so much time throwing victims at one another’s heads as substitutes for other weapons. This can only happen in a world that though far from Christian to be sure, is totally permeated by the values of the gospels” (René Girard, “Generative Scapegoating,” in Burkert, Walter, Rene Girard, and Jonathan Z. Smith, Violent Origins: Ritual Killing and Cultural Formation [Stanford University Press, 1987b], 140; ISS, 164, 158); TOB, 82).

221 TH, 37; EC 262. “Victims are still demonized, but no longer divinized: ‘Medieval and modern persecutors do not worship their victims, they only hate them” (Palaver, “The Ambiguous Cachet of Victimhood,” 71; Girard, The Scapegoat, 38).


223 Pal 71.
We can contrast this unleashed capacity for violence with what used to be a certain respect, even awe, toward enemies that used to moderate conflict—the enemy as both “evil and respectful person.” But with the rampant demonization of enemies that is supposedly on the increase today, “modern scapegoaters are aiming at the annihilation of the enemy because they are no longer able to divinize their victims…The protective side of the old pagan sacred has completely disappeared.”

The shift from sacred-enemy to an inhuman-foe can be described through not only to monotheism’s symbolic interruption, but also to what Palaver and Elias Canetti call “religions of lament,” which combine victim-sensitivity with vengeance for the victim. These would include religions where a victim is centralized, for example, Adonis, Tammuz, Attis, Osiris, Christ, and Husain (Shia Islam), just to name a few. These religions urge one to “side with a persecuted victim in order to expiate their own guilt as persecutors.” They center their myth around an unjust killing, perhaps an unjust trial,

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224 Palaver, “The Ambiguous Cachet of Victimhood,” 70. He cites Homer’s *Iliad* as a lesson in not hating the enemy, for example. This differs from H. Richard Niebuhr’s idea that monotheism is really the root of enemy-love in its universality beyond a closed society.

We can even see this in the sacred protections that surrounded a scapegoat-king, as in the “anointed” King Saul whom one cannot kill without incurring great guilt. 1 Sam 24, 26; 1 Sam 26:9. Wolfgang Palaver, *Politik und Religion bei Thomas Hobbes: Eine Kritik aus der Sicht der Theorie René Girards* (Innsbruck: Tyrolia, 1991), 1, 217-223; James G. Williams, *The Bible, Violence, and the Sacred*, *op cit*, 134-5.

The divinization of enemies (or seeing them as “cosmic enemies”) corresponds readily with political enemies, like Rahab for Egypt (Isa 30:7; Ps 87:4). This, in other words, is the equation of political enemies with cosmic enemies, regularly attested in ancient myth cycles (Mark Smith, *The Early History of God: Yahweh and Other Deities in Ancient Israel* [hereafter *EHG*] 2nd ed [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002], 58).


and “attach themselves to one who will die for them and, in lamenting him, they feel themselves as persecuted.” Animated and justified by this victimization, “the hunting or baiting pack expiates itself by becoming a lamenting pack” which is really a war pack.\textsuperscript{227} One calls to mind how, even if the Psalms excel in their narrating the victim’s perspective, they also cry out loudly for violent vengeance.\textsuperscript{228} Osama bin Laden claimed to be acting in defense of Muslims killed by the US and even the victims of Hiroshima and Nagasaki; much of 20\textsuperscript{th} century fascism was animated by laying claim to victimization, and so forth.\textsuperscript{229} By contrast, Canetti found it interesting how the Pueblo people, who suppress lament in their tribes, saw little war and hunting. Nietzsche called all of this an inability to properly and powerfully love enemies. In the biblical reification of God in the image of the weak, and its resentment of the strong, it constructs an absolute “evil enemy,” “the Evil One.”\textsuperscript{230} These can be regarded as temptations toward “scapegoating reduced to its demonizing side,”\textsuperscript{231} shorn of divinizing.

Girard suggests that a proper “conversion” to biblical revelation’s “truth of the victim” means not merely being scandalized at how other people are scapegoaters—\textsuperscript{232} which


\textsuperscript{229} Palaver, “The Ambiguous Cachet,” 76.

\textsuperscript{230} Nietzsche, \textit{The Genealogy of Morals}, §1.10.

\textsuperscript{231} Palaver, “The Ambiguous Cachet of Victimhood,” 73.
only repeats the pattern of accusation and expulsion—but “recognizing that we are persecutors without knowing it.” Repentance is scapegoating in reverse. This was the repentance of Peter and Paul in admitting their mob guilt; this is the Jewish moral traditions which refuse to demonize one’s enemy.

As for how and whether other religions have also participated in this reconfigured relationship to victims over the centuries, Girard is willing to grant them some place, but not nearly as central a place. The ancient Greeks critiqued group victimage, particularly the tragic poets, but, that Sophocles never explicitly did away with a justified lynching of the victim in his plays suggests, for Girard, that he knew that such a removal would have sealed his own lynching. Jainism and Hinduism, indeed, had an internal critique of sacrificial mechanisms, but this never became thoroughly developed. Islam may critique sacrifice at points, but Girard sees its refraining from explicit representation of Christ’s crucifixion as the reason it has not entirely dissolved animal sacrifice wherever it spreads. (None of this means the other religions are “more violent”; if anything, they are safer, in that sacrifice, by this theory, contains violence.)

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232 EC 198; 173, 223. Conversion means coming “to see oneself as a persecutor” (TOB, 60).


234 EC, 212; 201. See also Sacrifice for Hinduism commentary and EC for the relative similarity with the Orphic and Gnostic traditions (Girard, Sacrifice, 165; EC, 257). The Buddhist Upanishadic tradition involves “a scathing satire on how the religious establishment exploits the piety of sacrificers” (Cowdell 82; Sacrifice, 88-93, also 2, 65, 87-92, 94-5). On “victim innocence discerned in pagan antiquity (e.g., Socrates, Antigone)” (Cowdell 89; Girard, The Scapegoat, 199). For interreligious critique, see Leo Lefebure, Revelation, The Religions, and Violence (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis 2000), 21f; Mark Wallace, Fragments of the Spirit: Nature, Violence, and the Renewal of Creation (New York: Continuum, 1996), 109-11.

235 In a Docetist escape at the last moment, akin to the akedah’s replacement of Isaac with a ram, it only “seemed” Jesus was killed and was instead immediately assumed (Quran Sura 4:157-158). Girard has noted some “prophetic insight in Muslim tradition into the role of sacrifice” (Cowdell 150; Girard, VS, 4-5). And yet, “the Muslim religion has not destroyed the sacrifice of archaic religion the way Christianity has. No part of the Christian world has retained pre-Christian sacrifice. Many parts of the Muslim world have
2.5 Conclusion

In the fourth and last section above, that dramatic sociology of history stems from a hypothesis about what biblical symbols and religion have done, perhaps unwittingly, to the cultures where it has spread. My interest is to not grapple with that sociology of the Common Era, but to return to the core hypothesis—the biblical and theological hermeneutics—that founded and informed Girard’s ambitious reading of history. Is his reading of the biblical siding with victims, and more particularly, the pride of place devoted to monotheism, an accurate reading of those symbols, how they were born in the ancient world, and what they unleashed in civilization?

Monotheism’s political consequences concern, in his theory, its rejection of the victim-divinizing mechanism. As I have suggested, his idea remains fairly underdeveloped—and something of a hasty conclusion for the unconvinced.236 I.e. having identified “things hidden since the foundation of the world,” he may too quickly conflate retained pre-Muslim sacrifice” (Doran, Robert, “Apocalyptic Thinking after 9/11: An Interview with René Girard,” *SubStance.* Issue 115 (Vol 37, Number 1), 2008, pp. 20-32, 25, 28).

James Alison, among the most theologically developed interpreters of Girard, concurs: “Girard’s presumption of the effect of revelation is grossly under-demonstrated, is true” (Personal correspondence, Aug 11, 2016). In all of his books, Girard only spends about a half a chapter on monotheism specifically, along with some other scattered commentary (ISS, ch 9; EC). He briefly mentions how religions that “prohibit all images” ought to be analyzed with respect to “doubling” and “rivalry” (TH 14). He does not interact with virtually any monotheism scholars. Girard’s chief Jewish interlocutor, Sandoor Goodhart, who indeed emphasizes the importance of monotheistic “anti-idolatry” for mimetic theory, nonetheless remained within Girard’s method of comparative mythology, but not a detailed investigation of monotheism per se (e.g. Sandoor Goodhart, *The Prophetic Law* [Michigan State University Press, 2014]).

Mark S. Smith, a leading monotheism scholar, responded to my inquiry of his analysis of Girard’s concept of monotheism: “I don't think I recognize the polytheism that Girard presupposes about the ancient Near East. I think one should study something about the gods before accepting something that sounds so reductionist. There is a category of dead gods in Mesopotamian religion that differ from other gods (for the most part) and I'm not sure how Girard would deal with these (as far as I can tell Girard does not deal in any concrete manner with the facts about polytheism on the ground). It seems to me that Girard's theory makes polytheism into a scapegoat, not to mention a fantasy of his imagination” (Personal correspondence, Aug 25, 2016).
the Common Era’s accelerating historical drama with their causal basis in the biblical symbols. That other cultures may have given strong voice to innocent victims begs for more comparative analysis. For other critics, too, his *sui generis* monotheism appears almost mythical and unbelievable; this revelation seems to come out of thin air. It thus deserves exploration with respect to its polytheistic context and roots. This biblical “siding with the victims,” this “refusal to divinize victims,” this breakthrough of monotheism—where does it come from? What did it do to that world, and thus our world?

With those questions in mind, we now go outward from this theory to explore others, particularly that of Jan Assmann and his critical extension of Freud’s notion of monotheism. This will build up a greater understanding of monotheism’s relationship to violence and the political order. This will involve dwelling with greater attention on the context of the birth of monotheism and what it meant politically in its emergence and inheritance.

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CHAPTER 3:
MONOTHEISM AND THE RE-ENTHRONED SLAIN FATHER:
FREUD AND GIRARD

Whatever the merits of Girard’s theory of religion, violence, and biblical revelation, it surely resembles a “contrastive” or dialectic theological method, wherein a line between true and false religion is drawn. As such, his theory is party to what Assmann terms the Mosaic distinction. This is a distinction wherein the biblical revelation is a discontinuous, or superior religion in contrast with the “falseness” of other religions. For Girard, monotheism’s devictimization of God, its refusal to divinize victims, and its dedivinization of the social order characterizes this distinction. This true revelation concerns not only metaphysics but the truth about human behavior, victimization, and its cultural representation. In turn, the “falseness” of pagan religion lies in its mythic misapprehension of the scapegoating mechanism. Pilate, the mob, and really all humanity since the foundation of the world stands on the “false” side of this distinction.

That division is most familiar to us in legend form as the biblical “Egypt vs. Israel” theme, easily viewed as a “murderous distinction” between true and false religion, given the biblical violence toward idolaters. Biblical monotheism narrates its origins as an exodus from “Egypt,” even if this is a metonymy for the many cultures that Judaism sought
to distinguish itself from over many centuries. In light of this polemical distinction, a turn to “tolerance” would mean for some theologians trying to dissolve or soften this distinction between false gods and the True God, between pagan “Egypt” and the true “Israel.” The return to a more tolerant framework would forgo the hubris that one religion is superior to or truer than another. A most consequential symbol of dispute, then, concerns whether Egypt and Israel are not all that different. We can briefly outline some points of that long-standing discourse below. But when Freud stepped into this discourse with his *Moses and Monotheism* (1939), he did not simplistically take sides. He indeed theorized Israel as birthed from Egypt, thus blurring the historical lines between Israel and Egypt. To his critics, this seemed as if he was trying abolish the Mosaic distinction. But seeing the intermingled roots between Egypt and Israel does not abolish the line between true and false religion: Jewish monotheism for Freud involves a profound “advance in


Topics include, for example: rejoicing in Egypt’s destruction (Gen 17:21); Egypt is a descendent of Ham (Gen 10:6); Egypt as abomination (Deut 23:8; Ex 8:22; Targum Jerushalmi Pesiqta 55a and Pesiqta Rabbati 15 [78b]; Midrash Exodus Rabbah XVI.3); Egypt’s excessive sensuality (Ezek 16:26; 23:20; Lev 18:3); don’t go there (Gen 26:2; 1 Kgs 19:15; Jer 42:14-19); detrimental (Gen 12:10-20; 15:13; Ex 1; Jer 20:21-23); oppose alliances with Egypt (Isa 30:1-17; 31; Jer 2:16-18, 36; Hosea 7:11-16; Ezek 17:15); religious commentary (Num 33:4; Isa 19:1; Ezek 20:7; 30:13; Ex 8:22; Midrash Numbers Rabbah XIX.3; Midrash Song of Rabbah II 15; 1; Augustine *City of God*, XVIII.39-40).

For Philo of Alexandria the Egyptian army symbolizes the passions pursuing us, picked up by Origen (*De Decalogo* 76-80; *De Ebrietate* 110; *De Iosepho* 254; *De Posteritate Caini* 2; *De Providentia* (Smelik and Hemelrijk 1915). For Augustine, Egypt means affliction and symbol of the world (Psalmum CXIII Enarratio, Sermo 1,3). Jerome identifies Egypt’s etymology as “to be narrow, oppressed” (In Ezechielem VII.20; Hieronymus, in Esaiaem VII.23)


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intellectuality.” He thus situated himself as a *defender* of monotheism. In sum, monotheism for him involves a profound psychological grappling with humanity’s primordial relationship to despotic power and alpha-males. Monotheism involves the beneficial suppression of both violence and the instinct for material representation, with God as transcendent and image-less. Understanding the strengths and weaknesses of Freud’s position in this chapter will lead us, then, to how Jan Assmann builds upon and corrects Freud.

3.1 Finding Monotheism in Egypt?

Traveling back to the earlier debates on monotheistic intolerance, we can recall how the Jewish Maccabean revolution, in the 2nd century BCE, was seen by Greeks as a failure to get along with an inclusive Hellenic culture, echoed again in the 1st century Jewish revolts against Caesar’s Palestinian occupation. Celsus of the 2nd century CE saw biblical monotheism as stubbornly anti-social in its refusal to join in the Mediterranean political community. Its denunciation of other gods as false or demons posed a problem to the empire’s flexible “One God” that could tolerate many gods or the diverse manifestations of the One God, just as one Caesar had to manage many diverse regions.239 (We will discuss this as “henotheism” in the coming chapter.)

But the biblical monotheistic opposition to other gods, however, soon won a privileged position in the political administration of Western civilization, inheriting the throne of the empire’s One God, famously in Constantine and Theodosius. With Christian

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239 Origen reconstructs Celsus’ now lost work in his *Contra Celsum* (see 1.24; 8.35).
monotheism holding court, it was now the *plurality* of gods and nations that were regarded as a threat to the Christian political order. At the popular level, numerous Christian pogroms and iconoclastic violence asserted their triumph with great bloodshed. And at the political level, the following centuries of medieval inter-state conflicts often overlapped with inter-religious conflicts, both between Christian sects and against Islam—where intolerance of heterodoxy often coincided with restraining political division, revolt, or invasion. To be fair, the Roman Empire’s “inclusive” henotheism had not exactly been pacific, managing its domain with extravagant violence. But, it is not unreasonable to ask if the infusion of Christian monotheism damaged whatever tolerance Rome practiced, enflaming society with religious intolerance. While one could try to make the alternative case that biblical values somehow made Western civilization more tolerant or sensitive—say, in dissolving slavery or child exposure—it could also be argued, as religious historian Guy Stroumsa does, that “the boundaries of freedom and action and of religious thought were undeniably curtailed in the Christianized empire.”

240 For Constantine-friendly theologians like Eusebius, the monotheistic unity of God was tied to the unity of the Empire. Thus the “unifying” wars and Pax Romana of Caesar Augustus providentially prepared the way for a unity that could receive its true monarch, Jesus Christ. See, Erik Peterson, “Monotheism as a Political Problem” in *Theological Tractates* ed and trans Michael J. Hollenbach (Stanford University Press, 2011).

241 Eberhard Sauer, *The Archaeology of Religious Hatred in the Roman and Early Medieval World* (Stroud: Tempus, 2003); Johannes Hahn, *Gewalt und religiöser Konflikt* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2004); Firmicus Maternus in the 340s was “the first Christian writer to ask explicitly for a ‘zero degree of tolerance’ toward pagan worship” (Stroumsa, *End of Sacrifice: Religious Transformations in Late Antiquity* [Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2009], 106).

With this historical tension as a backdrop, many theologians have tried to mitigate monotheistic intolerance. Perhaps, many thought, the problem is not with the pagans or heretics, but with this whole biblical habit of denouncing pagans in the first place. Jan Assmann notes how many theologians around the Renaissance, trying to disarm the religiously-inflected conflicts of their day, suggested returning to a seemingly more tolerant pagan theology. This was sometimes done by arguing that monotheism was born not in Israel but in Egypt. Or, one could argue that monotheism was not a unique to Israel, but a common, natural, default philosophy held by all peoples since the beginning of humanity. With Israel’s uniqueness muted—and all the competing feelings of superiority and indignation fueled by it—monotheism could then be regarded as a more universally-shared, less antagonistic worldview. With the One God as transnational, Israel’s special

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243 Jan Assmann details this discourse-history in MM and PM, dating at least back to Celsus. Origen refutes Celsus’ notion that the Hebrews were originally Egyptians—not some uniquely called people—who revolted against their state, betraying also an originary penchant for rebellion (Contra Celsum 3:7-8).

The Renaissance’s “diffusion theory of truth,” tried to conceive a religion that transcends Christianity, based on a Noah-styled dispersion of early humanity in which the truth of (Platonism’s) One God enjoyed belief outside Israel, like in Zoroaster and Hermes Trismegistus (PM 77). Reinhold regarded the true nature of Israel’s “negation” of gods as particularly about the hidden secrecy of divinity, which is not uncommon in pagan religions. Or, Schiller saw Moses as not promoting a new idea but simply popularizing it (ME 126.) In the 15th century, the prisca theologia of Plethion, Ficino, and Pico della Mirandola suggested monotheism had permeated humanity since its origins (PM 77-78, 70; ME, 18, passim).

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244 In the 16th century Steuco argued God’s oneness antedated biblical monotheism, in a philosophia perennis. See also Patrizi’s “convergence theory,” that all religions converge toward the truth (PM 78ff). His Nova de universis philosophia, was placed in the Index of Forbidden books in 1592, as the Counter-Reformation cracked down on prisca theologia.

By the 17th and 18th century, we begin to hear more of the pagans having stolen biblical knowledge. E.g. Cardinal Huet argued for monotheism’s Mosaic uniqueness against Spinoza (PM 83; ME 71). See also Spencer especially, whose De legibus Hebraeorum ritualibus et earum rationais (1685), argued that Mosaic ritual law was rooted in Egyptian religion. Others include Tindal, Reinhold, Schiller, etc. (ME 75, 91-2, 100). Spencer applied Maimonides’ idea that many Israelite laws are really derivative: they are “normative inversions of the abominations of the other cultures into obligations and vice versa” (ME 31).
revelation and superiority complex can dissolve. But the defenders of biblical monotheism would in turn reinforce the unique biblical difference and the monotheistic revelation as stemming from Israel alone.

Throughout this discourse, Moses has been a key suspect under investigation. For he straddles the polytheistic world of Egypt and the monotheistic world of Israel. The whole discourse that emphasized an *Egyptian* Moses aimed “to deconstruct ‘counter-religion’ and its implications of intolerance by blurring the basic distinctions as they were symbolized by the antagonistic constellation of Israel and Egypt. ‘Revelation’ had to be (re)turned into ‘translation.’” In the 19th century, this discourse on mitigating the intolerance of monotheism gained an influx of grist for the mill, through the archaeological excavations of an Egyptian city, Tell-el-Amarna. Finding strong signs of monotheism there, a cascade of publications argued that monotheism first arose in Egypt, further dulling the Mosaic distinction.

Freud entered the stream of these publications with his own synthesis of the archaeological findings and a unique psychoanalytic spin on how to relate “Egypt” and “Israel.” Instead of Moses as monotheism’s first midwife, he argues it was a great Pharaoh, Amenhotep IV, who later changed his name to Akhenaten—named after the only God, the sun disc, Aten. Around 1350 BCE he forced a severe monotheistic revolution upon his

\[\text{[References]}\]

\[\text{[ME 147.]}\]


\[\text{[Aten’s longer, didactic name is, “Living Re-[Harakhty], Ruler of the Horizon, Rejoicing in the Horizon in His Name of ‘Re, the Father, who is manifested in [and/or who returns as] the Aten the Sun-}}\]
country. He shut down the temples, banned worship of (most) other gods, effaced old inscriptions on temples, prohibited sorcery and magic, and banned the cult of Osiris, the old god of the dead. The diversity of Egyptian cults was now monopolized at a newly built city.\(^{248}\) Sudden, violent, and strict, the religious revolution faced resistance, lasted for only the pharaoh’s reign, about 18 years, after which his name was erased from virtually all records and his revolutionary city buried.\(^{249}\) Records resume with the reestablished order and more tolerable religion under the leadership of Horemheb a few years later.\(^{250}\)

This revolution may have been in the making for decades, through an increasing cultivation of worship of an old high-god, Aten/Atum/Re.\(^{251}\) It is no coincidence that a supreme sun God emerged in Egypt while it also became an expanded, massive superpower, the first large territorial state in human history.\(^{252}\) Erik Peterson once argued the thesis that “the ultimate formulation of the unity of a metaphysical construction of the world is always co- and predetermined by a decision for a particular political conception of unity.”\(^{253}\) Freud’s employment of the great Egyptologist J.H. Breasted here concurs,

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\(^{248}\) The old non-exclusive center of worship was at Thebes. The move was to Amarna.

\(^{249}\) Hoffmeier notes the Boundary Stela at Amarna that references “evils” and “offensive things” against which Akhenaten had opposed his reign (161ff).

\(^{250}\) Akhenaten’s son, first named Tutankhaten, is known to us as Tutankhamun—the owner of the famous gold mummy-mask, who effaced the name and religion his father chose.


\(^{252}\) MM 72; *ATM* 53.

\(^{253}\) Peterson, “Monotheism as a Political Problem,” in *Theological Tractates, op cit*, 71.
seeing in this Egyptian “monotheism” nothing but “imperialism in religion.”²⁵⁴ This is to say that symbols of metaphysical unity may reflect the political “monopoly on violence”—the state as the consolidation of the legitimate expression of violence and power.²⁵⁵ And to the extent that Girard’s thesis hold true that the containment of violence is homologous with “the sacred,” we can likewise see how Egypt’s hegemonic unification of violence was reflected in its metaphysical conceptions of Unity. In any case, though political factors may have prepared the way for this revolution, Akhenaten’s regime came as a discontinuous break with the past. This is the “first attempt” in world history to install worship of an “Only God.”²⁵⁶

As for Freud’s general history of Akhenaten, there is no major controversy worth noting here. Akhenaten did indeed install a religious-political revolution centered on only one God and expunging other gods. Debates continue as to how and whether Akhenaten absorbed or abolished the other gods, and so on. But Freud’s unique and controversial interpretation of Egyptian monotheism concerns, first, how Israel may have inherited monotheism through an Egyptian Moses, and second, mapping this monotheism onto a

²⁵⁴ James Breasted, Development of Religion and Thought in Ancient Egypt (New York: Harper and Row, 1959 [1912]), 315


²⁵⁶ MM 21, 24, 73. Assmann calls this “The first conflict between two fundamentally different and mutually exclusive religions in the recorded history of humankind…not only the first but also the most radical and violent eruption of a counter-religion in the history of humankind” (ME 24, 25).
Darwinian, psychoanalytic theory concerning violence and despotism since human origins.\textsuperscript{257}

3.2 Moses the Aten Worshipping Egyptian

Moses is undoubtedly an Egyptian name, made of the root “born of.”\textsuperscript{258} Along with other reasons to posit Moses as an Egyptian, Freud goes onto suggest the following hypothesis: Moses lived during the reign of Akhenaton and was greatly inspired by his movement. He may have worked for Akhenaten as a governor in the border provinces, overseeing Semitic tribes.\textsuperscript{259} In any case, he was “a man of great importance in the land of Egypt” (Ex 11:3). In the political vacuum subsequent to Akhenaten’s death, Moses was inspired to use his authority to take up the lost cause. Heading out of Egypt, now hostile


\textsuperscript{258} 	extit{m\textsc{ses}} [Gk eq: ‘-genes’]. Hence \textit{Rams\textsc{es}} means “born of Ra” (Gk: Heliogones). Moses has no theophoric prefix—think of Girard’s dedivinization here. “Even more interesting than its Egyptian etymology is the fact that the Hebrew text is unaware of it and supplies a Hebrew etymology that does not work, deriving the name Moshe from Hebrew \textit{mashah}, ‘to draw’; but \textit{moshe}, then would mean ‘the one who draws,’ not ‘the drawn one’” (\textit{ATM}, 63f).

\textsuperscript{259} Josephus, in his \textit{Jewish Antiquities}, suggested that Moses was an Egyptian field marshal. Strabo (or Poseidonios) had also suggested Moses was an Egyptian priest who, disappointed with Egyptian religion, founded a new religion with an emigrating group (Strabo, \textit{Geographica} XVI, 2:35; Greek and Latin Authors (note 22), 261-351, 294, note 35; Jan Assmann, “The Advance in Intellectuality,” in \textit{New Perspectives on Freud’s Moses and Monotheism}, eds Ruth Ginsburg et al (Halle, Germany: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 2006), 13).
to the Aten religion, he took his retinue with him, the first Levites.\textsuperscript{260} And like Akhenaten, he forced a new religion upon people from his region.\textsuperscript{261}

Moses’ “speech impediment” (Ex 4:10) signals he spoke a different language than the acquired people, requiring translation.\textsuperscript{262} In the desert, there were many “grave revolts” against this alien despot; the people twice nearly stoned Moses to death (Ex 17:4, Num 14:10), which Moses put down in divine wrath. In the least we have a demanding superfather whom the people \textit{wanted} to kill.\textsuperscript{263} And the tension with this despot would take similar form as it did for the rejection of Akhenaton’s deposed religion: they are unable to bear Moses’ harsh rule and religion, and together they kill him in a rebellion at Shittim, the threshold of entry into the “Promised Land.” Freud is here drawing on Ernst Sellin’s hypothesis (and Goethe’s intuition) that this murder of Moses was repressed in early Jewish tradition and survived only in the dark recesses of memory, within the rabbinic tradition (in no less an authority than Rashi), memories of the killed Prophets (esp. Isaiah 52-3; Neh 9:26; Lk 13:34; Acts 7:52f), and the above passages of revolt.\textsuperscript{264}

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{260} \textit{MM} 45f.
  \item \textsuperscript{261} \textit{MM} 57, 166.
  \item \textsuperscript{262} \textit{MM} 58.
  \item \textsuperscript{263} “In monotheism, the suppressed progenitor of the primal horde returns on a quite different plane, as a norm-imposing superfather who demands that his children show him unconditional love, fidelity, and obedience” (\textit{PM} 86).
  \item \textsuperscript{264} Sellin sees such memory traces in the suffering prophet of Isaiah 53. Rojtman notes how Rabbi Rashi of the eleventh century read the passage “and the people sat down to eat and to drink and rose up to play” (Ex 32:6) around the Golden Calf incident as the “codified indication of murder and debauchery.” Rashi writes: “play” \textit{לְצַחֵק}: in this word, there is [also] a connotation of sexual immorality, as it is said: “to mock (\textit{לְצַחֶק}) me” (Gen. 39:17), and bloodshed, as it is said: ‘Let the boys get up now and play (\textit{וִישַׂחִקוּ}) before us’ (II Sam. 2:14). Here too, Hur was slain” (Midrash Tanchuma 20; Rojtman, “The Double Death of Moses,” in \textit{New Perspectives on Freud’s Moses and Monotheism} [93-116], 108).
  \end{itemize}

Also, the request for Aaron to “make us gods, which shall go before us” (Ex 32:1), “associates the death of the leader with the totem that replaces and represents him.” Rashi further exegesis: “At the end of forty days Satan came and confounded the world. Said he to them: ‘where is your teacher Moses?’ ‘He has
Having lived through the double trauma of two cast-off regimes, the extant Levites and the group must still somehow carry on.\textsuperscript{265} Given their association with Akhenaton’s infamous regime and religion, they cannot return to Egypt. Before long they encounter an Arabic tribe, the Midianties, at Meribat-Qades,\textsuperscript{266} who worship a volcano god named Yahweh. An agreement between these two tribes emerges, forming into one people and one god what had in fact been two.\textsuperscript{267} The mediator between the two parties is the son-in-law of the Midianite priest Jethro, who—in the legacy that follows—was imputed with the name “Moses.”

The two religions must negotiate. They retain Akhenaton’s prohibition of the underworld cult of Osiris—and thus Jewish tradition shows little signs of belief in an afterlife. And the name Aton may (or may not\textsuperscript{268}) echo in the Torah as Adonai: “Schema ascended on high,” they answered him. ‘The sixth hour has come [at which Moses was supposed to come down the mountainside],’ said he to them, but they disregarded him. ‘He is dead’—but they disregard him. Thereupon he showed them a vision of his bier” (Shabbath 89a). Rojtman concludes: “Moses’s ‘departure’ as it is re-enacted by the Midrash may be understood as a projection of the people’s desire to murder him, which is expressed in the Bible in the allusive form of concern for his safety…The Gold Calf would then mark the brutal rejection of the Mosaic Law…the story subsequently passes—with no transition—from this murderous desire to the adoration of the disappeared Master in the form of a statue of an animal” (Rojtman, “The Double Death of Moses,” 108).

The unknown whereabouts of his tomb (Deut 34:6) is one of the many tiny, suspicious traces that all—if one can weave the rope of threads—points in the direction of the murder-hypothesis (Rojtman, “The Double Death of Moses,” 113).

Ernst Sellin, Mose und seine Bedeutung für die israelitisch-jüdische Religionsgeschichte (1922), 73-113; \textit{MM} 42; Goethe, \textit{Israel in der Wüste}, Vol. VII of the Weimar edition, p 170. Sellin later downgraded the thesis to a mere “wish” to kill him (\textit{ATM} 65).

\textsuperscript{265} \textit{MM} 65, 84.

\textsuperscript{266} \textit{MM} 39, 75, 76.

\textsuperscript{267} \textit{MM} 64; simply, “the different names of the gods suggest different gods” (54).

\textsuperscript{268} Assmann rejects any connection: \textit{ME}, 22-4.
Jisroel Adonai Elohenu Adonai Echod.” But, any good Egyptian of any stripe, if they truly wished to be part of a holy nation, needed to retain the custom of circumcision. Forcing circumcision upon the Midianite tribe, who still comfortably wore their foreskins, was not an alluring option. So, if the Egyptian faction wished so strongly to keep this custom, they would have to allow Yahweh to have pride of place over Aten. Thus in merging the founding legends, Yahweh in fact precedes the Egyptian religion—hence the Canaan-centered, pre-Moses patriarch myths. Thus both parties have a shared interest in repressing any memory of the murder of an Egyptian Moses, though for different reasons.

In subsequent Jewish history, in which there is constant internal tension between Aten and Yahweh, Yahweh comes out on top, while Aten remains a constant subterranean pressure. Freud sees the mixture of volcanic-paganism of Yahwism with Aten’s enlightenment as a “retrograde development” that will mire the Jews in pagan, ritualistic religion for centuries. Yahweh is the narrow-minded, tribal, bloodthirsty god who was

269 MM 27-28. The god Atum, who described Re as the setting sun, was perhaps of the same origin as Aton—which may also apply to Adonai, which also share roots with the Syrian divine name Adonis. Freud admits a lack of evidence and research here, with only Weigall (MM 12, 19) offering commentary.

270 Circumcision supposedly could not have come from an Aramean like Abraham; not only did Herodotus tell us that the custom comes from Egypt, but our archaeological records find it in Egypt, not Mesopotamia (MM 29, 30).

The Atenists try to disassociate circumcision from appearing of “Egyptian” origin, wanting to differentiate themselves from the stiff-necked Egyptians who could not handle the Aten religion (MM 53). The swine prohibition is also an Egyptian import. The god Set, as a black pig, had wounded Horus (Freud 34).

271 MM 47.

272 MM 53.

273 MM 85.
useful for the early, violent conquests of this group.\textsuperscript{274} By contrast, Aten is too intellectually superior, too universal, for a primitive people. The sun-disc by which Aten was worshipped is not direct and idolatrous, but the manifestation of that source of all things which the sun represents.\textsuperscript{275} In contrast with the volcanic violence of Yahweh, Aten is a pacifist god who traffics in ethics and justice.\textsuperscript{276} Aten marks the more “spiritual conception of God, a single God who embraces the whole world, one as all-loving as he was all-powerful, who, averse to all ceremonial and magic, set humanity as its highest aim a life of truth and justice.”\textsuperscript{277} This enlightened spurning of sorcery, magic, sacrifice, and rituals reemerges in the prophets, who are the champions of reviving Aten worship and ethics—though not by name—against the constant drift to Yahweh. It is not until around the reforms of Ezra/Nehemiah, when Aten’s theological superiority seems to have been finally sealed in Jewish religion, even if not in name. In all, the subterranean Aten influence imbued in this people a deep psychological “progress in intellectuality,” spiritual endeavor, and a disinclination toward violence rooted in critical insight.\textsuperscript{278}

\textsuperscript{274} MM 61, 62, 77, 159.
\textsuperscript{275} MM 23.
\textsuperscript{276} MM 61, 78.
\textsuperscript{277} MM 61, 62, 80, 142; ethical vs ceremonial, 84; magic and ceremonial 82; ritualistic rules 81; anti-sacrifice 62.
\textsuperscript{278} MM 144-5, 147, 158, 109. Given that Freud strictly contrasts Gesitigkeit with mysticism, Assmann finds it best to see this flexible word translated as “intellectuality,” and not Katherine Jones’ “spirituality.” Assmann, “The Advance in Intellectuality,” \textit{op cit}, 17; he finds this corresponding with Weber’s notions of rationalism and disenchantment.
A key element in this “progress in intellectuality” concerns its “dematerializing of God”\textsuperscript{279}—the elevation of reason and rationality over physicality, visibility, and senses. This means grasping the ungraspable God, beyond material representation. The epitome of this, of course, is the prohibition of images in which God would have “neither a name nor countenance…in this, I suspect, Moses was outdoing the strictness of the Aten religion.”\textsuperscript{280} This renunciation of sensual instincts and the instinctual need for visible representation was, for Freud, a triumph, “unquestionably one of the most important stages on the path to hominization.”\textsuperscript{281} ” Assmann summarizes Freud here: “far from owing our most impressive cultural achievements to instinct, we have the suppression of instinct to thank for them.”\textsuperscript{282}

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Before we move on, we should note that Freud admits this reconstruction of the exodus, Moses, his murder, and the genetic connection between Egypt and Israel enjoys little evidence.\textsuperscript{283} He admits Moses’ religion may have been more like “monolatry,” the

\textsuperscript{279} MM 147.

\textsuperscript{280} MM 144.

\textsuperscript{281} MM 113.


Peter Schäffer’s analysis of \textit{MM}’s is dogged by a faulty and under-demonstrated accusation that, for Freud, Judaism’s “instinctual renunciation” is the same, deleterious thing as “repression” (Peter Schäfer, “The Triumph of Pure Spirituality,” in \textit{New Perspectives on Freud’s Moses and Monotheism},” \textit{op cit}, 32). But these are precisely \textit{not} the same thing, as Freud never says that the sexual and instinctual repressions of Judaism’s higher spirituality are malignant “defects.” Freud, rather, both appreciates this asceticism along with its liabilities.

\textsuperscript{283} Further, as Jacqueline Rose notes, “you can reject the flawed historical argument of [Sellin and \textit{Totem and Taboo}’s background to Moses] while accepting the underlying thesis that there is no sociality
exalting of one god above the rest, rather than strict monotheism. But, while these admissions would seem to be lost on some critics, his goal is not exact historical reconstruction. I have foregrounded here what I see as his way of interpreting the psychology at the roots of the antinomy between Egypt and Israel—which I will critique later. Some see in his hypothesis a larger speculative exploration of the roots of *anti-Semitism in the West*, as represented by Nazi Germany in Freud’s day. He wants to consider “how the Jew became what he is and why he attracted this undying hatred.”

One can also see here Freud, who was Jewish, coming to Judaism’s defense against Christian polemics of “carnal Israel.” Edward Said also notes how Freud’s emphasizing the Egyptian/pagan origin of Israel helped undermine doctrinal efforts to found purist Zionism to the detriment of Palestinians—as became a crucial issue in Freud’s era onward.

In any case, more important than the historical reconstruction of Moses are a slew of historical, political issues regarding intolerance.

without violence. What binds the people to each other and to their God is that they killed him” (Rose’s response to Said, in *Freud and the Non-European* [New York: Verso, 2003], 75).

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284 *MM* 61.


3.3 The Even Deeper Aims: The Historical Truth of Religion

We must now center upon how Freud sees this Jewish progress of intellectuality as related to despotism and murder—not just an especially spiritualized God. For Freud, this brings us to contemplate the major patterns of power in human evolution. This is the deeper layer of *Moses and Monotheism*, entering us into clear links with Girard’s theory.\(^{288}\) After having considered the hypothesis of an Egyptian-Moses and his murder, Freud layers a second hypothesis regarding murder catalyzing human evolution. This hypothesis, drawn from his earlier work in *Totem and Taboo*, suggests the earliest proto-humans lived in small groups, each dominated by an alpha male, a singular strong man who would put down all challengers and “owned” all the women. This alpha-male submission pattern was the primal dominance pattern, and left a *deep* instinctual mark upon our species’ minds and habits. And, as the omnipotent sovereign, the Father of the group, it is the originary psychological conditions of unconscious monotheism.

But he argues we killed our way out of this dominance pattern. At some point the brothers formed a horde to kill the alpha male and then eat him.\(^{289}\) Their cannibalism was

\(^{288}\) At this point, we see with Guy Stroumsa, that Freud’s work is not only about Judaism and anti-Semitism, but also “the ‘historical truth’ about religion—about religion in general…which he claims to have discovered” (Guy Stroumsa, “Myth into Novel,” 206).

\(^{289}\) This he credits to Atkinson. I find the transition from alpha-subordination to egalitarianism in Christopher Boehm, “Retaliatory Violence in Human Prehistory,” *The British Journal of Criminology* 51, no. 3 (2011): 518-534, 522, 527f. “Well-armed egalitarians will not allow enough authority to develop for alpha-style peacemakers to step in and stop hot conflicts, so, if peacemaking is to succeed among these hunter-gatherers or tribesmen, it must be attempted at an early stage of the conflict. When humans became egalitarian, such interference disappeared, while lethal self-help [taking violent vengeance into one’s own hands] developed as a form of negative reciprocity that could be readily engaged in by male kinsmen of homicide victims” (underlining added).
their identification with the “father,” whom they had wanted to become. The following instability eventually

led at last to a union among them, a sort of social contract. Thus, there came into being the first form of a social organization accompanied by a renunciation of instinctual gratification; recognition of mutual obligations; institutions declared sacred, which could not be broken—in short, the beginnings of morality and law. Each renounced the ideal of gaining for himself the position of the father, of possessing his mother or sister.”

Killing off the restrictive alpha-male pattern did not make for liberation from rules, but new ones. Humanity is thus, akin to Girard’s theory, born in containing violence—through taboos, renouncing instincts, and rituals that rearrange violence after having killed off the old dominance pattern. In such a transition, one can imagine how “aggressive egalitarianism” is perhaps the earliest, longest-standing human social form.

Having killed off the alpha-dominance, the first dilemma in group organization was not, “who will take the place of the Father?” Who would want to step into that position, exalt themselves to the Father’s position and also get killed!? Instead, the first replacement was some sort of strong animal or totem, putatively humanity’s oldest and most simple

\[290\] This Triebverzicht “signified subordinating sense perception to an abstract idea; it was a triumph of spirituality over the senses; more precisely, an instinctual renunciation accompanied by its psychologically necessary consequences” (MM 144).

\[291\] MM 104.

\[292\] Robert Bellah has argued that an “uneasy egalitarianism” characterized early humans for at least hundreds of thousands of years. He also outlines the transition from this to our much later statist-monarchies: “The elevation of rulers into a status unknown in tribal societies went hand in hand with the elevation of gods into a status higher in authority than the powerful beings they were gradually replacing…the establishment of the early state and the beginning of archaic society destroyed the uneasy egalitarianism of hundreds of thousands if not millions of years of hominid evolution.” Robert N. Bellah, “What is Axial About the Axial Age?” European Journal of Sociology, 2005, Vol.46(1), pp.69-89, 69.

\[293\] MM 104, 168
form of religion. The Father is still to be worshipped, but through its substitute, not only in the totem but in repetition of the father-cannibalism in the totem feast.\footnote{MM 105. This Assmann credits to the influence of Robertson Smith 168 (e.g. The Religion of the Semites [1889]), acknowledging that Smith theorized such "cannibalism" from merely one ethnographic report of Arabian camel-sacrifice. But Freud counters that the friction doesn’t necessarily refute the valid line of inquiry (MM 168). Further, while Smith’s exact hypothesis is thinly corroborated, substitute sacrifice is widespread in the ancient world and not in itself a point of controversy. See Walter Burkert, The Orientalizing Revolution (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 73f—for examples in Rome, Sumerian-Akkadian sources. Also, Walter Burkert Structure and History in Greek Mythology and Ritual (Berkely, CA: University of California Press, 1982), 70-72. Also, Walter Burkert, “Glaube und Verhalten: Zeichengehalt und Wirkungsmacht von Opferritualen," in Le sacrifice dans l’antiquité, eds. J Rudhardt and O. Reverdin. Entretiens sur l’antiquité classique 27 (Vandoeuvres, Genève: Foundation Hardt 1981), 91-133, 115f.} In the course of evolution, other replacements range from heroes and a humanized deity, with the spectrum between, including the mystifying animal-human hybrids we often find in primitive art.\footnote{MM 105, 171.} In the emergence of the humanized deities, the maternal deities probably came first, then later male ones who emerge as sons of mothers.\footnote{MM 64.} These religious shifts corresponded with political shifts, wherein matriarchal structures were replaced by patriarchal structures, even if “the new fathers, it is true, never succeeded to the omnipotence of the primeval father.”\footnote{MM 105f.}

In each stage of these religio-political changes, unconsciously latent under the god is the dead father,\footnote{MM 253, 165.} whose imagined will is “the sacred.”\footnote{MM 253, 165.} The three chief aspects of primitive religion relate to the will of the slain father: 1) he is to be worshipped through substitutes, 2) exogamy is the renunciation of desire to possess the father’s women, and 3)
egalitarianism is the group refusal to retake the father’s position. Like Girard, these patterns should not be regarded as sheer superstition. They are safeguards, renunciations of dangerously violent instincts, an ethics to safeguard the group, the establishment of authority for keeping order.

These instinctual renunciations that surround the traumatic violence of the father-murder, even if beneficially protective, come at a psychological cost. Memory of the murder of the father is repressed in human unconscious within the matrix of cultural management. As Freud knew from his therapy clients, people can repress and/or manage their memories through various defense strategies, like repetitively reviving the trauma so as to enact certain defenses against it. We call this a “fixation,” which can include compulsive avoidance, phobias, and inhibitions. The farther the actual memory becomes disconnected from any conscious, rational management, the more trauma enters a “latency.” The memory is then even less explicit, perhaps even unconscious underneath the fixations, which are no longer cognitively linked to the originary trauma, manifesting in neurosis. What can interrupt this entrenched latency is the “return of the repressed,” when some event or events resemble the original traumatic experience. When such

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300 *MM* 153. Because “regarding all as equal” had not been the will of the alpha male, Freud actually sees egalitarianism as in fact conflicting with the father’s will—and thus this remains unclear.

301 *MM* 144, 152, 153.

302 *MM* 95.

303 *MM* 101.

304 *MM* 101, 107, 164, 170.
retriggering is accompanied by a weakening of the ego’s defenses, the latent can more effectively return to the conscious, usually with great irrational force or terror.\textsuperscript{305}

On an individual level, this seems common sense: psychological problems can likely be traced to traumas which haunt us in varying degrees. But Freud applies this to \textit{collective} trauma, to \textit{mass} psychology, and the transmission of unconscious memory traces \textit{over generations and in groups}.\textsuperscript{306} He argues, somewhat in the Lamarckian epigenetics tradition, that experiences, traumas, repressions, latencies, and thought-dispositions can be transmitted genetically and culturally over time.\textsuperscript{307} Humans are not born as blank slates but as carriers of a messy mixture of phylogenetic inheritances that are not only bodily-morphological but psychological and cultural.\textsuperscript{308} Critics of Freud’s Lamarckianism\textsuperscript{309} are today being scientifically challenged, as transgenerational epigenetic and phylogenetic research has corroborated some of Lamarck’s position. One such important study demonstrates how mice transmit traumatic experiences to their offspring genetically without any exposure to the parents.\textsuperscript{310} There is no reason to doubt that some such

\textsuperscript{305} \textit{MM} 121
\textsuperscript{306} \textit{MM} 101, 87, 128, 163. Unconscious memory traces: 120, 170.
\textsuperscript{307} \textit{MM} 125-127.
\textsuperscript{308} There probably exists in the mental life of the individual not only what he has experienced himself, but also what he brought with him at birth, fragments of phylogenetic origin, an archaic heritage …the archaic heritage of mankind includes not only dispositions, but also ideational contents, memory traces of the experiences of former generations. In this way the extent as well as the significance of the archaic heritage would be enhanced in a remarkable degree. …The masses, too, retain an impression of the past in unconscious memory traces (\textit{MM} 125, 127, 120).
\textsuperscript{310} Brian G. Dias and Kerry J. Ressler, “Parental Olfactory Experiences Influences Behavior and Neural Structure in Subsequent Generations,” \textit{Nature Neuroscience} (2013): 1-9. Assmann seems to not factor in such research when he writes that “cultural memory is not biologically transmitted…group memory has no neurological basis” (Jan Assmann, \textit{Cultural Memory in Early Civilization: Writing,}}
transmission capacities exist in humans too. And, given the entirely culturally embedded nature of the individual, this can reasonably be applied to human cultures, groups, and their transmission over generations.\footnote{100}

For Freud, it is not that “religion” can be neurotic. Religion simply is the fixations, latencies, and neuroses stemming from humanity’s deep-seated trauma, the father murder and its post-violence management, repressed since our origins.\footnote{311} Throughout its manifestations, from totemism, to hero worship, to matriarchal, to patriarchal gods, “men have always known—in this particular [unconscious, repressed] way—that once upon a time they had a primeval father and killed him.”\footnote{312}

3.4 Monotheism: Restoring the Primal Father

Akhenaten’s despotism involved a supreme reenthronement of overwhelming magnitude, matched by conflict, rebellion, and resistance to it. This was doubly echoed out (hypothetically) in Moses’ despotism that was put down in murderous revolt. In this framework, monotheism is the restoration of the paternal father of his historical rights. Monotheism is the religion of the primal father, the return of the one and only father deity whose power is unlimited.\footnote{313} The credo quia absurdum that so characterizes monotheistic

\footnote{311} “[Animals and humans] carry over into their new existence the experience of their kind; that is to say, that they have preserved in their minds memories of what their ancestors experienced” \textit{(MM 129)}.

\footnote{312} \textit{MM 71}.

\footnote{313} \textit{MM 129}.

\footnote{314} \textit{MM 109, 108, 106}.
religion is precisely the powerful return of the repressed trauma of the murder of the dominant father. Only with monotheism “was the grandeur of the primeval father restored; the emotions belonging to him could now be repeated.”

But, just as the murderous transition from a proto-human alpha-male pattern to egalitarianism involved repressions of instincts, so too danger and violence is repressed and contained in Mosaic monotheism. Moses’ theological regime meant repressing any expressions of father-hate; this is to be replaced by the guilt of one’s own sin or Israel’s sins. As the Jews encountered national collapse, invasion, and exile over the centuries, a pervasive guilt silenced any mistrust in the Father’s providence. To manage this feeling of guilt, ascetic and spiritual practices increased over generations, drawing upon Atenic transcendence. This makes for a feedback-loop of ascetic, instinctual renunciations, resulting in the aforenoted “progress in intellectuality”—of which the ban on graven images is the cultic sign, and this ascetic, ego-strengthened, instinctual renunciation is the inner psychology. “Every renunciation of instinct now becomes a dynamic source of

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315 MM 107, 151.

316 MM 172; Sigmund Freud, The Future of an Illusion (New York: Norton, 1961), 19). Utterances of God as “Father” litter the Iron Age: Thutmose II attributed his military success to “his father Amun who loves him.” Or, on a Nubian king’s stela: “I proceeded from the house of my father, the king of the gods who ordained victory for me” (Hoffmeier 53, 54). Akhenaten ruled the earth as son of his father, the god Re, addressing himself to Aten as “your son” in the great hymn (Hoffmeier 122).

317 MM 172. Regina Schwartz sees here another repression with Moses’ murder as an Egyptian: “you slay your Other to forge your identity—not your father” (Schwartz, The Curse of Cain, op cit, 111).

318 MM 172. And yet, the defeat of the oppressors—Assyria, Babylon, the Seleucids, Rome, etc.—each in due time dimly confirmed the father’s providence.

319 MM 109. “The tradition itself remained and its influence reached—though only slowly, in the course of centuries—the aim that was denied to Moses himself…None can doubt that it was only the idea of this other god that enabled the people of Israel to surmount all their hardships and to survive until our time” (62).
conscience and every fresh renunciation increases the latter’s severity and intolerance.” By this unique combination, the Jews attained “ethical heights that had remained inaccessible to the other peoples of antiquity.”

With my larger goal of defending the Mosaic distinction in mind here, we must emphasize how Freud does not condemn this severe “intolerance.” Indeed, it is precisely this intolerance which mediated the unique Jewish intellectual breakthrough. And yet, this enlightenment has its costs for Freud: the satisfaction of having renounced one’s instincts feeds the ego—the byproduct of which is the mirage-fantasy of “election” or “choseness,” of the Father having bestowed special favor.

But latent within this increased intellectual rigor, under the increased asceticism, under the pride in having renounced instincts more effectively than the idolaters, under the deflected father-hate that we all bear, is the primal, repressed memory of the Father’s founding murder. Why would this have particularly emerged among Israel? The repressed returned to their consciousness because of conditions that resembled the originary deed: the murder of the Father-like despot, Moses. (Though he does not emphasize this, Akhenaten’s despotic revolution and its rejection would also be another moment within this return of the repressed.) So, while the conception of an almighty Father God was not


321 *MM*, 173

322 *MM*, 79, 108, 109, 135, 143

323 “It must have been a tremendous father image that stooped in the person of Moses … Moses might very well have incorporated into the character of his God some of his own traits, such as his irascibility and implacability. And when they killed this great man they only repeated an evil deed which in primeval times had been a law directed against the divine king, and which, as we know, derives from a still older prototype” (*MM*, 140, 141, 142; quoting Frazer regarding the ancient identity of the god with the king, 192).
exactly unique to the ancient near east, its combination with a repressed murder and an alpha-despotism made for a “reanimation of primeval experience in the human family that had long ago faded from the conscious memory of mankind.”

What so uniquely situates Freud’s account here is the crucial connection between monotheism and the trauma and repression surrounding group murder: “It seems as if the genesis of monotheism would not have been possible without these events.” Though Judaism sometimes bore no consciousness of the Moses-murder trauma, it had remained latent in the wish-fantasy of a Messiah who would return from the dead and finally usher them into the Promised Land. And so the doctrines of Moses, prophesying the father to whom they are subject, “should have been a stimulus to their memory.” They were instead met with a repetition of the primal act of patricide. Centuries later, Christianity’s murdered Messiah resurfaces this repressed murder of Moses and the murder of his subsequent prophets.

If Moses was this first Messiah, Christ became his substitute and successor. Then Paul could with a certain right say to the peoples: “See, the Messiah has truly come. He was indeed murdered before your eyes.” ... He was the resurrected Moses and the returned primeval father of the primitive horde as well—only transfigured, and as a Son in the place of his Father.

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324 MM, 167.
325 MM 129f.
326 MM, 43, 114, 57.
327 MM, 114. One might surmise Freud’s exegesis of Jesus’ “the father and I are one,” and “no one comes to the father except through me” as meaning their murders are homologous: one cannot expiate our guilt of the father’s murder except through admitting to the son’s murder today.
The repressed murder returns with intense force when the memory trace is awakened in Saint Paul’s gospel: the reason we are so unhappy is because we killed God—if only we would admit it.  

But just as under the Mosaic regime any father-hate was replaced by an internalized legacy of guilt and a bolstered ego (the fantasy of election), so too, in the Christian model, attention devoted to the traumatic murder was diverted and distorted. While Freud appreciates Paul as having “correctly traced” humanity to its murderous source, Paul doesn’t quite represent the murder deed rightly, but more as a “fantasy of expiation,” wherein facing the trauma of the murder is diverted into the sense of guilt in original sin. By this diversion, Christ is more the leader of the brother-horde who receives the due punishment for our uprising, and thus propitiates the Father’s wrath and will. Through this propitiation—Freud does not elaborate well here—the Son now stands in the position that the brother-horde had coveted; the brother now is God; whereas Judaism was a religion of the Father, Christianity becomes the religion of the Son.

For Freud, Paul’s expiation fantasy is yet another abrogation of Judaism’s “lofty heights of spirituality,” gained under Aten. This is visible in Paul’s abandonment of circumcision—which had symbolized the primal castration-threat of the father, to which

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329 Freud 110.
330 Freud 111, 175.
331 Freud 175.
332 Freud 111.
the son submitted. And all of Freud’s complaints against the ritualistic primitiveness of Yahweh are repeated on Christianity’s regression into magic, ritual, and superstition. In Christianity, the gods are re-enthroned in thinly veiled ways, like its mother of god. For all of Christianity’s enlightenment, in explicitly returning the repressed founding murder to our consciousness, its regression into paganism is really the “priests of Amun returning vengeance yet again upon the children of Akhenaton” to bury once again the higher spirituality. The true “progress in spirituality” abides in the Jewish spirituality of the dematerialized God, its instinctual renunciations, and its ethical heights.

Freud’s praises of monotheism’s “progress in spirituality” are measured. When we glance upon this drama of a killed primal father and imagine how its repression has returned to consciousness—through Atenic monotheism and the Christian representation of murder—he indeed appraises both these religions as unparalleled breakthroughs to truth. But he demurs from seeing such breakthroughs as verifications of the “eternal Truth” of some Father-God, Supreme Being notion. However lofty a concept this is in one sense, such a “Being” is for him idealism at best, or rather projection and neurosis. “As

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333 “[Paul’s] success was certainly mainly due to the fact that through the idea of salvation he laid the ghost of the feeling of guilt. It was also due to his giving up the idea of the chosen people and its visible sign—circumcision. That is how the new religion could become all-embracing, universal…nevertheless one characteristic of the old Aton religion [by which I presume Freud means “universality”] was reinstated” (MM 112).

334 By which I imagine he means Mary-Jesus as an iteration of the Isis-Horus cycle, for example—or perhaps other King/Queen of Heaven pairings, as in the Ugaritic Ilu and Athiratu pair, or the Canaanite El and Asherah pair, or Demeter.

335 This does not exclude Islam, which for Freud is a repetition of the Mosaic revolution in its own way (MM 118).

far as its distortion goes, [the God concept, as a projection of the Primitive Father’s sovereignty] may be called a delusion; in so far as it brings to light something from the past, it must be called truth.”

3.5 What to Do with Moses and Monotheism?

Freud’s *MM* made quite a stir in academia and thus earned its own version of repression. His hypothetical “founding scenario” of an alpha-male-murder underwent an unfortunately premature censure in anthropological studies—through a series of misunderstandings, because it is not easily falsifiable, recently detailed by anthropologist Richard Smith.

A philosophical husk that can obviously be discarded with Freud’s theory is the dualistic oppositions of enlightenment versus religion/ritual/magic, or spiritual immateriality versus materialist hedonism, or logic versus myth. This disenchantment-dualism is visible in his hard distinction between the universal, anti-ritualistic pacifist god Aten and the superstitious, ritualistic, violent volcanism of Yahweh. This echoes out in his declaring Christianity, in its magic-sacramentalism and reestablishment of pagan mother

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337 *MM* 167. Schäfer wrongly concludes that Freud’s rejection of a Supreme Being inherently means rejection of God per se (Peter Schäfer, “The Triumph of Pure Spirituality,” *op cit*). But this fails to consider apophatic traditions of, for example, God without Being—seen in Plotinus, Pseudo-Dionysius, et al. Rejecting *a* God need not imply simplistic, anti-religious polemic. Freud participated in Judaism, identifying “with the cultural, humanistic version of the ancestral faith advocated by the B’nai B’rith Lodge,” even if it did not take simple theistic form (Robert S. Wistrich, “Sigmund Freud’s Last Testament,” 45f, 53).

338 See Richard Smith, “Freud and Evolutionary Anthropology’s First Just-So Story,” *Evolutionary Anthropology* 25 (2016): 50-53. Used more as a postulate for theorizing psychoanalytic truths, it earned the title of a “just-so” story—as scholars could not figure out if it is bad to theorize a hard to prove originary scenario. This critic of Freud clarified a year later that calling the theory based on a “just so” story was not meant derisively, just of a different epistemological kind. But the rumor-cat was out of the bag, and its censure stuck in academia.
gods, as having lusted for the fleshpots of Amun’s Egypt. In this simplistic dichotomy, Freud’s project can be seen as among a lineage of Enlightenment deists, Free Masons, and so forth. As such, one can see where his approach may shipwreck upon a Gnostic enlightenmentism. In strictly empirical ways, it blatantly calls black white: we have a Pharaoh sitting atop one of the largest violent imperial agglomerations that had formed in history and a lavish sacrificial system at Amarna.339

We need not dwell long here on the countless ways this rigid distinction between intellection and ritualism can be put to rest, as I wish to return to it in the fifth chapter, seeking to moderate both the myth/history, primitive/enlightenment antinomies, regarding Christ as a re-uniting of God with the victim-mechanism. We can simply note here the impossibility of such an epistemological optimism: there is no non-ritualized, non-mythic space in human thought and culture. Ritual, myth, and narrative are fundamental modes of human thought and speech. There is no escape into pure non-mythical thought. Rational thought is an extension of, not an opposition to, mythical thought. “Ritual, when thrown out at the front door, returns at the back door: there are even anti-ritual rituals,” as Robert Bellah notes.340 Maybe Freud knew this, but he didn’t write like it. Seeing past the simplistic antinomy, one is reminded of how many Jews have rightly cultivated what Betty Rojman calls a non-idolatrous “material spirituality.”341

339 Small discussion of Akhenaten’s “pacifism”: John Wilson, The Culture of Ancient Egypt (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1951), 207. As for his over 2,000 offering tables and lavish sacrifices in his ornate temple, Kemp calls this “surely a symptom of obsession,” (Hoffmeier, 143, 150). Gnuse, on sacrifice (NOG 169) citing, Albright, Redford, and Kemp.


341 Rojtman, “The Double Death of Moses,” 107
As for the biblical, theological content of his book, one can understand its weak reception, and not merely due to a defensive bias of theologians. Since Freud’s time, it has become clear to archaeologists and historians that the link between Akhenaten and Moses is much weaker than he suggests. A leading Egyptologist, Donald Redford writes, “there is little or no evidence to support the notion that Akhenaten was a progenitor of the full-blown monotheism that we find in the Bible. The monotheism of the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament had its own separate development — one that began more than half a millennium after the pharaoh's death.”

If anything, the Phoenician scribal tradition, not some Aten-priest, may have carried some pieces of Egyptian texts and ideas into Israelite tradition (maybe like Psalm 104, etc.). Assmann simply writes, “the two religions are worlds apart,” with the exception of their both rejecting the other gods. As we will explore, Jewish monotheism took a significantly different trajectory than an Aten-influence would suggest.

But, while some aspects of Freud’s thesis have been critiqued or falsified, scholarship on his thesis has seen a recent increase in over a dozen monographs. One

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343 NOG 173.

344 ATM, 64, 68.

345 See a catalogue in *PM*, 85, 134 (n1). Akhenaten also remains a live political symbol today. In post-revolution Egypt (2012), “the country’s Muslim leaders embrace Akhenaten’s popular side while the Aten Museum is an up-for-grabs symbol in Egyptian self-representation…In 2012, after Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood came to power, they passed a constitution that cited Akhenaten’s ‘monotheism,’ as they named their policy program ‘Nahda,’ Arabic for Renaissance [just as Akhenaten repeated a renaissance in his day]” (Peter Hessler, “Akhenaten,” *National Geographic*, May 2017, 142, 143). Others, however, have regarded today’s Morsi as the caustic Akhenaten, and Sisi as the corrector, Horemheb. Generally speaking, the heretic Pharaoh’s reputation has served as a diffuse global symbol of revolutionary...
could even regard Girard’s work as one such critical redeployment of Freud’s originary murder hypothesis, even if Girard disavows that it was an ingredient in his mimetic theory. Girard saw in the representation of Christ’s Passion an urge to “get back to origins and look once again at constitutive acts of transference so as to discredit and annul them.”

No theory I have read to date more closely resembles Freud. The notion of resurfacing a founding murder—that has reverberated latent in our culture—and “admitting” to it, is a shared, crucial aspect in their theories. When asked of his take on this monograph, Girard affirmed it as comprehending religion “better than anyone,” highlighting how the themes of an inevitably resurfacing murder ultimately validate mimetic theory. Yet, he sought to expand Freud’s concept of murder beyond the biblical frame:

Freud’s thesis—the idea that Moses was eventually lynched—is deeper and more authentically biblical than it seems…. [But Freud seems unaware] that similar ‘rumors’ circulated about Romulus, Zoroaster and most foundational religious figures. Zoroaster is supposed to have been killed by groups of sacrificers (sacrificial associations) which were part of the old religion, and they decided to kill Zoroaster precisely because he was hostile to sacrifice. All these stories resemble the story of Moses, as interpreted by Freud, but he never related them, and that is why he was not able to discover the scapegoat mechanism.

Girard also critiqued Freud in several places as being too rigidly fixed on the psychology of the “father” or “mother” figures, insisting instead on a more generalized

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346 TH 153; EC 141; ISS 137.

347 EC 186, 204.

348 EC 204.
mimesis that can attach to any model. Desire for the mother, if it is common, is simply mimetic desire conducted through its most commonly on-hand model, the father. Oedipal desire is merely a species of mimetic desire, not a basic instinct.\textsuperscript{349} This grants mimetic theory flexibility, allowing for more random ethnographic data on how mimesis can arbitrarily work in groups and lynch mobs.

Girard’s preference for a more generalized mimesis than Oedipal desire, however, also means a more generalized, random scapegoat. The broader, more arbitrary aims of mimesis, disables Girard from drawing the dramatic link Freud does between monotheism and the re-enthronement of the sovereign primeval father. Girard thus cannot offer much commentary on Freud’s (underdeveloped) observation that Christianity’s Divine Son finally fulfills our primevally forged desire to “take the place of the father.” The connection may be in Girard’s provocative statement: “we killed Christ because we wanted to be him.”\textsuperscript{350} As such, Christ’s murder resembles the primally-slain father, who we also wanted to be. But Girard has tended to emphasize not an analysis of sovereignty with respect to symbols of father and son, but how the social processes of demonization-lynching-divinization affects our psychology and theology. This process can be enacted upon any scapegoat, not just a father figure. It is a machine into which anyone can be thrown and come out a god. As such, monotheism is for Girard less about “reenthronement of the father,” or the “son taking the throne with the father”—or any such variation—and more

\textsuperscript{349} See \textit{VS} chapters 7 and 8.

\textsuperscript{350} “Cannibalism is the essence of sacrifice. Cannibalism means that you eat the sacrificial victim in order to be your victim, because you want to be that victim. The reason you killed him is you want to be him” (Rene Girard, “Afterward,” in Michael Hardin, \textit{Reading the Bible With Rene Girard} [Lancaster, PA: Create Space, 2015]). See also \textit{EC} 217.
of “a refusal to divinize victims” and a devictimization of God. In any case, one wonders why Girardian scholarship has not given Freud’s monotheism and its successive scholarship more attention, apart from a few passing notations.351

Speaking from my grounding in mimetic theory, the more interesting idea in MM is less the connection between Moses and Akhenaten, and far more the connection between monotheism and the monopoly on violence. By this monopoly, I refer to the notion of how violence is used and represented in groups, vested in a “legitimate” or sacred center. Such a violence-monopoly over a region is often used as the most basic feature that makes a “state.”352 As Robertson Smith wrote, “What is often described as a natural tendency of Semitic religions toward ethical monotheism is in the main nothing more than a consequence of the alliance of religion and monarchy.”353 This becomes interesting insofar as monotheism may relate to how the state marks a relatively recent (in evolutionary terms) emergence of a once primal, and long-since abandoned alpha-male dominance. Contrast this with the much longer hunter-gather history of (violently enforced) egalitarianism. And in monotheism Freud sees something of a return to the expression of those earliest alpha submission patterns.

Speaking in terms of the state’s monopoly on violence, the relationship between monotheism and peaceableness is radically ambivalent. Having monopolized violence, the state insists and coerces, if need be, that all citizens are duty-bound pacifists, with the law


never to be taken into one’s own hands. That is, “vengeance is mine” saith the state, police, and judiciary. In its extreme form, the state’s consolidated “peace” feels non-coercive—especially when the demands are as small as a pinch of incense or when punishments become no longer public spectacles, as in the modern era. As such, one is tempted to see the political order as non-violent, if only incidentally violent at times. We might call this a pacifism “from above,” which would have naturally permeated cultures where archaic states increasingly monopolized legal violence into a judiciary and police.

It would seem reasonable in such a context, yet not entirely correct, to cynically regard the commands to “love your enemies” and “leave vengeance to God,” as nothing more than a byproduct of the state’s monopoly on violence. And yet, while the ancient state’s increasingly ubiquitous monopoly on violence may have made possible a certain kind of enemy-love and restraint upon retribution, such “pacifism from above” is almost the photographic negative of what we can call a love of enemies “from below.” It stretches credulity, for example, to see Christ’s command to walk a second mile as a mere byproduct of servility to the Roman occupation—when it obviously violates its regulations. Or, more recently, one might doubt that Gandhian pacifism was a mere reflex of the pacifying effects of English occupation. Rather, we see in such active peaceableness a nonviolent problematization of the state that, at the same time, does not enter into direct conflict with it. In any case, this connection between monotheism and the monopoly on violence will

retain a continual focus in the coming chapters, which will locate monotheism within the ancient near eastern political context.

If Girard is an “implicit” theorist on Freud’s linkage between murder and monotheism, the leading explicit theorist on MM today is Jan Assmann. Assmann, informed by the century of Egyptological scholarship since Freud, picks up where Freud left off. And, more specific to the concerns of this dissertation, he treats monotheism with special attention to our concerns of violence, intolerance, and political theology. Though one Girardian, Wolfgang Palaver, cites Assmann as yet another simplistic accuser of monotheism’s special penchant for violence (like the New Atheism’s Richard Dawkins et al), and Joseph Ratzinger and Mark Smith see Assmann’s “Mosaic intolerance” as univocally a slur against biblical revelation, we will find a more subtle and complex account once we read him closely. For, not only Freud, but Assmann too affirms the “intolerance” of the Mosaic distinction as the source of its “progress of intellectuality.” If nothing else, Freud is very obviously underlining the importance of the Mosaic distinction by praising the enlightenment of Atenism and battering the regressive falsehoods of Yahwehism—even if his speculations are schematic, simplistic, or even shots in the historical dark.

Insofar as Assmann develops upon Freud, he will help supplement the monotheistic rudiments in Girard’s theory. To clarify my goals, we are not in search of the historical

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355 “The most comprehensive attempt so far to locate Freud’s Moses and Monotheism on the spectrum of the history of ideas has been pursued by Jan Assmann” (Schäfer, “The Triumph of Pure Spirituality,” 35).

Moses’ exact lineage and activities (if he even existed) or whether Freud’s speculations are accurate with respect to Moses’s links to Akhenaten, his hypothesized murder at Shittim, or the mingling with the Midianites. Rather, all these are sub-themes within our larger search for what one can accurately say of the epochal changes monotheism wrought in the polytheistic world with respect to the political order, gods, and victims. What did the world incur through these revolutionary changes? Adding to Freud’s “progress in spirituality,” Assmann argues monotheism radically alters not only our conception of God, but also human nature and politics itself. This monotheism, forged over centuries, ultimately creates in the midst of the ancient world an unprecedented breakthrough.
CHAPTER 4: A POLITICAL THEOLOGY OF MONOTHEISM

The specific axial transformation that the Bible represents as the Exodus from Egypt by the children of Israel and their entering into a new form of religious and political order primarily involves the distinction between and separation of state and religion and must be reconstructed and interpreted in terms of political theology.  

We have thus introduced key concepts from Freud that will serve as topoi for Jan Assmann’s investigation of monotheism: first, the emergence of a kind of monotheism in Akhenaten’s Egypt prior to the Israelite story, second, the notion of a culturally transmitted complex relationship to murder, dominance, and instinctual renunciation which, third, contributes to a uniquely Jewish progress in intellectuality. The two following chapters will explore how Jan Assmann builds from those concepts by contrasting political theologies of polytheism and monotheism. As noted in my introduction, I am using “political theology” here to refer to the way God and the political sphere are related in thought and political and religious representation. A central topic of political theology in this sense concerns sovereignty and power, the arrangement of the king and his many administrators, or the One and the many. By exploring how Assmann compares polytheism and monotheism cashing out in political theology, and putting this into conversation with

357 GG 77.
mimetic theory, I will offer a particular argument about “intolerance” and violence. My thesis for the coming two chapters, in rough form, is that polytheism “contained” violence, whereas monotheism released violence. In subtler form, I argue that monotheism rearranged the polytheistic symbols of sovereignty to divide God from the religio-political order or ancient states.

I will make the polytheistic part of that argument in this chapter by distilling from Assmann and his proximate scholarship a framework for understanding different kinds of religion and violence. This means separating out two major ideal-types or genera of religion—those compacted with the political order and those separated from it. I will then introduce Assmann’s concept of the “translatability” of religions. Translatability, in brief, refers to whether one can translate a god’s name or religion into the god-names of other religions and cultures—i.e. at least a comparability or parallelism between religions. This is followed with a specific case study of polytheistic theology in an ancient Egypt. There, we get a general picture of how, in polytheism, God, royalty, violence, and cult are arranged.

4.1 Different Kinds of Religion: Primary/Secondary Religions and “Translatability”

The outline below is my distillation of Assmann’s rubric for different kinds of religions. The rubric contains the two large genera of primary and secondary religions, customary categories for historic analyses of religion. Translatability is then overlaid,

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358 Assmann draws partly from Theo Sundermeier, e.g. Theo Sundermeier, Was ist Religion? Reelgionswissenschafst im theologischen Kontext (Gütersloh: Güterloher Verlagsanstalt, 1999). We will notice a rough similarity with Girard’s common usage of “archaic” religion in contrast with “biblical” or revealed religion.
making for three different species of religions. We can then, in the next section, map “violence” onto these categories. Assmann uses such classifications in Weberian “ideal types”—simplified categories to make sense of what are, in reality, blurry phenomena.\footnote{GG 110.}

As such, we should keep in mind that the rubrics are used here specifically for discussing “violence and monotheism,” and are thus not meant to exhaustively classify religions.

1) **Primary religions**: locative (place-based), cult oriented, immanent-cosmotheistic religions (these religions and cultures “contain” four kinds of violence: raw, legal, political, and ritual):

   a) *Nontranslatable* tribal religions

   b) *Translatable* (thus “polytheistic”), state-based, archaic religions\footnote{Assmann shares these categories with Robert Bellah. See Robert Bellah, “What is Axial About the Axial Age,” *op cit*, 70. “Both tribal and archaic religions are ‘cosmological,’ in that supernature, nature, and society were all fused in a single cosmos” (Bellah, “What’s Axial,” 70). This refers to the homology of socio-political and religious realities.}

2) **Secondary religions**: world/utopian (not place-based), book oriented, invisible-transcendent\footnote{Henri Bergson, in *The Two sources of Morals and Religion* (Paris, 1932) uses the classes of “static” and “dynamic” religions, which corresponds with Assmann on the distinction between *immersed* (“conciliatory” in Sundermeier’s terms) and *distanced* (or redemptive) religions (*PM* 126).} (these religions introduce the new possibility of “religious violence”)

   c) *Nontranslatable*, generally “exclusive monotheism” religions. While first attempted by Akhenaton, a border case between primary and secondary religions, the key historical instantiation is found in the Jewish Mosaic Distinction. This is paralleled in a larger context via the “Axial Age” religions and cultures around the world, catalyzed by changes in writing technology and canonization.

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4.1.1 Primary and Secondary Religions

Primary religions stem back to human origins. They are specific to a local culture and place, and are marked by the centrality of cult, ritual, and illiteracy.\(^\text{362}\) They know nothing of the distinction between “true-” and “false” religion. Here “religion” is not a distinct category of life, but inextricably coextensive with culture. “There were no ‘religions’ in pagan societies, only ‘cults’ and ‘cultures.’ ‘Religion,’ like ‘paganism,’ is an invention of monotheism.”\(^\text{363}\) This is all the more evident in tribal societies without a distinct police force or judiciary; taboos and rituals embedded in the religion/culture do the work of containing group violence.

In such intimate contact between culture, gods, and violence-management, one doesn’t “believe” in the gods. Gods are not objects of “faith,” but one “knows” about gods in a way that may strike us today, who live in a world saturated by monotheism, as oddly matter-of-fact or intuitive.\(^\text{364}\) The gods are as real as the local, political body with which they are associated. Instead of having a distinctly secular “world,” in contrast to a singularly transcendent God, primary religions live in “a world of gods,”\(^\text{365}\) which bequeaths meaning and order. There is a good to this:

\(^{362}\) “Ritual cultures or cult religions typically operate on the assumption that the universe would suffer, or even come to an end, if the rites ceased to be observed in the prescribed fashion. Rituals always serve to prop up a cosmic order otherwise threatened with collapse” (\textit{PM} 105; 15).

\(^{363}\) \textit{GG} 10. In ancient Egypt, for example, “Cult and political identity are aspects of one and the same concept of divine presence and communication” (\textit{GG} 15).

\(^{364}\) \textit{PM} 15.

\(^{365}\) For Assmann, polytheism has three elements: a world of gods, humankind, and society. The divine difference of monotheism, by separating the world and God, adds a fourth: God, the cosmos, humankind, and society (\textit{PM} 40). “The divine world therefore determines the political structure of society” (\textit{PM} 41).
Embedding man in a social, political, and conceptual or ideological network of meaning and coherence and embedding the divine in a cosmic network whose meaning and coherence is modeled on the same basic ideas of order, truth, and harmony should be recognized in its own right as a major civilizational achievement.\textsuperscript{366}

Secondary religions, by contrast, are global (less place-based) religions, centered on books more than a locative cult. These coincide with a general decline in (or a replacement of) sacrificial cult.\textsuperscript{367} Such “book-” or “founded-” or “revealed-” religions include Western monotheisms of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, as well as Jainism, Sikhism, and, even with its complex relationship to theism, Buddhism. All of these are founded on a canonized scripture,\textsuperscript{368} and though they build upon primary religions, they typically draw some sort of distinction or denunciation against primary religions as pagan, idolatrous, or superstitious.\textsuperscript{369}

Secondary religions involve a distinction between “faith” and “knowledge” that simply did not exist in primary religions. This is a revolutionary new kind of truth: absolute, revealed, metaphysical, exclusive, or fideistic truth, which does not stem from mere empirical observation and experience.\textsuperscript{370} Instead of “knowing” God here, one instead “believes” in God.\textsuperscript{371} As such, secondary religions entail a radical transformation of the

\textsuperscript{366} CMA, 395.

\textsuperscript{367} PM 104, 109.

\textsuperscript{368} PM 104; ATM 88. All these follow either the example of the Buddhist or Hebrew canon, the two original innovators of religious canon. (CMA 390).

\textsuperscript{369} PM 1.

\textsuperscript{370} PM 15; ATM, 58. This adds another species of “truth” to what Assmann regards as the already existing list pagan list of truths: the truths of experience, mathematical truth, historical truth, and truths conducive to life. Secondary religions add “religious truth.”

\textsuperscript{371} PM 15; MPC, 146.
primary sacred from a localized culturally-identical mode—in which gods are not objects of faith, and the sacred is manifest in the world—into a mode that is detachable from a society and transplantable.\(^\text{372}\) Perhaps overstating this ideal type, Assmann writes that, for secondary religions, “the sacred is no longer to be found in the world.”\(^\text{373}\) That is, the sacred migrates entirely from the cosmos, cult, and king into scripture. (But even in ideal form, this would seem quite odd, given the largest secondary religion’s position on sacred presence in Catholicism.) If religion in this secondary mode doesn’t entirely destroy civic models of sacrifice, it at least turns sacrifice and worship more into “an act of faith rather than an obligation.”\(^\text{374}\)

Faith in secondary religions, besides involving a new kind of “interiority” and individualism,\(^\text{375}\) means something more contrastive or against than religion in its primary mode, involving conversion and decision.\(^\text{376}\) Indeed the counter-religious construction against paganism is “structurally related to conversion” and the obligation to remember—so as to avoid relapse.\(^\text{377}\) Here the command that you shall have no other gods means one has to commit to “love God with all one’s heart” (Deut 6:5): “In the frame of this

\(^{372}\) PM 105.

\(^{373}\) PM 106.

\(^{374}\) Stroumsa, The End of Sacrifice, op cit, 89. “Had Titus spared the temple, it would have had to be shut down—either that, or Judaism, and thus Christianity and Islam as well, would never have arisen. The temple had outlived its usefulness, for the cult that it housed had long since been laid to rest in the graveyard of scripture” (PM 108).

\(^{375}\) GG 110.

\(^{376}\) CMEC 184; ME 24, 7; PM 15.

\(^{377}\) ME 216.
partnership, man grows individualistic and God grows monotheistic.”378 By contrast, Cicero writes of what we are calling a primary mode of religion, which is more the expression of the political collective, not an individual’s commitment: “no one shall have gods to himself, either new gods or alien gods, unless recognized by the State.”379 One does not “convert” to a religion in the world of primary religions. In its stronger forms, a secondary religion retains the purity of an event, a conversion, and a text—and less a cult or institution, much less a state: “The monotheistic idea can only be guaranteed longevity as a textual corpus, not as an institutionalized religion, at least not in absolute strictness, purity, and consequentiality.”380 Having a more dialectical character, such a religion is “countercultural.” (This is sometimes seen in the inversion of pagan taboos—to do what is taboo for pagans, and not do what is prescribed for pagans.) In extreme form, the dialectical spirit of secondary religion means the pursuit of the “un-institutionalizable” in that it cannot be mediated by the relative stabilities of culture, cult, and the ritual patterns of cultivation. The vigilance toward conversion allows no such stable placidity.

Parallel with a sense of “conversion” and revelation, secondary religions do not see themselves as the result of a slow evolution of the many toward the One, but rather as a “revolution.”381 Even if biblical monotheism or other secondary religions may have, in

378 CMA 397.
379 Cicero, De legibus, 2.8.19, italics added.
380 PM 35. “Counterreligion is an aggregate state that no religion can sustain in the long run. None of these secondary religions has ever been able to avoid (and perhaps even wanted to avoid) incorporating into self elements of the very primary religions it proscribes as pagan” (PM 34).
381 GG 107; CMA 369-370). “Correct, embellish, and complete Baal and Astarte as you will, you will never make the God of Moses out of the gods of Canaan” (DeLubac, The Discovery of God, 34).
history, slowly evolved out of polytheism, in memory they tend to represent and conduct their religion as if they were a revolutionary break from polytheism. For example, the Jewish proclamation “The Lord is One” had many ancient parallels in terms of seeing the one behind the many (like the Egyptian proclamation like “Amun is One”). But it is very different in what follows: the exclusivist religious commandment, “You shall have no other Gods.” Regarding this exclusive against-ness, “there is no parallel in the religions dwelling on the theme of divine oneness.” In sum, unlike the primary religions, secondary religions know that they are religions, and they tend to have a sense looking at other religions as being false or at least lacking truth. Israel’s construct of “pagan Egypt,” is the most famous example.

Though lumping all religious forms into these two large genera can appear too crude to supply any meaning, it is at least better than seeing “religion” as always referring to the same kind of thing. Rather, “religion” can mean at least two very different kinds of things. Using two major ideal types helps us consider entirely different arrangements between the “religious” and “political” spheres. There is a primary mode of religion in which it coincides with state, cosmos, and culture; and there is a secondary mode in which it is somehow different from the state, cosmos, and culture. The latter refers to the epochal separation between Church and State, religion and politics.

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382 GG 108. Drawing any genetic, causal, historical connections between these religions and this shared feature is a separate line of inquiry.

383 GG 108; PM 34. See also John F.A. Sawyer, “Biblical Alternatives to Monotheism,” Theology 87 (1984), 172-80, 175.

384 PM 112.
More importantly, once we find that secondary religions derive their symbols from primary religions (like faith, allegiance, jealousy), as we will see in these chapters, we can expect a messy mixture between political and “religious” symbols. In this sense, primary and secondary categories are better regarded as modes or layers of religion. While secondary religions indeed involve changes from the primary form, certain primary elements inescapably remain. For example, secondary religions may genuinely transform out of the primary elements of cultic socio-political obligation and place-based cult, but they cannot escape the elemental social features like ritual, or association and dissociation. Even universally, open-minded religions will necessarily involve some dimension of exclusion. Likewise, evidently non-religious things, like capitalism or nationalism, might be regarded as “religions” in the primary religion sense of a socially binding mythos. (This will be especially helpful as we consider how, in Mouffe’s work, social theories which emphasize a “society beyond exclusion” inescapably involve exclusions.)

In other words, the primary/secondary classification offers a heuristic for analyzing the interlaced genes between political and religious/theological symbols. Carl Schmitt, for example, suggested that “all significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts.” But Assmann also adds that much of what counts as “religious” was once homologous with the political and only later hived off into this secondary sense: “The significant concepts of theology are theologized political

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concepts.” Even if secondary religion involves the separation of religious and political spheres, they left a lot of residues on each other. One cannot easily say whether the concepts of “faith” or “allegiance” are fundamentally political or religious concepts. Even secular polities, in a way, involve “faith.”

Distinguishing two major kinds of religions also helps us take more seriously the major transformative impact that literacy and written technologies have had on human subjectivity and cultural reproduction, especially pivoting around the great transformations of the first millennium BCE. Attention to such radical transformations from primary to secondary religions is housed within “Axial Age theory,” a hypothesized era of religious and intellectual revolution where three major centers of civilization virtually simultaneously underwent radical innovations in thought—in the Mediterranean/Mid-East, India, and China. This is an era not merely of impressive innovations, it is an era of what some call a revolutionary “leap in being” that divides time into a before and after, an “estrangement” from the past that its predecessors may not have known. This leap comes partly as a result of the substantial effects of writing technologies on culture and thought, creating the intellectual world that we now can recognize as partly our own. Recent axial theorists include Jaspers, Voegelin, Habermas, Bellah, and Eisenstadt—as well as

386 Jan Assmann, Jan, Herrschaft und Heil, Politische Theologie in Altägypten, Israel und Europa (Munich: Carl Hanser Verlag, 2000), 20; Agamben, The Kingdom and the Glory, 193.

387 Marvin and Engle have helped demonstrate this categorization by pointing out the co-genesis, if not competition, between religious and political symbols. Carolyn Marvin and David Engle, “Blood Sacrifice and the Nation: Revisiting Civil Religion,” JAAR LVIV/4 (767-780).

388 CMA 375.

389 ATM 85ff.
The Axial age is usually defined around 800BCE to 200BCE, though this is strongly disputed. For example, Assmann’s emphasis on how symbolic communication and writing restructured human thought causes him to diffuse the period to a 5-6kya time frame and hold the theory more loosely.

Assmann argues that many Axial theorists like Weber or Voegelin have too often tended to see the Axial breakthroughs of the first millennium BCE as primarily driven by ideas. By contrast, Assmann has emphasized the close relationship between intellectual and historical processes (material forces, politics, culture, etc.). He also argues Axial theorists have tended to over-emphasize similarities between these cultures. For him, although monotheism undoubtedly was accomplished through cultural creation, ideas, and human agency, and surely had profound consequences, its rise may also have been a consequence of historical changes and events. Specifically, in Israel’s case, their “breakthrough” to monotheism is more a result of their national breakdown. We also do

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391 CMA 380, 383; ATM 81. “It is writing that produced history and dispelled mythology. Writing caused history to be where myth was, because it documented conditions in which not gods but human kings reigned and in which humans were responsible for their actions” (CMA 389).

392 “The concept of an Axial Age both overrates and underrates difference. It overrates the difference between archaic civilization and the modern mind, and it underrates the differences between the different ‘axial’ civilizations as well as between the first millennium BCE and our modern age. Jaspers’ concept of the Axial Age is not a theory but a scientific myth…the features of axiality, however, such as reflexivity, individuality, interiority (“inner man”), distancing from the world, progress in abstraction and intellectualty, ‘theory,’ critique of tradition, differentiation, ‘transcendental’ concepts or visions—ideas and inventions with a tendency to global diffusion that have been brought up in the still ongoing discussion of Jaspers’ theory—have proved indispensable tools of cultural analysis” (ATM 94).

393 Assmann here can be seen as building upon the argument of Eric Weil, “What is a Breakthrough in History?” Daedalus Spring 1975, 21-36). Though other cultures saw such breakthroughs,
well to bear in mind other massive material forces surrounding this theoretical Axial age: the metallurgy transition from bronze to iron affecting farming and warfare; or changes toward market economies that destabilized traditional patterns; or advances in literacy technologies, just to name a few.\textsuperscript{394}

4.1.2 Translatability and Political Theology

A more detailed layer that Assmann adds to this primary/secondary classification is the notion of “translatability,” as seen in my above outline. This concept refers to whether a religion (its gods, ideas, rituals, culture, politics) can say of another religion or political group, “same god, different name” or “different god, similar functions.” Plutarch, for example, understood Osiris and Isis as the same god with different names. Herodotus understood the Greek gods were in fact imported from Egypt and then translated into different names, tasks, and ornamentation, identifying Horus with Apollo, Osiris with Dionysius.\textsuperscript{395} Cicero similarly equated Thoth with Hermes.\textsuperscript{396} And while gods could be translated, so too could a singular supreme God be translated: Varro, Porphyry,

Bellah echoes Weil, confirming that in Israel, “the revolution in mythospeculation was most profound” (Bellah, “What’s Axial?” 89).

Historians will see similarities here with Toynbee’s reconstruction of biblical history as a chain of the products of disintegrations: Abraham from the disintegration following Hammurabi, Moses from the disintegration of Egypt’s New Kingdom, the Prophets from the disintegration of Syriac civilization, and Christianity from the disintegration of Hellenic civilization (\textit{OH} 120; Toynbee, \textit{A Study of History}, V, 119 n.; VI, 39).

\textsuperscript{394} Bellah, “What’s Axial,” 74; NOG, 253ff, et passim. “Biblical thought is part of a greater evolutionary development in the ancient world beginning around 3000BCE, which is still occurring today” (NOG, 255).

\textsuperscript{395} Herodotus, \textit{Histories}, 2.144.

\textsuperscript{396} \textit{De Natura Deorum}, 3.22.56; \textit{GIT}, 252f.
Symmachus, Celsus, Plutarch, Seneca, Pliny the Elder all spoke of a One behind the many, whose specific name didn’t so much matter, given their singular backing.397

By contrast, monotheism’s “untranslatability” and thus apparent “intolerance” is quite different. We know from the numerous passages of monotheistic violence against the idolaters, that the biblical texts regard other religions as at least false and not translatable with Yahweh’s religion. Outsiders of that religion, too, like the Greek philosopher Strabo (b.64BCE), understood Moses’ religion as a monotheistic “counter-religion” that could not translate with the other religions.398 And as I have observed, it has been the aim of many theologians for centuries to soften this counter-ness and untranslatability in light of its apparent intolerance or potential for conflict.399 Assmann regards translatability as crucial to the historical transformations that radically shaped the ancient world, and it is still with us today, lingering amidst the problems of “religious violence” and “intolerance.” For the sake of this argument, “translatability” manifests itself in three religious forms (again, as ideal-types):

1) “Primitive” and “tribal” religions exist in sociologically smaller, face-to-face groups. While varying greatly, these religions are generally not translatable with other

397 **GG 56; PM 19f.** See e.g. Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*, Bk II, v 15: deities are a matter of “different names to different people” (*GIT*, 243). Or Apuleius of Madaurus, *Metamorphoses*, 11th bk: “my divinity is one, worshipped by all the world under different forms, with various rites, and by manifold names…”.

398 **ME 38; Richard J. Bernstein, “Jan Assmann: The Mosaic Distinction and Religious Violence,” Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal Vol 32, No 1 (2011), 5.**

399 E.g. John Spencer, in the 17th century argued that Moses was an Egyptian who “translated” Egyptian religion into Hebrew language and culture (*De Legibus Hebraeorum Ritualibus Et Earum Rationibus, Libri Tres*, 1685).
religions and are “by necessity, ethnocentric.” The most extreme of this ideal-type would be tribal religions that regard outsiders as not even human. Contact and interaction with other groupings are shunned or at least carefully controlled. Untranslatability here is a safeguard against the dangers of potential violence of the unknown other, and it corresponds with the lack of cultural presuppositions and norms that might mediate safe encounters. In societies with a judiciary, by contrast, they can risk a greater social osmosis.

As for Girard’s mimetic theory, he often focused on the ethnographies of mostly tribal religions and spent little time distinguishing them from the following translatable religions of archaic states. And yet, of crucial concern for him was the difference between societies with a judiciary (reactive vengeance) and tribal societies whose religious taboos and sacrifices serve as both preventative and reactive vengeance. In other words, a key feature of “primitive” society-religions is how they contain violence through sacrifice, whereas sacrifice languishes, or at least begins to phase out, in societies with a judiciary. For a judiciary takes over many of the violence-containment functions of sacrifice and taboo in tribal religion. Nontranslatable tribal religions will not retain the center of this dissertation’s attention.

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400 PM 24.

401 Girard writes of this: “In many archaic societies [like the Mundurucu] there are no human beings outside the tribe: they represent themselves as the only humans” (EC 115; Irenäus Eibl-Eibesfeldt, trans Geoffrey Strachan, Love and Hate: The Natural History of Behavior Patterns (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1996), 99-100; R. F. Murphy, “Intergroup Hostility and Social Cohesion,” American Anthropologist, 59 (1957): 1028).

402 VS, chapter 1. Whereas sacrifice used preventative means to quell and divert vengeance, the judiciary uses more accurate, strict, reactive, and curative vengeance with reference to the state’s monopoly on violence. After the judiciary’s slow but successful establishment in the ancient world, then, sacrifice would slowly become an appendix so far as politics is concerned. For religion no longer contains violence in the same way it used to.
2) With the growth of archaic states and larger settled societies of strangers in the last several thousand years, there emerge translatable religions. Generally regarded within a meta-system of “polytheism,” these religions and gods are more translatable across cities and cultures, accommodating greater intercultural exchange and trade. For example, our earliest documents of international law, dating back to the third millennium BCE, contain god-lists, glossaries of translated god-names of ancient empires. Peace treaties and alliances across city-states or empires were written up with reference to their gods who are translatable according to their cosmic, biological, or cultural functions (i.e. a city’s storm god, its god of craftsmanship, war, magic, etc.). Often, these gods serve as “an international divine council” as witnesses to the treaty’s terms. In this case, “intercultural theology became a concern of international law.” Also, many of these deity-lists were “directly related to sacrificial practice,” while “a deity’s own land was generally the appropriate site for her or his cult.” We can regard these as clear signs of the gods’ embedded socio-political function across societies, almost always with a “national god” as preeminent among them. And the merging and translation of gods, naturally, one can see


404 GIT, 57.

405 GG 55; GIT, 80, 111. See Judges 11:24 as a passage of international relations with the equation of national warrior gods (in Chemosh for the Moabites, Molkom for the Ammonites, and Yahweh for the Israelites—i.e. not yet “the whole earth.” First hard evidence of universality in Judaism appears in sixth century in the Khirbet beit Lei inscription “Yahweh is the god of the whole earth” (GIT, 178; EHG, 149: 2 Kings 5:15; 1 Kings 17:14; 19:15; 2 Kings 5:1; 8:13; Ps 47:2; cf. Ps 8:1; 24:1; 48:2; 95:4; 97:5; Isa 6:3.)

406 GIT 64.

407 GIT, 45, 119.
as coinciding with “political expediency at the highest levels of government” in the imperial consolidation of regions.\(^\text{408}\)

We can thus understand how a certain state-based “monotheism” coincided with the first millennium BCE’s immense imperial consolidations, and the concomitant reductions of “gods” in pantheons. That is, the political value of polytheism is not merely in its numeric theology of “many gods”; polytheistic translatability can include the notion of the One High (or Highest) God behind all other gods, governing all others.\(^\text{409}\) Assmann writes, “God’s oneness is not an invention of monotheism, but the central theme of polytheistic religions as well.”\(^\text{410}\) Celsus, for example, “seems to be more strictly monotheistic than the Christian Origen.”\(^\text{411}\) A One God worldview was already ascendant in Mesopotamia throughout the first millennium BCE,\(^\text{412}\) just as Egypt saw an increasing consolidation of its pantheon centuries prior under Amun.\(^\text{413}\)

In a One God theology, other gods may in fact be only manifestations of the One or exist distinctly as administrators. Such Oneness theology is still polytheistic,\(^\text{414}\) often

\(\text{408} \) NoG, 165-166. Over time, pantheons shrunk from the Late Bronze Age into the Iron Age, once populating by hundreds or dozens, down to usually a handful of deities for a polity’s pantheon, “largely revolving around national gods.” GIT, 128, 170; EHG, 25: “while more than two hundred deities are attested at Ugarit, the texts for the first millennium states in the region attest to ten or fewer deities.”

\(\text{409} \) Greek: Hyposistos, “The Highest One,” or Heis Theos. PM 31.

\(\text{410} \) PM 30.

\(\text{411} \) Stroumsa, The End of Sacrifice, 5.

\(\text{412} \) GIT 19.

\(\text{413} \) See the Hymn to Amun: “All gods are three: Amun, the Sun, and Ptah, without their seconds. His identity is hidden in Amun, his is the Sun as face, his body as Ptah” (Papyrus Leiden I 350), chapter 300. GIT, 245. Also, cases of Isis as universal goddess in Papyrus Chester Beatty IV recto x2; Oxyrhynchus papyri (11.1380).

\(\text{414} \) GIT, 158f.
regarded by the name “henotheism,” where one deity is the sum of the reality of the other
deities, or one supreme deity is the “realization of functions or aspects of divinity
traditionally associated with the other deities.”415 Or Voegelin refers to “summodeism,”
wherein the numerous gods, which may have distinct existence, are administrators of the
High One who stands above the many as an expression of a political sovereignty.416 “The
Lord is one” is common utterance in a polytheistic framework, referencing the total
sovereign political claims of a god, in unique distinction against the other gods:

“God is one” means “the only one”: in the context of polytheism this
is frequently used to emphasize the uniqueness or sovereign power
of a specific god, especially the creator. There are thus hundreds of
assertions such as “Amun is one {unique}.”417

In the late Classical era, Oneness theology could be known in a high God who was
called by different names like Zeus, Sarapis, Helios, Marduk, Iao (sometimes regarded as
the Greek equivalent of Yahweh), and so forth. “One Zeus, one Hades, one Helios, one

415 GIT, 166, 292.

416 OH 34, 46-47, 73-74, 267, passim. Assmann contrasts a familiar “monotheism” that C.S. Lewis
saw as the natural evolution of thought (and wrongly sees as the basis of biblical monotheism), with an
exclusive monotheism that must reject the other gods (ATM, 57; C.S. Lewis, The Allegory of Love: A Study
of Medieval Tradition (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958), 57). Assmann insists that such an
evolutionary, pacific notion of the One ought to be regarded as inclusive monotheism, really a variant of
polytheistic Oneness theology.

For henotheism, see Michiko Yusa, “Henotheism,” in The Encyclopedia of Religion, 2nd
(DeLubac, The Discovery of God, 29-31): first, an imperial kind that reflects political conditions and
metaphysical speculation, where variety rationally suggests unity, as applied by Babylon, Egypt, Indo-
Europeans, Achaemenid, Hellenic, and Roman empires. “It is right that whatever everybody worships
should be considered one thing: we behold the same stars, the heavens are common to us all, the same
world embraces us” (Symmachus, Relatio, n. 10). The second monotheism is “exclusive jealousy,” where
there is “no God but God.”

417 GG 107. GIT, 145: e.g. Akkadian “one” as “unique, outstanding.”
Dionysus, One god in all gods,” reads a Classical text. Egyptian wisdom literature also “generally speaks of ‘god’ instead of specific gods…the only god that really counts.” Because such “oneness” includes the idea of plurality, it can sometimes be referred to as “inclusive monotheism.” By contrast, the exclusive monotheism of secondary religions excludes such plurality in its “belief in only one God.” As we will explore next chapter in detail, Judaism’s exclusive monotheism emerges from the germ of Israel’s occasional “monolatry”: the other gods exist, but one god is exalted above the others, which can largely be regarded as an expression of local patriotism. In the ancient near east, we find many cases of such monolatry—though, the entire exclusion of all others gods is very rare.

The ancient political value of “one God” is most evident in the concept of “divine Monarchy.” Monarchy, meaning “one first principle,” was a crucial political symbol of the classical world, in both biblical and Hellenistic circles. Monarchy refers to the metaphysical simplicity that corresponds with political orderliness in states. As anyone can look upon politics and conclude that no two constituencies can agree upon the same


419 GG 63. Assmann clarifies this as a “monotheism of perspective,” or again henotheism. It can be seen in “the God” (p3 ntr) in Egypt or “the God” (DINGIR-ii) in the Akkadian version of the treaty between Hattusilis III and Ramses II—the “chief god of each party.”


law, so the logic goes, the perpetual drift toward division and revolution must be curbed by a singular reign. And yet this singular sovereign needs many others to administer and govern. “The king reigns but does not govern,” as any glance at a government or army suggests.

To the extent that such a One High God can be “translated” with the High God of another political sovereignty, we might regard this as analogous to how global state powers today recognize or respect one another as legitimate within the “higher” international political order. Mark Smith sees such international recognition especially in the Late Bronze Age, where “translatability…is a function of an imperial ecumene of relative equals,” where kings are inclined to address one another as “brothers,” not due to affection, but because their relation is neither domination or vassal, but parity. But, as to a “highest” order that stands even above such relations—like the United Nations today—this is a contestable position, all the more so in the ages of political fragmentation. Thus, it is not surprising that explicit ancient attestations of “the supreme god,” prior to the first millennium, are relatively rare, given the more fragmented sovereignties of the Bronze Age. In times when empires have almost ubiquitously absorbed all neighboring regions and cultures, henotheism can sometimes feature a certain “non-translatability.”

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423 GIT 61, 77.

424 The neo-Assyrian and neo-Babylonian empires “engulfed regional translatability.” As such, “parity no longer worked conceptually” (GIT, 157; Baruch Levine, “Assyrian Ideology and Biblical Monotheism,” Iraq 67 (2005): 411-27). Some have argued that the idea of Yahweh as a cosmic creator “is a response to the Babylonian image of Marduk as world creator. Jeremiah also borrowed the Babylonian idea that the creator deity also had a plan for the entire world” (NOG 82).
this seems best interpreted as chiefly political, coinciding with the expansive, imperial monopolies on violence. But in contexts of political fragmentation, Smith notes, “one god” representations are *inner*-cultural and not *cross*-cultural; they are expressions of the polity’s singularity. That there could be numerous One High gods should not trouble our logical minds. As Voegelin notes, the notion that a large state coincides with the entire cosmos, “remains undisturbed by its logical incompatibility with the existence of rival powers outside the cosmic analogue.”

The development of a “One high God” theo-political concept coincides with the annexations and consolidations of political sovereignties under larger states and empires. In turn, the many gods are more and more seen as administrators or functionaries of the One, just as smaller polities were absorbed under empires. That is, “empire informs the degree and nature of translatability.” As such, henotheistic political theology mirrors the Empire-Province, Emperor-Satrap political arrangement, whereas summodeism and monolatry would have been a more fitting theo-political concept in smaller, polycentric political conditions. In Mesopotamia, for example, where the polycentrism of city-states eventually merged toward centralization, the *Enuma Elish*’s hymn to Marduk uses fifty names for the High God, each of which are subordinate regions now regarded as aspects or manifestations of the singular power. In all, monolatry, summodeism, and henotheism

425 *GIT*, 55, 246, 325. Smith deems that, by the Hellenic period, one-god discourse indeed becomes cross-cultural. But I fail to see how a Hellenic utterance like “One Zeus, one Hades, one Helios, one Dionysius, one god in all” (Orphic Fragment 239) is not also akin to Babylon’s Marduk, which Smith deems “an expression of political power,” but extending imperialism by cultural, nonpolitical means.

426 *OH* 26.

427 *GIT*, 180.
inclusive monotheism) might each be regarded as a “spiritual byproduct of processes that belong to the practical and political sphere.” We can classify religions of a “One High God” among the religions of translatable polytheism, even if they appear numerically monotheistic, with plurality resolved into an ultimate unity.

At the heart of the “One God behind the many” is an overarching conception of the god-world relation, intimately relevant to politics. “God” in the polytheistic framework is compacted with the universe in what Assmann labels “cosmotheism” or a “world-of-gods that is God”: God’s being is inextricably tied with the cosmos such that it is the body of God. This cosmotheism can even include a capacity for “negative theology,” that negates any visible analogy of the world with God by asserting divinity’s transcendence and inaccessibility. But, even in this view, the cosmos is still a process, maintained through human attention to the gods through cult and worship. Once we draw attention to this god-world relation, we see that the deeper socio-political-psychological meaning of polytheism is not that “God is many” or that “God is One,” but that “God is all.” All patterns, all cults, all events, and all gods, are part of a singular system—an encompassing God. This is of such crucial importance for Assmann that he prefers to use cosmotheism to describe what we usually mean by polytheism. (For ease, I will tend to use the more familiar polytheism

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428 GG 57

429 PM 41f. Cosmotheism is “the religion of an immanent god and a veiled truth that shows and conceals itself in a thousand images that illuminate and complement, rather than logically exclude, one another” (PM 43). See also OH 41, 44: “the world is not created by the gods, but the gods are massively the world itself.”

430 OH 86f.

here, though denoting this cosmotheistic all-ness.) For, what is politically important is not numbers, but this god-world relation, of a cosmogonic compaction of the god’s close linkage with the cosmos, the political realm, and kingship. 432

3) Our third category, and the subject of our next chapter, is non-translatable religion: *exclusive monotheism*, or biblical monotheism, or for simplicity “monotheism.” If translatable cosmotheism meant God’s compaction with the cosmos, in an intuitive religion-politics compaction, untranslatable exclusive monotheism means God’s division from and incommensurability with the cosmos. We do not have here cosmos-as-the-body-of-God. Nor do we have here “a god of water,” “a storm god,” or even the god of the king, or any other societal function that could be translated across polities and religions. Divinity is not “completed” by any ritual or political procedures. Though words fail me here, it is as though God here is functionless:

A transcendent God has no cosmic function that could serve as a common denominator function for equating him with another God. [Yahweh] did not say, “I am the Sun,” or even “I am all that is, was, and will be,” like the Egyptian god…but “I am that I am.” 433

Unlike the many interlocking functions of divinities and cults in primary religion, this revelation means an entirely exclusive and transcendent God: “The world owes its

Stroumsa likewise discusses “the non-pertinence of an opposition between the concepts of monotheism and polytheism” (Stroumsa, *The End of Sacrifice*, 5). This is borne out by at least the emperor Julian (*Contra Galilaeos* 72.20-1), who saw the mono-/poly- difference as “trivial” (Cyril of Alexandria, *In Julianum* 9.306B; Christoph Markschies, “The Price of Monotheism,” in Mitchell and Van Nuffeln eds, *One God: Pagan Monotheism in the Roman Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 110.

432 “The great caesure between [religion and politics] is not located so much around the unity of God as around the nature of religion and its role in the state… the fact that the kingdom of God is not of this world could only mean great distrust of the ambient political and social system.” In this sense Christians “were incapable of understanding the idea of civic religion” (Stroumsa, *The End of Sacrifice*, 103, 107).

433 Assmann, “Religion and the (Un)translatability of Cultures,” *op cit*, 42:00f.
continued existence, not to the performance of any rites, but to the preserving will and workings of a transcendent god."

If the previous forms of an inclusive One High God could seem numerically monotheistic, here it is religious *exclusivity* that makes for “a totally different kind of monotheism,” that emanates most “specifically from Palestine.” This exclusive monotheism means *non-translatability* with, and intolerance of, other gods and religions. In such an ideal-type, Yahweh cannot be translated with Jupiter, Amun, Zeus, or Assur—even if other religions tried to make such a translation. While many other religion-cultures translated their gods, there is—to be mild about it—a “relative lack of translatability for many Jewish and Christian authors.” For this is *counterreligion*; exclusive monotheism understands itself as *not polytheism*; it is ultimately *anti-polytheism*. “The distinction between true and false religion pertains solely to this

434 PM 104f.

435 GG 107

436 PM 19. Mark Smith writes that “the history of ancient Israelite religion involved both translatability and its eventual rejection…the conceptual shift in this period involved a sophisticated hermeneutic that retained older formulations of translatability within expressions of non-translatability and monotheism” (*GIT*, 8).

437 Many philosophers and cults tried to translate Yahweh with Dionysius, Zeus, and Jupiter (*GIT*, 276f). Assmann locates Macrobius’ translation of Iao (Yahweh) as the “supreme god of all gods” as part of the Greco-Roman “quest for the sole and supreme divine principle beyond the innumerable multitude of specific deities” (*ME*, 51). Which, Smith argues, is a more “individual and personal” piety, as contrasted with the other Late Bronze Age deity-translations, which concerned national religion and politics (279).


439 PM 39, 22.
exclusive monotheism.”

This is a theoclasm that “blocked intercultural translatability. False gods cannot be translated.”

The original meaning of this idea is not that there is one god and no other, but that alongside the One True God, there are only false gods, whom it is strictly forbidden to worship…Exclusion is the decisive point, not oneness. Instead of speaking about mono-and polytheisms, it would therefore be more appropriate to refer to exclusive and nonexclusive religions, or, better still, theologies.

The crucial point of polytheism, again, is not that “the gods are many.” The breaking point with monotheism is rather about exclusivity and nontranslatability of fidelity to this particular God. It is about “the principle that there be ‘no god but God’ or, in the form of the first commandment, ‘[Thou shalt have] no other gods.”’

The core point here is less the nonexistence of the other gods and more that the other gods are “false” in contrast with the True God. Given these genuine differences, we are speaking of a different kind, a different genus of religion altogether.

Not the oneness of god, but the concept of ‘idols’ is the real monotheistic innovation…There were no idols and heathen in the realm of tribal religion and polytheism. The construction of

440 PM 36.

441 ME 3.

442 PM 34. “Akhenaten was the first in the history of mankind to apply the distinction between true and false to religion…He was also the first to formulate the principle of exclusive monotheism, namely, that there be ‘no gods but god!’…[But] he did not alter the ‘compact’ unity or indistinction between religion and politics” (GG 81).

443 GG 108; PM 31. “There has never been a religion that defined itself with reference to the concept of plurality, one that adopted polloi theoi (many gods) as its motto instead of heis theos (one god alone).” And only in Islam do we reach a religion of strict numerical monotheism that has no intermediary beings or angels.

444 GG110.

138
paganism is the single achievement of monotheism, based on the distinction between true and false.\textsuperscript{445}

We can thus understand how the word “polytheism” is really only a post-facto construct of exclusive monotheism; indeed, exclusive monotheism not only constructed polytheism, but a novel vocabulary of heathens, pagans, gentiles, unbelievers, idolaters, heretics.\textsuperscript{446} In light of this, it makes “no sense to talk of ‘tolerance’ with regard to the polytheisms of pagan antiquity, since here the criterion of incompatability is missing. As far as other peoples’ religion is concerned, there is nothing that would need to be ‘tolerated.’”\textsuperscript{447} (Likewise, it is a misnomer to speak of cosmotheism’s notion of “immanence in the world, for ‘immanence’ presupposes an understanding of ‘transcendence’ that is not yet achieved.”\textsuperscript{448})

As we will detail in the coming chapter, Assmann largely associates this kind of counter-religion with the Mosaic distinction, a movement or “event” within a more complex, changing, originally polytheistic Israelite religion. (“Event” in the sense that it is hard to institutionalize but is more like a perpetual possibility that emerges in spurts.) The exclusive monotheism that eventually took shape in Judaism, however, differs far more from Akhenaton’s kind of exclusive monotheism than Freud speculated. Nonetheless, Akhenaton’s revolution, because it was indeed \textit{against} the other gods, still counts at least partly as a species of exclusive monotheism.

\begin{footnotes}
\item[445] MPC 149.
\item[446] MPC 141.
\item[447] PM 18.
\item[448] OH 84.
\end{footnotes}
So the Mosaic Distinction means a type of “counter-knowledge” that knows itself as not-polytheism, applying the true/false distinction in relation to religion, just the Greek Parmenidean distinction applied the notion of true/false to science and logic.  

The Greek-scientific as well as the Mosaic-religious “true/false distinctions” are both “intolerant” counter-knowledge in that they know what is “false” or “not true” and exclude them.  

(That the Mosaic distinction invokes true/false does not preclude that, once that distinction is made, there is room for “reentries or subdistinctions” to be subsequently drawn up. These could include non-true, less-than-fully-true, etc. As we continue to explore this distinction, we should know that the spirit of this distinction in Israel’s religion, for Assmann, stems more from the idea of fidelity/adultery to Yahweh, and less the abstract true/false distinction.)

With counter-knowledge comes a different potential for violence and enemy-making: “the truth to be proclaimed comes with an enemy to be fought.” Thus we now turn to mapping different kinds of violence-potentials onto these different kinds religions onto different kinds. But as we delve into the violence dimension here, we must note how translatability does not simply mean pacifism and tolerance, nor untranslatability an arbitrary, malignant intolerance. In fact, in our next chapter, we will see how “Ancient Israel developed a critique of translatability as an act of resistance against empire,” and

449 PM 12-13.  
450 PM 12-13.  
451 ME 1ff.  
452 GG 7; PM 4.
that “translatability does not offer a model of tolerance for the modern world…. Ancient translatability is not a proper model for encouraging tolerance of others.”

4.2 Different Kinds of Violence

Assmann classifies five different kinds of violence that we can map onto this religious taxonomy above. There are again “ideal types” and they concern how varieties of violence have different motivational sources, symbolic or rhetorical legitimations, and social functions. As such, Assmann’s goals can be understood as an analysis of “symbolic violence”—by which I mean an ideological-, cultural-, or religious system, operating through and beyond the agency of its adherents, that foments or legitimates violence.

His first kind of violence is “raw” or affective violence: this violence is motivated by anger, revenge, fear, or greed, and it has no legitimizing- or authority-reference other than its being done “in one’s own name” or interest, as it usually has no legal basis or reference to the social order. At most, in cases of greed, its justification is “might makes right”; in cases of fear, such violence is motivated by self-defense or pre-emption.

453 GIT, 28f, viii; 89 on translatability as “religious imperialism.”

454 Or, similarly, Benedict Anderson explored how cultural and religious systems were at the root of violent nationalism in his Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism (New York: Verso, 1983).

My definition above is broader than Oxford University Reference. Theirs is “1) Pierre Bourdieu's term for the imposition on subordinated groups by the dominant class of an ideology which legitimates and naturalizes the status quo. Or 2) For Gerbner, the representation of physical violence in any medium...It functions as an instrument of social control that tends to maintain the existing social order.” (http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803100546777, retrieved Mar 25, 2018).

455 GG 142.
A second kind of violence is “legal” violence, seen as counter-violence against raw violence, done in the name of a law, devoid of affective passion. “The aim of legal violence is the creation of a sphere of law and justice in which raw violence is excluded.”\textsuperscript{456} Often such violence is today obliquely referred to as “force,” which suggests its normative and legitimate difference from raw violence. “Force” is good and just, but “violence” is bad and unjust—even though we know that “force” is indeed violence.\textsuperscript{457} This difference between good force and bad violence is fundamental for any society to legitimately and sustainably contain its violence.

A third kind of violence is “political violence,” which founds or establishes new political order outside of law and legal violence. It tends to be done in the name of a ruler, and the anti-affective, cool spirit of legal violence is shed here; rather, emotion and fervor are essential to the cause. All revolutions (which of course do not ask for legal permission to revolt), and thereby birth a nation, for example, are engaged in political violence. Political orders emerge and exert themselves, that is, in a state of emergency and exceptionality to law. For their political violence \textit{creates} law. Law derives from what is outside law.\textsuperscript{458}

Ritual violence is done in the name of some specific god or religion.\textsuperscript{459} This is most commonly exemplified in immolative sacrifice, though ritualized mock warfare, sacralized

\textsuperscript{456}GG 143.
\textsuperscript{457}GG 143.
\textsuperscript{458}GG 143. Walter Benjamin’s “Critique of Violence” distinguishes law-making violence from law-preserving violence (287). He terms law-making violence also as also “mythical” violence (295) and “executive” violence (300).
\textsuperscript{459}GG 29; GG 143.
interstate warfare, or ritualized raiding are also fitting examples. Insofar as these rituals of violence serve to annex land, persons, or territory and create or extend a political unit, ritual violence overlaps with political violence.\textsuperscript{460}

When the Assyrians, for example, referred to the god Assur in justifying the cruel punishment they inflicted on their apostate vassals, they did so not because these renegades persisted in worshipping their own false gods, but because they had become Assur’s enemies by breaking the oaths of loyalty they had sworn in his name.\textsuperscript{461}

Ancient accounts of massacres disguised as “plagues” or god-sanctioned warfare against the gods and enemies of another country are ritual violence as well—and numerous biblical passages of divine violence closely resemble that of their polytheistic neighbors in this regard.\textsuperscript{462} Sometimes ritual violence is expressed in myths where conflicts between the gods evidently reflect political conflicts.\textsuperscript{463} Ritual violence can likewise be seen as serving some of the politically ordering ends that we know in legal violence. For example, the ritual violence of human sacrifice, Girard especially emphasizes, is not a mere spasm of superstition, but a channeling, redirecting, and containment of raw violence—which may in fact order the community.

\textsuperscript{460} Egypt’s annexations by war, for example, could be classified political violence even while they also served an almost magical or “ritual function to ward off the peoples and tribes that surround Egypt” (\textit{GG} 28-30).

\textsuperscript{461} \textit{PM} 19.

\textsuperscript{462} Consider when Phineas’ murdered the idolater and thereby stopped Yahweh’s violent plague that killed twenty-four thousand. Assmann writes that the violence disguised as a plague “is normal, so to speak, in the ancient world. I am focusing on the deed of Phinehas, who intervenes spontaneously for God: this is new, even revolutionary, and would have been impossible, I assert, in any other ancient culture” (\textit{ATM} 118).

\textsuperscript{463} \textit{GG} 52.
Though ritual violence might seem to have vanished from the world, the migration of ritual violence from religious-into other spheres of society is a crucial topic of inquiry, as we see in Taylor’s *A Secular Age* for example. Interpretors of modernity may analyze, for example, sports as secularized ritual violence, or how the state sacralizes itself and its demand for allegiance or “faith” in nonetheless “secular” rhetoric. If such secular “rituals” bind a populace together, directing joint attention upon acceptable targets and ends, they at least serve a similar function as that of formerly religious ritual violence. Such a line of inquiry suggests that “faith” is an inescapable category of political existence—that “in terms of faith [the modern state] is often as ‘religious’ as any medieval or ancient community was.”

While the above four kinds of violence are native to tribal and archaic religion-societies, the fifth is “religious violence,” unique only to exclusive monotheism as set out in Assmann’s rubric. This classification is necessary due to monotheism’s “disembedded” or “distanced” relationship between the political order, religion, and gods. Within a polytheistic system, by contrast, these features are all more homologous. But because exclusive monotheism separates God from the political order and the cosmos, it makes possible their slamming back together in a novel explosion. This is what we mean by religious violence being different from the violences within polytheistic religions. So,

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467 GG 144.
ritual and political violence in a polytheistic context could indeed be done in the “name of God” or whatever gods, and its violence rests on the cultic distinction between pure and impure. But the “religious violence” potential of monotheism, by contrast, is when the novel distinction between “true and false religions” becomes re-applied to or conflated with the political distinction between friend and foe. Religious violence “is directed against pagans, unbelievers, and heretics, who either would not convert to the truth or have defected from it and are therefore regarded as enemies of God.”

The religious interpretation or legitimation of violence is as old as warfare in general…What is new, is the religious motivation of violence—the idea of killing a person or starting a war for the sake of God, to fulfill his will and orders, acting as God’s executioners.

Whereas the first four kinds of violence can be done within the polytheistic system, and thus regarded as intra-systemic violence, “religious violence” is by definition “extra-systemic” violence. “You can integrate an enemy into the polytheistic system. But the idolater and heretic are dealt with by extra-systemic integration and conversion.” Even though religious violence is theoretically directed against “paganism,” Assmann notices that, in practice, religious violence has been typically directed “against the ‘pagan within’—and not against political enemies.”

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468 GG 144.
469 MPC 142.
470 GG 31
471 GG 29.
Symbolizing the heart of the danger of monotheistic intolerance and “religious violence” is “Sinai,” where Yahweh reveals the true religion. Sinai, by rabbinic interpretation, means “hate.”\textsuperscript{472} That mountain symbolized a novel boundary of hatred or envy descending in the world: the hatred of the idolater for the elect and hatred of the monotheist for the idolater. Assmann writes of this, “hate as such did not come into the world with monotheistic truth, but a new kind of hate, the iconoclastic or theoclastic hatred of the monotheists for the old gods, which they declared to be idols, and the anti-monotheistic hatred nursed by those whom the Mosaic distinction excluded and denigrated as pagans.”\textsuperscript{473} Though Assmann will argue that hatred and “religious violence” are in fact a distorted application of mature exclusive monotheism, not fitting with its evolved, normative ideals, it is nonetheless a real and unique potentiality opened up by exclusive monotheism.

But we must again be very careful here: to analyze “religious violence” as unique to monotheism does not mean it is more \textit{prevalent}, more likely, or \textit{worse} than the violences of the polytheistic system, as already outlined. For in the archaic compaction between religion and the political sphere, “political violence” is inextricable from the ritual/religious ecosystem; in itself, there is not point outside it by which to radically critique it. Whenever monotheistic religions execute violence “in the name of God,” Assmann suggests this has to be classified as a regression into “sheer pagan violence.” Defined this way, monotheistic “religious violence” is something of an oxymoron. For as

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{472} Babylonian Talmud, Sabbat 89a.
\item \textsuperscript{473} PM 67
\end{itemize}
we will see, he will regard monotheism as by definition an urge toward nonviolence and a distancing from the political realm. Monotheism thus reverts to paganism insofar as it smashes back into the political realm with violent force. It becomes “pre-Axial”—or really worse than the pre-Axial. For it is an explosive re-mixing of a potent “secondary religion” zeal, that, distinct from the political realm of violence has its merits; but brings it back into the political sphere after having cultivated a zeal in depoliticized conditions. That is, monotheism can turn polytheistic swords into plowshares; but plows can still be re-weaponized.

This definition, which regards monotheistic violence as more an accidental distortion than an inherent characteristic, is a hard sell. Does it too easily write off the extreme violence narrated in biblical monotheism? Adjudicating this problem requires exploration of the complex political-religious history of Israel, to be explored in the coming chapter.

Given that the first four kinds of violence are native to a polytheistic context, Assmann asserts that “polytheism contains violence” in the double sense of the word, akin to Girard’s theory. “Tolerance” and “translatability” both restrained and expressed violence. And it is crucial to see how metaphysical oneness often has its corollary in

474 Stroumsa, The End of Sacrifice, 98.

475 Bernstein critiques Assmann for deeming nonviolence the “true” mission of monotheism. “Such an antiseptic view of monotheism fails to underscore how over and over again the Mosaic distinction has been used to justify and legitimize physical violence. Once we zealously commit ourselves to our god as the one and only true god, we have the strongest possible justification for destroying infidels” (Bernstein, “Jan Assmann,” op cit, 24).

476 GG 52.

477 GG 52. EC, 204. “Pagan violence stems from the indistinction between state and religion” (GG 29)
imperial henotheism or summodeism. Derrida’s remark on Oneness thus serves as something of a warning label over tolerance and translatability concepts: “The gathering into itself of the One is never without violence. As soon as there is the One, there is murder, wounding traumatization.” Nonetheless, when compared to tribal/primitive religions, we might consider archaic polytheistic translatability as still a relative “advance” in facilitating some pacific intercultural exchange. And, at the same time, the “tolerance” of the polytheistic framework, is always-already a system of political power relations that entail the possibility and threat of violence. Such “tolerance” contains not only varieties of ritual and legal violence, but the political decision of whether a difference is a threat to order and if it should be repelled or killed. Translatable gods are not particularly pacific; they can be used as the pretext, legitimation, and interpretation for war or vengeance, and they are of crucial value in imperial expansionism and management.

So, we have noted how “religion contains violence” quite differently in primary and secondary religions. This “positive” containing and ordering function of violence can go unaccounted for in some canonical “peace studies” classifications of violence. For example, whenever Johan Galtung speaks of “violence,” whether direct or structural, it is unequivocally unjust and to be rooted out, without sufficiently theorizing what could count as “just” or “legal” violence. One is thus left wondering if removing all violence can be

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done without more violence, or without replacing the ordering, restraining functions of the removed violence. Without accounting for violence-containment, such theories of violence can suffer from what our last chapter will explore as “de-politicization,” of avoiding political decision and exclusion so as to appear on the side of a neutral, pacific humanity. Similarly, religious peacebuilding literature rarely discusses these radically different religious genera (primary/secondary)—and their relationship to the political sphere.\footnote{The literature I have examined tends toward a “sociology of religious actors” approach, which does not delve into these philosophy of religion dimensions: e.g. Robert J. Schreiter, “The Catholic Social Imaginary and Peacebuilding,” and Kenneth Himes “Peacebuilding and Catholic Social Teaching,” in Scott Appleby, Robert Schreiter, and Gerard Powers., Peacebuilding: Catholic Theology, Ethics, and Praxis, (Orbis, 2010), 224-238; 265-299. Cavanaugh approximates my primary/secondary rubric by his usage of broad/strict definitions of religion: William Cavanaugh, The Myth of Religious Violence, op cit.}

I will have to show in the coming chapters how the intolerance within exclusive monotheism is a potentially liberating critique against all five kinds of violence. Namely, that while polytheism, and cosmotheism contained varieties of violence, “many of these forms were domesticated, civilized, or even eliminated altogether by the monotheistic religions as they rose to power, since such violence was perceived to be incompatible with the truth they proclaimed.”\footnote{PM 16. He is also critiquing those for whom “each deity stands for a distinction” and for whom monotheism “cancels and revokes all such distinctions.” In such an idealized view “before the One God, all people are equal. Far from erecting barriers between people, monotheism tears them down” (PM 16), making deity accessible to all. This fails to account for the intolerance of the Mosaic Distinction.} Crucial to those changes is how an intolerant untranslatability (and not mere numeric theologies of poly- or mono-), mediates a new relationship between politics and religion. With such a definition of terms (of religious genera, translatability, and violence), we can now explore a specific case of cosmotheistic Egyptian political theology, over a range of time that includes Akhenaten. This will then serve as a backdrop by which to explore Mosaic monotheism in the next chapter. Between
the two we can detect changes with respect to gods, religio-political symbols, and victims—supplementing Girard’s account of monotheism as a refusal to divinize victims.

4.3 The God-King Compaction: A Case Study in Egyptian Political Theology

“Political theology,” as I have been using it, concerns how rulers, administrators, legitimacy and political power itself are all configured in relation to the divine imaginary (see my note in the Introduction). If God and the cosmos are intimately linked, even connatural, in poly- or cosmotheistic political theology, the classic crux of that linkage is between the God and king. Egyptian divine monarchy, in the Pharaonic office, is a premiere case for the political theology of cosmotheism. There, “the divinity of the ruler assures the link between the divine world and human society,” and “‘reigning’ counts among the sacred actions.” A divine Pharaoh need not mean strictly incarnate divinity—which is a more specific, if rare, species—but the king as the analogy between divinity and the cosmos, or a manifestation of divinity.

Egyptian political theology was rooted in a long lineage of remembering its kings. The ancient historian Herodotus noted that the Egyptians had accounted for 11,340 years of their own history, an epoch during which

they said no god had ever appeared in human form... [But before this] Egypt had gods for its rulers, who dwelt upon the earth with men, one being always supreme above the rest. The last of these was Horus, the son of Osiris (also seen as the son of Re), called by the

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482 ATM, 9.

483 OH 72. Voegelin notes how Egyptians “were fully aware that their Pharaohs died like all other human beings” and that they were “a man in whom a god manifests himself,” “not a god who has assumed human form. As such, the god remains distinct from his manifestation.”

150
late Greeks Apollo. He deposed Typhon and ruled over Egypt as its last god-king.484

In the Atum myths, the gods withdrew from directly ruling humans in reaction “to a rebellion of mankind against the aging sun god.”485 And so as early as the fourth millennium BCE, it is in the gods’ absence that the Egyptian state mediates divine presence, as the “Pharaoh rules as the representative of the creator god,”486 ruling over the earth in analogy with Re’s reigning over the gods. As divine deputy, the Pharaoh “reigns as god, first as the incarnation of the god Horus and then also as the son of the sun and creator god Re.”487 In other words, the ruler is the “image of God,” a common royal epithet.488

The Pharaohs of early Egypt were some of the world’s first emperors to reign with expansive sovereignty that reached beyond the horizon. In this context, as we saw in Freud and Breasted, the religious sun god worship of ancient Egypt corresponds with the political power of the sovereign emperor489:

The solar myth represents the sun god’s encircling of the earth in terms of sovereignty, which obviously mirrors Pharaoh’s terrestrial sovereignty, as well as in terms of performing a life cycle by being

484 Herodotus, Histories, §II 142-143.
485 GG 61.
486 GG 16; PM, 68.
488 GG 62. e.g. The Instruction for King Merikare, wisdom literature in early second millennium BCE, writes of creatures, “His images are they, having come forth from his body.” It is not unheard of for other humans and animals besides the king to be regarded as “images of God” (GG 29; PM 68).
489 GG 18
born, dying, and being reborn, which mirrors human fate and hope.  

God having created the world and its many gods corresponds with the Pharaoh’s political dominion over lesser beings. That is, theological “creation” is the analogue of political “dependence.” Creation is the ur-power relation; this chain of relation ends with Atum-Re, who is not created, but “originated by himself,” and is thus ontologically sovereign.

Though the gods had fled, with royal deputies left in their absence, the gods nonetheless would regularly “come back” in the form of citywide feasts and processions. This return was essential to the common life of ancient Egyptian cities; to be a citizen in such a city means to participate, with unanimous assent, in the procession. These processions would suspend the common metaphysical boundaries between the god and the citizenry, reuniting heaven and earth. Whereas the temple usually contains the presence of the god, and the city itself can be understood as the vessel for god’s presence, in such processions the god is paraded outside the temple, through the city, in a festal, if grave, state of exception. The oldest evidence of an Egyptian processional song reads, “The god comes; beware, earth!” As we will see below, these processions often involved

490 *GG* 19.

491 “The power structure of a pantheon reflects the power structure of a society…Zeus reigning first among equals…reflects the loose power structure of the Greek aristocracy…But in oriental states and societies the socio-political situation was totally different. These societies were firmly centered in a monarchy and a bureaucracy where the king reigned not as first among equals but as a god or a god-like being on earth” (*GG* 59-60). “Cult and political identity are aspects of one and the same concept of divine presence and communication” (*GG* 15).

492 *GG* 60f.

493 *GG* 17; *ME* 26.

494 *GG* 16-17.
immolation of a surrogate victim, whether in effigy or animal; and they could involve the bringing together the many disparate pieces of a god’s torn up body. We can see some correspondences in these processions with Girard’s conceptualization of ritual, with the reproduction of a public crisis of distinctions and the importance of unanimous participation, not to mention immolation and dis-/rememberment. The sacred presence is distributed outside the temple, and there is a gathering into a form that, in other circumstances, might resemble a mob.

Resembling Girard’s notion of kingship as originating in human sacrifice (or the king originally as a scapegoat), the Egyptian form of kingship often involved the Pharaoh as one who—even though a representative of the god in one sense—must apologize to the god for any of his sins that may have caused problems in the city. For example, king Mursilis had to confess any sins he could imagine to end a pestilence crisis, lest he be killed; he even dug up his father’s sins from twenty years prior.⁴⁹⁵ We can see here residues of the scapegoat-king, the consecrated victim who reigns against the horizon of his immolation—a preparedness, if not a plan, to sacrifice the king in case of an unresolved crisis. Indeed, the earliest coronation rituals we know from the Old Kingdom, as mimetic theory would predict, “closely resemble those of the mortuary texts,” and that “the symbolisms are practically identical.”⁴⁹⁶ Voegelin is right to marvel at, and not decide on, the debate between whether these are coronation or mortuary rituals: for we have good reason to see them both stemming from human sacrifice, transformed over time into

⁴⁹⁵ *GG* 24.5.
⁴⁹⁶ *OH* 76f.
political office. The earliest attested coronation rituals invoke an admonition for the king to stand on the Primeval Hill.\textsuperscript{497} The connection between Pharaohs, these hills, and the iconic pyramids again suggest some subterranean linkage between kingship and immolation. For Girard, the shape of the pyramids “is reminiscent of the collective stoning of the original lynching”\textsuperscript{498}:

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\text{why do certain cultures bury their victims under heaps of stones that they often shape into a pyramid form? We can explain this custom as a by-product of ritualstonings…We find just this, put more or less into geometrical form, in the sacrificial or funerary pyramids of various peoples, beginning with the Egyptians. At first the Egyptians formed the tomb as a truncated pyramid and only later built it with the full pyramid point.} \textsuperscript{499}
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In some texts, a god is coidentified with the primeval mound itself, which then turns into a small pyramid in which the god dwelled.\textsuperscript{500} Sometimes heaps of stones served as representations of gods and “witnesses” to ancient pacts and covenants.\textsuperscript{501} And in

\begin{align*}
\text{497} & \quad \text{“Stand thou upon it, this earth…that thou mayest see thy father Re…The ascension of the king to the throne repeats the ascension of the god to the hill of cosmic order…the ascension to the throne can blend intelligibly into the ascension of the dead and reborn king into the embrace of his father Atum” (OH 77; Pyramid Text 199a-212b).} \\
\text{498} & \quad \text{EC 165.} \\
\text{499} & \quad \text{ISS 91-2; cf Simon Simonse, \textit{Kings of Disaster}, op cit; Walter Burkert, trans Peter Bing, \textit{Homo Necans: The Anthropology of Ancient Greek Sacrificial Ritual and Myth} (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1983), 55, n29.} \\
\text{This could supply a framework for interpreting the primeval “mound,” the first element of creation and crucial to pharaonic renewal-resurrection ritual: “The pyramid shape likely represents the primeval mound of creation…the mound first emerged from the primeval waters of Nun. This is why the resurrected king re-enacts the sun’s primal interaction with the emerging mound of earth” (Hoffmeier, 10f, 13).} \\
\text{At Medamud (near Thebes) a brick enclosure wall surrounds a smaller 1.75 meters high mound—a feature that appears echoed in other pyramidal schemes of an originary mound serving as the foundation for a temple. The “Holy of Holies” in such architecture is literally “the holy place of the first occurrence” (Hoffmeier, 12).} \\
\text{500} & \quad \text{Pyramid Texts 587, 600.} \\
\text{501} & \quad \text{GIT, 105.}
\end{align*}
cosmogonic myths and rituals—which we have learned are so frequently centered upon a group killing—we have references to a primeval hill or mound, which could have simply been a rough earth pile on which temples and their altars were built."502

Such speculation does not at all mean that scapegoating would have been explicitly understood then as a root symbol in the Pharaonic office. Rather, monuments can conceal as much as they reveal. In Girardian terms, there is forgetfulness or misapprehension within memorial, myth, and funerary. This is part of the adaptive value in the mythology that surrounds scapegoating. It thus follows that Assmann shows how, despite the vast amount of monumental in ancient Egypt (from its pyramids to its elaborate king-lists), Egypt’s grand monumental work proved to be “more a tranquilizer and not an incentive when it comes to the writing of history.”503 In ancient Egypt, we have a society that “was confronted by its past in an overwhelmingly grandiose manner, supplemented by annals and lists of kings, and yet it did practically nothing with any of them.”504

what can the Egyptians learn from their well-documented hindsight over thousands of years? Simply that nothing has changed…the lists of kings open up the past, but they do not invite us to look any further…This intensive preoccupation with the past…served to halt history and strip it of any semiotic value.505

If divine monarchy is indeed an unconscious and forgetful byproduct of the scapegoat mechanism, Egypt’s Pharaonic office is an extravagant example of this

503 CMEC 56.
504 CMEC 51
505 Herodotus, Histories, §II 142; CMEC 57, 58.
phenomena. It was both a pole that oriented and organized the imaginary of the populace and a dam against violence (or a channel that turned into a dam).

4.3.1 Osiris and Seth: Gods Who Contain Violence

We have roughly introduced the political theology that surrounds the Pharaonic office and the accoutrements that surround it. While Horus was a key symbol of this office, Assmann argues that another key symbol within Egyptian political theology, its second lung as it were, is in the violent drama that mythologically precedes Horus: the conflict between Osiris and Seth, where we find a political theology of social order and disorder. Seth is a victim-god par excellence; and his mythological cycle is a key cosmotheistic element that, while translatable in other ancient cultures, has no analogue in mature Jewish monotheism. For cosmotheism includes more than just the sublime; the cosmotheistic sacred contains evil and violence. Seth provides an example of this, in contrast with a political theology of exclusive monotheism, wherein God is theoretically separated from the cosmos as well as the victims of the political order and the land.

The Osiris of myth once “actually” reigned in Egyptian pre-history, by which Assmann surmises Osiris represents something of an actual king killed in very early Egypt. In any case, his myth lived on in as a backbone in Egyptian religio-political mythology for centuries. Once upon a time, so his myth cycle goes, Osiris’ brother Seth was jealous of his brother’s reign. And, in mimetic rivalry over the throne, Seth killed Osiris. Seth cut up Osiris’ body and scattered it all around Egypt. Where Osiris’s dismembered body parts were buried corresponded with the regions of Egypt. In eras when Egypt was comprised
of 42 nomes, Osiris had been cut into 42 pieces (at other points, 14 pieces/nomes). Thus, Egypt was often imagined as the “Body of Osiris.”

Osiris’ sister Isis gathered up his scattered body parts and reanimated him. She had intercourse with the resurrected Osiris to beget Horus, the god who we saw above as deputized by the Pharaohs.

His sister was his guard.

She who drives off the foes,
Who stops the deeds of the disturber
By the power of her utterance…
Mighty Isis who protected her brother…
Who roamed the land lamenting,
Not resting till she found him…
Who jubilated, joined her brother,
Raised the weary one’s inertness [his phallus],
Received the seed, bore the heir [Horus].

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506 *GG* 42; Assmann cites Girard here: “In accordance with René Girard’s theory of sacrifice, this primordial fratricide was prompted by ‘mimetic desire’ comparable to yet different from the murder of Abel by Cain…” (*GG* 34).

507 *GG* 34. While allusions to the Osiris myth are frequent but brief in many Egyptian texts over the centuries, this longest account does not directly describe the murder. “It seems that the slaying of Osiris at the hands of Seth was too awesome an event to be committed to writing” (Illana Pardes, “Freud, Zipporah, and the Bridegroom of Blood,” in *New Perspectives on Freud’s Moses and Monotheism*, 156; Miriam Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976], vol 2, 81).

Osiris’ cycle shows its origin and function not only in this myth form, but in the practice of the royal cult. “It is in royal funerary rites that the cult of Osiris achieves its earliest ascendency,” and that the Osiris myth “grew out of the royal funerary ceremonial.”  

(We will recall that Pharaoh funerals are often indistinguishable from coronations.) In such rituals, Osiris is the prototype of the deceased, buried, mummified king, and his son Horus is the living king. The killed god is the analogue of the alive divine king.

Insofar as the slain Osiris is raised to a new transcendence in the resurrected son Horus, who is the prototype of all kingship, we have here clear signs of the divinization of the victim. In cultic practice, representation of this myth took shape, as noted, in an annual nation-wide festival where each Egyptian sub-state brought their own regional canopic jar containing some part of Osiris’ body, and the forty-two priests from each region processed with said jars through the city. This public co-re-membering and resurrecting of Osiris’s body served to re-constitute the Egyptian political body and land, which is the body of its founding victim. (As a foreshadowing, if the land and polity is the body of the victim, it is very significant how Israel’s monotheistic political theology gestated most powerfully in exile, without a land.) Egypt as the remembered land-body-politic of a victim provides a crucial bridge between the victim-foundation hypothesis of Girard with Assmann’s idea

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510 *GG* 42.
of cosmotheism containing violence. It is a fairly bland and abstract thing to say that Egypt is the body of God, and then universalize this to say the whole world is the body of God. But, it is a quite striking thing to say the world is the slain, dismembered body of Osiris. Or: Egypt is the process of Osiris’ dismemberment and re-membering, in which humanity participates.

This political-mythology of cosmogony through Osiris’ murder and reunification corresponds with numerous creation/founding stories, as noted in the first chapter. These included the creation-dismemberments of the victim gods Purusa, Tiamat, Omorka, and so forth. “Practically every story of origin or foundation myth states that society was founded upon a murder.” The victim Osiris as the body of Egypt is a key building block—indeed a victim foundation—in the Egyptian god-world compaction, and it fits within the mimetic theory framework that the religio-political sphere is the expression of the scapegoat mechanism.

In the ritual-mythological legacy of Seth’s slaying of Osiris, Seth served as an Egyptian symbol for the dangers of violence and political dissolution. In the Schmittian framework where “the political” is characterized by the always-possible threat of an enemy, that which must be prepared for and repelled or killed when necessary, Seth is

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511 In cosmotheism, “the divine cannot be divorced from the world. But monotheism, however, sets out to do just that. The divine is emancipated from its symbiotic attachment to the cosmos, society, and fate and turns to face the world as a sovereign power” (PM 41f).

512 See also OH 44f: the world, which is the gods, and in which humanity participates, is also “the dismembered body of one of the gods who in this form goes on to exist.” See also Nintura hymns in which the universe is represented as parts of a single body, and the cosmos is the body of the deity (GIT, 174).

513 EC 163.

514 Schmitt, The Concept of the Political, op cit.
the most common narrative-construction of the crisis of “the political” in Egyptian thought. Seth’s slaying of his brother Osiris symbolizes how death itself corresponds with the dangers of violence that must be contained. In the public ritual life of Egypt, ritualistic violence was regularly conducted against representations of Seth, the bad guy, in which Horus was understood as the good guy, the avenger of Osiris.\footnote{GG 35, 40.} This corresponds with the political distinction between good force and bad violence: Seth, as both death and “bad” violence, becomes the object of ritual treatment…. [Death, that is, Seth] continues its destructive attack against life by tearing the body apart, scattering the limbs all over Egypt, and trying to gain access to the restored body and to repeat its destruction…. Death is not seen as an event that must be accepted passively in an act of powerless surrender but as an act of violence that must be counteracted by opposing, containing, controlling, and keeping it out… In personifying death, Seth is also the personification of evil… The restitution of life and honor to Osiris is acted out primarily by inflicting ritualistic sacrificial violence on Seth. Seth is the prototype of [and identified with] the sacrificial animal.\footnote{GG 35-36; ATM 74. In the Late Period, there was a ritual of overthrowing Seth: “Let a figure of Seth be brought made of red wax, his name inscribed on its breast, saying, ‘Seth, the miserable.’ …bind it with the sinew of a red bull…stamp on it with the left foot…hit it with a spear…cut it with a knife…put it into the fire…to spit on it many times in the fire” (GG 49). Many other similar accounts, all of which are directed toward internal or external political enemies, involve smashing pots or figurines inscribed with their names, and burying them, etc. These date back at least to the third millennium BCE. “If the ceremonies for Osiris are neglected…the country will be deprived of its laws. The plebs will abandon their superiors and there are no orders for the masses. If the foe is not beheaded that is at hand made of wax… then the foreign countries will rebel against Egypt and civil war and revolution will rise in the whole country….” (Papyrus Jumilhac XVII-XVIII, 11; GG 50, boldface added).} In sum, through publically condemning death and evil to death in the symbol of Seth, Osiris and Egypt’s political unity is revived and protected.\footnote{GG 36; Burkert, The Orientalizing Revolution, 67ff.} In times when Egypt
suffered extreme political turmoil and foreign invasions, Seth merged with another cosmic foe, Apep, only further evidencing Seth as “a god of both disorder and order.”\(^{518}\) Seth “is the violence that rips apart order which then founds the world; he is the murderer who must always be restrained. And yet he is also the one who holds back the cosmic foe Apep.”\(^ {519}\) Just like Girard’s notion of sacrifice as reproducing crisis to reactivate the scapegoat mechanism and reconstruct group unity, the Osiris myth and re-membering procession reproduces a societal crisis, where social-religious distinctions are ritually blurred and then clarified in the immolation of the Seth surrogate.\(^ {520}\) This is the pharmacology of ritual violence containing raw violence, of the virus of violence being used in small ritual doses to thwart the disease.\(^ {521}\)

Seth appears to symbolize, per Girard’s framework, a scapegoat who was slain at the foundations of Egyptian culture and demonized/deified in time. That Seth is guilty of murder is only the necessary accusation now attached to the danger he represents and thus deserves to be killed. The religio-political system that followed him was protected and strengthened by cultic attention upon his memory, as it symbolized the ongoing dangers of violence in society. Seth, as demon/god, binds Egyptian society together through being both a personification of disorderly violence, and the recipient of ordering violence—and

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\(^{518}\) *GG* 41.

\(^{519}\) *GG* 36. In one of Egypt’s representations of kingship, the unification of two Egyptian kings in a peace treaty is sometimes pictured as Horus and Seth tying together lily and papyrus. In Plutarch’s version, Seth is seen as a translation of the Greek demon Typhon.

\(^{520}\) *GG* 43.

\(^{521}\) The deeper connection between raw and ritual violence is visible, for example, in how red-heads in times of Egyptian crisis were more likely targets for human sacrifice, as red was the color representing Seth (*GG* 41).
thus a symbol for divine resolution and peace.⁵²² Seth’s “badness” and violence is “integrated into a holistic concept of sovereignty combining death and life, violence and law.”⁵²³ Even as a demon, Seth is still an ambivalent, good/bad, chaos/order figure: “He represents an evil that is necessary to keep the world going…that must simultaneously be controlled and contained because it threatens the world.”⁵²⁴ So, just as the demon Seth could politically symbolize violence and reconciliation, so too could Egyptian political theology incorporate reason and force, justice and violence in its application of legal and ritual violence.⁵²⁵ Seth is a necessary “process” or function of violence containment.

+++ Aside: was Seth Translatable in Israel? +++

Given that every society contains violence, it is not surprising to find that Seth was “translatable” in neighboring countries. For Seth is the translatable societal function of containing violence. The neighboring Hyksos, for example, translated their god Ba’al with Seth at their Avaris cult, wherein both were seen as the same storm god by a different name.⁵²⁶ The Baal cycle, certainly within ancient Israel’s religious watershed, was also

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⁵²² Recall how Girard regards the societal violence-containment function as crucial to mythological cycles: e.g.: “Culture does not proceed directly from the reconciliation that follows Victimage; rather it is from the double imperative of prohibition and ritual, which means that the entire community is unified in order to avoid falling back into the crisis, and thus orients itself on the model—and the anti-model—which the crisis and its resolution now constitute (TH 32). Horus is the model, Seth the anti-model.

⁵²³ GG 40. See also Encyclopedia Brittanica: “Seth embodied the necessary and creative element of violence and disorder within the ordered world.” See parallels in other theo-political systems in OH 39, passim.

⁵²⁴ GG 34, underline added.

⁵²⁵ GG 39.

⁵²⁶ GIT, 71.
rooted in royal funerary and symbolized political threats, displaying Seth-like elements: a founding murder, an intervention from sisters, an awakening from death, the defeat of the enemy (the Sea), followed by the building of the divine palace for the divine warrior, concluding with the vanquishing of the enemy, Death. And, by extension, the Babylonian conflict between gods Marduk and Tiamat, was arguably modeled on the Ba’al cycle. There, public New Year’s processions attacked Tiamat in effigy to renew the cosmic cycle of defeating the enemy. These parallels are visible elsewhere in the ANE and Hellenic era, though, we need not draw perfect translations.

The Seth-like Baal cycle which mythologized the Ugaritic dynasty, left residues in ancient Israelite politico-religion. Baal’s victory over enemies is reflected in biblical texts proclaiming Yahweh’s violent victory—including feeding on the flesh of captives,


530 See also the Greek Gorgon cycle: Zeus triumphs over chaos of the Titans (Burkert, The Orientalizing Revolution, 85f). There, Zeus’ divine monarchy coincided with the imperial order (Peterson, 70, 75; 211).

Mark Smith also explores, inter alia, Dumuzi-Tammuz, who appears to be a “divinized human,” and behind whose death “may lie the influence of royal funerary cult” (Smith, “The Death of ‘Dying and Rising Gods,’” 275, 277, 285; see also Voegelin OH, 34).

531 The roles shift in translation: Ba’al was the dismembered, not the Sethian dismemberer. The dismembering Seth thus translates more with the Mot, the god of the underworld (Smith, “The Death of ‘Dying and Rising Gods,’” 271).
drinking the blood of victims, and wading in the blood of the vanquished. Psalm 82, for example, would appear to be a declaration of Yahweh deposing or killing off the other gods. Some rabbinic and Christian literature carry forward these motifs, wherein the defeat of Sea, the building of the heavenly palace, and the destruction of death belong to the future divine transformation of the world. There is likewise good reason to see Baal imagery at the roots of the ‘Son of Man’ figure in Daniel 7 or St. Michael in the book of Revelation. Simply, the bible does at times have a sense cosmic enemies, common to ancient myth cycles, even if they are not always directly correlated with political enemies.

But these residues begin to fade in ancient Israel in relation to its losing political sovereignty. In early Israel, just as Horus was deputized by the Pharaoh, Yahweh was deputized with a monarch; but what happens when there is no monarch, no state? This is the political context which helps illuminate what it meant that Yahweh became opposed to and untranslatable with Ba’al and his translatable god, Seth. The idea that the land or cosmos are the body of a slain god seem to disappear in Israel; or rather, as we will see, the whole idea of land and sovereignty is rather creatively reconfigured. Exilic Deutero-

532 EHG, 61ff; Isa 34:2; Deut 32:43; Ps. 110:6; Joel 3:13; Rev 14:14-20; Judges 8:1-2; 20:44-46; Jer 6:9; Deut 32:42; Isa 49:26; LXX Zech. 9:15; Numb 23:24; Ps 58:11:68:24. “The battle with the sea was connected to Yahweh’s creation of the world and was celebrated in the autumnal New Year’s festival” (NOG, 119).

533 NOG, 181.

534 e.g. Rev 21:1-4.

535 NOG, 245.

536 EHG, 58; Isa 30:7; Ps 87:4.

537 E.g. Ps 2.
Isaiah, for example, when it speaks of creation, is conspicuously devoid of an originary conflict cycle: “‘Word’ has now replaced combat as the rationale for the high god’s universal dominion.”\textsuperscript{538} It appears that in a developing Jewish monotheism, evil and violence are no longer integrated as a necessary cultic-political function, a necessary aspect of the cosmic pantheon, as they were in Seth or a Baal. With that violence-containment function gone—and it took centuries for it to recede—there are no ritual means, no necessary sacrifices, by which to keep the world going. God is removed from the cosmic-process. This seems to be how the monotheistic God becomes untranslatable with the “victim mechanism.

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In the above, we have sketched a general Egyptian polytheistic political theology and its conceptualization of sovereignty and violence, with Osiris-Seth as a salient case. And we can reasonably aver similar parallels or “translations” in ancient religion-politics, without presuming precise correspondence. Importantly, with these gods, we see the ambivalent conceptualization of victimage and violence-containment. There, the point Nietzsche made against the biblical concern for victims stands in strong contrast: our species and our polities, depend upon the necessary sacrifice of certain individuals. Without this, you might as well imagine a society without police or laws. Society needs a Seth, a reified enemy, just as it must narrate why “force” is good and “violence” is bad.

\textsuperscript{538} GIT 177; NOG 208. Deutero-Isaiah even seems to poke fun at and critique the aforenoted Marduk procession. NOG 261.
As we saw in Freud, the difference between Egyptian polytheism and Mosaic monotheism is not simple. There is a gradient between these ideal-types, and the specific case of Akhenaten’s revolution, with which Freud acquainted us, is the most important such borderline case.

4.4 Akhenaton’s Borderline Case: Nontranslatable, But Still Compacted God-King

Akhenaton’s religion is a borderline-case between primary (polytheism/cosmotheism) and secondary religions (and exclusive monotheism). It bears many signs of the compact between God and King, but also a strong sense of untranslatability. Thus, it is something of a historic forerunner in manifesting the “Mosaic Distinction.” It will serve us well to understand Akhenaten’s revolution within the Egyptian political theology contexts drawn up above.

Preceding Akhenaten, around 1500-1360BCE, Egyptian political theology entailed the “oneness” characteristic of henotheism, with a very strong sense of divine unity behind the many. Atum is the pre-existent primordial One, who is represented in the sun, the god Re, the creator and king of the gods and key cosmic elements.\footnote{The aforenoted: Schu (air/light), Tefnut (fire), Nut (heaven), and Geb (earth).} In this pre-Akhenaten political theology,

The world that originated from God is a world to which also belong all the other gods. By creating this world full of gods and other beings, God renounced his original uniqueness, and became a god among gods, albeit the highest one among them. This theology of primacy is as old as Pharaonic civilization...\footnote{\textit{ATM}, 53.}
Indeed, stemming back to at least 3000BCE this same strong divine unity can still be detected, with its strong emphasis on the state of Egypt as coextensive with the cosmos (i.e. Egypt *is* the world), as it emanated from and was ruled by the sun and the Pharaoh.\(^{541}\) But from 1,500BCE on, the theological parochialism widens along with its political borders. A chain of foreign invasions and wars of liberation put Egypt into an increasingly global and interconnected position—often above or at least beside other large states. As such a more universalist political theology begins to emerge: “Egypt was no longer seen as coextensive with creation in the sense of an ordered world surrounded by chaos but just part of a far more comprehensive world containing many comparable nations and civilizations.”\(^{542}\)

We thus have a parochial unity-theology gaining a universal character in the period leading up to Akhenaten. Even more importantly, the prevalent sun worship of this period built a worldview in which, “The [sun] god confronts the world in sublime solitude. The distance between god and world has become extreme.”\(^{543}\) Thus a pre-Akhenaten hymn: “You have settled very remote, very far away; you have revealed yourself in heaven in your aloneness.”\(^{544}\) Theologically speaking, “the god himself approaches a transcendent invisibility of which no immanent visible order can be a proper analogue”; and yet, the

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\(^{541}\) *ATM*, 53.

\(^{542}\) *ATM* 53; *CMA* 377. Indeed, this increasing “internationalism” Assmann calls a hallmark of the Late Bronze Age (1500-1100 BCE). See also Voegelin *OH* 107.

We have a stela hailing Thutmose II as “Lord of every foreign land,” with Amun-Re as his patron, reflecting the Egyptian power that includes all that the sun encircles (Hoffmeier 58).

\(^{543}\) *GG* 67.

\(^{544}\) *GG* 66.
visible sun-god in the Pharaoh remains “the Egyptian political god par excellence, deeply affecting the structure and durability of the imperial order.”

We can see much of this divine solitude, distance from the world, and universal theology characterizing Akhenaten’s religious revolution (c1360-1340BCE). The Great Hymn of Akhenaten reads:

You made the earth following your heart when you were alone…the foreign lands of Syria and Nubia, the land of Egypt. You set every man in his place…Their skins are distinct, for you distinguished the people…Lord of all lands who shines for them, Sundisk of daytime, great in glory. All distant lands you keep them alive…

“O sole god, beside whom there is none!…there is no other except him”

Despite the striking universality here, such hymns are not yet properly “monotheistic” by Assmann’s reading. The Aten religion may have been more universal in divinity than any preceding religion, “but it still lies within the range of the polytheistic myth,” in that it is a henotheistic expression of political realities.

And yet Akhenaten’s “universal” God still radicalized the unity-theology that had preceded it. He did not merely notice a one God over all other nations; his revolution abolished all other gods. This is, so far, the earliest evidence of a nontranslatable religion

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545 OH 69f.
546 The Great Hymn of Akhenaten; Hoffmeier, 223.
548 OH 108.
549 ATM, 13.
550 PM 64.
that sought to “abolish a whole religious tradition in the name of truth.”\textsuperscript{551} This was the “most radical and violent eruption of a counter-religion in the history of humankind.”\textsuperscript{552} As such it can be categorized as “exclusive monotheism,” partially sharing a place with a later Judaism. But as Akhenaten did not say “thou shalt worship no other gods,” his religion does not have the same degree of againstness as the coming Mosaic religion. Rather, he

simply abolished the other gods and did not consider them worth mentioning after that, nor even for polemical purposes. Their exclusion took place on a practical rather than on a discursive and theoretical level…

The other gods for Akhenaten are more “nonexistent,” deceptions, due to his idea of total cosmic dependence on the sun—which generates all things, even time. By contrast, “Moses set out to establish a new political order, not a new cosmology…What Akhenaten takes to be a mistaken worldview is for Moses evidence of disloyalty or, more precisely, a breach of contract.\textsuperscript{553}

Akhenaten’s abolishing the other gods radicalized the prior henotheism. His religion imagined that a “solitary god and a godless world face each other in a relation of continuous creation and animation…The world originated not once in primeval time from the sun, but is constantly emanating, albeit without gods, deprived of any divinity of its

\begin{footnotes}
\footnotetext{551}{GG 47.}
\footnotetext{552}{ME 25; Hoffmeier 199, 203.}
\footnotetext{553}{PM 37f. ME 210 notes how “the rejected tradition is never mentioned in the text”—i.e. it didn’t develop “an antagonistic construction of the discarded tradition,” the way the Mosaic distinction constructed “Egypt” or “paganism.” The Mosaic form, however, “depends on the preservation of what it opposes” (ME 211).}
\end{footnotes}
own.” So there is here some sense of a dedivinized world that, at the same time, retained a pantheistic notion of participation: the multitude of things in the world are but transformations, manifestations, or forms of the One: “You create millions of forms from yourself…”

Akhenaton’s religion most especially remains a primary and cosmotheistic religion to the extent that it kept an extreme linkage between the God and King, with the Pharaoh as Aten’s co-regent. Akhenaten’s God-King compaction remains so intense that he installs an exclusive and extreme form of state- and emperor-worship, much unlike the Jewish monotheism that will, in time, emerge. “He did not alter the ‘compact’ unity or indistinction between religion and politics” as he was worshipped as the deified king, in exclusive mediation of the sun god to humanity, and revered as the object of personal piety. With Aten as a visible, cosmic God, creator of light and visibility, he offers virtually nothing new in spiritual or ethical content; “he is strictly heliomorphic. Freud did not understand this.” The political theology of the Amarna era thus is squarely located

554 ATM 15.
555 GG 67.
556 PM 46; OH 109.
557 GG 81.
558 GG 81. Jan Assmann, “Axial ‘Breakthroughs’ in Ancient Egypt and Israel,” in Axial Civilizations and World History (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 145; Hoffmeier 87. In Mesopotamia, some similarities exist by degree: “the sun-god Marduk is appointed as the ruler over all the peoples, and his earthly analogue, Hammurabi, rises like the sun over the people and lightens up the land, dispensing the essentials of just order” (Voegelin OH 26). Vassals address Akhenaten as “my god” in the El Amarna letters (Smith, GIT 14, 74). “Whereas personal piety tended to create a direct relationship between a deity and an individual outside the official institutions of cult and temple, Akhenaton reinstated the king as the sole mediator between god and man.” GG 82.

559 ME 210.
in the cosmotheistic compaction we discussed above, even if its sun-god effaces all the other gods and is not “translatable.” Akhenaten’s henotheism is more like politicized monotheism, or a despotic “monotheism from above,” unlike a mature exilic Jewish “monotheism from below” (see next chapter).

With the Pharaoh as co-regent with the god, his revolution ought to be regarded as a supreme *connection* of political and religious salvation. The potential for redefining the god-king link may have begun, even while the two remained intimately linked.⁵⁶⁰

the distinction between true and false leads to a radical redefinition of the link between kingship and salvation…The king [Akhenaten] does not ‘represent’ the absent god on earth as before; rather, both *reign together*, one as a cosmic, the other as a political and moral power. Here, too, then, the connection between dominion and salvation is strengthened, even as the two are distinguished.⁵⁶¹

Put in terms of the god-world relation, Akhenaton’s god is, in fact, not truly transcendent or eternal, but Aten is the sun, with Akhenaten as his co-regent.⁵⁶²

Akhenaton’s religion of the sun-disc, Assmann insists, is *not* the model for the later Jewish prophets,⁵⁶³ contrary to Freud’s speculation that the Jewish prophets were ultimately restoring Aten worship against the Jahwist primitivism. Instead, the few ancient accounts that associate Moses with Akhenaton’s revolution appear as a distortion and conflation of historical memories. We find this conflation, for example, in Manetho, an

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⁵⁶⁰ *PM* 47f.

⁵⁶¹ *PM* 47f, boldface added.

⁵⁶² *PM* 47f, *ATM* 55. Hoffmeier qualifies: “Aten was not merely the sun-disc. Aten, rather, is the source of light and power by which he reveals something of his character to his creation on earth” (Hoffmeier 225).

⁵⁶³ *GG* 161.
Egyptian priest around the 3rd century BCE. He wrote of a long-ago revolution of atheist lepers who rose up against Amenophis III—one of whose leaders took the name “Moses.” They prescribed all that was forbidden in Egypt, refused to worship any god, and forbid intercourse with outsiders. Joining forces with the Hyksos of Jerusalem, they tyrannically ruled until they were cast off.

Manetho’s account likely reflects how Akhenaten’s revolution was remembered by many Egyptians over time and became conflated with the Jewish exodus story: both were a political revolution of impurity, atheism, and theoclasm. Assmann catalogues several other similar Egyptian versions of the Jewish exodus. But these legends are conflations in that they are “retroactively interlinked.” They project the many Egyptian political traumas (including the Hyksos tyranny) onto the Jews, wherein iconoclasm, symbolized as unclean leprosy, marks the danger of political and religious persecution that Egypt suffered over time. Akhenaten was remembered namelessly, as “the criminal of

564 The Moses element may have been a later interpolation in light of the encounters between Hellenic-era Egyptians at Manetho’s time and Jews, who were likely seen as threats to the Egyptian sense of religious stability. As such, the story easily equates a sense of national religious stability-threat, the repressed trauma of the Amarna period, and Jewish iconoclasm (PM 59f; ME 32; GG 46).

565 PM 62. (That a massive plague spread throughout the entire Near East for twenty years at the end of Akhenaten’s despotism we can imagine only sedimented the trauma. ME 25.

566 ME 35ff, cataloging Hecataeus of Abdera, Lysimachos, Chaeremon, Pompeius Trogus, etc.

567 GG 47. Manetho seems to conflate the commandment to worship no other gods with a ban on worshipping any gods at all. The ban on graven images conflates with destroying images and slaughtering sacred animals (PM 60, 111; GG 47; ME 57-59).

568 PM 57, 59f. The account fragment, in Manetho’s otherwise lost History of Egypt, written under Ptolemy II in the first half of the third century BCE, is preserved in Josephus’ Contra Apionem I. 26, 237-250. For other perceptions of Judaism as anti-polytheistic, see Smelik and Hemelrijk, op cit, 1911.
Amarna”⁵⁶⁹; and his impure iconoclasm may have woven into the symbol of Seth, who “rejoices in separation, who hates fraternity, who relies only on his own heart among the gods.”⁵⁷⁰ These supposed histories which paint Israel’s exodus negatively are informative, in that the Mosaic distinction, from an Egyptian perspective, is presented in a very negative light—and we do well to carefully sift out what may be conflations. In all, we have good reasons to not put much stock in establishing linkages, as Freud does, between Akhenaten’s and Israel’s monotheism.

4.5 After Akhenaton in Egypt: A Return and Middle-Way Compromise

After Akhenaten the gods returned. Theologians retained a strong emphasis on divine, hidden unity that was manifested in diversity.⁵⁷¹ In a greater compact between God and the universe than even before Akhenaten, God as invisible begets himself into the millions of visible manifestations of the cosmos.⁵⁷² In this sense, the cosmos is creatio ex deo, the body of God; God is like the hidden soul that animates a visible body.⁵⁷³ God is the world in this intensified cosmotheism.⁵⁷⁴ This involves compatible dualities:

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⁵⁶⁹ Such references are found in court proceedings 40 years after Akhenaten’s death wherein he is avoided to be called by name, but simply “the enemy of Amarna,” or over 50 years later, just as “šby” (“the rebellion” or “the rebel”) (Hoffmeier 244).

⁵⁷⁰ GG 48; Hoffmeier 243.

⁵⁷¹ PM 33, 26.

⁵⁷² GG 68.

⁵⁷³ GG 68, 70; PM 73.

⁵⁷⁴ GG 68. ATM, 19. Or “hypercosmism.”
hidden/manifest, One/many, esoteric/exoteric religion. God was hidden and ineffable as ever, while the Pharaoh received, as a representative, this devotion.\textsuperscript{575}

His revolution left behind traumatic memories of kingship turning evil, criminal, and against the gods. The severity of the trauma, in Akhenaton’s co-despotism with divinity, provoked reactions to further deepen the god-king fissure, even while the two would stay closely linked. Religious piety thereafter migrated from explicit attention upon the visible, political Pharaoh into an increasingly private, personal form of piety toward the god. It is no longer to the Pharaoh, but to the “God alone” whom one prays for providential protection.\textsuperscript{576} Devotional language usually reserved for the political sphere was transposed into a distinct divine sphere; “God” no longer coincides with the king who saves.\textsuperscript{577} After Akhenaten one can find many prayers like: “I have not sought for myself a protector among men, God N is my defender,”\textsuperscript{578} resembling biblical language of trusting alone in God.\textsuperscript{579} In such prayers, “God” now plays the role that Akhenaten had played, and had been formerly played by kings and patrons.\textsuperscript{580} This ushers in an increase in what Assmann calls “explicit theology,” wherein religion begins to receive more distinct reflective attention in writing and teaching than in previous centuries—Egypt becomes a “country of theologians.” To some extent, then, a more personal, proto-depoliticized

\textsuperscript{575}“People fall down immediately for fear if his name [Amen] is uttered knowingly or unknowingly. There is no god able to call him by it” (\textit{GG} 65).

\textsuperscript{576} \textit{GG} 83.

\textsuperscript{577} \textit{GG} 80.

\textsuperscript{578} \textit{GG} 82.

\textsuperscript{579} E.g. Ps 20:7; 33:16; Amos 2:14; Hosea 10:13.

\textsuperscript{580} \textit{GG} 82.
“religion” which transcends the political realm, slowly begins in Egypt. This is evident in how “protection” migrates from the King-God to “God.” But, note how this change did not happen merely through “ideas” and rationalization, but through national breakdown, disappointment, and tumult.

The above is a transposition of “protection” from the political sphere to a newly distinguishing and transcendent religious sphere. In other words, this is part of Assmann’s overarching thesis that what we think of as “religious” concepts are genetically “theologized political concepts.” Such a transposition had also taken place in a different way in Egypt a millennium prior with respect to “judgment” and the afterlife: whereas the divine Pharaoh used to hold a monopoly on judgment (as well as burial and immorality), traumatic disappointment with the political sphere (through the breakdown of kingship and destruction of the old tombs) detached it into a wholly transcendent Osiris.\textsuperscript{581} By Assmann’s estimation, “this is the first instance of the transposition of an idea or institution from the earthly sphere involving the social and the political to the transcendent sphere of the divine.”\textsuperscript{582} Whereas the divine sphere had been inextricably compacted with the political sphere, we have here the beginnings of a distinct religious sphere, separating from a compact with the political.

This form of cosmotheism will live on for some centuries and undergo transformations with the great Hellenic upheavals centuries later. This double layering is retrieved much later in the Enlightenment’s nostalgia, evident in secret societies (the

\textsuperscript{581} GG 80.

\textsuperscript{582} GG 79; ATM, 20; OH 56f.
Illuminati, the Free Masons\textsuperscript{583}), who saw themselves as re-discoverers of this Egyptian legacy: an enlightened, esoteric, pure, spiritual pantheism for the initiated, on the one hand, and a banal, exoteric religion of animal-gods for the plebeians on the other.\textsuperscript{584} For the Enlightenment rediscoverers, this theology mirrored their own social context, “with its exterior face of Church and absolutism and its interior of deism and enlightened philosophy.”\textsuperscript{585} Freud appears to have imbibed some of this.

Cosmotheism permeates Egyptian religion from Akhenaten into the Alexandrian era, amidst its increased synchronicity with Greek influences. It finds parallels in Plato’s “God Beyond Being” and Aristotle’s Unmoved Mover. In all cases God remains quite translateable. Or, there is even no need for a name of the One Hidden God, as this God is One and behind all.\textsuperscript{586} But Assmann argues it is only Judaism that truly reconfigures ancient political theology through an untranslateable God, radically transcendent to the cosmos. Judaism will use “Egypt” as its symbol for the religion out of which it escapes and opposes itself. Notably, it will do so not from the pinnacle of political power, as Akhenaten did, but at the bottom of a chain of historical traumas and descending into sub-sovereignty.

\textsuperscript{583} See Cudworth, \textit{The True Intellectual System of the Universe} (1678), and Schiller, \textit{Die Sendung Moses} (1790).

\textsuperscript{584} \textit{ATM}, 97.

\textsuperscript{585} \textit{ATM}, 104.

\textsuperscript{586} \textit{PM}, 20.
A supreme difficulty in understanding the Hebrew Bible is that it contains both primary and secondary religions. Even if one of its great centerpieces is the radical exodus from pagan “Egypt” into the promised land of revelation, its pages also evince a poly/cosmotheistic Israelite religion. Its pages contain multi-century intra-Jewish tensions between parties who do not agree on its proper religious form. The final redaction and compilation of the Tanakh, which only crystallizes in a post-exilic era, largely reflects the winning party’s interpretation of the several preceding centuries of Israelite history, even while it leaves traces of the other parties.

This victor’s history displays strong signs of “intolerance” and at least fantasized violence, visible especially in the Deuteronomistic layer. But, unlike Freud, who simplistically distinguished the pacific-Aten from the violent-Yahweh, this seemingly “intolerant” winning party is also the one that bequeaths to us the most unique and profound critique of violence. Between the two “religions” of the Tanakh, this is the one

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587 PM, 8.
more critical of divinized kings and politics, or political theology. Its combination of intolerance and opposition to oppression, which we will unpack in this chapter, is the fruit of a complex history involving Israel’s battle for political sovereignty and the fall from it. Exploring this history will help us, among many things, answer Gans’ critique of Girard, regarding “what peculiarities in the ethical organization of the Hebrews made them, among all the peoples of the ancient world, the ‘chosen’ discoverers/inventors of monotheism.”

Our guide to this peculiar Israelite history will remain mostly Jan Assmann and his guiding theme of the Mosaic distinction, supplemented with other scholarship for corrective and clarity. To clarify my aims, parsing this historical-critical scholarship and dissecting the many “layers” within the Hebrew Scriptures is not our focus. It is only when we overlay this Israel’s religious history with the problematic of violence and intolerance, as Assmann does, that the significance of monotheism emerges for us here. Less of concern is the precise dates of monotheism’s emergence—which is so contested in the source-criticism field—but more why, how, and to what end a monotheism centered on the story of the exodus grew. Likewise, the quest is not for determining the historical status of the exodus from Egypt—about which we have no material evidence, though may be the extreme end, Thomas Thompson argues we cannot reconstruct Israel’s pre-exilic history; and Garbini argues even post-exilic Ezra is a theological fiction from a later time in the post-exilic era (NOG, 111-115).


combination of several histories—and more why this exodus story was being told. And what has this story done to us, to our world, that these stories were remembered? In Assmann’s reading, this exodus story symbolizes the shift from polytheism to monotheism, the shift from primary to secondary religions, “supplanting, absorbing, and extinguishing everything that went before.” At the same time, it symbolizes “the emancipation for humanity from its embeddedness in the world and its political, natural, and cultural powers, and for the emancipation of the divine from mundane immanence.”

So, if we are not looking for the history of “Israelite religion,” but more an “Old Testament theology,” Assmann’s thesis is that the beating heartbeat of the latter is, roughly speaking, monotheism. But more to the heart of this monotheism: the distinction between true and false in the realm of religion, the Mosaic distinction. This Mosaic Distinction never shows itself unanimously, with lasting effect in Israelite religion or later “Judaism.” Rather, it is manifested unevenly in “moments” over centuries. This distinction rather than the widespread idea of the unity of the divine, was the great innovation that transformed the ancient world in the form of an axial breakthrough. The distinction between true and false was alien to ‘primary religion,’ which was based on distinctions such as

590 *ATM*, 26, 61, 67. Assmann’s suggested historic ingredients in the exodus legend include a several century period: the regional traumas of the Hyksos, Akhenaten’s revolution, the regional plague following his regime, the experiences of the Habiru, and the large-scale migrations of “the sea people.”

591 Assmann calls this method, which asks about how this exodus paradigm was transmitted differently throughout Israel’s history, “mnemohistory.” *CMEC*, 180; *ME* 2; *MPC*, 148.

Such a historical method asks: who was retelling this story, to whom, when, and why—and what did it do to them? Even the Passover Seder’s structure itself, Assmann shows, is more concerned with animating that story within one’s own generation, making it their own, than it is about the historical event. It is not about Moses, but seeing the exodus as achieved “for me” (*ATM*, 39). Voegelin names a similar method in *OH* 122.

592 *ATM* 42.
pure and impure, sacred and profane. Its introduction signaled a revolutionary step in creating a new type of religion.\footnote{GG 84.}

While the metaphysics of this new type of religion is the separation of God from the cosmos, its chief political consequence, he argues, is the separation of religion from politics.\footnote{PM 48.} As such, the Mosaic distinction marks one of the most crucial intellectual and cultural breakthroughs in civilizational history.

Using Assmann and concomitant scholarship, my argument is this: Jewish monotheism adopted the symbols of political power and, almost unwittingly, turned them into a devotion that is ultimately incompatible with any political order. There were many different generations of intolerant and rigorist branches of Israelite religion that drew upon the exodus story, stressing a pure religio-political revolution. These movements saw themselves as confronted by enemies both within and without, and they sought to circle Israel’s theo-political wagons. The threats to such unification efforts were perceived as insufficiently patriotic Israelis or foreign threats, symbolized in stories of destroying the Egyptian over-lords in exodus, the cleansing of the land of “Canaanites,” or the slaying of idolaters. But, through Assmann’s guidance, we find that the meaning, practice, and potential of this intolerance transposes over time from political-power ambitions to messianic patience. The power politics of intolerant monotheism transformed into something of its photographic negative: a refusal of any political representation of God. This transformation of intolerance bequeaths to us an entirely new way to view politics,
God, religion, and the world itself. Strikingly, this monotheistic breakthrough is found amidst Israel’s breakdown.

5.1 Israel as Originally Polytheistic

Israel’s early archaeological record gives little signs of a revolutionary difference or Mosaic distinction in its religion.595 Israel likely began not with an influx of Egyptian refugees on exodus,596 but simply the indigenous of Canaan, for whom intermarriage with surrounding tribes and city-states was common.597 It was likely a loose confederation of polytheistic Canaanite tribes, even down to the Davidic monarchy (1,000BCE), when it was still more of a “well developed chiefdom” than a state. An Israelite “state” didn’t truly emerge until around the eighth century BCE.598

“El” was one of Israel’s earliest chief gods among several others.599 Yahweh, in these earlier stages, likely entered into Canaan from the nearby southern highlands along with a tribe that slowly intermixed with Canaanites.600 Yahweh seems to have been originally a more solitary god, without a divine family, and not integrated into a pantheon;

595 The earliest artifact testifying to the existence of “Israel” dates around 1208BCE, in a pharaonic monument celebrating Egypt’s power over Syro-Palestine. EHG 5; GIT, 100. Merneptah stele, line 27.

596 EHG, xxxi.


598 NOG 200.

599 EHG 7. Other names would include El-Elyon (Gen 14:19-24); El Shaddai (Gen 17:1), El-Bethel (Gen 35:7) El-Roi (Gen 16:3), and El-Olam (NOG 182).

600 Hoffmeier 258; Deut 33:2; Judges 5:4; Ps 68:8, 18; Habakkuk 3:3, 7; GIT 96; EHG 25, 32-33, 81. NOG 194.
this may have supplied some monolatrous potentiality as Yahweh became integrated into the Canaanite pantheon. Early visual representations of Yahweh included the calf, which was either “the footstool of an invisibly throned Yahweh,” or a symbol of his power. Not until around the time of Hosea (8th century BCE) do we find any critique of representing Yahweh visibly, in the Golden Calf legend. In Israel’s earlier periods Yahweh was worshipped alongside El and other gods, including Baal, the sun, the moon, the stars, and the female deity Asherah. El and Yahweh were likely “translatable” in pre-exilic history. During the ascendancy of Yahweh in Israel, worship of this god “could vary from coexistence or identification with other deities to outright rejection of them.” Generally speaking, “translatability was an early feature of Israelite religion,” both internally and in relation to its neighboring countries. In sum, “Israelite religion in its earliest form did not contrast markedly with the religions of its Levantine neighbors in either number or configuration of deities.”

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601 Rainer Albertz, “Monotheism and Violence,” op cit, 376. NOG 196.

602 Though, this may have symbolized “Egypt” and its bull Apis (NOG 187). “Prophetic criticisms against images belong largely to the eighth century” (EHG, 23). Polemics against images: Isa 2:8; 10:10; 30:22; 31:7; 40:19; 42:19; Jer. 1:16; 8:19; Micah 1:7; Nahum 1:14.

603 Molek worship, via infant sacrifice, up until Josiah’s reforms, is also arguably part of the religious milieu (NOG 118, 187f, 191). Condemnations are clearer in Jeremiah (2:23; 19:6, 11-14; 31:30; 7:31; 19:5; 32:35), Isaiah (30:33), and Micah (6:7), and Ezekiel (16:20-21; 20:26, 23:37-39).

604 EHG, 146.

605 GIT, 96, 98, 102, 129. See, e.g. El’s identification with Yahweh in Ex 6:3. “Israelites and Judahites probably perceived Yahweh in the same fashion as other polytheists perceived their deities in countries around Israel” (NOG 87).

606 EHG, 25.
During the monarchy period, Yahweh eventually subsumed El, wherein “El” or “El Elyon” become two of Yahweh’s titles.\(^{607}\) Similar to neighboring state religions in Mesopotamia and Egypt, Yahweh “became the divine ‘king’ and national god, assimilating the characteristics of other Israelite deities.”\(^{608}\) Similar “divine warrior” gods are in Babylon’s Marduk, Assyria’s Assur, Egypt’s Amun-Re, etc. Assmann writes that Israelite religion, “from its beginnings well into the 7th century was polytheistic, in the sense of a summodeistic state,” wherein Yahweh was the head of a small pantheon.\(^{609}\) There would have been relative tolerance toward subordinate gods and cults inside its borders, and supreme gods outside its borders. With Yahweh as the sponsor of Israel’s monarchy, foreign gods were tolerated “as the divine king of other nations…as long as such gods remained in the foreign domain.”\(^{610}\)

Such a summodeistic Israel included the classic ancient pattern of a king who is a representative or an analogy to the supreme deity. “El” had served earlier in Ugarit as a royal god with whom deified kings would merge at their death.\(^{611}\) Israel’s monarchs, too, as adopted sons of Yahweh, were perhaps thought to “participate in” Yahweh’s reign.\(^{612}\)

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\(^{607}\) GIT, 142. Exodus 6:2.


\(^{609}\) CMEC 181f.


\(^{611}\) Van der Toorn Becking, Van der Horst eds, Dictionary of Deities and Divinities in the Bible (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 1725.

And just as Seth cosmically symbolized Egypt’s political enemies, “the cosmic enemies hostile to Yahweh parallel the human enemies opposed to the Judean monarch.”\textsuperscript{613}

Though redactors apparently attempted to efface this original polytheism, it still peeks out within the biblical text or is even at times explicitly acknowledged.\textsuperscript{614} For example, Ezekiel 16:3: “Your origin and your birth were in the land of the Canaanites: your father was an Amorite and your mother a Hittite.” Or, an earlier textual stratum shows signs of Yahweh’s polytheistic genes: El had divine kids with Asherah; Yahweh was such an offspring, who then received from El his inheritance of land (Deut 32). Or, at other times, a text may show an earlier translatability which was partially effaced in redaction: e.g. Psalm 82 appears to critique translatability in an attempt to dissolve plural gods,\textsuperscript{615} even while its original text may have been polytheistic and translatable: the other gods had been gods of nations, but in the psalm’s “final prophetic call, Elohim the god of Israel is to assume divine authority over all the nations.”\textsuperscript{616}

See how 1 Chr 29:20 entails the people bowing to Yahweh and the king as if one, or Psalm 68:25 making God and king identifications. Margaret Barker also traces from Qumran texts the liturgies of the first temple, wherein the King “underwent an apotheosis and was venerated as the Lord in the midst of his people. Solomon’s ascension to the throne is described with divine airs” (Patrick Chatelion Counet, “The Divine Messiah: Early Jewish Monotheism and the New Testament,” in \textit{The Boundaries of Monotheism: Interdisciplinary Explorations into the Foundations of Western Monotheism}, ed Anne-Marie Korte and Maaike de Haardt, Studies in Theology and Religion 13 (Leiden: Brill, 2009) 47; Margaret Barker, \textit{The Great High Priest: The Temple Roots of Christian Liturgy} (London: T&T Clark International, 2003).

\textsuperscript{613} \textit{TOBM} 157.

\textsuperscript{614} E.g. the Book of Kings acknowledged Asherah worship, or Jeremiah’s “Queen of Heaven” \textit{(GIT} 143).


\textsuperscript{616} \textit{GIT} 139.
On this matter of originary polytheism, Assmann fits with the scholarly majority on monotheism’s origins (even if his idea of the intolerant Mosaic distinction is a point of scholarly controversy and misunderstanding). The extreme, conservative end of the spectrum regards Israel as monotheistic from its very early birth—originating with a historical Moses or in the following age of tribal judges.617 On the other extreme are those who argue that monotheism is only a very late post-exilic achievement (after 538BCE, perhaps by centuries), and everything prior to this is at best indistinguishably polytheistic and/or retrojected propaganda from later centuries. In between the two positions is the scholarly-majority and Assmann: early Israel shared many features with its surrounding cultures; it slowly evolved from an earlier polytheism, to a monolatry of “No other Gods,” into a monotheism that crystallized around Josiah of the late monarchy and especially the Babylonian exile; and it carried on its religious transformations after the exilic period.618 Any signs of “monotheism” in Israel prior to these times are likely reflections of a smaller movement or textual retrojections.


There are about only 25 declarations of full, strict monotheism in the Bible: “most of them in the Old Testament, and virtually all of them are Deuteronomistic or Deutero-Isaianic, that is to say, datable to the sixth century BC, the time of the Babylonian exile (e.g. Deut 4.35; 32.39; 2 Sam. 7.22; 1 Kgs. 8.60; Isa. 45.5, 6, 14, 18, 21). The same applies to passages in which other gods are dismissed as ‘nothing’ (e.g. Jer. 2:5, 11 [and chap 10]). The few exceptions like two Psalms passages (86:10; 18:32 = 2 Sam. 22.32) are hard to date and do not affect the general conclusion that in ancient Israel monotheism was not explicit or emphasized until the sixth century BC” (John F.A. Sawyer, “Biblical Alternatives to Monotheism,” op cit, 173). See also EHG 15.
But we in the West are more familiar with the cleaner version of Israelite religion as told mostly by the Deuteronomic history: Israel was originally purely monotheistic, in a revolutionary and normative Yahwism, but it then regressed into a corrupt polytheistic syncretism. Majority scholarship sees this as an anachronistic ideal projected backwards.\textsuperscript{619}

This raises an important question: the question is not at all why Israel accepted a plurality of gods with Yahweh at its pinnacle. That was normal. Rather, why do we see a movement that eventually condemns the worship of other gods?\textsuperscript{620} Why does Israel remember its history not only through an exodus liberation but as a violent revolution against idolaters?\textsuperscript{621}

\section*{5.2 Exodus and the No Other Gods Movement}

Answers to this are complex, but crucial ones linger around the mnemonic-history of the exodus legend and its “covenant,” which served at various times to consolidate Israel’s political unity.\textsuperscript{622} This story begins to be told sometime around King Asa in the 9th century.\textsuperscript{623} Asa, his son, and the prophet Elijah supposedly enacted sweeping and wrathful religious reforms and persecuted Baal priests, temples, and idols, using the exodus legend as a basis: just as Yahweh had taken them out of Egypt and commanded them to do away

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\textsuperscript{619} \textit{EHG} 81. \\
\textsuperscript{620} \textit{EHG} 150. \\
\textsuperscript{621} \textit{MPC} 147. \\
\textsuperscript{622} \textit{NOG}, 77. \\
\textsuperscript{623} Albertz argues that “the exodus tradition was well known at least in the northern kingdom of the 10th century (1 Kgs 12:28-29; Rainer Albertz, ed Bob Becking \textit{Orthodoxy, Liberalism, and Adaptation} [Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2011], 40).
with idols, so must the Israelites of Asa’s day do away with their idols.\(^{624}\) And yet we suffer layers of distance from this Asa story. While Asa was supposedly calling upon an exodus event that preceded him by centuries, the stories about him are being told centuries later, in Ezekiel around the 6\(^{th}\) century. Furthermore, it is difficult to know how much Ezekiel’s text are products of later redactive agendas.\(^{625}\) The same could be said of king Hezekiah, who later centralized the Judean cult (710-700 BCE), prohibited worship of any god but Yahweh, and tried to prevent Israel’s destruction under Hosea’s warnings about worshipping foreign gods.\(^{626}\)

Sometime in these centuries, between Asa’s and Hezekiah’s supposed centralizations, we can postulate “the beginnings of a Yahweh-alone movement,”\(^{627}\) whose core text comes down to us in the form of Deuteronomy.\(^{628}\) Assmann prefers “no-other-Gods movement,” as this is precisely the wording in the texts.\(^{629}\) This was likely a prophetic minority movement, whose size and popularity are disputable, and who were in conflict

\(^{624}\) For the purge see Ezekiel 20, 36-38. Asa reigned circa 911-870BCE.

\(^{625}\) NOG 258: “much of the language in the prophetic books may be the product of the exilic and post-exilic redactors who created the books in their final written form.” Again, “The narrative material of the Hebrew Bible pertaining to the Iron I period dates largely from the latter half of the monarchy, removed at least two or three centuries from the events of the Iron I period that the texts relate” (EHG, 3).


\(^{627}\) CMEC 182; EHG, 155 offers a few critiques of the Yahweh-alone construct. I.e. perhaps not a minority-prophetic position.

\(^{628}\) CMEC 192.

\(^{629}\) GG 115. This phrasing “set them apart from all other religious practices inside and outside the Hebrew world” (PM 33).
with Israel’s original polytheism. The early stages of this movement were not “monotheistic,” in the numeric sense of disbelieving that the other gods exist. Rather it prophesies that, for Israel, it should have no other gods. This is a monolatry that condemns allegiance to any other gods, just as matrimony condemns taking other lovers, who nonetheless exist. This monolatry and its friction with other gods is a crucial ingredient of what later, by the end of the monarchy and the onset of exile, morphs into monotheism proper.

One of the early expressions of this monolatry is Elijah, who, in the name of Yahweh, attacked the priests of only a certain kind of Ba’al gods, the ones from the north. But, Elijah left the worship of other gods untouched—like the asherim and other local Ba’al cults. Elijah’s political context is telling as to why: he was objecting to the northern Israelite Omride Dynasty who, under pressure from the Assyrian empire, syncretized their cults and forged trade partnerships, thereby ensuring some economic ascendancy and stability. But this Omride boon came at a cost to many, and was “rejected by those who became its victims…[To the] conservative opponents of the societal development [like Elijah], the religious policy of the Omride dynasty looked like as if the king had come...


632 “By the end of the monarchy much of the spectrum of religious practice had largely disappeared; monolatrous Yahwism was the norm in Israel, setting the stage for the emergence of Israelite monotheism” (EHG, xxviii). Israel’s 8th-6th century “monolatry,” which entails some “non-translatability,” fits in with Smith’s timeline that “non-translatability in Israel may predate its explicit expressions of monotheism” (GIT, 147).

633 GIT, 115, 122. 1 Kings 18. NOG 79, 200, 186.
under the bad influence of his foreign wife [Jezebel] and was ready to sell off Israel’s religious identity. OBJECTING TO THE COSTS OF SUCH A POLITICO-RELIGIO-ECONOMIC arrangement, Elijah aimed for a more protectionist Israel and, with Elisha, executed a violent coup against the Omride dynasty and a destruction of its Baal temples. Their isolationist monolatry desiccated the state and its economy.

When the Deuteronomistic historians later recounted this history, however, they stressed only the religious dimensions of the rebellion, even though the conflict “may have been more political than religious.” Albertz sees here an early instance of “monotheistic” intolerance. But Assmann reads this as simply common, political-ritual monolatrous violence. (It is only much later, with the Maccabean revolt in the 2nd century BCE, that he sees true monotheistic religious violence.) For the other gods that Elijah attacked were as real as Assyria and the Omrides.

This No-other-Gods movement more clearly emerges through prophets like Amos, Hosea, Micah around the eighth and seventh centuries BCE. Like Elijah, they wrote under the pressures of Assyrian dominance and invasion in the North, though the situation had only worsened. Assmann calls this time for Israel a political “state of emergency” in which politically establishing who is “the enemy” corresponded with theologically exalting the god who will save. Under the threat of absolute servitude to Assyrian

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634 Albertz, “Monotheism and Violence,” op cit, 380. Albertz suggests the more solitary character of Yahweh could be part of this isolationist policy.

635 NOG 76, 183.

636 Albertz, “Monotheism and Violence,” 381.

637 ATM, 27; Micah 6:4, Hosea 11:1, Amos 2:10. Dating much later, around 520BCE, see Haggai 2:1-5. “Hosea appears to be the first ‘Yahweh aloneist’ among the prophets (750BCE)” (NOG 76).
overlords, these prophets reached back in time, calling upon the covenant established in exodus, to consolidate Israelite identity. 638 “But I am the LORD your God from the land of Egypt; you know no God but me, and besides me there is no savior” (Hos 12:4).

In this era, employing a golden era founding legend was not entirely unique to Israel—all the more so in contexts of foreign threat. Many cultures of the first millennium BCE were nostalgically retracing founding stories which marked the transition from the Late Bronze Age into the Iron Age as a basis for aesthetic and legal norms. Homer’s Trojan war is a most famous example among many. 639 Israel’s exodus, told around the 8th century, was looking back to revolutionary events of the 14th or 13th century in Rammeside Egypt. This notion of a covenant established in a golden age conveyed that the Israelites, having been once slaves and having been chosen in an exclusive alliance with the liberating god in a time of danger, were to resist any alliances or subordination to Assyrian power. So too, the covenant established between Yahweh and the Davidic dynasty (2 Sam 23:5) would have been understood to underwrite sovereign claims to the land. 640


639 Homer of the 8th century is looking back to Mycenaean Greece of the 13th and 12th centuries. The Neoassyrian Renaissance was particularly archaeologically nostalgic as it dug for this golden age under Sargon of Akkade of the 24th and 23rd centuries. Or in Egypt, the Saite Dynasties (of the 7th and 6th centuries), in their own renaissance, were looking back to the Old and Middle Kingdoms. CMEC 77; ATM, 32f.

640 EHG, 146; 2 Kings 11:17.
5.3 A Covenanted People

“Covenants” were political agreements, vassal-treaties, or loyalty oaths, commonly used by archaic states in the Near East in the 2nd millennium BCE and after. The formula “thou shalt have no other gods besides me,” is a variation of common covenant formulas in the ancient near east: “thou shalt have no overlords besides me.” Similarly, the imperatives to “love the Lord with all your heart” or “to love X as oneself” were common vassal-treaty formulas to love one’s king in full loyalty, seen in Hittite and Assyrian treaties. Once northern Israel was annexed, and the south (Judah) was subjugated by Assyria, it is likely that some kings of Judah would have had to use such covenant “language in swearing a loyalty oath to the Assyrian king.”

But what is crucial here is how this covenantal loyalty begins to transpose from a political oath into an alternate allegiance to whom Israel owed a prior loyalty: Yahweh and his covenant established in exodus. Thus, while one can find in Israelite covenants common formulas that “seem to be almost verbatim translations of Esarhaddon’s loyalty oaths,” Israel did not simply borrow, translate, and repeat the political covenant model.

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642 *ATM* 49; *GG* 113; Among many exponents see: Eckart Otto, *Das Deuteronomium: Politische Theologie und Rechtsreform in Juda und Assyrien* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1999).


644 *GG* 113

645 *ATM* 119.
without modification. They transposed or displaced political loyalty in a new, odd way, with different ends. They transposed this religio-political concept into a distinctly “religious” register, “transforming god–king, king–subject, and king–vassal relations into the relations between god and man as well as God and Israel.” This is “less a translation than an inversion of the original model.” For the role of Assyrian overlord is transposed onto Yahweh as “a liberator who offers the liberated people a treaty.” This notion of “a political alliance between a god and a people is an absolutely new, unheard of, and unprecedented concept.”

But this transposition comes at a cost; political unity and loyalty oaths bear violent baggage. Political loyalty treaties often required an intense surveillance of one’s neighbors, even one’s family members, of denouncing and prosecuting those who expressed disloyalty. This may have served as the model of the Deuteronomistic command, that one should kill even one’s family members who entice one to “go and worship other gods.” Now, applied in a new way, Yahweh takes “the place previously occupied in the collective mind of the nation by the feared, almighty king of Assyria,” becoming the despot demanding surveillance. Assmann regards this as a key port of entry where violent political

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646 ATM 119
647 ATM, 28, 49.
648 GG 113; Ex 32:27-28 or Deut 13:7-10. GIT, 160.
zealotry, originally a feature of polytheistic political theology, is smuggled into early monotheism and remains as residue or potentiality over time. These early pangs of the Mosaic distinction involve a conflation of true/false religion with political friend/enemy. This accounts for the strikingly violent biblical accounts of monotheistic violence in its founding. For the intense violence and jealousy surrounding the religio-political realm has been redirected into a new, extra-political, distinctly “religious” positioning, which creates at least a new potentiality for religious violence.650

In light of this transposition, we can dismiss how Sloterdijk or Cliteur critique monotheistic violence: that monotheism’s zeal supplied the ingredients for monolatry.651 The historical case is simply the opposite: political jealousy remains as residue in monotheism because it emerges from the political registers of monolatry and imperial lord-vassal subjugation. But monolatry supplied the ingredients which became depoliticized into (secondary) “religion” and “monotheism.”

That political treaty language could become distinctly “theologized” is not entirely unique to prophetic Israel, even if it is pronounced therein. We already saw a theologization of prayer and piety, for example, in the last chapter, where the traumas of Akhenaten’s kingship tainted the Pharaonic office with radical disappointment; as such,

650 ATM 118, 126; ME 211.

prayer became more theologized and detached from divinity’s immanent, kingly representative. It thus turned into a personalized piety that doesn’t trust in pharaohs or chariots. Similarly, Assmann detects that, amidst political upheavals in the third millennium, the idea of “final judgment” detached from the Pharaoh’s political competency, into a distinctly theological register, with Osiris’ judgment in the underworld.\textsuperscript{652}

Despite some of these other ancient parallels in the theologization of political realities, the depth of the Jewish innovation “corresponded in importance and consequence to the gravity of the historical trauma, which far surpassed anything that had previously occurred in Egyptian history.”\textsuperscript{653} Furthermore, the political covenant concept was here being applied to a whole people, and not just a land, a state, a priestly caste, or king. The “priestly separation,” that one can find in, say the cultures of Egypt, now applies to a whole people: “thou art a holy people unto the Lord thy God.”\textsuperscript{654} While the Moabite national god would become angry with “his country,” Yahweh was always furious with “his people.”\textsuperscript{655} That is, there are no ancient parallels of a god directly choosing a whole “people” as his


Mimetic theory, in a way, argues that the originary “theologization” in human consciousness was in perceiving the endogenous scapegoat mechanism as an exogenous divine force, the sacred. The victim was the site of theologizing the physical into the superphysical, from the immanent to the transcendent. The original theo-political “analogue” is between the body of the victim and the body of god.

\textsuperscript{653} \textit{GG} 83.

\textsuperscript{654} Deut 14:2; \textit{CMEC} 185.

\textsuperscript{655} Rainer Albertz, “Monotheism and Violence,” 377; Num 11:1, 11. The Hebrew Bible concept of “a holy people” (\textit{goj qadosh}, Ex 19:6) is not present in the Egyptian lexicon (\textit{CMA} 406).
vassals, from out of the world, to form a treaty. This birthed “a new genus of society,” a shift from the representative theocracies of the ancient near east into a mode of “direct” theocracy. In polytheistic political theology, God ruled among the gods, among metaphysical equals, analogous with the human ruler ruling over humans. But Yahweh here directly rules a whole people—and not merely by his intermediary the king. This marks a genuinely different kind of political theology:

The idea of forming an alliance with God himself instead of appointing certain deities as supervisors of political alliances draws God more intimately into human affairs than had been the case in Mesopotamia and its neighboring civilizations…Nothing of this sort is to be found in Egypt, at least not until the Late Period. 657

While ancient covenantal politics were often directly linked with the fate of a state, this more intimate and direct morphology of covenant can outlive Israel’s monarchy or the invasions and deportations and political oppression in the centuries to come. 658 For these covenanted exodus-people owe their Lord fidelity irrespective of the sovereign status of their state or any royal mediator.

656 OH 113.

657 GG 26-27. Egypt saw itself as “the holiest land” and a “temple of the world.” This entailed “an awareness of absolute uniqueness, based on special proximity to the gods, or a living community of the whole of Egypt with the gods.” But while both Egypt and Israel narrated this golden era communion as lost, Egypt’s healing of this break precisely by means that Israel condemned as idolatry. “Herein lies the crucial difference between Israel and Egypt. Yahweh’s ‘dwelling’ (shekhinah) is never symbolic but always directly present, though changeable and inaccessible. According to the reformed theology of Deuteronomy, it is not God but his name that dwells in the Temple” (CMEC 176, n.5).

See also OH 124. “Israel alone constituted itself by recording its own genesis as a people as an event with a special meaning in history, while the other Near Eastern societies constituted themselves as analogues of cosmic order.”

658 In Egypt, the symbols of origin, god, and religion all stem from the locality itself, where the “primal hill” is the house of the god. The exodus God, by contrast, is “extraterritorial,” ultramundane, and “had no temple or place of worship.” This religion remembers itself as preceding “the acquisition of a homeland” and “remained universally valid no matter where in the world the Jews find themselves” (CMEC 180; GG 83f.).
This “absolutely new, unheard of, and unprecedented concept” requires explanation and a background story; and this why the exodus was told, Assmann argues. The no-other-gods counter-narrative grasped to consolidate Israel amidst the decay of its monarchy, making it less and less “translatable” to its neighboring nations and their gods. Eventually, the only religious “translatability” left in Israel was its reaching back in deep time to translate an exodus god into the present. This recovery involved effacing Israel’s original polytheism, as noted, with a mythological origins story driven by a single deity, against which any other gods were new and false.

This loyalty alliance with Israel’s highest God originally had little to do with “monotheism.” And yet it eventually grew into a numerically singular and Only God. Though other ancient political theology was also around this time expressing varieties of divine oneness, Israel’s kind involves a “subversive inversion.” Whereas the political theology of Assyria, for example, stressed the “inseparable unity of the divine and the political,” Israel’s “stressed the categorical separation of these two spheres,” making it...

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660 GIT, 147.

661 Its central point is Deut 32:17. Israel “chose new gods” (Judg 5:8; cf. Ps 44:21)


663 MPC, 148f.

664 GG 84.
different—indeed inverted—from the other ancient near eastern “political monotheisms” of the first millennium BCE.\footnote{\textit{GIT}, 166.}

So, what is new here is not just “exclusivism” or “jealousy” \textit{per se}. For violent jealousy was native to ancient political bodies, subjugation, and loyalty treaties. What is new is that a once political zeal and exclusivism morphed into a zeal and exclusivism that transcends political status. An originally political treaty changed into its inverse. This marks the beginnings of a politically detachable religion, a theologized “exclusive allegiance” attached more to a people and a God than a state. But this transcendence will only fully emerge as it is forced out of the land-based nest of politics when its national hopes are crushed.

5.4 Prophetic Critique

Another crucial factor in the emergence of Israel’s monotheism is its intensified prophetic movements. Amidst the decline in the north and south, the prophets who called upon a covenant established in exodus often spoke in “opposition to almost all the kings,”\footnote{\textit{CMEC} 179, Smith likewise notes how the “prophetic critics and legal codes opposed the monarchy on [the asherah, solar language, and Baal devotion]” \textit{(EHG}, 150).} facilitating the shift from political Israel to theological Judaism. In such a prophetic schism, the will of God \textit{differs} from the will of the political sphere, severing the link between the wills of the king and God. As such, through Israel’s prophets, justice

became more extreme, central, and intimately linked with religion than it was in any neighboring cultures.\footnote{PM 43, 45.}

This is not at all to say that justice was a concern unique to ancient Israel. Justice was a matter of extensive attention and devotion in cosmotheistic cultures and in nearly all of them some advocated “a righteousness greater than that required by law.”\footnote{Smith, “The Common Theology of the ANE,” \textit{op cit}, 144; Assmann, \textit{CMA}, 396. On Egyptian obligation for feeding the hungry and clothing the naked, see Stephan Seidlmayer, “The First Intermediate Period (c. 2160-2055),” in \textit{The Oxford History of Ancient Egypt} ed. Ian Shaw (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 118-119. Also, the god Istanu was the “father and mother of the oppressed, the lonely [and the] bereaved” (\textit{EHG}, 99; \textit{ATM}, 19). Or, see the Code of Hammurabi’s obligation “to prevent the strong from oppressing the weak” (\textit{OH} 24).
See also Gnuse for ANE deities with social justice imperatives, who “act in history,” and have “linear views of reality,” (\textit{NOG} 231, 249f, 351).}

In Egypt’s King Merikare we have “Hail Re, lord of justice….who rescues the fearful from the overbearing, who judges between rich and poor.”\footnote{GG 64.} And in Egypt the character of the upright was declared more important than the sacrifices the evil doers.\footnote{James B. Pritchard (ed.), \textit{Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament} (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969), 417ff.}

Full excerpts of Proverbs’ wisdom seem to be lifted from Amenemope of Egypt.\footnote{PM 53. For a review of common theology between not only Psalm 104 and Akhenaten’s Great Hymn, but much of the ANE: Morton Smith, “The Common Theology of Ancient Near East”; Hoffmeier 247, 255, 256.}

The difference is that Israel’s prophets uniquely elevated justice as central to religion, as sacred duties, all the while in critical friction with political rulers.\footnote{PM 53; \textit{NOG} 250.} “No other society took the literature of dissent and placed so much of it into a sacred text, which in
turn provided the blueprint for religious and social life.”

So, even if the justice of the biblical Sabbath- and Jubilee Years were adopted from Babylonian Amorite edicts from the early second millennium BCE, nevertheless the Jews under prophetic injunction, Gnuse writes, “attempted to make these institutions more extensive and regular mechanisms in the economic life of a society.” In all, the prophets “theologized justice” more so than had been done in neighboring cultures, elevating it to the status of religious truth. But there is a religious-intolerance cost to this: when “justice becomes the epitome of true religion,” lawlessness and indecency become seen as the hallmark of “paganism.” This only further galvanizes the antinomy of true “Israel” against corrupt, idolatrous “Egypt.”

Besides uniquely elevating justice to a religious duty, this prophetic schism made law a more directly divine matter. When Egypt transposed “judgment” from the pharaoh to a transcendent god (as a consequence of political disappointment), the god was still not a distinct lawgiver. For the god’s and the king’s wills were still imagined to be the same. But with Israel’s prophetic agitations, Assmann sees the beginnings of the genuine difference of the divine will from the human: “only in the context of a religion in which god appears as both lawgiver and judge does the thought first become thinkable that man’s judgment and god’s can diverge significantly. That is the authentic innovation of biblical monotheism.” This prepares the ground for a different kind of political imagination.

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673 NOG 256.
674 NOG 256, 259, while acknowledging the Jubilee Year’s possibly rare implementation.
675 PM 52.
676 PM 55.
involving incompatibility between the now-separating religious and political spheres: with God now as a legislative sovereign in his own right, he “competes with the king on his own terrain, usurping his position and unseating him from the throne of sovereign, legislative royalty.”

The prophetic, king-critical legacy distinguished Israel from Ancient Near East cultures, which, though they also suffered their own invasions and national breakdowns, and certainly had strong concepts of justice, never experienced such a dramatic prophetic schism with its ruling elite. Once we see how emphatic, even “intolerant,” much of this prophetic criticism was, we also begin to see the potentially liberating nature of this “intolerance.” Robert Gnuse, for example, outlines how our modern sources of anti-tyranny, like The Federalist Papers for example, often cited the prophetic intolerance of tyranny.

5.5 King Josiah’s Reforms Toward Sovereignty Under Assyrian Rule

Israel’s fall from sovereignty happened in stages. Assyria destroyed the 10 tribes of the Northern Kingdom in 722 BCE, subjugating its inhabitants or deporting them.

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677 PM 52; Assmann, Herrschaft und Heil, op cit, 46-52.

678 GG 83.

679 Robert Gnuse, No Tolerance for Tyrants: The Biblical Assault on Kings and Kingship (Liturgical Press, 2011). e.g. 1 Sam 8. Though Gnuse also admits how writing technology itself was part of what aided critique of sacred claims of deified kings and hierarchical class structure (NOG 253).

680 “It may well have been that it was in the territory of the former northern kingdom, after the destruction of the sanctuaries, and the deportation and forced mixing of the people which was the result of Assyrian hegemony, that the remnants of the northern priests and scribes began to put into writing monuments to their religious culture and heritage…[the discovery of the scroll] was very probably a northern textual element that was granted place of privilege and right of citizenship in the religious world
Assyria also subjugated the southern kingdom politically and culturally as a vassal state. It would seem that the hope of the Lord Yahweh coming to His vassals’ aid was dashed. But a few generations later, in the 7th century, during King Josiah’s sub-sovereign rule of the south (625-609BCE), the ascendancy of the Babylonians weakened Assyria’s power over Israel. With Assyria’s grip loosened, Judah of the south could try to regain the lands of the North. “Deuteronomy was the result of this quest for autonomy.”

This opportunity was seized through a revival of the No-other-Gods movement and Josiah’s calling on fidelity to the god of the exodus. This retrieval is described in 2 Kings 22-23, with the “discovery” of a lost scroll during Temple renovations. The scroll may have been an early version of Deuteronomy, or what came to be in later editions the central text of the no-other-gods party and a core element of the emerging Torah. 2 Kings recounts this discovery as a return of forgotten memory; the discoverers and listeners become convicted they had backslid from once pristine Yahweh-alone origins into syncretistic idolatry. They had forgotten their founding story of Egyptian exodus and covenant. The scroll also might not have been a discovery so much as a creation of this time, propaganda of Josiah’s campaign for independence from Assyria: as such, “the Yahwism they painted into the past was the Yahwism that they had begun to create by

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681 CMEC 204.

682 CMEC 182. Around 621 BCE.
their own reforms.⁶⁸³ Judah’s subjugation to Assyria now had an explanation: it was divine punishments for their “violation of what had been set out in the covenant.”⁶⁸⁴

Seeing from what religious fidelity he and his fellow country folk had fallen, King Josiah rent his garments in repentance, centralized the cult at Jerusalem, and enacted sweeping reforms, with “a severity that can hardly be overestimated,” reminiscent of King Asa’s supposed reforms and Akhenaten’s revolution.⁶⁸⁵ The originally pluralistic identities, multiple regions, and syncretistic religions of Palestine were centralized in the Jerusalem cult under a singular Exodus golden age narrative. For all we know, the figure of Moses may have first acquired importance sometime around these Josaian reforms, “as a kind of local alternative to Assyrian royal ideology.”⁶⁸⁶ Moses and his exodus symbolized for Josiah’s generation “holding fast to a bond [with Yahweh] that had been sealed under completely different and extreme conditions,”⁶⁸⁷ even if this original, pure bond was a dubious construct of a minority group. The branding painted monotheism emerging from something forgotten, even if the actual case was that it “surfaced from the underground,

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⁶⁸³ NOG 73, 76, 121.

⁶⁸⁴ CMEC 194.

⁶⁸⁵ The reforms are of unsure historicity given that “neither Jeremiah nor Ezekiel make any detailed reference to them.” Even so, they are “nevertheless of central importance as a memory figure” (CMEC 194).

While the Deuteronomic historian records no massacres in Jerusalem, “more brutal seems to have been the destruction of Bethel, the competing Yahweh sanctuary off the former northern kingdom. (2 Kings 23:15—18). [Bethel] was the model for the story of the golden calf, the first apostasy in the wilderness, where many of those who deserted were killed (Ex 32); but that is to be regarded as a warning example, written during the period of exile, and has never been reality” (Albertz, “Monotheism and Violence,” 383).

⁶⁸⁶ Alison, Jesus the Forgiving Victim, 155.

⁶⁸⁷ CMEC 205.
branding the existing conventions as a relapse and an act of forgetting. In other words, the accounts surrounding Josiah paint its enemies as backsliding idolaters on originary monotheism, when they in fact were not aberrations but just like the common cultures of the ANE:

What the texts describe as an endless conflict between the notoriously rebellious and forgetful people of Israel and the demands of their own religion, was in historical reality a conflict between a monotheistic minority and a polytheistic-syncretistic majority.

Idolatry and forgetfulness, in Josaian propaganda, are symbols of assimilation to Assyrian influence. The syncretistic majority was portrayed as having forgotten the exodus and its demanded fidelity. Those who had assimilated to Assyrian influence were “the Egyptians”; they had entered the Promised Land only to forget. They had grown soft in the decadent comforts of the milk and honey of assimilation, breaking the Law. They were the complainers in the desert of exodus, longing for the flesh pots of Egypt. True fidelity to Yahweh, on the other hand, is portrayed as in the desert, at Sanai, as wanderers, exiles from Egypt.

The Judeans of the South who truly “remembered” this unifying origin story had hopes to become fully independent from Assyria and annex the North. This polemical contradistinction between memory/forgetfulness would emerge again, upon the South’s destruction, as the fidelity of those who suffered deportation and exile, not those who

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688 CMEC 204.

689 CMEC 182; Alison, Jesus the Forgiving Victim, 156.

690 “Lest you forget the things which your eyes have seen” (Ex 4:9), supposedly once told to the people of the exodus, is now told to those of Josiah’s generation.
assimilated or stayed. This valorization of the desert hints at why “the Promised Land” is not included in the Torah. Even if the symbol is being invoked within a political discourse, it was beginning to undergo a “theologization” like the vassal-treaty did. The Promised Land, charged now with the notions of forgetfulness/idolatry and remembering/fidelity, is turning into something that “cannot be conquered within history.”

5.6 Royalty Disappears

While some amount of sub-Assyrian authority rested on the Judean King Josiah, the aura of divinity could not. Nor could the divine aura rest upon any subsequent Jewish “kings.” Just as the symbol of the desert was displacing a strictly religio-political dynasty of Yahweh, so too the Deuteronomic movement reconfigured the god-king compaction, dissolving Israelite royalty.

The political theology of the Deuteronomic tradition is subversive in two respects. First, it reduces the position of the Judean king to that of a keeper of divine law whose legitimacy depends on the strength of his obedience to the laws. Second, even more innovatively, it replaces the traditional dependence of the Judean king on his Assyrian overlord through the revolutionary idea of an alliance with God himself, not only overriding but even excluding every other alliance.

This is unique to Israel in that the sacred aura of kingship was slowly being replaced by the authority of the nascent Torah. For, as we have seen, God was becoming more like a “direct king” and direct lawgiver via the prophetic and covenant concepts; Israel was “embedding the law into a master narrative of a normative past” in which

691 OH 114.
692 GG 96.
Yahweh became the direct “overlord of a political alliance.” Thus through the confluence of the several factors we are outlining, in Judaism “royalty disappears.”

By making salvation the sole prerogative of god and withdrawing it from the control of temporal powers, monotheism ensures that precious little remains of sovereignty apart from a king who must prostrate himself before the Torah and study it day and night. Essentially, royalty disappears; in Judaism, it takes the eschatological form of messianism, while in Christianity, it is invested in the figure of Jesus Christ, whose kingdom is not of this world.

Quite simply, then, Israel’s developing (anti-)political theology makes it such that “Yahweh’s kingship does not necessarily allow, much less require, a human correlate.”

This replacement of kingship with a scriptural and interpretive tradition becomes pronounced when Babylon destroys the South in the 6th century and sends thousands of Judeans into exile—others are scattered, some stay. Such a catastrophic destruction must have been striking in contrast with the recent unity-bombast of Josiah’s campaign. With exile and Temple destruction, Judeans longer enjoyed even sub-sovereign rule as they did under Assyria. And yet, counter-intuitively, in this more depoliticized context as conquered exiles, the notion of Yahweh alone as direct King begins to grow even stronger—at least among those who cultivate it. Jewish kingship and sovereignty migrated from the body of a king (or the “body of the land,” as Egypt’s Osiris suggested to us), into

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693 GG 96.

694 PM 48. “Kingship appears here as a more or less necessary evil whose dangers must be contained through scripture as effectively as possible” (ATM 125; Deut 17:18-20; Haring 18).

a portable Fatherland of the Torah. In short, while “YHWH originally stood for Israel, the biblical god soon outgrew this political role.”

If Freud’s monotheism meant re-enthronement of the primal father, do we not have here a dethronement? In a cosmotheistic framework the analogues were relatively clear: “the human king’s defeat implied the divine king’s defeat.” But here a once enthroned Yahweh now turns homeless and sub-sovereign. Or rather, Yahweh remains “sovereign” despite all political signs to the contrary. As Smith writes, in contrast with “the parallel or mirroring worldview known from the royal psalms…as Judah’s situation on the mundane level deteriorated in history, the cosmic status of its deity soared in its literature.” This inverse correlation, as Haring terms it, between decreasing political power and increasing theological elevation of Yahweh’s mastery, is “a new formulation or interpretation of religious reality.” Instead of the king as divine analogue, there emerges a political theology in which, “there is no single royal agent on earth whose human foes mirror the cosmic foes of the divine king.”

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696 “Pure monotheism does not recognize national gods...Israel develops the pure form of monotheism only under minority conditions, in the Babylonian exile and under Persian rule. Under these conditions, YHWH may renounce his political function as a state god and become truly universal” (MPC 149-150).

697 Haring 15.

698 TOBM 165. Given Marduk’s reign via Nebuchadnezzar, “Ezekiel had to alter radically the people’s understanding of the link between the power of the Davidic ruler and the power of Yhwh as sovereign in the heavenly sphere. He retains the royal model of rule where personal agency and cosmic power are joined in ordering the world, but he frees this divine rule from its ties to an earthly king or dynasty” (Dale Launderville, “Ezekiel’s Throne-Chariot Vision: Spiritualizing the Model of Divine Royal Rule,” Catholic Biblical Quarterly 66 (2004): 362, 367; Haring 20.).

699 TOBM, 193; Haring 16.

700 TOBM, 170; Haring 19.
The textual epitome of this inverse correlation between divine power and royal power would seem to be in Deutero-Isaiah’s Suffering Servant. While there are in it several passages on Yahweh’s kingship, there are no references to the royal covenant with David. Instead, Yahweh’s suffering servant “is anonymous, and likely represents Israel or an eschatological figure. Israelite Kingship now refers only to the future exaltation of ‘one deeply despised, abhorred by the nations, the slaves of rulers’…If these chapters have room for human kingship, it is only eschatological.” Writing from the exilic perspective, Deutero-Isaiah doubles down on the inverse correlation: his “universal dominion” is no longer the expression of political hegemony, but it dissolves the link between religion and politics, where a high god’s rule is determined by the extent of the devotees’ empire. For Second Isaiah, Yahweh was so truly universal in divine rule that a foreigner, Cyrus the Persian, could be a tool of divine action. No one had made claims so radical for the deity to hold such universal dominion over all by ruling through a foreign power.

Again, it is not that other states, like Babylon, didn’t have around this time a notion of a One High God. But one cannot find such an odd inverse relationship. If in henotheism the political and metaphysical normally coincide by direct relationship, we are seeing here an inverse, almost like a photographic negative. Given this, Assmann and Gnuse see here the first truly universal deity, capable of transcending politics. Or, more

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703 GIT, 159. Or, Smith, “The Common Theology of the Ancient Near East,” 140 for a dozen gods who had extensive power “beyond their own lands,” or even rule all the world and humanity.
704 NoG, 260.
specifically, “The Jews did not invent the concept of a universal deity. But they were the only people who could express it ‘from below,’ strip it of political pretentions.”\textsuperscript{705} It seems no coincidence that we find Judaism express its most explicit monotheistic formulations either under threat from, or subjugation to, towering neighboring empires.\textsuperscript{706} Far from being an expression of imperial monotheism (or henotheism), “Israel’s monotheism emerged in the context of its lack of power in the face of empires, perhaps as a form of resistance to them.”\textsuperscript{707} We should not fail to see the irony that this monotheism “was arguably a form of notional imperialism on the part of a people with no claim or capacity to imperialism of its own.”\textsuperscript{708}

By Assmann, Smith, Gnuse, et al’s scholarly lead, we can see in ancient Israel both an evolution and a revolution. It adopted common, neighboring monolatrous or henotheistic elements but in a unique and even revelatory recasting. And this account allows for a possibly unintentional mixture of several realities over time: i.e. the vassal treaty, an idealized originary legend, an elevated prophetic movement, and a series of political breakdowns and tumult. And this mixture resulted in the symbols of hegemonic power being recast in a counter-construction to political power, or what Smith calls a “form of inverse hegemony.”\textsuperscript{709} Whatever forms of transcendence had previously bubbled up in Egypt or other cultures around this era, Assmann insists that the decisive “axial

\textsuperscript{705} NoG, 261.

\textsuperscript{706} GIT, 178; TOBM 149-66, esp 165.

\textsuperscript{707} GIT, 180; 222.

\textsuperscript{708} GIT, 225.

\textsuperscript{709} GIT, 183.
“breakthrough” happens in Israel’s monotheism. Cosmotheistic cultures had never clearly distinguished the political from the religious; nor had they ever abrogated the “claim to represent the divine sphere and to act on earth as a representative of the creator.”

5.7 Ban on Images and Political Representation

An important element in the disappearance of Israelite royalty, and the evidently “anti-state character of biblical monotheism,” is the ban on graven images. The core biblical meaning of idolatry and the ban on images, for Assmann, concerns “the legitimization of rulership in terms of divine representation.” When exactly aniconism and anti-idolatry emerges in Israel’s history is disputed. It may have been a minority position like the no-other-gods tradition; some of the early monolatrous prophets, like Hosea, show signs of anti-idolatry of the calf. We can also surmise that the lack of a temple (or money and artisans) for exilic Yahwists may have abetted aniconism. It certainly shows up strongly in and after the Maccabees (2nd century BCE) who violently rejected the cultic translatability of the Jewish god with Greek and Syrian/Seleucidan gods, their

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710 Assmann, “Axial ‘Breakthroughs’ in Ancient Egypt and Israel,” 149.

711 “With the ban on images, the distinction between true and false in the divine world, and with it the distinction between reason and madness, enters religion for the first time” (PM 103). “The ancient oriental state may be classified as a ‘representative theocracy.’ The states were ruled by state-gods...yet they ruled not directly but indirectly, through representatives such as the king, the sacred animals and the innumerable images in the temples...This sphere of representation is destroyed by the prohibition of images. The god of Israel rules directly, not indirectly. Every image would destroy the immediacy of his presence.” (MPC 158).


713 The origins and course of Israel’s anthropomorphism of God is not entirely clear. Even while it seems that “over the course of its history, Israelite religion reduced anthropomorphic depictions of Yahweh,” still “the avoidance of anthropomorphic imagery was by no means a general feature of Israelite religion after the Exile” (NOG, 212; EHG, 100, 102; e.g. Daniel 7; Isah 27:1; cf. Zech 14:4; 1 Enoch 14).
cults, and their hegemony. For, cultic translatability in this context clearly “served the purposes of foreign, royal power.”

Whenever precisely a strict ban on images appeared in Israelite history, its political consequences are crucial, cutting at the linkage between political and religious representation. This bears powerful liberative potentials, in that slavery and idolatry are closely linked in the exodus paradigm, wherein the people’s liberation from political oppression coincides with God’s emancipation from political representation. As such, the ban on images runs counter to archaic politics’ representative theocracy. As we have seen, Israel had been birthing a unique covenantal direct theocracy; and the ban on images is another key ingredient in this.

With the radical destruction of representation, the divine or “transcendental” sphere became independent of political institutions and was able to survive the Babylonian exile and the loss of sovereign statehood…Religion became an autonomous sphere, constituting and consolidating a vantage point from which all other spheres of culture, including the political, could be transformed.

By contrast, Akhenaten’s iconoclastic monotheism was the supreme expression of political sovereignty, a forced union of “political and religious salvation.” But in the Israelite form, monotheism again becomes virtually the photographic negative, wherein the transcendence of God does not found, but precludes, representation in a ruler. Assmann

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714 GIT, 283-286.

715 GIT, 286, 126. For Smith, the Jewish avoidance of “the Name,” may also suggest something of “an implicit claim against translatability.” GIT, 304. 1 Macc 1:11-15, 43, 52; 3:15; 2 Macc 5:15. “Morton Smith notes that before the Maccabean revolt Yahweh was identified in Jerusalem with Zeus and Dionysius” (GIT, 284).

716 GG 85.

717 GG 99.
clarifies of biblical monotheism, “this is not Akhenaten’s god, who was neither transcendent nor a god of history, but the sun.” While the Jewish ban weakened the link between political dominion and salvation, Akhenaten’s tight god-king relationship resembled nothing of a “political resistance movement.” It had no memory of a prophetic “critique of the state” and it never kept its religion alive as a stateless society of exiles. Thus, Assmann concludes, “I do not see in the ban on graven images a ‘religious arrogation of political power’ but quite the opposite, a blocking of such arrogation.” This blocking of arrogation I will revisit as “apophatic intolerance.”

The consequences of this block cannot be overexaggerated, as they attack not merely “false religion” but the very basis of ancient political legitimacy itself. Assmann again:

The state presents itself in its images, symbols, and ceremonies as a representative of the divine. From the viewpoint of the Bible, this is idolatry. From the viewpoint of Egypt, however, it is precisely for this that the state was created...Biblical political theology is the exact reverse...it is precisely the category of representation that points up the falseness of Pharaonic politics with respect to religion in its most obvious and abhorrent form, namely, the sphere of kings, images, and sacred animals.

We cannot call this ban on images a sheer escape from politics or a direct opposition to competing polities—as if this emerging monotheism simply implies

718 PM 47; GG77.

719 PM 131; Albertz, “Monotheism and Violence,” 386.

720 GG 87. Especially to the extent that, as Girard put it, many ancient gods were dead kings, there is something distinct about this “living” god, who continues to rule directly and not through a royal representative. Insofar as mimetic theory is correct that kingship is a byproduct of the victimage process, we can see how monotheism’s refusal of royal representation is also a “refusal to divinize victims.”
founding another kind of state. Rather, this is more an inverse or reverse politics, which does not have to simply mean a direct, oppositional conflict with or replacement of a political regime. Even though Israel was reconfiguring statist symbols, monotheism meant not so much the founding of a state as getting “rid of the oriental principle of statehood” and the birth of “a kind of counter-society in which the principle of statehood or kingship is permitted only minimal importance.”721 Instead of simply replacement politics, we have born in Jewish monotheism something of “an alternative life form,” where “perhaps for the first time in history a clear-cut distinction between state and society.”722 This likewise opens up an “Archimedean point from which to lift any given political system off its hinges.”723

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To sum thus far: through national breakdown, Israel may have lost the world, but it gained a soul. It lost political sovereignty to its overlords, but its collective identity and memory held onto a uniquely theologized “King,” to whom they ultimately owed fidelity apart from national fortunes. Particularly among a minority movement, energized by a no-other-gods theology, this meant refusing for centuries to translate this sovereign god with any other gods. This meant resisting political alliances or cultural assimilation, whether in subjugation or in diasporic host countries. This sovereign Yahweh could not be represented

721 GG 85. PM 45. We thus see why Isaac Deutscher refers to the Jews’ embrace of the nation-state as “the paradoxical consummation of the Jewish tragedy” (Said, Freud and the Non-European, 52; Isaac Deutscher, The Non-Jewish Jew and Other Essays (New York: Hill and Wang 1968, 35, 40).

722 GG 85; Assmann, “Axial ‘Breakthroughs’ in Ancient Egypt and Israel,” 149.

723 GG 75.
through the translatable signs of a political sovereign. All of this “tears apart the archaic unity of creation and dominion, or cosmic and political power, and to conceive of religion as a means of emancipation from the politico-cosmological power structure of the ancient world.”

We can admit of this liberative dimension even while acknowledging that this monotheism had in its genes an imperial, violent, political notion of monolatry and henotheism, or “monotheism from above.” Henotheism means a compact between divinity with politics, while its theology is never far from “veiled nationalism and imperialism.” If such imperial monotheism has any non-translatability, this is because empires can grow so large and eat up all competitors such that no other “valid” gods or sovereignties remain—just barbarians. Monotheisms from above, like Amun, Aten, or Marduk, have a “hidden God” because the sphere of violence containment has grown so ubiquitous it is no longer perceived.

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724 *GG* 75; *GIT*, 160; 327. Or: “Israel articulated nothing radically different from other ancient Near Eastern religions about Yahweh. Israelite religion came to be unique more in terms of ‘recognition of what God was not.’ God was not in the forces of nature, not to be represented by human or animal form, nor to be found in a multiplicity of forms. The emergence of monotheism entailed the final reduction of conflicting wills in the cosmos to one divine will” (*NOG*, 82).

725 *NOG* 22, 94, 170-1; Gnuse, “Breakthrough or Tyranny,” 85, 90f.

A problem with Gnuse’s assessment (“Breakthrough or Tyranny” 85), however, is he thinks the “Mosaic Distinction” animates only monotheism “from above,” as if the “from below” somehow sheds that intolerance. He simplistically regards a monotheism “from below” in a more democratic, liberal frame—centered upon “the people,” entailing “dignity, toleration, and peace.” He retains nuance when admitting that sometimes it was rather the educated religious elite that held back the mob violence of “the people” in their monotheistic, if misguided, religious zeal (90).

726 *NOG* 170.

727 “Empire theism short-circuited their own translatability, and that is the backdrop for Judaism’s untranslatability” (*GIT* 324).
A mature monotheism from below is like henotheism in reverse. While their implications are opposed like a photographic negative, they both share the same politically potent “intolerance.” Israel’s early germs of monolatry and its later monotheism both share the “general distinction between true and false in the realm of religion.” But it was only its monotheism from below that separates “religion from the overall system of culture, politics, morality, and law.”** Monotheism’s early monolatrous genetics were statist in orientation: the Deuteronomist strata “sought to control the state in order to carry out the social implications of their ideology,”* with a fervent intolerance under the supposed efforts of Asa, Elijah, Josiah, or Ezra-Nehemiah. And yet through the transformations we have outlined thus far, an inverted view of ancient political theology emerged most powerfully among exiles, who knew sovereignty only as a memory and wish, applying their “intolerance” in a counter-political manner.

Monotheism’s transformation of political symbols must be seen as a rope of many threads: a unique reemployment of the vassal-treaty concept, a prophetic schism, a polemical contradistinction of memory with the forgetful, the ban on images, etc. Each stems from a specific, contingent flow of events, and had they not to combined together in such force, we might not have seen the birth of exclusive monotheism. The “memory” aspect of this rope strengthens amidst exile and the loss of the crucial memory markers of

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**GG 84

*NOG, 84, 258. “The state was responsible for emergent monotheism more than any other group” (NOG, 100). “The Yahweh alone party which first appeared in the ninth century BCE supported this state sponsored trajectory” in a conventional summoneism (101). Mature monotheism is then not so much a simple “opponent” or monolatry or henotheism. It is more their transvaluation, their creative reconfiguration.
land and temple. This, as we will see, is aided by Israel’s intensive cultural memory techniques and the birth of “canon.”

5.8 Exile, Memory, and the Birth of Canon

The political meaning of idolatry, we have seen, had an especially powerful meaning under Josiah propaganda, wherein idolatry was cast as “forgetfulness.” Assmann thus helps connect the ban on images with practices of remembering. The Jewish attention to memory, he insists, constitutes the unique cultural achievement of monotheistic Judaism. With national destruction, and the loss of normal memory markers like the Temple and its cult, Judaism co-evolved with new memory techniques to keep the covenant—either that or assimilate into its host cultures. So, what was new here was not so much structural forms, like a one High God, but its meaning and application. Its notion of a directly covenanted people who must never forget their origins made for “an all-embracing framework” of life that no longer relied on the common archaic memory markers of place-based temples, monuments, tombs, political territories, etc. Rather, “all these places were transferred from the exterior to the interior”—i.e. from the locative to the utopian mode, from cultic to textual, as axial theory noted.

Exile provided the crucible that catalyzed such a transference. Monotheism more strongly emerges in Israel just as, in the sixth and fifth centuries BCE, its political functions

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730 CMEC 90.
731 CMEC 191. EHG, 151.
of the state “were absorbed by the Babylonian and Persian empires.” And instead of its culture also being absorbed, their cultural identity was increasingly based on Torah (and at certain times a temple) rather than a king and a palace. With a new genus of society now taking off from the nest, thereafter “religion and politics, or church and state, would remain separate spheres whose relationship had to be laboriously negotiated and whose reunification could be achieved only through force. Political theology was transformed into a critical discourse.”733

Judaism as an exilic and remembering culture “refused to become part of the social fabric,” in something of a “self-imposed isolation.” While Israel had attained monolatry and henotheism under political and geographical peripheral conditions, it was their being “culturally peripheral” in Babylon that “enabled them to attain monotheism.”734 While the ancient world was already honing the art of memory on a more individual level, Israel’s imperative to remember and stay faithful to its exodus covenant turns into a novel and profound breakthrough in collective-memory techniques that, Assmann argues, “had and has had no parallel in human history.”735

Ancient covenants did not only involve surveillance of one’s neighbor’s fidelity, as we saw is a consequence of adopting the common vassal-treaty model. Covenants also

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733 *GG* 86; *NOG* 104f, 150.
734 *NOG*, 213, 214.
735 *CMEC* 193; 204. It lacked not only historical reference but was even counter-historical wilderness against the Promised Land (*CMEC* 205).
required frequent public remembering. For example, Syrian kings encouraged regularized memory of oath-loyalty swearing with its subordinates—lest they treasonously forget their oaths. For example, the Sarsaru oath-ritual of Esarhaddon: “you speak in your hearts: Ishtar, she is close. But then, you will go back to your towns and districts, eat bread, and forget these oaths. However, when you drink from this water, you will remember and observe these oaths…” So too must the exodus covenant be regularly remembered in Jewish cultural memory. The Deuteronomist tells us that remembering the covenant required obligatory memorization by heart, continued teaching, inscription upon doorposts and body, public recitation at holidays, etc.—and, the memory technique par excellence, the Seder liturgy. The imperative to always remember the exodus covenant and partake in the Seder, lest they forget like the assimilated, is likely a variation on political memory-rituals like the Sarsaru oath-ritual.

But while some outer forms of Seder are evidently borrowed, its Jewish adaptation has no ancient parallel in its attention to detail, narrative, and elaborateness. This memory-work constitutes a uniquely stateless people while transforming the past of the exodus people into “our past.” While the pre-exilic prophets had used exodus imagery, it was

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736 There was a “common practice among the Hittites and Assyrians to read treaties publicly at regular intervals and for Babylonians to curse false copyists of legal agreements. These appear theologized in the Israelite usage” (CMEC 199, 200).

737 CMEC 201, 203. “When thou hast eaten and art full…beware thou forget not the Lord” (Deut 8:7-19). Hence the liminal imagery at doorposts, threshold reminders when one goes “into the world.”

738 CMEC 53, 196f: Awareness, Deut 6:6, 11:18; Education 6:7; Visibility 6:8, 11:18; Limitic symbolism 6:9, 11:21; Storage and publication 27:2-8; Festivals 16:3, 16:12; Oral tradition 31:19-21; Canonization as basis for literal observation 12:32, 4:2.

739 Mark Smith calls this “vertical translation,” wherein the god of the past, becomes our god, who was the god of our ancestors. Horizontal translation, by contrast is cross-cultural, and pertaining to the present (GIT, 305).
the Jewish community of exile that deepened it into “an art of memory that is based on the separation of identity from territory…outside the Promised Land.”

This is how memory and monotheism reciprocally deepened through exile and diaspora. Yahwism no longer enjoyed state supports and was now standing, as it were, on its own two feet.

We need not overly valorize this God with special pacific, universal, liberal qualities; it is reasonable to bear in mind that the monotheistic utterances of Deutero-Isaiah may stem from an inherited spirit of “exaggerated patriotism,” as Morton Smith writes. Yahwism could indeed have been animated, at times, with what might have looked like a strident populism to “Make Israel Great Again.” And yet my study suggests it is crucial to conceive how a possible break with jingoism could be afforded through this very energy.

A life saturated by attention to covenantal memory is intimately linked with the notion of living a life based on canonical Scriptures. Holy writings, of course, were not new in the world. But the notion of centering one’s life on interpreting and basing one’s life on them “was a new phenomenon in the history of writing as well as that of religion and civilization generally…No pagan religion had ever made similar claims.” As we saw, the exodus covenant had been established between Yahweh and a whole people, not just its ruler, or scribes, or priests. Thus, everyone is responsible for remembering and keeping the oath of the people. As such, the Jews became, en masse, an exegetical people.

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740 CMEC 192. To this we can also add Bernhard Lang’s idea that “monotheism arose in the exile to explain the reason for Israel’s destruction”: it was ultimately because of our sin, not the gods of other nations. NOG, 90


742 GG 120-1.
As Yerushalmi noted, we have in exilic Judaism the first time in history wherein “a sacred text ceased to be the exclusive property of the priestly class and became common property of the people. This represented the birth not only of Scripture but also of exegesis.” With the crystallization of canon, the interpreter, more than a priestly caste, begins to interpret the will of God.

The imperative to not forget coincides with canon: not adding, changing, or subtracting anything from the founding story and covenant (Deut 4:2). It is not that Judaism invented “canon”; this was a common textual technique for making ancient legal contracts unchangeable. But this legal technique of textual closure is now transposed into a distinctly “religious” realm. This further galvanized the unique religious notion of a Mosaic distinction, which “draws a definitive line between the canonical and the apocryphal,” between the covenant-faithful and apostates, between true and false religion. Living in the horizon of a canon through rigorous memory practices—a sanctified life in fulfillment of a sanctioned script—is a novel form of life in the ancient

743 GG 99.
744 GG 99f.
745 Deut 4:2; CMEC 200; GG chap 5.
746 CMEC 78. Canon is different from sacred texts which are “a kind of speech-temple, a presentification of the holy…it does not require any interpretation, but simply a ritually guaranteed recitation…A canonical text, however, embodies the normative and formative values of a community. It is the absolute truth. These texts must be taken to heart, obeyed, and translated into real life. That is why they need interpretation rather than recitation” (CMEC 79).

Thus, the birth of interpreters: the Israelite sofer, the Jewish rabbi, the Hellenistic philologos, the Islamic sheikh or mullah, the Indian Brahmin, and the sages of Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism. The earliest of these figures may have “received or gave orders within the existing political structure.” But with the deepening of canonization, this also involved a deepening “social differentiation, as it produced a position independent of the political, administrative, economic, legal, and even religious authorities” (CMEC 80).
world. It is closely related to Judaism’s exilic and diasporic enclave cultures, the nature of which ultimately “informed the final redaction of the biblical texts.”

While all ancient societies had some amount of or retrospective obligation to preserve its past, Israel developed *an extreme* and vivid narrative form. And while many polytheistic scriptures made demands upon human action, there was no ancient “parallel for the claim the Torah holds on the totality of human existence.” The development of an elaborate set of laws, as canonized in the Torah, to be regularly reflected upon through hermeneutical attention “would have been totally unnecessary in a self-evident culture. Whoever lived according to these laws could not forget for one minute who he was or where he belonged.” This extreme attentiveness crosses the threshold into “secondary” religions with a notion of “conversion” and “commitment” that is foreign to primary religions. The character of such commitment is memory, or better, *countermemory*: a refusal to forget a people-wide commitment.

5.9 Post Exile

The Persian Empire released several thousand Jews from Babylonian captivity around 536 BCE, at which point they were granted a territory that would remain

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747 We have evidence of the Septuagint concluding that it must be preserved unchanged in the 2nd century BCE (The Letter of Aristeas, §§310-312). For the New Testament, we begin around the 39th Easter epistle of Athanasius with the list of holy scriptures (CMEC 87-88).

748 CMEC 90.

749 MPC, 145. e.g. Pythagoreans, Orphics, Platonists, philosophical schools, sectarian movements of early Judaism, Gnosticism, Hermeticism (MPC, 145).

750 CMEC 185
subordinate to the Persians, Yehud (Judah). As the new overlords until 323BCE, Persia may have facilitated Israel’s canonization of the Torah.\footnote{Ezra 7:14. Indeed the Persian Empire was likely responsible for a sea change in canonization in that era, through their imperial guardianship of many local traditions and their attempts to rule diverse local cultures at distance.} But whatever form the Torah took around that time, it was not a sovereign, territorial Legal Constitution; it was more likely in a semi-depoliticized “wisdom literature” genre than executable legislation. So, while post-exilic Judaism could never fully legislate a distinctly sovereign Jewish law (and many parties certainly tried to, ultimately culminating in a few liberation revolts to be discussed\footnote{See for example, Jeremiah Cataldo, \textit{Breaking Monotheism: Yehud and the Material Formation of Monotheistic Identity}, Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies 565 (New York, NY: Bloomsbury, 2014).}, its sub-political way of life as codified in the nascent Torah became a crucial point of conflicting interpretations. A chief contention was between the communities of Jews who had for generations suffered captivity and exile from Assyrians or Babylonians, on the one hand, and, the “Jewish” communities who had remained in the land during those eras, forming mixed-marriages with neighboring cultures or the former conquerors on the other.\footnote{CMEC 188. He also suggests that the rigorist party may have \textit{provoked} the growth of the more generous and syncretistic accounts of Jewish identity.} Quotes surround “Jewish” here because the former exilic parties, who mostly won the debate in forming the canon, saw these groups precisely as not true Jews. They were painted with the brush Josiah had used: the assimilated idolaters. Only now the conflict was exaggerated by the growing importance of canon.\footnote{CMEC 183.}
Thus, the more boldly emerging Mosaic distinction in post-exilic Judaism produced a fissure of at least two contending Jewish positions concerning neighboring cultures and religions: 1) the Deuteronomic tradition and the No-other-Gods movement, as roughly traced above, played the more rigorist role, while 2) the more syncretistic parties were painted as the idolaters. These battle lines left traces in the biblical text. The book of Exodus, for example, appears to have been useful to the rigorist, exclusivist party in this debate, in contrast with the Patriarchal out-of-Mesopotamia narratives of Genesis. Assmann sees the antinomies of this era playing out as follows, with the Exodus-rigorist emphasis first, and Patriarchal-laxist narratives second:

- Strict observance of law vs. Genealogical belonging (circumcision),
- Conquest of land vs. Purchase/Coexistence,
- Non-contracts with outsiders vs. Contracts,
- Exclusive vs. Non-exclusive,\(^{755}\)
- Aggressive vs. Pacifist,
- Particular Liberator vs. Universal Creator,
- Alliance with a people (the chosen people of exodus) vs. An individual (Abraham),
- Nontranslatable religion vs. Melchizedekian translatability.

Though the categorization is simplistic, it helps us identify how and why differing rigorist and laxist agendas could co-exist within the same scriptures. The Priestly strata

\(^{755}\) This debate is also evident, for example, in Ruth’s cross cultural-marriage as distinct from the Ezra/Nehemiah on policy of forced-divorce with any foreigners.
appears to have synthesized the two into a larger narrative, reconciling these apparently irreconcilable camps.\textsuperscript{756} The emulsifier was the Joseph legend, which narrated how the patriarchs got to Egypt, thereby creating a single, long-term saga between the two post-exile parties.

The Torah’s combination of these apparently incompatible parties is a creative, unique, complex achievement. “This highly charged antagonism within the Bible undoubtedly represents one of the secrets of its worldwide success.”\textsuperscript{757} It combined into one narrative the existential themes of being “strangers and aliens” in this world, with all of its separatist rigors, as well as the cosmotheistic feeling of being “at home” in the world, with its osmotic inclusions. Judaism thus wove together seemingly opposed religions—the different genera of primary and secondary religion. Judaism’s unique reconfiguration of ancient political theology redirected “zeal” from the sphere of state-creation and maintenance into a transcendent allegiance. In redirecting the zeal of the state and setting up a “countersociety,” monotheism helped inaugurate “the discovery of an alternative realm of human commitment and investment beyond the traditional realms of state, society, and nature.”\textsuperscript{758}

\textsuperscript{756} Assmann sees the priestly tradition (dispersed throughout the Torah), oriented toward the Jerusalem temple and sacerdotal readers, as cosmotheistic and “scarcely differing” from the primary religions of that day (\textit{PM} 8–9).

\textsuperscript{757} \textit{PM} 10.

\textsuperscript{758} \textit{GG} 125.
5.10 Zeal, Active and Passive

And yet this counter-society can still regress and repoliticize with violence. Critical, prophetic, anti-statist zeal is, as we have seen, genetically linked with violent, political zeal, found in vassal treaties and imperial subordination. Both are imbued with a strong sense of intolerance that can manifest politically in active or passive forms—both revolutionary zealotry and pacific martyrdom. Monotheistic intolerance does indeed involve the possibility of a new kind of violence: violence toward those outside the truth of the canon. This is a kind of violence we didn’t see in the polytheistic system, for it stems from a canonical distinction between religious truth and falsehood and is thus an “extra-systemic” violence. It is directed “primarily against members of one’s own group who, in one way or another, have fallen out of the system. It is extra-systemic but mostly introverted violence.”

This active zeal in the post-exile era, aiming to restore the kingdom to Israel, is exemplary in the Maccabean revolt (167-160 BCE). Assmann classifies the Maccabean-era Jews who refused Hellenic assimilation as the first executors of uniquely “religious” violence. While it is true that many other polytheistic heroes had preferred death to ignominy, the whole Maccabean notion “dying for God was something new.” The intolerant zeal that the Deuteronomistic history had recast from Assyrian loyalty, centuries prior, was emulated literally by the Maccabees, as they sought to zealously live a “life in

759 GG 32.
760 CMEC 188.
761 MPC 144.
quotes,” fulfilling scripture. Taking passages from Numbers and Deuteronomy perhaps more literally than the founding events were in actual history, the Maccabean Mattathias took up arms against the Seleucids: “he was seized with the passionate zeal for the Law and he did what one Phinehas did to Simri”\(^762\)—viz. kill idolaters during the exodus. The revolt is recounted in our Maccabean texts “with pride, not with horror.”\(^763\) The captured Maccabees even “fulfilled scripture” in their dying, under pain of torture from the Seleucids, with the scriptures on their lips.

While this revolt might be considered “the first religiously motivated resistance movement known to history,” we should notice in its extensive killing of fellow “Jews.” This easily overlooked fact suggests the revolt was perhaps more a religiously motivated civil war disguised as an anti-assimilation political revolt.\(^764\) The war aimed not merely at the destruction of the Seleucids, but the cleansing of Jewish apostates and collaborators, for whom a special violence was reserved. The Maccabees extinguished “the life of entire Jewish towns and cities that had adopted the Hellenistic way of life according to the treatment that Deuteronomy prescribed…”\(^765\) This may have left traces in the redaction of Joshua, wherein the conquest of Canaan legends suspiciously resemble the religious character of the Maccabean revolution: Joshua’s “neighboring tribes” (now the Seleucids) were treated with the common ancient warring practice of taking booty and slaves, but

\(^{762}\) 1 Macc 2:24; Numbers 25; Deut 7:2: “You shall conquer them and utterly destroy them. You shall make no covenant with them nor show mercy to them.”

\(^{763}\) MPC 143.

\(^{764}\) CMEC 64; ATM 120.

\(^{765}\) GG 119; ATM 121.
complete annihilation was reserved for those living nearest to Palestine (Jews collaborating with Hellenists).\textsuperscript{766}

In any case, the Hasmonean regime installed by the Maccabees was eventually crushed by Roman invasion, under which Jews remained subject until the dual destructions of 70CE and 135CE, subsequent to revolts. Jewish depoliticization, for the most part, can be seen as effectively sealed thereafter—wherein most Jews found a way to imagine living without an Israelite king.\textsuperscript{767} Judaism from then on, Assmann generally concludes, somehow “matured” and went beyond a theology of jealousy and zealotry at the same time that the ideal of zeal, of dying for God, was being adopted by the early Christians…The rabbis deliberately overlooked the passages that call on a faithful Jew to take up arms against the “abominations” of “paganism.”\textsuperscript{768}

The politics of cult and sacrifice were not so much dissolved after the Jewish revolts but transformed into a different register. No longer having even a subordinate Herodian Temple in which to offer sacrifice, both Jews and its offshoot sect of Christians, reconfigured sacrifice. For Jews, sacrifice transformed largely into prayer and study of the Torah. For Christians, it became a mixture of martyrrial- and Eucharistic sacrifice.\textsuperscript{769} We can rightly regard this Jewish and Christian reconfiguration of sacrifice as crucial to the

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\textsuperscript{766} GG 118.
\textsuperscript{767} Mack, The Christian Myth, 134.
\textsuperscript{768} GG 126.
\end{flushleft}
epochal redefinition of religion itself, the Axial shift from primary to secondary religion.\textsuperscript{770} A more diachronic study would extend these observations into a study of how monotheism in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam worked itself out in the coming centuries in relation to the political sphere.

Speaking normatively, Assmann regards the Maccabean and bar Kochba revolts as not consonant with the mature potentiality of monotheism. Monotheism’s best self is not in its monolatrous origins, but in its sub-sovereign conditions from below. In concert with a majority rabbinic tradition, he regards Maccabean revolutionary violence as backtracking on the Jewish “progress in intellectuality.”\textsuperscript{771} Taking those violent revolts as exceptions from the much larger implications of Jewish political theology, Assmann concludes, “Judaism is the only [monotheistic religion] that has never turned the implications of violence and intolerance into historical reality precisely because it has relegated the final universalizing of truth to eschatology and not to history.”\textsuperscript{772}

But, while the Maccabean active intolerance is regrettable, we must appreciate how it is but the distorted flip side to the mature passive intolerance that monotheism can engender. If there is revolutionary value in monotheism, it comes through its intolerance. Its unique benefit comes with this liability. Its passive zeal is cut from the same cloth as

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{770} “It was elsewhere that Christians had to establish their true citizenship…in no case could the \textit{civitas Dei} be identified with the \textit{civitas terrena}. I cannot insist enough on this overthrow of the categories in which the very idea of religion had been inscribed until then’” (Stroumsa, \textit{The End of Sacrifice}, 80, 77).}

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{771} \textit{ATM} 124.}

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{772} \textit{GG} 111; Gideon Aran and Ron E. Hassner, in “Overview of Religion and Violence in Jewish Tradition,” in \textit{Oxford Handbook of Religion and Violence} eds. Michael Jerryson, Mark Juergensmeyer, and Mark Kitts (Cambridge, MA: Oxford University Press, 2013). Assmann’s position on this seems in tension with his admission that the fall of the fortress at Masada now serves as a foundational story for the modern state of Israel (\textit{CMEC} 59).}
its active, persecuting zeal.\textsuperscript{773} The Bible thus contains both monotheisms from above and below. As such, the truly practical implication of the Mosaic distinction is not so much how it divides Israel against polytheistic pagans, but the divide “between monotheistic Yahwism of the exile and beyond with the earlier Yahwism of the pre-exilic era\textsuperscript{774}—between a monotheism from above and a monotheism from below. The latter is potentially liberative from the former, even as it re-uses the former’s “intolerance” and political symbols in a new way. The cost of this liberation, Assmann admits, is the possibility of religious violence and turning into an absolutized universalism.\textsuperscript{775} It is right to say that this danger should be mitigated by maintaining the separation of church from state, as Albertz \textit{et al} have noted.\textsuperscript{776} We can admit this while also recognizing that it was monotheism itself that helped \textit{birth} this very separation of religious from political power itself.

This passive intolerance involves a \textit{self}-exclusion from the world, aimed at protecting its fidelity to God by practices of memory.\textsuperscript{777} “This act of self-isolation has no


\textsuperscript{774} \textit{NOG}, 125.

\textsuperscript{775} \textit{ATM}, 126.

\textsuperscript{776} Rainer Albertz, “Monotheism and Violence,” 386.

\textsuperscript{777} “Our lawgiver…fenced us about with impregnable palisades and with walls of iron, to the end that we should mingle in no way with any of the other nations…revering the one and mighty God above the whole creation…he has…prescribed purifications in matters of food and drink and touch and hearing and sight” (\textit{Letter of Aristeas} trans. Moses Hadas (New York: Ktav Pub House, 1973), 139, 142, 157). Aristeas, an Alexandrian diasporic Jew during the time of Ptolemy, is here redeploying an old Egyptian notion (paralleled in the ANE) of a cultural wall in the face of conflict, or the “brazen wall,” which referred to the king who protected his country, soldiers, and vassals (\textit{CMEC} 177). But Israel’s prophetic schism added to this a separation of religion from political power (\textit{CMEC} 183-184).
need to resort to violence, or at any rate to persecute those who hold differing beliefs.”

As such, Assmann argues a mature monotheism must sublimate and humanize its inherited intolerance into political patience. This involves transforming antagonism into dispute and dialogue, and even the practice courageous nonviolence. Zealand as such expresses what I have called “apophatic intolerance,” a refusal of the representations of the Absolute in the political sphere. For “true religion” in this account of monotheism means the refusal of political idolatry, which is the “false religion” that correlates divinity with the political. “Jewish messianism was a step in this direction because it postponed the full political fulfillment of total religion at the end of history. Another anti-totalistic step was Jesus’ teaching to ‘give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s,’ and also the statement ‘My kingdom is not of this world.”

The “religious violence” of active intolerance differs from passive, martyrial intolerance in a way that, again, is like a photographic negative. The two are wrongly conflated when we call religious suicide bombers “martyrs.” The word “martyr” ought to be reserved for occasions where a passive intolerance of refusal incurs but does not execute violence. This is dramatized in pacific sacrificing for peace by peace, evidenced in not only in Jesus’ love of enemies (and the many nonviolent Jewish movements around his

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778 PM 17.

779 GG 114. “We need to hold fast to the distinction between true and false, to clear concepts of what we feel to be irreconcilable with our convictions, if these convictions are to retain their strength and depth. But we will no longer be able to ground this distinction in revelations that have been given once and for all...we must make the Mosaic distinction the object of incessant reflection and redefinition...if it is to remain, for us, the indispensable basis for an advance in humanity” (PM 120; GG 126; Kirsch, God against the Gods, 89).

time\textsuperscript{781}), but also the modern peaceable activism of, say, Indian decolonization, the United States’ Civil Rights movement, Lehmah Gbowee’s Nigerian movement, and so on. In such cases, peaceable means and ends remain tightly united, without any of the calculus of attaining peace through violence.\textsuperscript{782} The “sacrifice” for these works of justice is indeed costly, severe, and a kind of passive intolerance. And yet, while violent/active zeal and pacific/passive zeal both receive their power from “intolerance,” they are deeply opposed in meaning and practice. Assmann thus writes that monotheism ultimately means for us “the liberation of man from the omnipotence of political power...Religion can exert its counter-power against the political only if it has recourse to totally different means and values....”\textsuperscript{783}

It nonetheless remains a possibility for monotheism to revert to a compacted god-political unity. Monotheism’s symbols do not guarantee a healthy, perfect, sustained division of God from the political order. Wherever monotheistic religions have insisted on the direct political realization of religious truth and forced the union of salvation and political dominion—like we saw in Akhenaton or the Maccabees—“whether in the form of theocracy, Byzantine caesaropapism, or the usurpation of profane authority by spiritual leaders,” Assmann regards these as regressions from the potentiality of monotheism. This is akin to the Constantinian fall of the Church so emphasized in Anabaptist theology, where

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\textsuperscript{781} See Richard Horsley, \textit{Jesus and Empire: The Kingdom of God and the New World Disorder} (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2003).
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\textsuperscript{783} \textit{GG} 145.
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monotheism devolves from critical distance into legitimization of the state, becoming the ruling order. Assmann identifies this corruption also especially in Christianity and Islam when they “universalize” the Mosaic distinction and paint those outside their religions as categorically outside of “truth,” which especially paves the way for religious violence.

In sum, when “religion” becomes a distinct sphere from the political, as Assmann’s overall theory suggests, they can slam back together with greater force than before. This possibility of violent relapse is the price of monotheism. And yet Assmann reminds us for what this price has been paid. Monotheism indeed means exodus; it means “the liberation of mankind from the constraints of the powers of the world, of the given.”

5.11 Monotheism is Worth the Price of Its Intolerance

Given Assmann’s appreciation of both the cost and value of the Mosaic distinction, I think we can put to rest some of the critiques that have dogged his theory. In sum, Assmann’s critics have read him as arguing that monotheism’s intolerance and untranslatability is simply “bad,” while polytheism’s translatability is the kind of good tolerance we need for a pluralistic world. Mark Smith lodges this criticism in his GIT, which is framed as a rejoinder to Assmann and any who (seem to) claim that god-translatability and polytheism are a more pacific theology. I have shown, however, that this is a position Assmann clearly does not hold. Smith’s GIT is thus an exquisitely detailed

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784 GG 89. “Religion is now [theoretically] constituted as a sphere with its own normativity, which might even override the political normativity of the state. In political practice, however, the pagan principles of indistinction and representation frequently return even under the conditions of monotheism” (GG 29; 86; PM 47f).

785 PM 18.

786 GG 125.
shot at a wrong target when he critiques Assmann by refuting most his book- and chapter-titles, not his content:

Assmann’s construal of monotheism as an intolerant form of religion represents a polemic against traditional Christianity. The point is arguably clearer from the title of his book, Die Mosaische Unterscheidung: Oder der Preis des Monotheismus. The second part of this title makes a claim that monotheism itself has taken a terrible toll…this message is represented in the very title of the book’s final chapter, “Abolishing the Mosaic Distinction: Religious Antagonism and Its Overcoming.” …he takes sides in the contemporary debate over theism and belief787…he wishes to hold up translatability as a model of religious tolerance in contrast with the religion of “the Mosaic distinction.”788

But in that book and chapter of Assmann’s he argues quite the opposite of any abolition of the Mosaic distinction. He argues that monotheism’s price, though high, has been worth it; and any theological efforts to abolish the Mosaic Distinction—a long tradition of efforts we sketched at the beginning of our Freud chapter—are in fact mislead, futile, and wrong.789 If anything, Assmann’s appraisal of Mosaic intolerance could be critiqued as too optimistic about monotheism. For, even while Assmann emphasizes the originally violent semantics of exodus/conquest/Asa/Josiah/et al, he largely dismisses these cases of likely merely-fantasized violence and residues of monolatry, only realized

787 E.g. Assmann can agree with the following from Smith: “translatability often served empires or empire cultures over and against local cultures, in short in the interests of political and cultural domination…Ancient Israel developed a critique of translatability as an act of resistance against empire…translatability does not offer a model of tolerance for the modern world” (GIT, 28).

788 GIT, 326. Smith’s inability to countenance a beneficent or liberative meaning of “intolerance” limits his work, inclining him into an unnecessary emphasis on how Israel’s monotheism had tolerant and translatable underpinnings, or was at least ambivalent.

789 The same misreading applies to Smith presuming that Assmann thinks the Mosaic distinction characterized Israel from its origins (GIT, 324), which he obviously does not.
in the exceptional Maccabean and bar Kochba revolts. If anything, Assmann downplays
monotheistic violence as mostly that of a potentiality and a relapse, not an essence.

Joseph Ratzinger in *Truth and Tolerance*, like Smith, also critiques Assmann as
trying to abolish the Mosaic Distinction, and thus misses Assmann’s point. When
Ratzinger tells us “the gods were by no means always peaceful and interchangeable. They
were just as often, indeed more often, the reason for people using violence against each
other,” we can simply move on, knowing that Assmann agrees and has more subtle
points to argue about the value, costs, and political nature of Mosaic intolerance and
untranslatability.

Assmann’s position is *not* trying to abolish the Mosaic distinction for its intolerant
exclusion of polytheistic gods. The Mosaic distinction for him inaugurates a different
genus of God and religion, a novel stratum of thought, which radically divides and
reconfigures politics and religion. It is almost as profound and consequential as the birth
of the subjunctive in thought and speech. Assmann is not repeating the Enlightenment
attempts at abolishing the Mosaic distinction and dull down any difference between the
paradigm of Egypt vs. Israel. Assmann initially and mistakenly saw this in Freud’s *Moses
and Monotheism*. But, while Freud’s efforts were too speculative and simplistic, he

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790 Ratzinger has the excuse of having released his book the same year as Assmann published his explicit clarifications in *PM*. This critique is owed as well to Sloterdijk (*God’s Zeal* 151-154) and Cliteur (*Monotheistisch dilemma*, 191-194), who refer to Assmann superficially as yet another critic of monotheistic violence (Van Riessen, “A Violent God?” 186).


792 Erich Zenger also falsely characterized Assmann as arguing that the Mosaic distinction “has brought so much suffering and violence into the world that it ought finally to be done away with” (*PM* 6).

793 Assmann initially though Freud was trying to abolish the Mosaic distinction, but “I now think that Freud was trying, on the contrary, to present the Mosaic distinction (in the form of the ban on graven
nonetheless upheld monotheistic intolerance as something we must learn to appreciate and sublimate. Freud and Assmann both point us toward integrating the intolerance and zeal of monotheistic anti-political theology today, amidst contending plural communities and democracy. This “progress of intellectuality ought not to be relinquished, no matter how dearly it may have been purchased.”

The importance of the Mosaic distinction is its making possible a critical perspicacity toward the political realm, an Archimedean lucidity that relativizes the all political imaginaries in light of an absolute truth that we do not possess. Regina Schwartz, by contrast, may validly critique monotheistic transcendence as creating absolutist certainty, jingoistic pride in having the “true religion,” and pathological ownership of truth. But we must also consider the photographic negative of this: the emphatic divine difference introduced in monotheism also reveals our own relative grasp on that absolute, that we do not possesses this truth nor can it be represented in the political, or any, realm. This is in fact, as Voegelin argues, the very nature of monotheistic “intolerance.” Paradoxically, such an absolute and exclusive truth—as housed in the idea

images) as a seminal, immensely valuable, and profoundly Jewish achievement, which ought on no account to be relinquished” (PM 86; ME 5).

Likewise, for Girard, however much it might court apocalypse, the truth of the victim cannot and should not be relinquished. Every attempt to cast out the truth of the victim will only re-illuminate its truth.


“The break with early tolerance results…from the profounder insight that no symbolization through analogues of existential order in the world can even faintly be adequate to the divine partner on whom the community of being and its order depend...The horror of a fall from being into nothingness...
of a “true religion”—relativizes our grasp on this truth. The Absolute, yes, can absolutize; but it can also relativize. This sense of “truth” knows that it does not know. 798

Assmann entirely opposes any return to a polytheistic translatability or dulling down of the Mosaic distinction. Rather, we must continually contemplate how this Absolute is known. That is, if the Mosaic distinction refers to “true religion,” what is truth? On this point, on the content of the Mosaic distinction, Assmann admittedly devotes little attention. He briefly draws on Lessing and Mendelssohn’s “weak” notion of truth: a permeable openness, an ongoing pursuit of truth through reasoned discourse. 799 This means that one cannot “ground” religious truth only in “revelation,” without any appeals to reason. Rather, Lessing wrote, “the development of revealed truths into truths of reason is absolutely necessary if the human race is to be assisted by them.” 800 Without this leaven of reason, monotheistic faith ossifies into what Sloterdijk calls a monotheism of “personal supremacism,” where our reason plays the role of servile vassal in an “extreme will to obey the most rigid laws and commandments,” however arbitrary or unreasonable (i.e. an extremist Divine Command Theory). 801 Overall, however, Assmann does not theologically motivates an intolerance which no longer is willing to distinguish between stronger and weaker gods but opposes the true god to the false gods” (OH 1, 9).

798 Hence, when St. Paul wrote “now that you know God…” he immediately qualified: “rather, are known by God.” This is a revelation in concealment—that we “see through a glass dimly” (Gal 4:9; 1 Cor 13:12).

799 GG 145; ATM, 127.

800 Toshimasa Yasukata, Lessing’s Philosophy of Religion and German Enlightenment (Oxford University Press, 2002), 107.

801 By contrast, Sloterdijk refers to a preferable “impersonal supremacism” within monotheism, which treats reason as not the antipode of, but a participation in the divine (Van Riessen, “A Violent God?” 184).
elaborate on this weak notion of truth, deliberately eschewing “any discussion of the revelatory content of… the Mosaic distinction.”\(^{802}\) And his passing remarks on Christianity mostly emphasize its special danger in absolutist application of the Mosaic distinction, or repeat Freud’s critique of Christianity regressing from monotheism into mythological ritualism. I take this as a reason, therefore, to use the next chapter to sketch, using Girard, a Christian theology of “monotheism,” attending especially to where it seems to have regressed from monotheism in its scapegoat king.

For Girard, we will see, the answer to “what is Truth?” is no less than the “foundational” status of the victim in human culture, thought, and religion. In sum, the Mosaic distinction for Girard is the same thing as the “Victim distinction”—the ascendant awareness of the hidden victim of the political, and siding with it. The division of God from the victim mechanism corresponds with the Mosaic division of God from the political—and ultimately the cosmos. Girard thus suggests more explicit content to the Mosaic distinction than Assmann. But, as we will explore next chapter, this “absolute Truth” of the victim is revealed not through triumphant domination but only when it is being cast out by our violent blindness.\(^{803}\) As such, this “Truth” is not “strong” but recessive. Girard echoes Assmann in appreciating that this “distinction” is indeed potentially dangerous, and intolerant, but that is nonetheless worth it. The biblical division


\(^{803}\) TH, 235.
of God from the scapegoat is dangerous in the relative, as it unsettles the ordering power of political symbols, but worth it in the revelation of “truth.” “True religion” unveils victims while false religion occludes them. The absolute distinction of right and wrong religion concerns the distinction between Pharaoh and slave, victimizer and victim. For the political is founded on the victim, as exemplified in the body of Osiris, the drama with Seth, and all their archaic parallels. Girard helps makes the distinction between true and false religion not arbitrary, but in fact of critical insight. More on this in our next chapter.

5.12 Conclusion

The politics of translatability and tolerance in the polytheistic framework was incapable of transcending the falsehoods of religio-political representation. The monotheistic ban on idolatry, in concert with the many other factors explored here, steered Yahwism away from the political theology we saw in the Egyptian case study. Whether compared with the ancient cults of kingship, Seth, Ba’al, or representative theocracies, Jewish monotheism inaugurated an exodus from such representation and political theology.

We are indebted to monotheism today. The separation of religion from politics, or God from the cosmos, is not a universal idea that always existed. It birthed and grew at contingent times, places, and ways. Even if the Mosaic distinction narrates its origins through the infamous stories of active-intolerance and violence, this zeal has also helped birth a novel passive-intolerance of tyranny, a critique of and a desacralization of political order itself. Although “Egypt” is a coarse and polemical metonymy, against which “Israel” symbolizes truth, the way past the apparent intolerance of this dichotomy is not to reject
false/true criteria applied to religions, societies, and cultures. Rather, we must search for the criteria of this distinction. What exactly makes “Egypt” “false” and “Israel” “true”? The seemingly conciliar idea of “the truth in all religions” becomes toothless, especially when Girard joins this conversation, if it fails to penetrate the question of victimization, the “falseness of Pharaonic politics,” of injustice and our blindness to it.

The political effects of monotheism, and particularly the Mosaic Distinction, made for a division of God from politics and a de-divinization of the world. This situates monotheism at the roots of, not opposed to, “secularism”—at least in the sense of separating divine royalty from political power. Monotheism critically distances the political from the theological in refusing to immanentize the Absolute. All politics, rather, are relativized against a greater eschatological horizon under biblical revelation. Assmann’s detecting in monotheism a fundamental break between religion and politics also shines light on Girard’s lapidary comment that three quarters of what he says is already in Saint Augustine. For my account of monotheism suggests a “two cities” theology, wherein the heavenly city is simply not any city of this world. For Augustine, distinguishing the heavenly from the earthly city meant grave recognition of how “earthly peace” is founded upon victims. It’s not that pagans like Tacitus couldn’t admit that the

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805 René Girard, When These Things Begin: Conversations with Michel Treguer trans Trevor Merrill (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 2014), 196.

806 Augustine critiques how the Emperor Augustus had through injustice and war “wrenched a limp and exhausted liberty from the Romans” and “reduced everything to the decision of the king” (City of God §3.21, 30; 18:22, 46). His critical distance is matched by a patience amidst eschatological incompletion: despite the ostensible peace,
*Pax Romana* made a desolation and called it peace\textsuperscript{807}; it is that Christianity constructed an entire religious worldview and distinct ecclesial society upon their separation.

But if we are to speak of monotheism separating God from the victim mechanism, how does this fit with the evident re-unification of God with the victim in Christ? Does this not backtrack on the monotheistic commitment? We saw this critique in Freud, and it stands in Islamic and Jewish traditions, concerning Christ’s divinity and/or the Trinity.\textsuperscript{808} My next chapter will synthesize Girard’s attempted solution to this problem while developing upon it, considering how dividing and re-uniting God with the Victimage-mechanism makes for a paradoxical monotheism.

\textsuperscript{807} Tacitus, *De vita et moribus Iulii Agricolae*, XXX.

\textsuperscript{808} E.g. Quran 4:171; 5:73, 116; 18:88-93; 23:91; 112:1-4
CHAPTER 6:

JESUS CHRIST AND INTOLERANCE:

OR, MONOTHEISTIC REVELATION WITHOUT RIVALRY

Early Christian theologians had to contend with, among many problems, the question of relating Christ’s divinity with Jewish and Hellenic monotheism. Did a divine Son mean *two* gods and a regression into polytheism? Conciliar Christology aimed to settle these controversies, resulting in the famous Trinitarian formula of one God and three persons, keeping Christian plurality from violating divine unity. But the preceding chapters suggest that what is distinctly consequential about monotheism is not so much the idea of “Divine oneness.” Again, this had already been generally achieved in polytheism and ought to be decentered from our contemplation of monotheism. Rather, Assmann’s foregrounding the Mosaic distinction’s unique intolerance and the notion of “cosmotheism”—i.e. the compaction of God with the cosmos and politics in a unified

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process—suggests that exploration of Christianity’s relationship to monotheism must consider not God’s oneness but God’s division from, the cosmos, and politics.

But if we are to accept the claims from our last chapter that monotheism involved a “separation” of God from the political sphere and cosmos, this will bring us to consider Girard’s notion that monotheism divided God from the victimization process that founds and animates human culture. This, and the striking Christian image of a divinized victim, or a victimized divinity. In light of the seeming parallels between Jesus Christ and, say, Osiris’ murder and rising, ought we not classify Christianity as cosmotheistic? Do we not have in Christianity, as Girard asked, a badly disguised polytheism, a “myth diverse influences have modified but that is not essentially different from the ancient myths of death and resurrection”? Or, put in more political terms, if monotheism theoretically separates religion from politics, doing away with deified kings, what do we make of Jesus Christ as a divine king?

These questions all fit within the broader dilemma of how exactly to “separate religion from politics.” Consider two ideal types in ways to separate them: one is evidenced in the history of Christianized empires from Constantine onward, which employs what Jonathan Z. Smith called the ancient political distinction between power and purity: the king is powerful but impure (as a symbol of violence, the executioner, etc.), while the

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810 TOB, 39, 59.
812 Monotheism’s rejection of political representation as idolatry seemingly includes “exaltation of a mere human being to divine or semi-divine status” (Gnuse, “Breakthrough or Tyranny,” 86).
priest is powerless yet pure.\textsuperscript{813} This configuration allows for a pseudo-separation of religion and politics that conceals a deeper compatibility. This is visible in Eusebius’ imperial theology, wherein the divine Christ appears as the transcendent sovereign, with Constantine as his deputy.\textsuperscript{814} Even though the emperor is dedivinized in Christian empires, the religio-political compact abides, is even strengthened under the false pretense of separation. One could rightly investigate the political history of the West using this pseudo-division as a heuristic.\textsuperscript{815}

Alternatively, one might conceive of the separation of religion and politics under a more explicitly depoliticized approach: monotheism inaugurates a pacific universalism that sheds political division. Monotheism as such is a sheer dialectic break with primary religion, denuded of any contact with the world’s violence, with rituals, with myth. In its place, theologians may invoke a society beyond hegemony, beyond particularist identities, beyond exclusion, beyond violence, beyond hierarchies, beyond religion, beyond us-versus-them thinking. The most suspect symbol in this framework is Christ’s “blood sacrifice,” evidence of the Church’s failure to cleanse itself of scapegoating and a wrathful divinity. Girard regarded these types of monotheism as seeking to “move God so far away from any involvement in the scapegoat mechanism that they view with suspicion any

\textsuperscript{813} Mack, \textit{The Christian Myth}, 130, 143, 172.


\textsuperscript{815} See, e.g. Agamben, \textit{The Kingdom and the Glory}, \textit{op cit.}
contact with it in religious thought and symbolism.”

Both extremes of “separating” religion and politics are insufficient. They either re-politicize or depoliticize faith; both privatize faith. In the first Constantinian case, it is a universalizing aim for global theo-political dominance, perhaps for a Christian nation, perhaps just the insistence on “religious freedom” to retain the bipolar power dynamic: the realist state rules the body and facts, while the idealist church gets the soul and values. In the depoliticizing case, it is a rhetorical universalism transcending all differences and conflicts. The first sees enemies as defeatable through the triumphant Truth of Christ; the second says the problem is having enemies in the first place. The first’s key image is Christ the cosmic monarch; the second is “neither Jew nor Greek, male nor female.” The first is institutional; the second is anti-institutional. The first, sacrificial; the second, anti-sacrificial. In the first, the Kingdom of God means continuity with archaic religio-polities through their fulfillment; in the second, God’s hegemony means discontinuity from the archaic through sheer exodus. In the first, Christ’s death is the ultimate sacrifice, founding the true Kingdom in alliance with the Pax Romana (or whatever regime du jure); in the second, Christ’s death is an anti-sacrifice that dissolves all forms of belonging from which conflicts stem.

Both fail to imagine an interpenetrating continuity and discontinuity between archaic religions and Christian monotheism. In this chapter I explore how the symbol of Christ as divine scapegoat-king invites us to consider how this continuity/discontinuity

\[816\] EC 211.
dynamic moves us beyond the politicized and depoliticized receptions of monotheistic faith. Using Girard, who spoke of “the God who reveals himself to be the arch-scapegoat in order to liberate humankind,” and my own synthesis of scholarship, I instead conceive of monotheism in a way that neither abets scapegoating nor presumes a simplistic escape from it. This pushes our imaginations to see in the Christ symbol both analogy and dialectic, continuity and discontinuity, conciliation and attack. Giorgio Agamben identified this tension in the apostle Paul, for whom Christ attempted to escape the grasp of political power and its laws, “without entering into conflict with them yet rendering them inoperative.” Such a messianism does not simply negate, attack, or annihilate every power, but “de-activates” them from within. How to conceive of such a mystical approach is difficult. For the fact that the Mosaic distinction seems prone to “enter into conflict” tempts one to dampen its dialectical and critical spirit. But this dampening also softens its prophetic intervention on our world. The challenge, then, is how to shed a conflictive monotheism while not, in turn, become depoliticized, leaving political power untouched and operative as usual.

Christ as divine scapegoat king supplies an image to answer this question. To describe this I will, first, elaborate on the rubric introduced in chapter 3: Axial theory. This theory concerns the supposed transition from myth to logic, or from archaic religions to

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818 Agamben, The Time that Remains 24, 27, 97, 98, 99. He notes the linguistic link between deactivation and fulfillment, between abolishing and conserving.
revealed religions. Axial theory helps us speak of a genuine monotheistic breakthrough while also not falling into naïve categories of pure discontinuity or anti-mythology. It suggests secondary religion involves critical rethinking and redeploying of the symbols of primary religion, but it does not simply escape them.8¹⁹

Second, I apply that Axial rubric, along with Girard and others, to interpret within Christianity a few key political theology symbols we saw in Egypt: sovereignty and land. Sovereignty here will include the symbols of Jesus’ trial, crucifixion, and resurrection. Just as in Egypt the land was also the body of a victim, I will explore the New Testament’s reconception of “land” as the symbol of Christ’s body and his “reign.” In such symbols, we can see how Christianity creatively redeploys cosmotheistic political theology while transcending it, constituting what I argue is a genuine monotheistic “progress in intellectuality,” not a regression into polytheism.

6.1 Axial Theory: Not Escape but Reconfiguration, Not Substitution but Addition

Axial theory concerns, among many historical topics, the shift from primary to secondary religions in the ancient world. As we introduced in chapter three, speaking in ideal types, primary religions are central to tribal and archaic states, wherein religion and politics, divinity and society, God and cosmos are roughly homologous. Secondary religions break up this compaction; they stem from an era, often framed as the first millennium BCE, marked by eruptive socio-political changes—e.g. the transition from

8¹⁹ Girard considered mimetic theory as aiming precisely to interpret this transition “from one type of religion to another. Beyond that, [mimetic theory] does not claim to exhaust the innumerable forms this transition has assumed in human history” (TOB, 113).
tribes and smaller city-states into larger, more imperial, cosmopolitan regions; the growing prevalence of writing technologies and market economies; iron overtaking bronze, etc. Through a complex array of such factors, this era was marked by what the sociologist and historian Robert Bellah calls a Eurasian-wide “political legitimation crisis.” This crisis served as the context and basis for rethinking “the religio-political premises of society itself”—evinced among Jewish prophets, Plato, Buddha, and so on. In these small but concentrated pockets, Axial theorists see a theme of critically stepping back from the world, in something of a benevolent alienation and self-transcendence. While the “mechanisms of social domination” were increasing significantly in the first millennium BCE, Axial theory concerns how the protest of it, in both renouncing and denouncing it, “for the first time becomes possible.”

The cosmotheism of primary religions begins to give way to secondary religions and their theo-political differentiating or disembedding of God from the cosmos and political order. Cosmogonic myths that once combined the foundation of the cosmos, the origins of the state, the birth of the gods, and history are broken up into philosophy, history, theology, political science, etc. Ideally speaking, secondary religions all share this disposition, even if they differ widely in their respective details and forms (e.g. even if Buddhism radically differs on the theistic concept).


822 See OH; GG 88; PM 125; Bellah, “Heritage of the Axial Age,” 462; Assmann, CMA, 370. Assmann: “the distinction between, and the separation of, religion and politics, or state and church, has to be regarded as one of the most important features of axiality” (Assmann, “Axial ‘Breakthroughs’ in Ancient Egypt and Israel,” 151).
Bellah argues that one of the most consequential and shared features of these pockets of Axial critique is in the “rethinking of sovereignty.”

King and god emerged together in archaic society and continued their close association throughout its history. It is not surprising, then, that the axial age sees some dramatic new twists in the relation between god and king…one of the questions that recurs is who is the (true) king, the one who really reflects divine justice.  

In our previous chapter, Jewish monotheism, forged amidst various crises, posed and answered this question in its division of God from the cosmos and the king, its covenantal “direct theocracy” not mediated by the state. Christ’s paradoxical kingship, with his crown as thorns and his throne as a cross, is also a striking new relationship between God and king, as we explore in this chapter.

But Axial theory invites us to situate these biblical breakthroughs amidst many other cultural-religious transformations. In Greece for example, Bellah notes the shifts in emphasis from Achilles the hero-prince to Socrates the stonemason. In China, Confucius and Mencius were the itinerant, unrecognized, and uncrowned kings. In India, Buddha the prince abrogated his kingdom for his politically irrelevant enlightenment. Temiya (a Buddha incarnation) “ruled” over an “empire of renunciation,” involving the abstention from violence and sex, in a reign that could never be realized on this earth. In Egypt, in

823 Bellah, “What’s Axial,” 71, 72. “The historical significance of the early Christian turn to symbols of sovereignty… [as a response] to the breakdown of societies in the Greco-Roman age, is therefore very great”—even if this could turn into Constantinianism (Mack, The Christian Myth, 136, 142).

824 When OH 74, contrasts Egyptian divine kingship with Christianity, he emphasizes “the scandal which Christianity must have been for men emerging from cosmological civilizations, if we consider that not a king was the god incarnate but an ordinary man of low social status…”


response to generations of political subjugation, an eschatological religious messianism emerged.\textsuperscript{827} In Plato the truly good king would not want to reign and would be killed by the unenlightened mob.\textsuperscript{828} Aristotle was an alien, not a citizen, who couldn’t buy land for his “school of renouncers.”\textsuperscript{829} In Ramayana, the Hindu epic, the ideal king is radically alien to this world. In Islam the Prophet is, in Bellah’s words, “a king and not a king.” While all these cases each have their own unique qualities, Bellah identifies a common thread: “The old unity of God and king was broken through dramatically in every case, and yet reaffirmed paradoxically in new axial formations.”\textsuperscript{830}

Such new formations involve new tensions and new equilibriums between divinity and politics, between the transcendent and the world: “the resolution of the tension was found by creating a transcendent realm and then finding a soteriological bridge between the mundane and the transcendental.”\textsuperscript{831} In other words, as religion breaks up from its homology with politics, there emerge different kinds of religions and politics which then need to forge new kinds of relationships. In such a setting, another axial theorist, Eric

\textsuperscript{827} E.g. “the Potter’s Oracle and the Demotic Prophesies of the Lamb…foretell the return of a messianic king who, after a long period of oppressive foreign rule, will establish a new time of glory by restoring the Pharaohs…” (CMEC, 64).

\textsuperscript{828} Plato, Republic §347c-d, 521a-b, 540.

\textsuperscript{829} Bellah, “The Heritage of the Axial Age,” 463.

\textsuperscript{830} Bellah, “What’s Axial,” 72. The differences abide here insofar as, Voegelin notes, “Confucianism did not lead to a break in the cosmological form of the empire because it was not a philosophy in the sense established by Plato. And since there was no radical incompatibility in the experiences of order, the empire could even utilize Confucian scholarship as a bureaucratic support for its cosmological form” (vol 1, 62). See also Schmel Eisenstadt who, speaking generally about Axial shift, but with its most dramatic example in ancient Israel, he writes, “The king-god, the embodiment of the cosmic and earthly order, disappeared, and the model of secular ruler appeared…Similar concepts emerged in ancient Greece, in India, and in China—most clearly manifested in the concept of the Mandate of Heaven” (Eisenstadt, “Destructive Possibilities,” 280).

\textsuperscript{831} Bellah, “What’s Axial,” 81.
Voegelin, sees in this axial epoch new negotiations between transcendent and immanent symbols:

there develop the tensions, frictions, and balances between the two levels of attunement, a dualistic structure of existence which expresses itself in pairs of symbols, of *theologia civilis* and *theologia supranaturalis*, of temporal and spiritual powers, of secular state and church…

The mature philosophical resolution to these new tensions, for Voegelin, is attained in admitting the inescapable tension and contact between the transcendent and immanent. Breakthroughs in thought may introduce a radically critical spirit—a “love of being which inspires intolerance,” an intolerance of the insufficiency of former religions and ideas. But this critical transcendence must learn to “compromise with the conditions of existence.” Without this compromise, the sense of an intolerant and critical breakthrough is tempted to take itself to be a coup and replacement. That is, in “the loss of meaning that results from the breakdown of institutions, civilizations, and ethnic cohesion,” one can become radically alienated from the entire world. This alienation has manifested in myriad ways for millennia now, wherein the world feels like “an alien place into which man has strayed and from which he must find his way back home to the other world of his origin.” In its most rigid and dangerous forms, this manifests itself in aiming for the “destruction of the old world and passage to the new.”

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832 *OH* 11. Mack sees here “there is no debate about the fact that the early Christian experiments did create a split view of the world in which the structures of each half did not easily mesh and were hardly expected to do so” (Mack, *The Christian Myth*, 118).

833 *OH* 11.

834 *SPG*, 8, 9, 11.
Voegelin’s word for such antagonistic substitution is “Gnosticism” (though this is not the only way to define Gnosticism’s diversities). This can involve the creation of an idealized “second reality,” that becomes not just other worldly but overworldly: it can see the only way forward as “abolishing the constitution of being, with its origin in divine, transcendent being, and replacing it with a world-immanent order of being, the perfection of which lies in the realm of human action.” (He saw this especially in political communism of the 20th century.) In this sense, the problem with Gnosticism is not that it is too radical or too much of a secondary religion. Rather, in trying to destroy and replace the old world, it regresses into and repeats it, thus failing to truly critique the political realm. Put in terms of metaphysics, as John Betz writes, this means we must see how harshly dialectical styles of theology, which emphasize an absolutely transcendent divine difference, paradoxically fail to “safeguard the transcendence of God.” Rather, such dialectical theology “is effectively indistinguishable from metaphysical monism.” For the revolution becomes the new regime. Opposed to the varieties of alienated Gnosticism, Voegelin suggests one must regard “the new” (i.e. critical transcendence) as an “addition” to the old, not its sheer destruction or substitution.

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835 *SPG* (35)
836 *SPG*, 100.
837 Erik Peterson calls Gnosticism’s political theology one in which “the government of the demiurge is always wrong.” Of this two-tiered political metaphysics, “the sovereignty of God is truly good, but the regime of the Demiurge (or demiurgic ‘Powers,’ usually seen as officials) is bad: in other words, the regime is always wrong” (Peterson 71f and n15. See also Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory*, 77, passim, for examples from Numenious onward).
839 *OH* 11.
In religious terms, we might likewise be tempted to regard the shift from primary to secondary religions as a shift from “mythical” to “logical” thinking—from *mythos* to *logos*. But, while this is partially true, to imagine logic as *replacing* myth is misleadingly simplistic. We already saw in Freud an untenable dualism between Yahweh as superstitious, mythical, ritualistic, violent; and Aten as enlightened, anti-ritual, anti-mythic, pacific. But myth and logic—indeed the gambit of simplistic antinomies like ritual and spontaneity, nature and revelation—do not work as poles, but more like layers. Logic does not replace myth; rather, logic extends, supplements, or reconfigures mythical thought. For narratival or mythological thinking is not *de facto* irrational; even more, all logic is narratival in nature. Words themselves are simply mini-narratives and metaphors. Bellah writes, “analytic or theoretic thinking does not displace, but is added to, narrative thinking.” Logic does not escape from narrative or myth but creatively redeployes them, leavening them in new ways. Logic that presents itself as having entirely escaped myth simply becomes a new myth.

Mythical thought, in ideal types, can sometimes be described as “analogical” in form, prevalent among “compact,” “cosmotheistic,” and “mythic cultures.” In such a mode of thought, the world and all its processes and functions are analogues for the world of gods, the cosmos—which ultimately *is* the One body of God. And, by ideal-type

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840 “The very idea of myth as ‘a story that is not true’ is a product of the axial age.” As much as Akhenaten broached this, his revolution “failed to raise the critical question of the relation between god and king, the very hallmark of the axial transformation” (Bellah, “What’s Axial,” 83).


842 *CMA*, 372.
contrast, secondary religions can be characterized by their tendency toward a “dialectic” mode: in contrast with analogical thought, the revealed God cannot be known by any analogy in the natural world. Such a dialectic mode of thinking involves an epistemological divide from God. We saw the crucial aspects of this in Jewish monotheism, wherein nothing can represent God; one can also find elements of this in a Hellenistic God beyond being; and in the Christian tradition it shows itself in a wide range of utterances from Patristics to Barth. Irenaeus wrote, “No one can have any knowledge of God unless God teaches him.”

Or St. Hilary, “God himself is our authority about God; otherwise he is not known.”

This dialectic epistemology, which would seem to coincide with monotheism’s distinguishing God from the cosmos, sees the cosmos not as the body of God but as secular and understandable on its own terms. As noted last chapter, God in this secondary-religion sense is not one of the cosmos’ functions; God is functionless, beyond being. God is not a process which any ritual or act in the cosmos completes. Under monotheism’s dismissal of the gods, the subordinate gods who administer the nature-functions of the universe are demoted to angels, eventually reduced further to two basic poles of Manichean good and evil, and perhaps drifting ultimately—with God fully functionless—toward what seems like atheism. But as to whether the cosmos (among whose processes includes the

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845 Dante, for example, regards angels as misperceived “deities” prior to the Christian era (*Paradiso* XXVIII.121; *Convivio* II.IV.6; Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy* [Oxford World’s Classics, 2008], 518). See also Sawyer, “Biblical Alternatives to Monotheism,” 176—on the demotion of other gods to diabolical sub-members of the divine council (e.g. Baalzebub, Satan, Mastema, Azazel, etc; Job 1:6; Ps 89:6-7; 82:1). This can involve some small signs of viewing foreigners as worshipping Yahweh in other
political sphere) reveals anything about such an utterly transcendent God, the logic of monotheism would seem to suggest this is *de facto* impossible\(^{846}\): between creature and Creator there can be imagined no greater ontological difference. This is one way of describing what I am referring to as “dialectical” thought in contrast with “analogical” thought—roughly coinciding with secondary and primary religions.

But if we bear in mind that logic, in the sphere of religion, is not the replacement or destruction of myth but its extension, we can expect that secondary religions do not simply replace but reconfigure primary religious symbols. Secondary religions do not cleanly escape primary religions any more than logic escapes myth. Dialectic thought does not and cannot escape analogical thought. When Voegelin discussed this relationship between myth and logic, he suggested how the Axial revolution opened up a mode of thought where myth is not replaced by, but interpenetrated with, logic, calling this “mytho-speculation.” Such thinking knows that rationality is inescapably constituted by myth. It does not pretend to be simplistically “myth-free,” to replace myth, or to have absolute knowledge. Rather, it knows that it is “myth with an element of reflective theory in it,” having *added to* myth.\(^{847}\) Assmann describes this interpenetration in religious terms:

> The history of religion does not proceed in such a way that primary religious experience is superseded by the new experience pioneered by the visionaries and founders of secondary religions. It is rather the case that in a third phase, a complex process of repudiation and symbolic reintegration, the vital elements of primary religious forms (Dan 4:34ff; 6:25ff; Isaiah 19:16-25). For monotheism appearing as atheism (Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory*, 286; Gnuse, “Breakthrough,” 88).

\(^{846}\) Thus, Kant recognizes the enlightenment inaugurated by anti-idolatry’s break from analogical representation, emphasizing how reason cannot access this “beyond.” For him, if there is any “analogy” of divine participation in us, it is not in ontology, but our moral conviction.

\(^{847}\) Bellah, “What’s Axial,” 81.
experience are integrated and fused into a new synthesis. Here we find an organic syncretism at work that is both inevitable and unobjectionable.848

And so, even if secondary religions are rhetorically counter-religions, denouncing primary religions as “false” and idolatrous, they cannot ultimately escape all of their forms. Secondary religions retain the symbols of primary religions by, at least, opposing them as the reified opponent—e.g. “Egypt” as the symbol of Israel’s idolatrous origins that the no-other-gods movement tried to efface. But the symbols of primary religions also will also remain within secondary religions for a deeper reason: primary religion coevolved with the inescapable features of human sociality since our origins. Some of these are fundamental to human association: inclusion and exclusion (“us” constructs), solidarity, reciprocity, taboo and restraints, loyalty/faith, and zeal, etc. For example, as explored last chapter, the intolerant zeal of political loyalty oaths was transposed into a distinctly “religious” zeal. As such, the zeal and allegiance of the political sphere transformed into a potentially martyrrial or nonviolent “intolerance,” while also leaving residues that make possible “religious violence.” This is just one example of the interpenetration of primary and secondary religions. In all, this means for Assmann that, “counterreligions are duplicitous: they bear encrypted within themselves the paganism they ostensibly reject.”849

One could therefore say that secondary or counterreligions develop a new form of unconsciousness by enriching themselves with elements of primary religious experience and religious practice, while at the same time having to reinterpret their semantics and refungion their forms to fit them to the new context. These elements constitute a kind of ‘crypt’ in the edifice of secondary religions, a

848 PM 109.

849 PM 111.
subterranean realm no longer illuminated by the light of consciously cultivated religious semantics...\textsuperscript{850}

The previous chapter demonstrated how monotheism has polytheistic and political building blocks in its crypt. Jewish monotheism’s foundation included not only the jealousy of vassal treaties, including the surveillance of neighbors, but the building blocks of common ancient norms of justice, law, and memory rituals; monotheism reused, but made uniquely religious, the growing trend in canonizing normative texts; even the notion of an \textit{only God} was not entirely unique. In all, while ancient Judaism may have been on exodus from archaic “myth,” it could not, in cultural linguistic practice, escape from myth into a pure rationality unlike anything prior to it.\textsuperscript{851} It instead modified and critiqued myth in its own unique and liberating, if ambivalent, adaptation.

Even though Freud declared that Christianity ultimately regressed from monotheistic logic into pagan myth, he nonetheless admitted that its victimage-symbols bore an enlightened, if muffled, return of the repressed. Christianity brought before our eyes the primal scenario of murdering the alpha male and dramatized his reenthronement. Freud appreciated how this drama invites us to admit our guilt in humanity’s founding murder, opening up and airing out humanity’s repressed crypt so to speak. But, despite its dwelling on such weighty images, Freud also argued that Christianity turned this crypt into a gift shop, as it were, averting awareness of our founding murder with mythologies of

\textsuperscript{850} \textit{PM} 110 109.

\textsuperscript{851} While chapter four supplied most of this information, some monotheism scholarship specifically devoted to “reconfiguration” or “mixing” include: William Dever, “How Was Ancient Israel Different?” in \textit{The Breakout: The Origins of Civilization}, ed. Martha Lamberg-Karlovsky (Cambridge, MA: Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University, 2000); Gnuse, “Breakthrough or Tyranny,” 79.
atonement and fantasies of expiation. Freud praised Aten’s monotheism as pacifism and a-ritualism, while reviling Christianity’s “ritualism,” “superstition,” and “magic.”

Echoing and mostly affirming Freud, Assmann agrees that Christianity’s mythical modes of thought, like the “theology of incarnation,” regrettably “reopened the doors to images, sacramental magic, and other forms of religious life.” Unfortunately, Assmann doesn’t elaborate enough to make this a substantial rejection. But such a curt exodus from mythical symbols, I argue, is not only epistemically naïve, in its putative escape from myth. But it also implies a kind of monotheism Girard critiqued as too alienated from scapegoating, ritual, and myth. Assmann leaves the Christian theologian asking again how exactly to relate monotheism to an apparent Christian regression.

6.2 Girard on the Transition from Primary to Secondary Religion

Girard offers, by contrast with Assmann, a better frame for interpreting Christianity’s relationship to monotheism, relating crypt and edifice, myth and logic. For Girard, Christianity’s dialectical, revelatory discontinuity from archaic religions is mediated through its analogous continuity with them. The more similar Christianity appears to myth, “the more clearly it becomes a radical rereading of myths.” For Girard,

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852 GG 105.

853 In an oblique flourish, Assmann regards monotheism’s trauma and murder as comingled with its enlightenment: both come from its killing off, first, pagan gods, and then the “God” of monotheism itself. This “theclastic violence” involves negative theology and the death of god as part of the path of the progress of intellectuality (PM 97). Though similar with some of Girard’s theory on this point, Assmann offers no theological elaboration.

854 EC 178f.
the path to subverting violent falsehoods within archaic religion is not by external attack or escape, but by internal subversion.

Girard has, at times, lacked emphasis on this, speaking of Christianity in almost purely dialectical tones: Christianity is an anti-religion that, in theory, should not even exist, given its attack on the fundamental features of human association.\textsuperscript{855} Christianity is non-sacrificial, an attack on myth, an attack on religion and human culture itself. But, at his more nuanced points, he plied what I call here a more “interpenetrative” understanding of the change from primary to secondary religion. As such, he emphasized Christianity as discontinuous with archaic religion through its continuity with it; Christianity is an “exit out of religion that is offered from within the demythified religion.”\textsuperscript{856} Or Christianity is a “myth,” but in reverse.\textsuperscript{857} This did not mean for Girard softening the distinctive discontinuity of Christian revelation. Rather, it meant seeing that discontinuity amidst its continuity. “If biblical texts resembled myths less than they do, they could not differ from myths as much as they do.”\textsuperscript{858}

\textsuperscript{855} One can hear the dialectician in Girard: “by submitting to violence, Christ reveals and uproots the structural matrix of all religion” (\textit{TH} 178-9). “Christianity is destructive of the type of religion that brings people together, joining them into a coalition against some arbitrary victim, as all the natural religions have always done, except for the biblical ones” (Vattimo, 25).

\textsuperscript{856} He admits of having spoken with exaggeration, and that he wanted to “rectify the error of the so-called anti-sacrificial argument I made in my first writings on this subject, especially in \textit{TH}…[this] brings my perspective into closer alignment with traditional theologies” (\textit{TOB} xi; 42). While \textit{TH} contained some of paradoxical sense of continuity/discontinuity (and a chafing at the book of Hebrews for its sacrificial themes), he later solidified his paradoxical form supplied here—likely on account of his correspondence with Raymund Schwager.

\textsuperscript{857} \textit{TOB}, 38.

\textsuperscript{858} \textit{TOB}, 38.
His theory required this nuance because he recognized that archaic features like myth, ritual, and rites are inescapable. We do away with ritual only to create anti-ritual rituals. A sheer escape from the myths within culture and religion, which contain the exclusions of the scapegoating mechanism, only invites new exclusions, myths, and rituals. The path forward is not to abandon these elements but to somehow hollow them out of their sacrificial violence:

Education, rites of passage, funerals, many of the practices of archaic religion remain viable in the context of the Christian world. They derive from sacrificial practices, but [the rites] can live on without [the sacrificial practices]. In any case [rites] constitute the only way for people to live together. Social life without rites is unimaginable.859

In other words, Girard acknowledged an inescapably “religious” layer to human culture in the sense of binding together, present in even “secular” things like belonging or allegiance. In this primary sense of human association, rituals and rites are constitutive to life, and no secondary religion escapes them. To abolish them, in sensitivity to their exclusions, only repeats new ones.

The most important unavoidable feature in human affairs for Girard is contained in the dense word “sacrifice.” Sacrifice for him is akin to what we defined in my introduction as “the political”: the inescapable fact that human association contains exclusions and decisions. “Sacrifice” similarly connotes the practices of inclusion and exclusion in society, how society contains violence at some cost. Such containment may involve

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859 *TOB* 126: “Jehovah’s Witnesses, for example, condemn Christianity for modeling its feasts on pagan feasts. They are wrong to do so, because the meaning of these feasts has changed…we must take into account the continuity of history, and of the intermediate stages between sacrifice and the rejection of sacrifice.”
repression, like in taboos, myths, and rules, or explicit violence—including ritual sacrifices which channel attention to an animal, human, or effigy. Sacrifice is well-symbolized in the tragic calculus that “it is better that one man should die than many.” The concepts of sacrifice and the political can also be symbolized in Girard’s use of the word “victim,” given how the word de-cision bears a sacrificial etymology of cutting off, even slitting the throat of a victim.860

We may today rightly chafe at “sacrifice,” as a symbol of violence and a regression into archaic religion. Girard initially resisted defining Christ’s Passion as “sacrificial” for these reasons:

What is a sacrifice in archaic religions? It is an effort to revive the conciliatory effects of unanimous violence by substituting an alternative victim for the original scapegoat...So great is the distance between the sacrifice of Christ in this sense and archaic sacrifice that a greater one cannot be imagined.861

But, sacrifice, in a more primary and fundamental sense, is not optional. At some point, in even the most inclusive of cultures, sacrifice shows itself as constitutive of human association. In other words, if one refuses to sacrifice or do violence to others, one must be prepared to be sacrificed themselves. This is the paradox by which Girard understands Christ’s non-sacrificial “sacrifice,” in his refusal to sacrifice others: “Use of the same word in each case dispels the illusion of a neutral ground where violence is nowhere to be


861 TOB 40f; ISS 131. He also calls this “entirely other and yet inseparable from the old” (Girard, Sacrifice 81).
The exodus from violence involves possibly suffering it. “There is the sacrifice of the other, and self-sacrifice; archaic sacrifice and Christian sacrifice. However, it is all sacrifice…absolute knowledge is not possible.” That is, there is an analogy between the inescapability of sacrifice and the unavailability of absolute, non-mythic reason.

For Girard, the cross and resurrection of Christ reconfigures the myths of the archaic sacred, unveiling its misapprehension through the forgiving victim. The violence contained in the archaic sacred is both its prefiguration and its antithesis. This means God in Christ

reuses the scapegoat mechanism, at his own expense, in order to subvert it….the irony has to do in part with the structural similarity between the two kinds of sacrifice, which, at one extreme, exhibit odd mirror effects in relation to violence, and, at the other, a love that surpasses our understanding and our powers of expression…From the symbolic point of view…one sees something like a return to archaic religion…[and yet] violence now imitates the love of Christ, and not the other way around…There are two radically opposed yet formally similar modes of divinity.

On this point, Girard aligns with his Jesuit interlocutor, Raymund Schwager, who writes:

If sacred ideas and concepts develop from aggressive projections, then the true God will reveal himself most clearly where the world of violence also is most decisively contrasted to him. If the gods are the product of human mechanisms, then [God] must appear most clearly in the world of violence as a person where this mechanism is most radically unmasked.

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862 TOB 43.
863 BE 35; TOB, 71, 72: “Everything is summed up in this idea…There is no way out from sacrifice. There is no purely objective knowledge.”
864 TOB 43f.
865 Schwager, Must there Be Scapegoats?, 134.
Here, we begin to see how the “separation” of divinity from scapegoating comes precisely through the “unity” of divinity with the scapegoat. The “opposition” to sacrifice emanates from the sacrificed. Thus, for Girard, Christianity’s using the same word “sacrifice” for formally similar but substantially opposed realities “paradoxically hints at going beyond the opposition between them.”866 As such, the “sacrifice of Christ” is oddly both continuity and break with the sacred. This complex interplay attempts to dispel violence “but does not authorize us to condemn violence, as if we were by nature strangers to violence.”867 For a direct condemnation or attack on violence does not reveal but repeat it. That is, we must think it possible to not merely abolish swords but redeploy them as plowshares. We must imagine how the sword could become the medium of the revelation against the sword. For Girard, this means Christ’s lynching becomes the salvific medium of the deactivation of the scapegoat mechanism. We saw an analogue of this in ancient Israel, in that political zeal (whether in monolatry and loyalty oaths) was turned into a critical revelation against political absolutism.

This interpenetrative approach meant for Girard abandoning the apologetic search for a “symbolically manifest difference” between biblical revelation and archaic religion. Instead of finding the revelatory nature of Christianity in some sheer discontinuity with primary religious symbols, it is found precisely in its critical reconfiguration of them. This involves not a destruction of myth and sacrifice, or a rivalrous opposition to them, but myth and sacrifice in reverse. That is, Christianity bears all the structures of myth,

866 TOB 43.
867 EC 218.
particularly in its murder and rising trope, even while the myth’s content (victim-guilty, lynchers-innocent) is profoundly inverted. Concerning the resurrection, for example, he drew special attention to this similarity and difference: “Christ’s divinity, which precedes the Crucifixion, introduces a radical rupture with the archaic, but Christ’s resurrection is in complete continuity with all forms of religion that preceded it. The way out of archaic religion comes at this price.”868 While admitting the resurrection might indeed have been some sort of miracle, in the sense of a “prodigious transgression of natural laws,” what is even more critical is its overcoming the powerful bio-psychological mimetic contagion at the foundation of all human culture: “Far from deceiving the disciples, [the resurrection] enables them to recognize what they had not recognized before and to reproach themselves for their pathetic flight in the preceding days. They acknowledge the guilt of their participation in the violent contagion that murdered their master.”869 I will offer further commentary on the resurrection later in this chapter.

Girard’s interpenetrative approach opens a theological method that can be confessional while not avoiding the data found in “history of religions” methods, like the evidence of Christianity’s archaic parallels. It also offers a way of treating the dense reality of “sacrifice” with no pretention to a neutral, objective non-sacrificial position. This in turn leads to seeing sacrifice as a self-implicating reality for which we must respond, personally and normatively, in a way that neither abets its violence nor escapes it. His approach suggests that attempts to abolish “sacrificial Christianity” on account of its

868 BTE xv, 126.
violent history or to redefine sacrifice more pacifically around “gift” concepts, as some theologians are inclined today, too easily takes the position of being a stranger to violence through rhetorical escape. And yet, Christianity is certainly not yet another “sacrificial” religion. Nor is not in the tepid middle. We must imagine both a severe dialectic against, and an analogy with, sacrificial religions.

This interpenetrative approach conceives the transition from primary and secondary religions as indeed revelatory, affirming Mosaic distinction concepts like superior/inferior, true/false, intolerance of falsehood. But it also opens up the possibility of a revelation without antagonistic rivalry, without scapegoating primary religions. There is a nonviolence to this method in that it treats revelation as an “internal subversion rather than external assault.” For an external assault upon “false” archaic religion and its misapprehension of sacrifice would simply repeat the scapegoating mechanism of

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870 For an overview of literature in this frame, see J. Denny Weaver, The Nonviolent Atonement (Grand Rapids, MI: WmB. Eerdmans, 2001). On constructing a more pacific definition of sacrifice and “cooperation,” see Sarah Coakley, Sacrifice Regained: Reconsidering the Rationality of Religious Belief (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2012). She misreads Girard in referring to his position as “mandated violence” (25), or a simplistically “negative theory of sacrifice,” or that she treats cooperation positively without considering how scapegoating, too, is “cooperative.” Similar misreadings are in Grace Jantzen, “New Creations: Eros, Beauty, and the Passion for Transformation,” in Toward a Theology of Eros: Transfiguring Passions at the Limits of Discipline eds Virginia Burrus and Catherine Keller (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), 284ff. Jantzen even sees Girard as arguing for “violence” and that conflict resolution requires scapegoats. Girard “leaves no room for generosity of spirit rather than rivalry and incessant struggle” (285). This misses the virtually pacifist dialectic in Girard’s approach (e.g. BTE xiv, 63).

871 Girard retained some of this nuance in his earlier TH, emphasizing both “discontinuities and continuities” (TH 401, 445, 402). A recent essay on this is Anthony Lusvardi, “Girard and the ‘Sacrifice of the Mass,’” Contagion (2017): 159-190. He counteracts the “Eucharistic idealism” of some of Girard’s more liberal interpreters, like Daly et al, where sacrifice is muted in favor of “meal, communion, etc., while not at all abandoning the dialectic counter-ness of revelation.

872 Cowdell 99.
expulsion in another mimetic rivalry.\textsuperscript{873} One must rather imagine how to “supersede” sacrifice “while leaving it intact,” as Chris Fleming notes.\textsuperscript{874} “Indeed, any straightforward ‘destruction’ of the old system through force—supernatural or otherwise—would have been simply its \textit{continuation}.”\textsuperscript{875} With this in mind, Jesus’ nonviolence is structurally essential to his mission. Nonviolence does not soften the Mosaic distinction. Rather, it suggests the \textit{content}, the \textit{meaning} of the Mosaic distinction concerns the scapegoat and the misapprehension of victimage.

Girard thus reframed the Mosaic rivalry between archaic and revelatory religion such that he refreshed “figural” or “typological” theology. He viewed “archaic religion as a prior moment in a progressive revelation that culminates in Christ.”\textsuperscript{876} This is a more conciliatory perspective on the exodus from primary to secondary religions, while not abolishing the liberating dialectic of an exodus. It affirms the positive value of archaic religions, which were the “educators of mankind,” which helped “lead us out of archaic violence.” And yet revealed within this education, “God becomes victim in order to free

\textsuperscript{873} “Any form of opposition [between archaic and revealed religion] would be mimetic, so I would rather not see any radical break. This is something more powerful in the long term, because archaic polytheism in a way becomes part of the revelation in a figural sense” (\textit{EC} 204). Girard mentions “figural” interpretation seven times in \textit{EC} (180, 181, 204, 207, 208, 209, 255).


\textsuperscript{875} Fleming 132.

\textsuperscript{876} \textit{EC} 216–17. Girard’s method here resembles that of Henri DeLubac, who saw how biblical revelation could not be reduced to either discontinuity or continuity. Rather, he writes: “the victorious God takes over and uses to his advantage all that is true [I might add here, “and all that is false”] in the thought and worship that had gone astray. The phase of opposition is succeeded by a phase of absorption” (DeLubac, \textit{The Discovery of God}, 35; 36, 23). For him, then, a truly transcendent God cannot be reduced to dialectic, synthesis, or antithesis—affirmation or negation, integration or contrast.
man of the illusion of a violent God, which must be abolished in favor of Christ’s knowledge of his Father."\textsuperscript{877}

Contrast this with, say, Karl Barth who dialectically opposed the Word to polytheism and false religion, abhorring the idea that “idolatry is but a somewhat imperfect preparatory stage of the service of the true God.”\textsuperscript{878} But the interpretative approach I am sketching here suggests, in the least, we must appreciate how idolatry or polytheism “contained violence” in human evolution. When “the sacred” was misperceived in early humanity as an exogenous agent, it nonetheless helped objectify our apprehension of and control over our own violence. Similarly, monolatry and henotheism were the medium, when inverted, of revelatory monotheism. Appreciating this interpenetration helps steer us away from the chief potential vice of the Mosaic distinction: the rivalrous scapegoating of other religions.

Having laid out this idea of the interpenetration of primary and secondary religious symbols, we can apply it in brief reference to some Christological symbols, seeing in them not a putative regression into cosmotheism, but a continuation of Jewish monotheism: trial, crucifixion, resurrection, and land. On each of these topics, I have selected from a variety of scholars who may be situated more in a confessional theology (Lohfink, Robinette) or more religious studies-, philosophical-, or history of religions approaches (Miller,

\textsuperscript{877} \textit{EC} 217; “The archaic, is prophetic of Christ in its own imperfect way” (\textit{EC}, 215; Girard, \textit{Sacrifice}, xi).

\textsuperscript{878} Clifford Green ed., \textit{Karl Barth: Theologian of Freedom} (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1991), 158.
Agamben, Marcus). Girard’s interpenetrative method shows its flexibility in being able to see the revelatory import of Christianity through both lenses.

6.3 Trial: Judgment in Reverse

Similar to the way in which monotheism divided God from the cosmos, Giorgio Agamben’s Pontius Pilate argues that Christ’s trial critically separates two incommensurate forms of judgment, the worldly and heavenly. Agamben is especially attentive to the contemporary political theology issues of the separation or unity between human and divine authority. With this in mind, he turns especially to Augustine, who was among the earliest writers to have observed a critical feature of the Passion’s court proceedings: they conspicuously lack any ruling or judgment. It is only after numerous backroom discussions, in the back and forth of indecision, that Pilate finally sits on the ruling bench. This signifies “that the entire preceding debate had not a procedural value but a private one.”879 And in the end, Pilate refuses to judge, limiting himself to "handing over."880 But a trial without a judgment is not properly a trial.881 Augustine saw how this representation of a judicial hoax implicated Pilate and the courts “in the crime from which

879 Giorgio Agamben, Pontius Pilate (Stanford University Press, 2015), 24

880 Agamben, Pontius Pilate, 37, 47; “handed over,” or “accede to their demand,” or “handed over Jesus to their will” Matt 27:26; Mk 15:15; 19:16. See gospel of John also.

881 Agamben, Pontius Pilate, 49.
they tried to hold themselves aloof; for ‘Pilate would have done no such thing, save to implement what he perceived to be their fixed desire.’”

This comports with Girard’s reading of the Passion, as a snowballing of unconscious and mimetic rivalry. The representation of a victimization at the hands of great powers is not what is unique, as this can be found in various pagan myths. Rather, Girard writes,

> From the anthropological perspective the essential characteristic of the revelation is the crisis it provokes in every representation of persecution from the standpoint of the persecutor…The coalition of all the worldly powers is not unique. This coalition is found at the origin of all myths. What is astonishing about the Gospels is that the unanimity is not emphasized in order to bow before, or submit to, its verdict as in all the mythological, political, and even philosophical texts, but to denounce its total mistake, its perfect example of nontruth.

And it is in the continued representation of this total mistake, throughout its reception history, that the gospel makes “sacrifice unworkable, at least in the long run, bringing sacrificial culture to an end.”

Agamben affirms as much when he writes that, by its ignominy and failure of judgment, the Passion is “the most severe objection that can be raised against the juridical order.” By the Passion, one is led to see that what is hidden under law is mimetic ochlocracy, where the mob overrides law. “Jesus of Nazareth was not condemned but

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883 Girard, *Sacrifice*, 114f.

884 GR 18.

885 Agamben, *Pilate and Jesus*, 51.
murdered.”

Rather than representing a harmonious relationship between human and divine administrations, we see that between Christ and Pilate “two judgments and two kingdoms truly stand before one another without managing to come to a conclusion.”

The human and the divine, the temporal and the eternal stand in inconclusive confrontation. And under the contrastive light of these incompatible judgments, “every possibility of a Christian political theology or of a theological justification of profane power turns out to fail.”

Similar to Girard’s notion of the Passion damaging sacrifice’s legitimacy and workability, Agamben sees that Pilate has rendered “unfathomable” any compatibility between the two judgments. “In this way he has condemned humanity to an incessant *krisis*—incessant because it can never be decided once and for all.”

And because of this, “our history, often known as a trial, is in a state of permanent crisis.”

It is not coincidental, then, that “the radical critique of every judgment is an essential part of Jesus’ teaching.”

This critical, eschatological separation of worldly from heavenly judgment has often been lost in the Christian tradition. Pascal and Dante are, for Agamben, popular examples of having missed it—though Eusebius’ building on some of Origen’s attempts at making Christ and the empire compatible is another striking example. Dante imagined

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886 Agamben, *Pilate and Jesus*, 32.
887 Agamben, *Pilate and Jesus*, 37, 14.
888 Agamben, *Pilate and Jesus*, 57.
889 Agamben, *Pilate and Jesus*, 57.
890 Agamben, *Pilate and Jesus*, 57.
891 Agamben, *Pilate and Jesus*, 37.
that Christ, coming amidst the Roman Empire, supplied the providential context for suffering a proper judgment of a lawful earthly judge.\textsuperscript{892} Therein the “lawfulness of the whole Roman Empire” is symbolically levied against Christ in concert with, or in analogy to the heavenly will.\textsuperscript{893} Jesus’ registration under Caesar’s census symbolically sanctioned his Passion with the “seal of the law.”\textsuperscript{894} So too for Pascal, “Jesus Christ did not want to be killed without the forms of justice, because it is much more ignominious to die justly than through an unjust sedition.”\textsuperscript{895} By this logic, with Pilate as the executor of earthly justice, and the legitimacy of mission assured, Christ would then not want to escape the trial.\textsuperscript{896} Adhering to this myth of being “justly” and legally killed is also why Martin Luther regarded Pilate’s wife’s dream—which suggested something was wrong with killing the evidently innocent Jesus—as a demonic interruption.\textsuperscript{897}

According to the logic of Eusebius, Dante, Luther, and Pascal, Pontius Pilate directly administered God’s sovereignty. He is even regarded in some communions as a saint. They get the ignominy of the cross, but not the incompatibility of divine and human judgment. They get some idea of salvation through the cross; but they do not grasp how this truth was delivered by its opposite, in mistake and injustice. We must instead see the dialectic amidst this seeming continuity: Pilate’s sword is beaten into a plowshare by

\begin{footnotes}
\item Agamben, \textit{Pilate and Jesus}, 38.
\item Agamben, \textit{Pilate and Jesus}, 39.
\item Agamben, \textit{Pilate and Jesus}, 56.
\item Pascal, \textit{Pensées}, §790.
\item Agamben, \textit{Pilate and Jesus}, 31.
\item Agamben, \textit{Pilate and Jesus}, 30.
\end{footnotes}

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Christ’s weak power. It is not Pilate’s judgment, as some sign of righteous law, but our exposure to its injustice that is salvific. Salvation in the Gospels does not mean a legal death according to the forms of justice.\textsuperscript{898} Such atonement theory misses what Augustine saw and we must too—this is not a just and valid judgment, but precisely a representation of the world’s falsity and incommensurability with divine judgment. Christ’s judgment is not a replacement for, fulfillment of, or even an alternative to Pilate’s judgment and law. Nor is it in strict rivalry with Pilate or an apolitical escape from judgment. It stands before Pilate in silence, in incompatability with the world’s judgment. Instead of rendering a new judgment, his “judgment” unsettles all judgment.\textsuperscript{899}

\textbf{6.4 The Cross: Coronation in Reverse}

Freud argued that the experience of a group murder of an alpha male helped catalyze the emergence of monotheism. This manifested first, in the experience of Akhenaten’s despotism and its rejection. Then it was echoed in the speculated murder of Moses, which Jews repressed in the guilt-fantasy of a returning messiah, and which resurfaced in Christ’s crucifixion. We can appreciate elements of Freud’s line of thought here while also avoiding his simplistic a-ritualism from which he judged Christianity as a polytheistic regression. We can do so by seeing how the Cross, while it obviously depicts an unjust murder, also strikingly represents it in the form of a powerful monarch’s glorious

\textsuperscript{898} Agamben, \textit{Pilate and Jesus}, 51.

\textsuperscript{899} See also Rowan Williams, \textit{Christ on Trial: How the Gospel Unsettles Judgment} (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003).
coronation. This odd combination resurfaces a primal human experience of violence and dominance while also redirecting our sense of praise and glory.

It is a familiar, if mysterious, acclamation that in Christ’s Passion he was crowned with “glory and honor,” much as one would speak of a king being crowned in glorious ceremony. For example, Jesus is never called “king” in the book of Mark until his trial and suffering, after which come six such accolades. More intriguingly, Mark superimposes the extravagant Roman ritual of gloriously coronating Caesar onto his rendition of Jesus’ execution. The Caesarian coronation ritual around Mark’s day involved several parts: the full gathering of the Praetorian Guard, group acclamation, putting on him a purple robe and crown, giving him Jupiter’s scepter, and processing to the Capitoleum (“head hill”) with a slave carrying the sacrificial ax along with the bull. The final step of the coronation, with authorities to his left and right, was to slaughter the bull in identification with, or substitution for, Caesar. Mark’s Passion adapts this political coronation with striking detail—all the way down to Golgotha as skull hill, to a helper carrying the instrument of torture, or the co-crucified at Jesus’ right and left.

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900 Hebrews 2:9; Colossians 2:15; 2 Cor 2:14.
901 Joel Marcus, “Crucifixion as Parodic Exaltation,” JBL 125.1 (2006): 73-87, 73, 74. While the other gospels don’t precisely follow the same form, Marcus argues they still preserve this basic form.
903 Such coronation-sacrifices are, again, arguably rooted in the immolation of the king himself, later replaced with an animal. Girard interpreted Rwandan coronations, wherein the to-be king, who had just committed ritual incest, is identified with the bull at the moment of his coronation (VS 106).
We may be inclined to see Mark as derivative while Caesar’s ritual is the “original,” much as crimes are often punished in parody to their offense. For example, when the criminal Carabas was executed for insurrection, his torture parodied kingship: “young men carrying rods on their shoulders as spearmen stood on either side of him in imitation of a bodyguard.” Dio Crysostum also spoke of this kind of crime-punishment parody:

They take one of their prisoners…who has been condemned to death, set him upon the king’s throne, give him the royal apparel, and permit him to give orders, to drink and carouse, and to make use of the royal concubines during those days, and no one prevents his doing whatever he pleases. But after that they strip and scourge him and then hang him.

Insurrectionists, in parody of their rivalry with the king, were often “exalted” on impalement poles or seated on a “throne.” This was certainly the symbolism surrounding crosses (and their little seat-thrones) in Jesus’ day.

But Mark’s account is not merely about a punishment parodying its crime. Jesus is indeed seated on a throne, presumably in parody of his perceived danger to the stability of Pilate and Herod’s joint thrones. But with Mark we have a parodying of parody. Surely the historical Jesus did not undergo this exact ritual sequence of Caesarian coronation. What is striking is that Mark would superimpose an apparent mob-fueled abortion of justice onto

905 Philo, *Flacc.* 38; Marcus 75.

906 Marcus 85:


908 Marcus 84; Tertullian, *Nat.* 1.12.4. *Sedile*, the word commonly used for the small wooden seat or peg on which the buttocks of the crucified victim rested, was also commonly used to denote a throne.
the most respectable, powerful ritual of monarchy in the world. The whole affair is revealed as “not knowing what they are doing,” in a spiral of cowardice and antagonism toward the innocent one. Caesar’s ritual may have come first in the order of cultural production, but concerning the primal forces behind political power in human evolution, namely mimetic ridicule and scapegoating, Mark’s Passion evokes the original. In this sense, ridicule of the scapegoat came first, while Caesar’s coronation is derivative. Political glory is a mere byproduct of ridicule. In human evolution, mocking precedes and gives birth to worship.909

This is why Girard can say that, in light of Christ’s revelation, “violence now imitates the love of Christ.” Mark’s literary Christ is “imitating” the Caesarian ritual; but in analytical insight, the Caesarian ritual is in fact imitating the scapegoating process. Coronation and glory are parodies of the scapegoat, knowing not what they do. This is the anthropological rationality to the theological rhetoric about Christ “turning sacrifice on its head.” If there is a “paradox” in the cross, it is not from a misty-eyed contrarianism about the weak somehow being strong; for there is “nothing here that is contrary to reason,” as Girard writes: “The paradox of the Cross is that it reproduces the archaic structure of sacrifice in order to stand it on its head. But this inversion is a matter of putting right side up what had been wrong side up since the beginning of the world.”910

909 Analogies to my point here are in William Cavanaugh’s treatment of the Eucharist as counter-torture, wherein torture appears as the distorted copy. Or, in terms of the “order of discovery,” James Alison points to Christ’s gratuitous self-giving as logically but not chronologically prior to mimesis embedded in the scapegoat mechanism (Alison, The Joy of Being Wrong, 44, 61, 102, 174, 203, 300).

910 TOB, 63.
This account of the Cross reveals that what we take as rational, natural, and original—monarchy, authority, political power, coronation, or even civilization itself—are in fact “wrong side up,” misperceived derivatives. What we regard as self-evident and valid power, is in fact a byproduct of the sacrificial mechanism. This is why when Christians applied Isaiah’s oracles to the crucified Christ, which proclaimed the glorious dominion of a Davidic heir and his coronation, they were not being merely ironic. For even underneath the Davidic coronation and throne lie a mechanism unveiled in the passion. Likewise, the claim “the rulers of this world Lord it over, but not so for my kingdom…” is not simply a dialectic protest against the world, an ethical denunciation. It is an ontological claim on the nature of politics, desire, and human organization. It shows that what we call “normal” should really be called “average.” We must divide what “is” from ought to be, denaturalize the given powers. This is “rethinking sovereignty.” Unlike the ancient pseudo-separation of religion and politics—with the sovereign as powerful but unclean and the priest as weak but clean—the cross makes for a striking a collision. Christ crucified is both a weak sovereign and an unclean priest. He is the first among “the garbage of the world”; the weak and foolish shame the strong and powerful; God chose, in Christ, the despised, “the things that are not to nullify the things that are” (1 Cor 1:27; 4:13). This is, as historian Burton Mack writes, a radical violation of “both the template-state model’s

\[911\] Isaiah 7-9 and 11 all contain oracles traceable to the coronation or the anniversary of the installation of a Davidic king of Judah, possibly Hezekiah (Richard Clifford, “The Major Prophets, Baruch, and Lamentations,” in The Catholic Study Bible [New York: Oxford University Press, 2006], 286).
bifurcation of purity and power, and the Greek ideal of sovereignty grounded in personal virtue.”

In light of this revelatory payload, it is rational to speak of the Mosaic distinction between true and false religion. There is some rationality in Christianity’s apparent rhetorical excess—when it denounces the “falsehood” of not just other religions and gods but of the entire civilized order. For the cross, in this sense, supplies the Mosaic distinction with specific criteria of what exactly is “false”: a world founded on scapegoating, knowing not what it does, not even knowing what it is praising and glorifying. But what is essential to the Cross as such a revelatory “truth” is not that it comes as the new rivalry, to scapegoat the scapegoaters. Rather this truth comes from the mouth of the forgiving scapegoat. He is not seeking vengeance, with blood calling out from the ground as Abel’s did; his blood calls out from the ground “a better word” (Heb 12:24). It is only in this context of a merciful revelation of scapegoating “from within”—wherein a divine grace that transcends scapegoating is also revealed—that Christianity can refrain from an antagonistic reception of the Mosaic distinction. It is through the profession, “forgive them, they know not what they do,” that we can, with Marcus’ exegesis, see in the Passion a derision of derision. Marcus reads:

the derision of kingship is itself derided and true royalty emerges through negation of the negation. For many early Christians, this reversal of reversal, which turned penal mockery on its head, was probably the inner meaning of Jesus’ crucifixion.\footnote{Mack, The Christian Myth, 143.}

\footnote{Mack, The Christian Myth, 143.}

\footnote{Marcus 87.}
In the passion’s “exaltation” of a glorious Lord, we don’t have here a cosmotheism of divinity appeased in suffering or a polity founded on a justified exclusion—nor do Pilate, Herod, or Judas, as parties to the violence, become anti-types for cultic immolation, like Egypt’s Seth. Rather, we have an unsettling penetration of the mechanics of how rivalrous, unthinking derision is the operation, not the corruption, of the political. In the Passion we have yet again a similar-yet-discontinuous play between the archaic and the revelatory, the old and new: “mockery is reversed and the derided victim demands to be taken seriously.”  

914 In the *ecce homo* of the scapegoat king the humiliated is exalted, inviting us down into humanity’s repressed crypt, the foundation of human culture and consciousness itself.

6.5 Resurrection: Sovereignty in Reverse

Modern critics of Christianity, at least since James Frazer’s *Golden Bough* (1890), have emphasized how Christ’s resurrection is continuous with paganism, thereby dismissing its uniqueness by citing numerous mythic parallels. Christian apologists have tended to respond by emphasizing its discontinuity, isolating it as *sui generis* from other dying and rising gods. This can involve defending how his resurrection and appearances must not have been a hoax, myth, or delusion, but instead the “great miracle which justifies belief.”  

915 Interestingly, however, early Christian theologians never seem to have bothered

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915 One of the most widely read evangelical approaches to this is in Lee Strobel, *The Case for Christ: Journalist’s Personal Investigation of the Evidence for Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 276)
to conceal how Jesus’ resurrection resembled other rising and translated gods in that day.\textsuperscript{916} Rather, the similarity of Christ’s resurrection was evidently granted while also emphasizing its difference\textsuperscript{917}—that the other gods have all been idols, and Jesus is Lord. That difference amidst similarity is what is precisely of concern.

In something of a continuation of the patristics, Girard’s method clarifies the content of this difference. This content concerns the mimetic misapprehension of victimage and the unconditionality of a divine love that forgives and transforms it. Girard comes to this view not only by embracing the resurrection’s similarities with the archaic sacred, but in Christ’s achieving a revelatory difference through them.\textsuperscript{918} What drives this discontinuity, in Brian Robinette’s gloss of Girard, is not merely Christ’s passive innocence and victimization, but that he took hold of the scapegoating process and “wicked

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\textsuperscript{916} Miller, \textit{Resurrection and Reception in Early Christianity}, \textit{op cit}, 5, 10. Justin, \textit{Dial} 69.1-3; 1 \textit{Apol} 21; Tertullian, \textit{Apol}. 21.20-23; \textit{Nat}. 1.10.29-33; \textit{Marc}. 4.7.3; Minucius Felix, \textit{Oct}. 21.9-10; Origen, \textit{Contra Cels}. 2.55-56; 3.22-31 and Theophilus, \textit{Autol}. 1.13; 2.27; Plutarch, \textit{Vita Romuli} 27.3-28.6. Miller deems that “Justin Martyr, Origen, Celsus, Tertullian, Theophilus, and Arnobius each candidly classed the postmortem accounts of Jesus under the larger ‘translation fable’ rubric” (Miller 179, 196n87)

\textsuperscript{917} Miller, 8, 181. E.g. Athenagoras’s \textit{De resurrectione mortuorum} and Tertullian’s \textit{De resurrectione carnis} do not attempt historical proof. Debates, rather, often surrounded “the nature of raised bodies” (Miller 158).

Schillebeeckx came to similar conclusions: “Initially the appearances are not reported with any apologetic purpose in view, as a kind of proof of Jesus’ resurrection. What is at issue is simply the legitimation of the apostolic missionary mandate, not some confirmation of the resurrection’s having taken place” (Edward Schillebeeckx, \textit{Jesus: An Experiment in Christology} [New York: Vintage, 1981], 354).

\textsuperscript{918} “Mimetic theory does not seek to demonstrate that myth is null, but to shed light on the fundamental discontinuity and continuity between the Passion and archaic religion. Christ’s divinity, which precedes the Crucifixion, introduces a radical rupture with the archaic, but Christ’s resurrection is in complete continuity with all forms of religion that preceded it. The way out of archaic religion comes at this price” (\textit{BTE}, xv, 126).
it toward himself...with the ultimate goal of defeating it." The revelation is not simply Christ-as-innocent-victim but Christ-the-revelator. Girard did not, however, elaborate much on how Christ’s resurrection referenced the political theology of antiquity. If we briefly consider the resurrection from this angle, it shows how that the resurrection’s resemblance to archaic political symbols supplied the medium for a critical rethinking of them. As such, it birthed a unique form of life that New Testament scholar Richard Miller calls “transcendent rivalry.”

Kings and heroes of the ancient Mediterranean were often exalted to the divine realm in what are referred to as a “translation” or an “apotheosis.” These often served to sediment a dynasty and ensure that a king’s reign would continue after his day. Plutarch wrote:

> On account of being against the natural order, it is necessary, therefore, not to send off to heaven the bodies of good individuals, but instead to suppose that, according to natural order and divine justice, their virtues and souls altogether be translated from being men to being heroes, and from being heroes to being demigods, and finally, provided they have been purified and made holy, having escaped mortality, from being demigods to being gods, not by civic custom, but in alignment with reality and sound reason; in this way, the lives of such individuals obtain the best and most blessed conclusion.\(^{920}\)

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\(^{919}\) Robinette 289-290. Also, “Having willingly become the victim to humanity’s deicide, the resurrection of Jesus from the dead exposes the injustice and inhumanity of the scapegoating process and offers in its stead reconciliation with God through forgiveness” (362).

\(^{920}\) Miller 110; Plutarch *Vita Romuli* 28.8. (Cicero, *de Natura Deorum* 2.24 is very similar, citing cases of Hercules, Castor and Pollux, Aesculapius, Liber (i.e. Dionysus) …and Romulus/Quirinus, who “are fittingly regarded as gods, since they are the very best and are immortal.”
Translations into heaven were not necessarily to be taken “literally,” as Cicero insisted\(^\text{921}\); but they were certainly taken very *seriously*, as honorific. In cases where a tomb was empty, it “was not simply a monument to a dead ruler, but, perhaps, more significantly, an accession monument as well, erected either by an emperor for himself out of concern for his descendants or by an heir to validate his claim to the throne.”\(^\text{922}\) We can thus understand why Alexander the Great conceived that he should have his body disappear after death to sustain his legacy as a son of Ammon-Zeus, or that Heraclides Ponticus conspired to have his tomb emptied as a sign of his transcendent glory, or that an empty coffin was politically honorific in King Numa’s mythology, or that the myth of Heracles’ missing bones were the analogue for the missing remains of a sovereign.\(^\text{923}\)

Classical scholarship can supply dozens of other examples of apotheosis, translation, or a resurrected divine hero, revealing the kind of semiotic atmosphere the gospels lived in and potentially accessed. I will point out only a dozen from Miller’s recent work (though we could just as well apply my heuristic to other studies). It is not necessary for us here to show the gospels as directly dependent upon these texts, much less that the gospels share their meaning. Rather, Christianity’s similarities with the translation/apotheosis mythos is the medium for its difference—namely, an inverted reconfiguration of symbols of sovereignty and glory, redirected toward the humiliated, forgiving scapegoat:

\(^\text{921}\) Miller 111. Plutarch theorized what exactly is meant by a spiritually translated body: *De Iside et Osiride* 47.

\(^\text{922}\) Miller 38, 111.

\(^\text{923}\) Miller 41, 54, 56, 165; Plut, *Num* 22.1-5; Arrian, *Anab*. 7.27.3; Chariton, *Chaereas and Callirhoe* 3.3.1-7; Diogenes Laërtius 5.89-91.
1) Plutarch and Livy’s disappearance and translation myths of Romulus, as the killed and/or disappeared founder of Rome, served as the basis the funerary consecration of the principes Romani and annual rituals of fleeing in fear from his disappeared body.924 Luke-Acts, with Jesus’ tomb and the road to Emmaus appearance, share a similar structure as the Romulus mythos.925

2) Herodotus wrote of a hero-poet, Aristeas, who was translated into heaven after his death, only to return in physical form two hundred and forty years later, bidding the people to erect an honorary statue of him next to the altar of Apollo. Then he vanished.926 “Paul’s Damascus road fits the Romulean structure or the famous legend given in Herodotus of the translated Aristeas having met a man on the road to Cyzicus, who then travels to the city of Aristeas’ disappearance to report the encounter.”927

924 Miller 14, 16; Vita Romuli 27.3-28.6.

925 Miller 174. “Amobius of Sicca’s Adversus nations (ca. 300CE) provides a most candid window into the topical, conventional character of Christ’s translation in early Christ thought, with the postmortem ascension of Romulus shown as analogical, indeed, by precedence, archetypical to the tradition” (Miller 174f).

“Both the vanished body (proceeding from Heraclean tradition) and the affrighted flight from the scene more than suggested the invocation of this archetypal tale. The annual Festival of Romulus on the nones of Quintilis (July 7) and the related Poplifugia (July 5) reenacted this flight in cities throughout the empire, namely, the people fleeing in dismay when Romulus vanished during his lustratio on Campus Martius in Rome” (Miller 169, n67; Dionysius of Halicarnassus, Ant rom. 2.56.5; Plutarch, Rom 27.7).

926 Miller 31.

927 Miller 173. See p175 for numerous parallels between the gospels and Romulus, including a missing body, darkness over the land, ascension, divine sonship, taken away in a cloud, meeting on the road, a heavenly body, dubious alternate accounts, people fleeing, deification, rejoicing, bright/shining appearance, etc.
3) Matthew’s birth narrative appears to adapt the mythological signs surrounding the birth of Alexander the Great—a myth that also served as basis for Suetonius’ divinization of Augustus.928

4) Mark’s temple incident resembles the climactic cleansing of the House of Odysseus at Ithaca.

5) Brutus’ betrayal of Caesar is echoed in the gospels’ “men armed with swords and clubs.”929

6) Jesus’ mockery as king invoked “the ascetic themes of Heracles’s labors and tragic death, the archetypal king,” and the ascesis and certitude of the misunderstood Socrates.930

7) The provision of asylum to foreigners was a hallmark of the Roman emperor, echoed in Matthew’s “many will come from the East and West.”931

8) Roman symbols of power often invoked the vogue orientalism in the 1st century, reaching east for symbols. Does the Christian resurrection, in its own exaltation of its sovereign, draw upon the Persian theme of resurrection of the dead?932

928 Miller 125; Plutarch’s Alexander 2.1-4 and Matthew 1.1-25. “On the same night when Diana’s Temple at Ephesus was burned, it coincided that Alexander was born from Olympias, and when daylight had come, magi cried out that the prior night there had been born the plague and demise of Asia.” Like Matthew, Suetonius applied Alexander’s birth myth as a pattern for his Divus Augustus; Cicero Div 1.23; Plutarch Alex 3.3; Miller 126, 127.

929 Miller 133, 135.

930 Miller, 136. He reads John’s Gospel as imitatio Socratis (Miller 162).

931 Miller 153.

932 Namely, in Zoroastrian eschatology of the Achaemenid period and thereafter (Miller 155).
9) “The jeering reception of the incognito king of Gospel portrayal mimetically drew upon the most famous of all ancient tales, that of the returning king of Ithaca, Odysseus, once having been divinely transformed into a doddering vagrant.”

10) Matthew’s Great Commission resembles Julius Proculus’ great commission.

11) Thomas salutes his monarch (“My Lord, my God” Jn 20:28) with the formulaic address reserved for Domitian himself.

12) Ancient divine heroes like Heracles, Empedocles, Asclepius, and Apollonius all “famously exhibited the power to raise the dead.”

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The more similar Christ appears to these divinized emperors or heroes, the more his difference from them is pronounced. The difference is not just by species but by genus. Christ is not here in competitive rivalry with Rome’s throne of glory—as if attempting to replace Caesar in a coup. Even if the gospels seem to award Jesus “the highest possible rank, even the rank of the glorified king and founder of the empire, divine Romulus,” the gospels’ resurrection is entirely opposed to the spirit of, say, the translated Nero, who returns to destroy the corrupt Roman aristocracy. And yet Christ is not in harmony with the empire, its founders, emperors, or heroes, as Eusebius plied in Constantine’s propaganda. Rather, the symbols are critically redeployed in a “reversal” or “inversion.”

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933 Miller 163, 168.

934 Miller 170; Livy’s Ab Urbe Condita Libri.

935 Miller 167; Suetonius, Dom 13.2.

936 Miller 159.

The shock of the Gospels, then, is not that they contain noticeable imperial, honorific symbols of that time, but that they apply them to a ridiculed, humiliated scapegoat—that they apply “such supreme cultural exaltation to an indigent Jewish peasant, an individual otherwise marginal and obscure on the grand stage of classical antiquity.”

Again, if Christianity resembled the imperial myths less than they do, they could not differ from them as much as they do.

While one cannot overemphasize Christianity’s Jewish roots, we must appreciate how even Judaism’s roots, by Jesus’ day, were also comingled with the Hellenic cultural matrix. The gospels doubtlessly accessed the Jewish semiotic registry when it came to the resurrection—like the Maccabean torture accounts or other Old Testament allusions. But only looking there robs us of the critical difference achieved through Christ’s similarity with Hellenic imperial myths. (Furthermore, Miller argues, “no form of resurrection in early Jewish tradition called for worship or cultus toward the one raised. Translation [apotheosis] alone called for the worship of the one who had been mortal, then made immortal.”

To the extent that the myths of Roman origins were referenced in the gospels, Miller writes, they supplied “the scaffolding for the empire’s new transcendent...

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938 Miller 180.

939 E.g. Schillebeeckx sees the appearances of Jesus largely tapping into models of Jewish conversion stories (Schillebeeckx, Jesus, 329, 527); or that the empty tomb had no semiotic registry beyond Jerusalem (336). His thin treatment of Romulus, Chariton, and Philostratus (or the idea of resurrection as solemn enthronement, 531) is a brief but lost opportunity to consider what other extra-Jewish models (rapture or otherwise) were at hand (341, 342, 704, 705, n. 56.). He at least notes how Plutarch’s Romulus resembles the Emmaus story, though this seems to him little more than just Luke’s way of “dressing it up” (Schillebeeckx, Jesus, 342).

Though I concur on his concluding note: “The models are not a starting point for a mythological interpretation of Jesus; but with the help of models already generally familiar Luke is contrasting Jesus, already acknowledged elsewhere as the actual presence of salvation, with the emperor” (Schillebeeckx, Jesus 343, italics added).

940 Miller 167.
rival, Christianity.” This is a “transcendent” rivalry in that its sovereign reigns from a cross, and he judges from his silent incompatability with worldly judgment. This subversion is not frontal attack, nor transcendent escapism, nor dialectic rivalry, nor depoliticization. This Christ is a “transcendent king, not a mundane opponent of the political structures of the day.” And yet he is not a non-opponent. It is subversion without sedition. Approaching the resurrection in this interpenetrative way does not abolish identity and allegiance, which would only create a new rivalrous identity and allegiance. It rather inverts it in an “ascetic critique of mundane civilization which transvalues the codes and structures of antiquity, turning them on their head.”

Girard, when he spoke of the resurrection, thus affirmed its revelatory import—but, again, finding its dialectic mediated through its analogy with the archaic sacred. The resurrection’s analogical sense is visible in the grand symbols of sovereignty, apotheosis, and divinization—which, when applied to Caesar’s throne, commanded no greater allegiance and devotion. But the dialectic turn comes when these intense symbols of praise, fear, and glory are redeployed in a total inversion: from the exalted to the humbled, from the sovereign to the scapegoat.

To the extent that analogy and dialectic here are combined and interpenetrating, we find that methods focused only on the resurrection’s historical quality dampen the scope of its revelatory meaning, leaving its meaning too misty and depoliticized. Such


942 Miller 135; 137 n, 88, 90.

943 Miller 137.
approaches will tend to emphasize the sheer discontinuity of the resurrection, as a sui
generis miracle that justifies belief. But this does not safeguard its revelatory value. As
Brian Robinette argues, in the defense of only discontinuity faith becomes reduced more
to a proposed belief and cognitive assent.\textsuperscript{944} At such a reduction, as Burton Mack notes,
euphemisms like “Easter,” “appearance,” and “spirit” are evoked not so much to enlighten
as to

mark the point beyond which reasoned argument must cease. They
serve as ciphers to hold the space for the unimaginable miracle that
must have happened prior to any and all interpretation. They have
become an all too convenient rhetorical device for evoking the myth
of Christian origins without having to explain it.\textsuperscript{945}

Girard’s approach helps “explain” the context and valence of the resurrection, especially
with respect to the transcendence of the victim, without “explaining it away.”

As Robinette’s use of Girard clarifies, the resurrection operates upon humanity at
a level deeper than its cognition, penetrating to the level of “scapegoating”—the layer of
human behavior where we “know not what we do.” The resurrection of the scapegoat
concerns not just a historical proposition for assent, but a self-involving experience that
prophesies to a blindness in our desires and perception, \textit{anterior} to our cognition.\textsuperscript{946}

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Robinette 54. Such approaches are evident in N.T. Wright, Wolfhart Pannenberg, and Gerald O’Collins \textit{inter alia} (see eds. Stephen Davis, Daniel Kendall S.J., and Gerald O’Collins, \textit{The Resurrection: An Interdisciplinary Symposium on the Resurrection of Jesus} (Oxford University Press, 1999). Nevertheless, Robinette admits how Wright “attempts to integrate both historical-critical methods and
literary-narrative approaches…we must not only be interested in \textit{what} actually happened but \textit{why}.” In this
sense Wright admits the resurrection “might lead to a reappraisal of the theory of knowledge itself” (N.T.
\item Burton Mack, \textit{Mark and Christian Origins: A Myth of Innocence} (Philadelphia: Fortress Press,
\item Robinette 291, 296.
\end{enumerate}
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the scapegoat concerns how our reason, desires, and perception are themselves radically “dimmed by the false transfigurations of mimetic idolatry.” Faith in the resurrection means not mere assent to a historical proposition so much as being exposed to a new self-involving way to perceive, a new grammar of reality. Historical, propositional approaches to the resurrection become delimited to the extent that they fail to see how reason and language work at the level of metaphor, not absolute knowledge. Robinette thus suggests “resurrection” is a delimited signifier for an event greater than the word can supply. But this “greater” does not imply a vague fideism that empties the resurrection of meaning and value. Rather, the more the resurrection of the scapegoat is mediated through the most glorious symbols conceivable, the more it doubly reveals our human blindness, “they know not what they do,” and divine gratuity: “father forgive them.” For the resurrection disseminates Christ’s identity not into a defined singularity, but infinitely into the persecuted, revealing hiddenness: thus Saul is struck that he is persecuting Christ without knowing it: “why do you persecute me?” I see harmony here in Assmann’s reading of the ban on images: the “intolerance” of that ban is not about the “‘religious arrogation of political power,’ but quite the opposite, a blocking of such arrogation.” The resurrection of the forgiving scapegoat is not about the arrogation of power but it

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947 Robinette 291; Girard, A Theatre of Envy, 342.
948 Robinette 56.
949 And further after resurrection: “peace be with you” and “forgiveness of sins”, etc. Lk 24:36, 47; Jn 20:21-23, 26; Acts 9:4.
950 PM 131; Albertz, “Monotheism and Violence,” 386.
undermines “every pretense to authority and possessiveness…It prevents a single image, such would be idolatry.”

6.6 The Land as the Body of a Victim: Paganism in Reverse

We have thus briefly explored how Christ’s trial, crucifixion, and resurrection entail both a similarity and a separation, both analogy and dialectic with classical symbols of sovereignty. A final crucial symbol for this chapter is that of land. In Egypt, we explored land in archaic political theology as the slain body of the God. We showed how numerous archaic states and tribes have represented their society, their land, and the cosmos itself as composed in the body of a victim. Much like many cosmogonic myths, where the cosmos is made through the body of a victim, Christianity too proclaimed that all things had been created through Christ (Jn 1:3; Col 1:16). But, consonant with our rubric thus far, Christianity does not escape from but reemploys this cosmic victimage symbol. This is most apparent in its image of land.

No theologian I have read, so far, so explicitly connects the New Testament’s concept of land and victimage as Gerhard Lohfink. His connecting land and victim echoes the theme we saw in Egypt—the land as the slain body of Osiris—but with considerable discontinuity as well. When Lohfink asks “what is new about the New Testament,” he refuses several answers. What is new is not love, enemy-love, forgiveness, atonement, discipleship, grace alone, openness to Gentiles, mercy overcoming wrath, an opposition to

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951 Robinette 92, 110.
ritualism, or the individual over false-collectivism. These were already present in Judaism by Jesus’ time. Rather, what is new is that, whereas Moses did not bring his people into the Promised Land, gospels depict Jesus as indeed “entering the Land.” And yet, he brings his people into a redefined Promised Land, his Body.

The official arrangement of the books of the Tanakh end not in the minor prophets but the books of Chronicles. Its last words follow Cyrus’ decree: “The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Whoever is among you of all his people, may the Lord his God be with him! Let him go up.” When the Tanakh ends with these words “go up,” it is using “the biblical term for the return and entry into the land of promise,” a powerful symbol of Israel’s hope amidst its many destructions, exiles, and trials: “arrival in the Land.” The Torah similarly ended with the death of Moses, who was not permitted to enter the Land, but left symbolically in the wilderness. In both the Torah and Tanakh, “the people stand on the threshold of the land of promise, but they are not yet in the Land itself. Everything remains open. The threshold has not yet been crossed. And the New Testament takes up this very situation. Here the threshold is crossed.”

John the Baptist, eating locusts and honey out in the desert, is drawn up intentionally to pick up where the Torah and Tanakh left off. He is at Israel’s “threshold

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952 Gerhard Lohfink, *Does God Need the Church?: Toward a Theology of the Church* (Michael Glazier, 1999), 121f, 124.
953 2 Chr 36:23.
954 Lohfink 125.
955 Lohfink 125.
situation before its entry into the Land…in the water of the Jordan at the very place where Israel stood before, under Joshua’s leadership, it crossed over into the Land.” And yet John does not cross into the land. By contrast, after Jesus’ forty days in the Jordan wilderness, coinciding with the exodus wandering of 40 years, Jesus

does not remain in the Jordan steppe but instead returns to Galilee; that is, he enters the Land, but under entirely different circumstances. He passes through the Galilean villages. Instead of having the people of Israel come out of their villages and cities and go into the wilderness, as the Baptist had done, he himself comes to them in the context of their normal life.956

Instead of ending up where the first Moses did, at the threshold between the exodus wilderness and the land, this second Moses enters the land. This is the inauguration of the Kingdom of God, per Isaiah 52, wherein “God gathers Israel, scattered in exile, and leads it home to the Land…the eschatological gathering of the people of God is beginning; Israel is being definitively given its land.”957 From the perspective of Pilate and Herod, we can see why Jesus’ gathering of twelve disciples might appear to like an attempted restoration of the political kingdom to Israel, rooted in twelve tribes, to seize back its land from its Hellenic usurpers.

But the gospels reconceive of “land” the way a mature Jewish monotheism reconceived covenants. “Land” here differs radically from any “concept of the state,” as Assmann argued. This “land” is no longer compacted with state and soil, even while it is still the Body of a victim. Osiris’ killed and dismembered body was the land; he was

956 Lohfink 128f.
957 Lohfink 129f.
reconstituted, post-murder, through the national, ritual procession of Egypt’s various states, which numbered the parts of his body. The New Testament’s reconfigured land, too, is a slain victim, constituted in the Body of Christ. This is evident, first, in John’s baptism of Christ, held at the threshold between exodus and land, where we hear from heaven, “here is my servant,” a clear reference to Isaiah’s Suffering Servant.\textsuperscript{958} That is, Jesus’ “entry into the land” coincides with his entrance into suffering.

Secondly, entering the promised land of Christ meant not a Joshuanic land grab or a Maccabean revolt. Neither apolitical nor political, entry into this land for his followers meant incorporation into the “body of Christ,” the Church. This is intriguingly present in Barnabas selling off his land near Jerusalem to join the Church.\textsuperscript{959} Having lived abroad, Barnabas likely owned land near Jerusalem, like many Jews then,

in order to make his belonging to Israel a concrete fact and to receive a share in the blessings of the messianic era. However, he sold that field to benefit the young Jesus community in Jerusalem, because it was more important to him to build up that community than to possess that field. That event makes clearly visible what is meant in Mk 10:29-30: the houses and fields that Jesus’ disciples will leave are their share in the ‘Land.’ Those are lost to them. But their share in the land of promise is not lost, because their ‘Land’ is the new family that Jesus gathers around himself.\textsuperscript{960}

If we consider what it would have meant for an Israeli settler then (or now), to sell off land around Jerusalem, this is not a merely “transcendent” or spiritual gesture. It had then, and would have today, a solid character that, at the same time, does not fit into the

\textsuperscript{958} Isa 42:1-4.

\textsuperscript{959} Acts 4:36-37.

\textsuperscript{960} Lohfink 132f.
rivalrous script of either subordinating to the Romans’ occupation or violently resisting it. Sale of land for the sake of joining and building up the Body of Christ is not Gnostic, apolitical escape; Barnabas’ land sale helped constitute a real, visible Body, while being neither zealot nor collaborationist. This takes the cosmotheistic notion of land as the body of a victim and reconfigures it. This body and land, though that of a victim, does not coincide with soil, state, or Temple, but in “Spirit and Truth.” It is a “temple” is made up of the living stones of humans (1 Pet 2:5). It is not a new founding murder to organize an earthly city; rather, insofar as it is a founding murder of a city, it is incompatible with all earthly cities.

It is right to prophesy against imperialistic images of land by invoking perpetual sojourning, much as Regina Schwartz did in her *The Curse of Cain*. She critiqued monotheism’s apparently unique lust for land- and women- domination and entitlement. But, while agreeing with the poison in any such libido dominandi, the above vivid, symbolic representation of victimage and land supplements her critique with a dense and practical image. Christian monotheism, with respect to land, cannot mean a politicized, Eusebian justification of *Landnahme*. And yet it cannot also mean the abrogation of solid images of land and victims—so long as we live in a world of hubris and victimization. In

961 Schwartz 39ff, 97. She recognizes the biblical dependence on land-grabbing practices common to the ancient near east (42) and biblical monolatry’s dependence on political vassal treaties (26). But she does not theorize how these can be reconfigured; rather, they are simply to be abolished in a boundless inclusivity.

But her brief critiques of landedness, the biblical idealization of the wilderness, and linking “humanity” to the land (and not the nation, 43f) are promising. We will find agreement in Mouffe that “whatever communities are, they are not a body, and imagining corporate identity as corporeal—as defined by blood and by seed—has served racial, ethnic, and religious hatred all too well throughout history.” But we add to this Mouffe’s notion of the inescapability of us/them constructs.
my last chapter I will offer a few more ways by which my approach is distinct from Schwartz’ treatment of monotheism and victimization.

We have here applied an interpenetrating rubric to Christ’s trial, crucifixion, resurrection, and land. It could be extended toward other symbols. For example, applied to the Eucharist, Girard saw this ritual as “cannibalism in reverse.” It dramatically resembles humanity’s violent crypt, where the cannibalistic mob imitates one another, animated by wanting to be the victim they kill. In the Eucharist, the victim offers himself as food to those who knew not what they do, transforming victimizers into forgiveness itself. The Eucharist digests us. “Primitive cannibalism is religion, and the Eucharist recapitulates this history from alpha to omega.”

It is still a community “united in othering” or exclusion; but it is a paradoxical revelation of our othering, an exclusion in reverse. In the Eucharist we see the deeper unity between primary and secondary religion: they all worship victims, even if primary ones were unaware of it. Applying this heuristic in detail to various theological symbols is a task for other studies.

6.7 Truth in All Religions?: The Mosaic Distinction and Christianity

What my sketched model above offers is a way to retain a sense of revelatory breakthrough without necessarily entering into antagonism. It offers a way to conceive of monotheism that affirms its dramatic difference from cosmotheism while, at the same time, not downplaying its striking resemblance to inescapable symbols like sacrifice and

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962 EC 217.

963 EC 211.
violence. This interpenetrative approach suggests that any attempt to “abolish” the Mosaic Distinction, through “inclusivity” or “tolerance,” do not escape the constraints of intolerance. Inclusivity and tolerance still have hegemonic potentialities and can become caught in rivalrous oppositions. I have tried to read Christianity’s symbols in such a way that illustrates at the least the potential for a relationship between exclusion and inclusion, between religion and enlightenment, that is neither politicized or depoliticized. Far from Christianity escaping hegemony—or intolerance, or sacrifice, or myth, etc.—we have outlined a rubric for seeing in Christianity an interpenetrated meaning of “hegemony in reverse.” This, I suggest, is a pathway for confessing a monotheism that does not gnostically reassert rivalry through an escape into transcendent, pacific, inclusive universalism. Rather, it retains an ever-open crypt, as it were, in the scapegoat-foundation illuminated and remembered. This crypt is in fact the engine and medium of its revelation. In this, Christianity bears fundamental continuity with all the primary religions that, in its own unique way, it surpasses.

And so, the putatively inclusive formula, “In Christ, there is neither Jew nor Greek,” does not abolish the Mosaic distinction. Claims to tolerant inclusion, per se, are not particularly unique to Christianity.964 For example, we learned of how inclusive, imperial monotheism was strategically tolerant and benevolent. But Paul’s inclusivity is not vaguely universal; it is “in Christ,” in Christ crucified. Paul speaks of an inclusion within an exclusion. His inclusivity does not attack, replace, or spiritually transcend

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964 Plutarch: “nor do we regard the gods as different among different nations nor as barbarian and Greek and as southern and northern” (ME 53; Plutarch, De Iside et Osiride, chap 67, pp 377ff, trans. Griffiths, in Plutarch’s “De Iside and Osiride;” 223f).
exclusion. Rather, it animates an upside-down politics, seeking to see inclusion in the light of exclusion.

As I began this chapter, I noted how the Constantinian “separation” of religion and politics masks a deeper, if schizophrenic, partnership, where the state runs the body and the church the soul. Burton Mack rightly sees this partnership as animating the history of Christendom’s “monocratic” will to power, inherited from imperial forms. But Mack would seem unmoved, however, by what I have drawn up here, in monotheism breaking up absolutism with a sense of eschatological deferral and reconceived symbols of sovereignty and praise. When Mack considers the idea that the Kingdom of God is “never actualized by the kingdoms of this world,” he only takes this to mean an itch that will always beckon violent scratching: the Christ-king must battle to the end against idolaters. As such,

the Christian mythic system has created a peculiar mentality capable of accepting opposition, conflict, and violence in the interest of protecting a monocratic ideal...This deferral of a resolution to the dialectic of Christ as lord and savior has given the Christian conscience a great desire for cleansing and release...the unfortunate consequence of such a resolution to such a problem is that the event invariably must be radical and violent, destroying the opposition in order to position the victor as absolute.965

The Christian monomaniac myth for Mack, in other words, exudes a fictive cosmic imperialism of Christ along with a monotheistic aura of exceptionality and uniqueness. It

is universalist, monolinear, singular, hierarchical, dualistic in all the noxious and hubristic ways. This myth has militated against Christians coming to terms with the pluralistic social and cultural world in which they lived. Other peoples found ways of accounting for cultural difference that did not demand uniformity… [But the] Christian monocratic mentality obstructs critical thinking about contemporary social and cultural issues… [it has] canceled out the importance, often the memory, of the indigenous histories of all other peoples converted to Christianity.

Echoing commentary on what we have called the Mosaic distinction, Mack argues monotheism in Christianity means nothing but a dualistic damnation of its opposite, the idolater, the lost soul, the pagan, the outsider. It has failed to appreciate difference, accept critique, celebrate plurality, negotiate compromise.

Instead of this monocratic mythology, Mack invokes a non-fictive and non-mythic mode of belonging, promoting instead a disposition in defense of victims that is plural, open, inclusive, and without the totalizing imagery. Instead of Christianity annexing, first, the Jewish story into its allegorical totalizing myth, and then appropriating every culture and story in the world, Mack instead promotes that no single story should be traced through all of western history to the end of the world. What my study suggests here is

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969 Mack, *The Christian Myth*, 106, 173, 174, passim. He refers to the “Greek notion of…participating in a ‘kingdom that was, in effect, an order of things prior to, displaced from, and in contrast to the kingdoms of this world…a theocratic model to counter the tyrannies of the Roman imperium’” (138, 164).

that Mack’s objection to monocratic myth in defense of victims paradoxically affirms a
deep truth as absolute. His defense of the victims of monocratic Christianity tacitly
affirms the Mosaic distinction as an absolute. His refusal of a singular story reaches toward
what I have called an “apophatic intolerance.” His exodus from the oppressive Mosaic
distinction is his unconscious affirmation of it. He does not countenance that his concern
for victims, his hope for a unity beyond exclusion, may be what Girard calls “the secular
mask of Christian love.”\textsuperscript{971}

Similarly, the Mosaic distinction need not be framed as the collapsing of openness,
as Regina Schwartz does. For example, she exegetes Deutero-Isaiah as delivering a vision
of a God of plentitude which then collapses once he starts condemning false gods: Isaiah
must have “feared that his assertions of divine plentitude were not compelling enough and
that he had to add, just for good measure, warnings to coerce singular devotion rather than
simply invite assent to his ideal of boundless giving.”\textsuperscript{972} Instead of such coerced zeal,
Schwartz wants to reject forms of identity that are competitive and based on a sense of
“monotheistic scarcity”—the sense that, “once you start loving, either you lose your
identity or else the loved one does: someone loses.” Instead of such scarcity, she invokes
a “plentitude” which “proliferates identities without violence.”\textsuperscript{973} She is against “forging

\textsuperscript{971} ISS, 165.

\textsuperscript{972} Schwartz 37; Isaiah 41:17-19; 44:3-4.

\textsuperscript{973} Schwartz 117.
identity agonistically,” but rather imagining divinity which “gives and goes on giving endlessly without being used up.”

I too wish to worship in this choir. But, when I do, I am told that we did not recognize this God, and we killed him. I am told this God stands as the eternal Temple as a slain lamb. Schwartz’s vision of rivalry-lessness is indeed beatific, in imagining a world founded without an originary exclusion. But, in a political sense, Girard is more realistically attentive to the exception: to reject sacrifice in this world means that one accepts it, at least potentially, upon one’s self. Even the heavenly city is not an exclusion-free utopia. It is indeed like the earthly cities, in its being founded upon a victim, but in reverse. The limitations of Schwartz’s open-minded take on monotheism will become in my final chapter clearer as we draw upon Mouffe’s notions of exclusion and exclusion.

If the Mosaic distinction means the distinction between true and false religion, the question for continual reflection is what is truth? In Girard, Christianity’s answer is apophatic and “weak”: “there is no privileged stance from which absolute truth can be discovered…That is why the Word that states itself to be absolutely true never speaks except from the position of a victim in the process of being expelled.”

This is the most important utterance in all of Girard’s work. Christianity supplies explicit content to the

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974 Schwartz 146, 118. She is right to note how canonization is not the result of a peaceful consensus, but that canonization entails exclusion and even violence (Schwartz 146). But her solution of “consensus” cannot dissolve exclusion. Opting for a “substantial archive” and not a “closed corpus” is matter of differing configurations by degree over the power, interpretation, and control of the archive, not the abrogation of power and control. Even openness guards its openness.

975 TH, 435. This paradox is what Burton Mack fails to see in the Christ myth. For him Christianity is ultimately about “an exclusive claim to ultimate justification into an absolute and universal principle of judgment about the rest of humankind…the only representatives of a superior and uncompromising social vision” (Mack, The Christian Myth, 158).
Mosaic distinction between true and false religion. In this, the Mosaic distinction does not mean that God is on “our” side and everything else is on the wrong side. My interpenetrative approach here looks at the line of Mosaic demarcation and sees it drawn, as it were, upon the body of God. For Girard, the divisions of law all stem from the originary distinction, drawn upon “God,” upon the victim as founding exclusion. A similar reading can be found in one of Barth’s more paradoxical images: the Mosaic-inflected duality of a God who saves the elect and totally damns the reprobate is, in Christ, divided upon God’s very self: in Christ the incompatibilities—of total divine communion and abandonment—collide.\(^976\) Agamben similarly saw Paul’s Christ crucified messianism as “dividing the division” between Jews and Gentiles—“dividing divisions of law, rendering them inoperative, without ever reaching a final ground.”\(^977\) One might even see this interpretation in a crucial symbol for Israel: in Abraham’s bloody covenant with God, the customary violence written into the vassal contract is oddly reversed: the threat of violence against the party who fails in the covenant is placed not on Abraham but on God.\(^978\)

In this sense, a Christian iteration of the Mosaic distinction does not necessarily reject the “non-dual thought” of, say, Seng-T’san (d609BCE), who wrote: “If you want to realize the truth, never be for or against. The struggle between ‘for’ and ‘against’ is the mind’s worst disease.”\(^979\) In light of Christ crucified, such a maxim does not abrogate the

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976 Barth, *Church Dogmatics* §II.2.

977 Here Agamben’s reading of Paul’s messianism is suggestive: *The Time that Remains*, 53, 51.

978 Schwartz, 32.

Mosaic distinction. Rather, the very identification of the for/against disease, the us/them antagonism, is precisely a penetrating observation of the originary division which Girard calls the scapegoat mechanism. Seng-T’san’s deconstruction of antagonism coincides with his affirmation of “Truth.”

On this matter of “the victim,” this is an “intolerance” that Christianity should not relinquish or dim. That stumbling block has indeed become a cornerstone in our day, in the ubiquitous concern for victims, even if it can turn dangerous as a new rallying cry to persecute the persecutors. Or, as Mouffe will tackle in our concluding chapter, the liberal rhetoric of “inclusion” in our day can be used as cover for neo-liberal hegemony. Instead, we must consider how inclusion and unity are only “true” when exposed to the penetrating light of the victim. And given that any and every human association may be blind to its victims, any theory of inclusivity will need to remain infinitely open to critique, ever under construction lest it become a new regime of tolerance. Thus, the scapegoat king rightly remains uninstantiatable in history, incompatible with every worldly judgment. This is symbolized not only in the trial, cross, resurrection, and land, but also in the eschatological New Jerusalem’s temple as the slain lamb, the body of the God-human-victim. Matthew 25 likewise prophesies how no one within history understands or can lay final claim to their relationship to the victim, who thereby haunts us, world without end. Given this uncertainty, any inclusion that fails to represent the victim will be in danger of hiding something, in a unity forgetful of its violent foundations.

I take my concluding chapter to show the implications of this theory of intolerance and monotheism through contemporary social theory. The increasing critiques of liberalism’s “intolerance” today share much in common with the critiques of
monotheism’s potential for universalistic hubris. But the notion of an unavoidable and unobjectionable interpenetration between myth and logic as explored in this chapter are relevant to this problem. Just as myth is an inescapable feature of logic, so too intolerance, exclusion, and division are inescapable features of socio-political order. We have found that monotheism did not destroy, but novelly reconfigured intolerance and zealous political loyalty, just as Christianity reconfigured sovereignty and the symbol of a founding exclusion. Neither of these abolish the us/them duality. For, to abolish these would only create a new us/them. Rather, I am conceiving of a monotheism that reconfigures the us/them duality with a self-critical patience and attentiveness to God as the hidden victim. This is a way for us to interpret and retrieve the liberative potentials of monotheism while staying attentive to the dangers of politicization and depoliticization. My thesis will cohere around the idea that mature monotheism offers an “apophatic intolerance.” This entails a refusal to represent the Absolute in the political sphere, disallowing any monopoly on the foundation of society, and an orientation to an eschatological “foundation” of the victim. If we ask what that might look like today in social theory terms, I conclude by pointing to the pluralistic work of Chantal Mouffé.
CHAPTER 7:

HOW TO BE INTOLERANT:

ON PARADOX AND INCOMPATABILITY

We opened this study noting monotheism’s reputed unique intolerance, an apparent threat to our diverse world in need of coexistence. I then offered a larger evolutionary framework for seeing how monotheism, as compared with the context it emerged from, helped inaugurate a unique division of God from the political sphere. Monotheism, I argued, reconfigured the zeal and intolerance of monolatry, loyalty oaths, and henotheism, once supreme expressions of the political sphere, into refusing this sphere of divine or absolute status. I have termed this crucial gesture “apophatic intolerance.” With Assmann and others I showed this as a civilizational achievement, in its opening up an Archimedean point outside of the cosmos from which divine royalty dissolves and the political realm stands subject to everlasting critique. Barring historical explorations of the numerous ways this has been worked out in Jewish theology and messianism, much less Islamic monotheism, I offered a brief sketch for conceiving how a Christian monotheism might not regress on this breakthrough and fall back into pagan cosmotheism. Rather, I described in the scapegoat king a rearrangement of divine kingship—such that it proclaims a hegemony “in reverse.” Christ is neither in direct oppositionalism nor privately spiritualized, both of which fail to critique the political sphere. Rather, his exclusion founds
a heavenly city that is not compatible with the earthly city, suspending identity and allegiance in a never-resolved tension. Or, paradoxically, if this is an “identity” it means belonging to a “land” that is the Body of the sacrificed—both visible and real, yet at eschatological distance.

In this final chapter I consider how my account of monotheism is relevant to patient coexistence today, interpreting it in light of the pluralistic theory of Chantal Mouffe. It is common-enough sense to see political pluralism as implying religious polytheism. H. Richard Niebuhr, for example, made such a connection, as did William Connelly in promoting a pluralism whose religious parallel invokes the dictum “there is not only one god.” But, central to Mouffe’s pluralistic theory is her refusal to lay claim to any monopoly on the absolute foundations of society, resembling what I have called a monotheistic “apophatic intolerance.” The way Mouffe sublimates what I will define as the Liberal distinction helps us consider how to sublimate the Mosaic distinction. Both distinctions entail the dangers of universalist absolutism and a unique intolerance, but both are of immense value if only we can integrate their intolerance into civic practice and disposition.

In concluding with a political theorist, my aim is not to open up a whole new quadrant of political concepts and theory, but to simply use Mouffe’s logic of paradox to invigorate the implications in my previous chapters. The logic I draw from her entails five

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980 “Pluralism of the gods has its counterpart in the pluralism of self and society” (Niebuhr, Radical Monotheism and Western Culture, op cit, 30).

themes relevant to my account of monotheism and intolerance: 1) that tolerance contains intolerance, much as polytheism contains violence. 2) Reason does not provide an escape from exclusion or hegemony, much as Christ’s nonviolence does not provide an escape from sacrifice. 3) Pluralism involves refusing unity-myths that conceive of a society beyond hegemony. That is, pluralism means refusing to represent the Absolute or monopolize the foundation of society. 4) There is a beneficence in incompatibility—for Mouffe, this incompatibility is between liberalism and democracy, or in my account of monotheism, the eschatological proviso. And yet, 5) given the inescapability of the political, one must provisionally work with identity constructs, using “us and them” relations in the agonistic struggles of the earthly city. After exploring Mouffe’s logic in these points, I conclude my study with overarching commentary on the implications for monotheism and intolerance.

7.1 Liberalism and the Intolerance of Tolerance

Mouffe defines “liberalism” as the diverse socio-political traditions that have championed individual liberty, universal rights, the rule of law, tolerance, inclusion, and pluralism. Amidst the varieties of liberalism, Mouffe is most concerned with a prevalent mode of thought which advocates a primary allegiance to the “worldwide community of human beings” and the formation of a “common belonging beyond all differences.” This is a vision of overcoming exclusion and division, breaking down barriers to create a society

982 AG 29.
983 AG 22, 20, discussing, inter alia, Martha Nussbaum and Kantian, universalist cosmopolitanism.
beyond hegemony. She calls this a “depoliticized” view of politics, given its desire to transcend “the political.” The political, again, refers to that aspect of human association which inescapably involves divisions, boundaries, and decisions between conflicting alternatives.984 The political is akin to Girard’s inescapability of “sacrifice”—the decisive exclusions at the foundations of human culture.

The penchant for apolitical politics today, Mouffe argues, stems from a failure to see the incompatibility between the liberal tradition and democracy, a tradition which, by contrast, emphasizes “equality, identity between governing and governed, and popular sovereignty.”985 Today we in the West might generally consider ourselves as living in “liberal democracies.” But she insists there is no necessary relation between the liberal and democratic traditions. They in fact emphasize different, even incompatible, principles.986

For example, liberalism as she defines it speaks of “humanity” in abstract, universal, and unconditional ideals. But the democratic tradition speaks not of “humanity,” but of a particular, definite people. Democracy concerns not “universals,” but the application of specific laws for who and how. Lacking liberalism’s universal, individual, and moral emphases, democracy is specifically political, legal, and statist in scope. In the democratic tradition “equality” is a political concept and means citizenship, a legal equality. But

984 “‘The political’ refers to this dimension of antagonism which can take many forms and can emerge in diverse social relations. It is a dimension that can never be eradicated” (AG 2, 3).
She is borrowing partly from Carl Schmitt, for whom the political concerns “the ever-present possibility of the friend-and-enemy grouping.” And this enemy possibility then forces us to consider “which social entity…decides the extreme case and determines the decisive friend-and-enemy grouping” (Schmitt, The Concept of the Political Expanded Edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007, 1927/32), 43, emphasis added; 25, 32, 35, 37).


986 AG xiii.
liberalism’s idea of equality is our shared humanity, more like a substantive equality.\textsuperscript{987} Living amidst a liberal democracy, then, requires negotiating these two ultimately incompatible principles.

This incompatibility can be illustrated by briefly noting some critiques of liberalism. Despite the inclusive and tolerant rhetoric that characterizes the liberal tradition, many critics have accused it of being, in practice, the purveyor of great intolerance and violence. In such a critique, liberalism is exposed as nothing but the ideology of Western hegemony, parading as if it were neutral and universal. “Human rights” can serve as a pretext for which country to invade next, violating democratic sovereignty.\textsuperscript{988} Or, liberal policing of a particular version of “open-mindedness” can make for a violent, silencing, intolerant “regime of toleration,” as is now often cited in U.S. culture wars.\textsuperscript{989} One can trace critiques of liberalism back to sources like Johann Hamann, who argued Immanuel Kant’s universally-hued reason is not so much universal as it is a byproduct of his culture.\textsuperscript{990} An infamous 20\textsuperscript{th} century critic of liberalism was the Third Reich jurist Carl Schmitt who spoke of the violence hidden in “universal brotherhood.”\textsuperscript{991} Such liberal rhetoric, he insisted, paints opponents as inhuman and thus worthy of

\textsuperscript{987} DP 40-1.


\textsuperscript{989} See footnote 6 in the Introduction.

\textsuperscript{990} See Robert Alan Sparling, \textit{Johann Georg Hamann and the Enlightenment Project} (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011), 57-75.

annihilation, using a prohibition on violence as a new justification for violence. He found this in post-WWI Germany, wherein the “humanitarian” League of Nations hid their retribution in pulverizing economic sanctions. Walter Benjamin also critiqued how all societies, especially liberally inclined ones, are prone to ignore or forget their own violence. Rather, they tend to perceive their own society and its legal institutions as pacific, and others as violent, failing to see how even non-violent diplomacy and legal contracts contain violence.

Jason Springs identifies Stephen Carter’s *The Culture of Disbelief* (1993) as a more recent bellwether critique of “liberal tolerance.” Such a critique involves identifying liberalism’s hypocritical “failure to perform according to its own self-image,” including imposed “common sense,” anti-religious bias, or the attempt to forge a religiously “neutral” space. Or, on the matter of universal rights, the United Nations’ Universal Declaration of Human Rights appears much less inclusively “universal” once we consider how Islamic councils found that declaration insufficient and penned a Universal Islamic

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993 Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, 60, 61, 70. “From this polarity [liberals] attempt to annihilate the political as a domain of conquering power and repression…” (71).

994 Benjamin, *Reflections*, 288. “When the consciousness of the latent presence of violence in a legal institution disappears, the institution falls into decay...they have not remained conscious of the revolutionary forces to which they owe their existence.” See also Brad Evans, “Liberal Violence: From the Benjaminian Divine to the Angels of History,” *Theology and Event* 19.1 (2016).

Declaration of Human Rights.  Would it not be better to admit, critics ask, that liberalism makes a space that is not universal but delimited and exclusive?

These varieties of critiques reframe and ventilate the entire monotheism-intolerance discourse. They help expose, in the words of David Martin, “the potential violence inherent in all forms of human solidarity, not merely the solidarity conferred by religion.” The critique of liberal violence and intolerance suggests we add to Assmann’s types of violence: raw, legal, ritual, political, religious, and liberal violence. Liberal violence, in light of these critiques, is distinct from legal violence on account of its justification: it does not sanction itself with respect to a legal order, a polity, or a god, but universal “humanity” or human rights, executed in a posture of neutrality, or possessing the natural and universal position. And akin to the Mosaic distinction between true and false religion, we can see in liberalism a distinction between true and false societies: illiberal societies can be treated as false, wrong, inhuman, or at least less than true.

The potential for liberal hubris can lead to the abandonment of liberal democracy. Some theologians like Alasdair MacIntyre, Stanley Hauerwas, or John Milbank have, each

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in their own way, become famous for their varieties of abandonment. MacIntyre retorts that “human rights are as mythical as witches and unicorns,” and Hauerwas writes that “justice is an unchristian idea.” Far from religious identities being the source of intolerance today, they argue, it is the state and its rights discourse serving as cover that are the greatest purveyors of violence. Hauerwas, for whom Christian particularism means pacifism, rejects critiques of his sectarianism: the true sectarian is the liberal state and its libido dominandi. The contrastive rhetoric of such theologians can sometimes succumb to a black/white rivalry with liberalism, suggesting that it should be abandoned. This has aggravated pragmatists like Jeffrey Stout, who have tried to make Hauerwas—who could be an ally in democratic politics—at least admit that “justice might not be a bad idea.”

We will not dwell further on the critiques of liberalism, but simply note how the abandonment of liberalism on account of its violent potentialities resembles the rejection


1001 Stanley Hauerwas, *War and the American Difference: Theological Reflections on Violence and National Identity* (Baker Academic: 2011). “Niebuhr, in the interest of making Christianity politically responsible, argued that in matters of politics Jesus must be left behind, because the political work necessary for the achievement of justice requires coercion and even violence. For Niebuhr, ‘justice’ names the arrangements necessary to secure more equitable forms of life when we cannot love all neighbors equally. Good Barthian that I am, I worry that justice so understood becomes more important than the justice of God found in the cross and resurrection of Christ” (100).


of monotheism for its violent potentialities. Both monotheism and liberalism seem to have origins that involved severe (or at least fantasized) violence against enemies; and both have the potentials to be universalized and deployed in hubristic ways. Both involve some sense of “incompatability”: in monotheism, this involved a politically unrepresentable God; in Mouffe, there is a universality in liberalism that can overtake democratic principles.

But, that liberalism may be dangerous or incompatible with democracy need not lead to liberalism’s rejection. Rather, as with Mosaic intolerance, we must consider how to orient this intolerance in relation to the political realm. Liberalism, as Mouffe discusses, also opens up beneficent modes of law and human organization in its vision of a society not founded on exclusion. Liberalism may entail radical distinctions that endanger and polarize our world, but its benefits may be worth the price.

7.2 The Inescapability of Sacrifice, Exclusion

The way to situate liberalism with democracy, for Mouffe, requires fully grasping “the political.” As a chief example of what she means by this, she uses John Rawls, among whose most important ideas is the pursuit of an “overlapping consensus.” This is an ideal to create a society not founded on any exclusion but on the consent of all governed. Such a consensus would aim to be sufficiently encompassing and neutral, and thereby more stable and pacific, not an arbitrary, imposed hegemony. This would lay the foundation on which we can safely tolerate objectionable differences amidst our pluralities. Rawls thus imagines a well-ordered society as one in which the political “has been eliminated.”

1005 DP 91, 29; AG 55.
Rawls’ ideal aims to close “the gap between justice and law,” as if they are ultimately compatible and could fully and definitively coincide.

Mouffe reads a similar ideal in Jürgen Habermas, whose “deliberative democracy” promotes the exchange of reason and deliberation as an alternative to the exclusion of opponents. This preference for procedure and norms is supposed to lend “credibility and legitimacy to the democratic process, guaranteeing that such a consensus was obtained by reasoned assent and not mere agreement or subjugation.” In debates over the EU today, Mouffe identifies a similar ideal, that “through informed participation and discussion, citizens should be able to reach an agreement about the best policies.”

While well intentioned, Mouffe sees these liberal conceptualizations of pluralism as ultimately evading the political. They fail to “acknowledge the hegemonic nature of every form of consensus” and indeed “every kind of social order.” For, once this consensus is supposedly reached, Mouffe insists, it simply is the new hegemony, the new order of which there is no right to question. Even inclusion is exclusive. Once we ask whose legitimacy and whose rationality would enforce consensus procedures, we see that these would not only restrain political hegemony but would be an expression of it. In light of this paradox, division is not merely an incidental breakdown of political order; division

1006 *DP* 87. Similarly, Seyla Benhabib’s social theory seeks for a kind of “legitimacy” that is an “impartial standpoint which is equally in the interests of all” (*DP* 47). Arendt is seen in parallel here, with her aim of replacing parties with councils and aiming to obtain inter-subjective agreement (*AG* 10).

1007 *AG* 54.

1008 *AG* 11, 2.

1009 “Once the very idea of an alternative to the existing configuration of power disappears, what disappears also is the very possibility of a legitimate form of expression of the resistances against the dominant power relations” (*DP* 5; 43, 45).
is inescapably “constitutive” of political order. Tolerance constitutively contains intolerance; and consensus contains hegemony. “Consensus in a liberal-democratic society is—and will always be—the expression of a hegemony and the crystallization of power relations.”

Mouffe is not being pessimistic about human nature so much as naming the paradox of inclusion. This paradox illuminates how much “unity” political strategies can achieve. If liberalism’s ideals were ever to become fully realized in a politico-juridical form, say in some plural cosmopolitanism, it would paradoxically no longer be liberalism, at least in any objective sense of inclusivity, pluralism, and openness: “the very condition of the creation of consensus is the elimination of pluralism from the public sphere.” In light of this, we ought not imagine that “pluralist democracy could ever be perfectly instantiated, since the condition of possibility of a pluralist democracy is at the same time the condition of impossibility of its perfect implementation.” To lay a foundation in consensus is still to exclude.

Mouffe thus argues that theorists like Rawls and Habermas have envisioned not a genuine pluralism but a privatized pluralism “whose legitimacy is only recognized in the

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1010 DP 139; AG 3, 89. Agamben’s etymology of law aids us: nomos (law) stems from nemo, “to divide and attribute in parts.”


1011 DP 48f, 42.

1012 DP 49.

1013 DP 16.
private sphere and that it has no constitutive place in the public one.\textsuperscript{1014} Their attempts to ground legitimacy on rationality erroneously treat political disagreements and divisions as merely incidental, as if they could be definitively overcome by some kind of rational procedure. But, politics cannot preempt hegemony by using rationality and common sense, because politics \textit{is} “the terrain where competing interpretations of shared principles struggle in order to \textit{define} the ‘common sense’ and establish their hegemony.”\textsuperscript{1015}

Given this ineradicability of division, the political sphere can channel, modify, and referee divisions; but it cannot \textit{abolish} them without, in turn, reproducing a new division. Even the most inclusive of politics inescapably involves “the creation of an ‘us’ by the determination of a ‘them.’”\textsuperscript{1016} For expunging or escaping this us/them reality only creates a new one—much as we noted in Gnosticism. (Marxism, too, succumbs to this evasion of the political, in its attempt to abolish all divisions in a final unity.\textsuperscript{1017}) Echoing Girard’s notion of the inescapability of sacrifice, Mouffe concludes it is impossible to constitute a “form of social objectivity which would not be grounded on an originary exclusion.”\textsuperscript{1018}

The blind spot and liability of certain liberal social theorists, then, is their habitual “incapacity to conceptualize”\textsuperscript{1019} the boundaries of the political. Such depoliticized thought fixates on the “norm,” where the rules of consensus and inclusion pacifically work, while

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{1014} AG 55.
  \item \textsuperscript{1015} Chantal Mouffe, “Religion, Liberal Democracy and Citizenship,” 323. Emphasis added.
  \item \textsuperscript{1016} DP 101.
  \item \textsuperscript{1018} DP 11
  \item \textsuperscript{1019} DP 43.
\end{itemize}
evading the “exception,” where decisions are made without any legal foundation. (Our reading of Christ’s trial, in Pilate’s caving before a mimetic mob, is a key instance of “the exception.”) For example, when Habermas emphasizes procedures of “deliberation,” so as to guarantee the moral impartiality of democracy, Mouffe notices a conspicuous lack of thinking the exception, of placing any “limits on the scope and content of such deliberation.”

And yet the limits surely remain, hidden in whoever referees the deliberation. What will not be allowed in the deliberation? Who will decide that and how will it be excluded? In painting an optimistic picture of “deliberation,” Habermas evades the “negative aspect of sociability” and avoids “the recognition that violence is ineradicable.” Instead, he wrongly imagines that once we engage the other’s difference “violence and exclusion could disappear…as if politics and ethics could perfectly coincide.” Such an “idealized view of sociability” presumes that pacific-sounding words like reciprocity or cooperation solely make for the peaceful realization of the good. But, as mimetic theory emphasizes (and Mouffe cites Girard on this point), reciprocity involves not only the norms of peaceful exchange, but the exceptions of violent solidarity and reciprocal violence. In other words Mouffe draws upon Schmitt’s insistence that mature political thinking must “think the exception with a passion”: “The paradigm that

1020 DP 86.
1021 DP 132.
1022 DP 134.
1023 Mouffe cites Girard at DP 130-1, and shows other implicit connections on pages 11, 32.
defines the proper functioning and structure of the law is not the norm but the exception.”

Mouffe is thus reframing how we think about reason’s relation to violence. Reason does not only restrain violence but is an expression of it. What we so often view as “common sense” or universal reason must be recognized as a contingent byproduct of power. The prevalent Western anthropology of individualism and liberty, for example, appears less like universal common sense once we see how many societies have viewed humans as innately interindividual, with “harmony” instead as a central principle. Western individualism often tends to view any communal identities (any “we” that has more claim on me than my “I”) as irrational, divisive, and violent, belonging to “a bygone age when reason had not yet managed to control the supposedly archaic passions.”

But Mouffe argues that such rationalist individualism, thinking itself as objective, universal common sense, is a failure to see how every identity is relational and that “the creation of an identity always implies the establishment of a difference.” Rationality and the modern cogito fail to see how every I is already a we, mimetic and interindividual. Reason does not supply absolute, objective access to universals but is “the result of sedimented hegemonic practices.” As Dumouchel writes:

The monopoly of legitimate violence is what provides reason with its claim to be violence’s Other, thus making itself ‘Reason.’ The difference between reason and violence, on which we would like to

1024 Agamben, The Time That Remains, 104. “The exception is more interesting than the rule. The rule proves nothing; the exception proves everything; it confirms not only the rule but also its existence, which derives only from the exception” (Schmitt, Political Theology, 15).

1025 AG 4; AG 137.

1026 AG 5.
does not precede the action that establishes the political order, but flows from it. Reason, conceived of as violence’s Other, depends on there being a monopoly of legitimate violence. If there is no such monopoly, the difference that defines Reason also fades away.1027

Girard’s evolutionary model anticipated this, locating mimesis and violence-containment as producing what we call reason. This is another way of acknowledging the unavailability of an entirely neutral form of reason. And thus, for Mouffe, “there will always be a struggle between conflicting views of the common good as the ‘true’ incarnation of the universal. No rational resolution of that conflict will ever be available.”1028 To identify this inextricable link between reason and hegemony is not at all to abandon reason or give into relativism, but to insist on the contingency and contestability of every social order. “Every social order is a contingent articulation of power relations that lacks an ultimate rational ground.”1029 The supposed natural order of society “is never the manifestation of a deeper objectivity that is exterior to the practices that brought it into being.”1030 This idea, that common sense is not so common, enables us to denaturalize every supposedly natural power and conceive how, if needs be, they “can be transformed through counter-hegemonic interventions.”1031 So there is no vision of depoliticized “escape” here, but transformation from within.

1027 Dumouchel, The Barren Sacrifice, xvii.

1028 AG 79.

1029 AG 131.

1030 AG 2; “through a process of sedimentation, the political origin of those contingent practices has been erased; they have become naturalized” (AG 89).

1031 AG 90.
Trying to attain “consensus,” or enrich decision making through deliberation, may helpfully *reconfigure* exclusion by enlarging it or making it more flexible. But it does not abolish exclusion. Any consensus, at best, will always be a *conflictual consensus*—a continued process of dispute where conflicting interests are battled out, in what Mouffe calls “agonism.”\(^{1032}\) Such a consensus still excludes certain positions as falling outside the ever-contested boundaries and terms of engagement and dispute.\(^{1033}\) At the same time, the public space can never be definitively stabilized in a balanced and pure agonism. For whoever regulates that agonism would again be a contestable hegemony. Rather, “pure agonism is impossible for me. Or maybe it is possible, but you cannot call it political anymore.”\(^{1034}\) In the common and liberal view, “the public space is the terrain where one aims at creating consensus.” But Mouffe’s idea of politics is both bolder, in emphasizing divisions, and yet more modest, in that finalized unity is simply not possible. We must admit that politics involves “necessarily unstable forms” which rationality, procedures, and toleration cannot eliminate.\(^{1035}\) Agonism means the public space is where “conflicting points of view are confronted without any possibility of a final reconciliation.”\(^{1036}\) Politics “consists in domesticating hostility and in trying to defuse the potential antagonism that exists in human relations…there can only be contingent hegemonic forms of stabilization

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\(^{1032}\) Mouffe’s original work on agonistic pluralism is in *The Return of the Political* (New York: Verso, 2005), and her “key thesis” is in *DP*.

\(^{1033}\) *DP* 103; *AG* 139.

\(^{1034}\) Decreus and Lievens 684.

\(^{1035}\) *DP* 11.

\(^{1036}\) *AG* 92.
of their conflict…” Politics, we could say, is about as lasting as archaic sacrifices; it dissipates conflicts into a provisional unity around certain exclusions.

7.3 Refuse Unity Illusions

In light of the inescapability of the political, Mouffe urges giving up the illusion that we could somehow attain a non-hegemonic social unity. We ought to “abandon the very idea of a complete reabsorption of alterity into oneness and harmony.” Engaging in liberal democracy means abandoning “the ideal of a democratic society as the realization of a perfect harmony in transparency.” As reason itself is linked with unity and power, we must abandon “the very idea that there could be such a thing as a ‘rational consensus’; namely, one that would not be based on any form of exclusion.” Mouffe is, again, not theorizing humanity as essentially aggressive or valorizing conflict. Rather, the point is that when we view politics from the position of the exception, the boundaries of our evidently peaceful norms, we see how myths of oneness naturalize power relations which should remain ever contestable.

For Mouffe, a chief sedimented myth of oneness today is especially visible in “neo-liberal hegemony,” whose unity entails enforced deregulation and privatization, at the

1037 Mouffe, “Religion, Liberal Democracy, and Citizenship,” op cit, 323; DP 5
1038 DP 33; AG 22, 49.
1039 DP 100.
1040 DP 32
1041 She resembles, at least on this point, William Connelly’s pluralism which emphasizes the “profound contestability of our practices” (Connelly, Why I am Not a Secularist, 36).
1042 DP 5
cost of justice and planetary sustainability. Political moderates and “third way” proponents have been especially prone to capitulate to neo-liberalism, ignore its divisions, paint it as natural and reasonable, and mythologize it as fate. For example, Margaret Thatcher’s continued refrain that “there is no alternative” to neo-liberal globalization paints it as our natural, unquestionable destiny. Or, Mouffe also notes Tony Blair’s rhetoric, that “we are all middle class,” so we should all be able to agree with one another. The idea of conflict has just disappeared.” I add, similarly, William Cavanaugh’s observation that national “unity” is often invoked in the U.S. to defend tax cuts for the mega-rich, saying its critics are “sowing divisiveness.” As Dorothy Day observed, the rich mysteriously turn from just war theorists into universalist pacifists once class war is broached; they even pretend that the conflict is not there.

These are rhetorical moments of idolatry—of positing a Unity where there is none, of saying “peace where there is no peace” (Jer 6:14). It is a failure to see how the “common good” is good for some, yet very bad others. We may interpret Jesus, in this framework, as something of an anti-henotheistic prophet; “I came not to bring peace but division” (Lk 12:51; Mt 10:34). A genuine pluralism, likewise, admits “there is no single entity called

\[\text{\textsuperscript{1043}}\quad AG 131.\]
\[\text{\textsuperscript{1044}}\quad \text{Decreus and Lievens, 698.}\]
\[\text{\textsuperscript{1045}}\quad \text{William Cavanaugh, “Killing for the Telephone Company: Why the Nation State is Not the Keeper of the Common Good,” Modern Theology 20:2 (2004): 243-274, 264.}\]
\[\text{\textsuperscript{1046}}\quad \text{Dorothy Day, “Why Do the Members of Christ Tear One Another,” The Catholic Worker (Feb, 1942), 1.}\]
‘society’” and likewise rejects “the reduction of such a diversity of publics to a single sovereign will.”

For Mouffe, the mirages of idealized consensus make for “a dangerous utopia of reconciliation,” an “illusion of rational consensus.” Such false unity I am inclined to see as a chief idol that monotheism negates. While idols and “unity” may safeguard us in one sense, they can so repress our divisions that they eventually provoke, in Mouffe’s analysis, “particularist and violent reactions” of antagonistic excess. These arise today not just in jingoistic populism, but in pogroms and mobs—of which Mouffe explores examples in recent torching and looting in France. There, she argues, forced and false unity has robbed people of alternatives, distinctions, and channels for confrontation, which shrinks political vocabulary for voicing grievances. With grievances but no words, what could have been a manageable agonism of dispute and democratic contestation boils over into raw antagonism.

Instead of “can’t we just get along,” agonistic pluralism for Mouffe asks, “can’t we just argue?” Pluralism means refusing idolatrous unity (or other deterministic fates, like the “material forces of production,” or “the development of the spirit,” etc.). Such mythic unity will tend not to make us more aware of oppression but excuse it as a necessary sacrifice. Because of this, any political order “should never be justified as dictated by a

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1048 DP 28f
1049 AG 27-8, 122, 146.
1050 AG 132.
This strikes me as an apophatic intolerance, akin to a monotheistic refusal of a henotheistic absorption into one. It does not see God in the tolerance or translatability between cultures because such tolerance is relativized by an Absolute and seen for its contingency; tolerance is made possible by its containing violence, by its monopoly on violence. Monotheism as I have conceived it does not so much attack henotheism as negate or hollow out its divinity. Its refusal to represent the absolute corresponds with viewing the Absolute from the perspective of the subjugated. This problematizing of “unity” resembles the photographic negatives between henotheism and a genuine monotheism: henotheism justifies an order under an absolute vision, while monotheism’s vision of the absolute apophatically renders all political orders contestable.

For Mouffe this above refusal to represent the “the totality” of a society is the same thing as refusing to lay hold to a final political “foundation.” For the idea of a foundation for her concerns that which can never be subject to dispute or conflicting interpretations. But, given the unavailability of absolute knowledge, “no agent should be able to claim any mastery of the foundation of society,” or a monopoly of the foundation. Such a refusal is crucial for keeping political strategies from turning into totalitarian and fascist regimes,

1051 AG 17.

1052 DP 21; Connelly, Why I am Not a Secularist, 83, 155. One hears similarity with Niebuhr: “The democratic process may be carried on within the context of monotheistic faith. Then no relative power, be it that of the nation or its people as well as that of tyrants, can claim absolute sovereignty or total loyalty” (Niebuhr, Radical Monotheism, 77).

This refusal for Mouffe stems from her understanding of the democratic tradition as involving a symbolically “empty” place of power, even if, in practice, a constraining power is always exercised. In regards to this emptiness, “totalitarianism is the attempt, after the democratic revolution, to reoccupy the empty place of power. Totalitarianism can only come after democracy. It is democracy that opens up the danger of totalitarianism” (Decreus and Lievens 680). Parallels are evident in Assmann: monotheism’s distance from the political makes possible a new kind of violence to fill that distance.
many of which throughout the 20th century laid claim to their “foundation” by laying claim to victimhood. Refusing to claim a monopoly on the foundation of society is that it is, paradoxically, its own kind of “foundation.” It is an ever-opened-up foundation; ever exposed to its contingency and its exclusions.

In Mouffe this foreclosure of absolutism affects our notion of time and expectation, or we might say eschatology: “full objectivity can never be reached.” We must come to terms with our “lack of a final ground and the undecidability that pervades every order.”

The notion that a perfectly open and objective justice cannot be definitively instantiated through law finds theological corollaries in, say, Gregory of Nazianzus, for whom the Triune monarchy cannot be represented in nature, or in Augustine, for whom the Kingdom of God could never be installed politically. This is sometimes known as an eschatological proviso, such that every political strategy remains subject to critique. Eschatology, in other words, coincides with apophatic renunciation of definitively representing the Absolute in the world.

For Hitler’s victim rhetoric see Palaver, “The Ambiguous Cachet,” 76. Atalia Omer, similarly, notes here how “religion” is not merely a source of absolutizing identities, but “deconstructing and reimagining identities” (Omer, “Can a Critic Be a Caretaker,” 472).

In different terms, consider Gary Wills’ reading of Augustine’s two cities: “saints and sinners can live together precisely because they do not share an ultimate orientation toward justice. What they have instead, in the criss-crossing of social ties, are sufficient concrete good things to protect and love in a joint way” (Garry Wills, Saint Augustine (New York: Viking, 1999), 119). Wills sees a realism here in a “rough assemblage” approach and not a totalizing tolerance.

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1053 For Hitler’s victim rhetoric see Palaver, “The Ambiguous Cachet,” 76. Atalia Omer, similarly, notes here how “religion” is not merely a source of absolutizing identities, but “deconstructing and reimagining identities” (Omer, “Can a Critic Be a Caretaker,” 472).

1054 AG, xi, 17.

1055 AG 2

1056 Peterson, “Monotheism as a Political Problem,” in Theological Tractates, op cit.

7.4 Maintaining the Incompatibility

Even with liberalism’s potential dangers of hubris, of pretentions to universality, and even with its incompatibility with democracy, Mouffe does not propose abolishing liberalism. In fact, we must, first of all, appreciate its beneficent intolerance. This is precisely its constantly exerted pressure for the extension of rights, inclusivity, its intolerance of tyranny, and the representation of minority voices. These are cataphatic intolerances, as it were, the positive forces exerted by the liberal tradition. “By constantly challenging the relations of inclusion-exclusion implied by the political constitution of ‘the people’—required by the exercise of democracy—the liberal discourse of universal human rights plays an important role in keeping the democratic contestation alive.” Liberalism is also critical in making visible “what the dominant consensus tends to obscure and obliterate, in giving a voice to all those who are silenced within the framework of the existing hegemony.” While the liberal tradition of human rights can indeed be applied in an imperialistic fashion, Mouffe is among the many who insist liberalism need not be seen as an idolatrous credo of a global secular religion, or as a totalizing “conversation stopper.” Rather, she affirms, like Atalia Omer, that human rights, despite the potential

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1058 DP 45
1059 DP 5.
1060 AG 93.
dangers, can be used as “a starting point and diagnostic lens for illuminating the underlying root causes of conflict…It is important to safeguard against a wholesale rejection of everything ‘liberal’…”

Besides giving liberalism’s intolerance its due, we must also recognize how it is “only thanks to the democratic logics of equivalence that frontiers can be created and a *demos* established, without which no real exercise of rights could be possible.” In other words, the rubber of universal rights hits the political road in specifically political, thus hegemonic and contestable, forms. Thus, the interface between liberalism and democracy (in “liberal democracy”) involves “the articulation of two logics which are incompatible in the last instance and that there is no way in which they could be perfectly reconciled.” Without this apophatic awareness, the awareness of incompatibility, the cataphatic intolerance of liberalism is not counter-balanced and is thus liable to become the liberal totalitarianism critics have derided.

In light of this incompatibility, liberalism should not be simply softened; its power is found precisely in its universalist, “intolerant,” ideals—even if they cannot be instantiated without becoming hegemonic. Liberalism means constant pressure toward increased inclusion and justice in tension with the constitutive exclusions, decisions, and boundaries of the political. Accepting this ongoing incompatibility and paradox is Mouffe’s path toward sane social theory. Mouffe thus writes, “even while we must admit to the constitutively divisive nature of the political,” we should not abandon liberal

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1063 Omer, “Can a Critic be a Caretaker?” 478. See also *AG* 30; Raimundo Panikkar, “Is the Notion of Human Rights a Western Concept?” *Diogenes* 120 (1982): 75-102, 81-82.

1064 *DP* 9.
Instead of seeking to resolve the incompatibility, we must appreciate how agonistic tensions within democracy—divisions perhaps intensified by the pressures of liberalism—can be productive and liberative.

7.5 Identity and Adversaries

Mouffe is careful to point out how this refusal of closure, when pushed into an extreme pluralism, can succumb to evading the political. She identifies this in William Connelly, for example, in whose pluralism she detects a mere “valorization of multiplicity” that avoids “any attempt to construct a we.” This evasion of the political makes him “unable to grasp the nature of the hegemonic struggle”—that even pluralism “will necessarily imply some form of closure” in various exclusions. Any pluralism today that attempts to abolish us/them alliances leaves neoliberal hegemony insufficiently critiqued. Again, “it is only when division and antagonism are recognized as being ineradicable that it is possible to think in a properly political way.”

\[\text{DP 45}\]
\[\text{DP 20.}\]
\[\text{AG 14-15; Connolly, What I am Not a Secularist; William E. Connolly, Pluralism (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005). I agree with Mouffe, but see minor exceptions when Connelly rarely speaks of “decisions” and “restraints” and not his more common “public engagements” or “deferrals and diversities” (e.g. Connolly, Why I am Not a Secularist, 5, 8, 154).}\]
\[\text{Niebuhr sees a similar pattern in the “religion of humanism,” which starts in “protest against the doubtful assurance and the partial loyalties of closed societies,” but it then “ends with an enlarged but yet dubious and partial closed-society faith. It remains a kind of henotheism” (Niebuhr, Radical Monotheism, 35).}\]
\[\text{AG 15.}\]
“Identity” for Mouffe thus involves not the abrogation of adversaries but respectful engagement with them. A generous pluralism does not mean abolishing “us/them” from our vocabulary. Rather, democracy supplies the institutions that reduce antagonism into agonism, subduing potential enemy relations into adversary relations. This conceives the central feature of politics as not the “enemy,” but the “adversary.” An adversary is the opponent with whom one shares a common allegiance to the democratic principles of ‘liberty and equality for all,’ while disagreeing about their interpretation. Adversaries fight against each other because they want their interpretation of the principles to become hegemonic, but they do not put into question the legitimacy of their opponent’s right to fight for the victory of their position.

In other words, pluralism means not abolishing conflict but treating adversaries with respect, even while opposing them. This is a crucial element in what is also known as conflict transformation, wherein conflict is seen as a positive opportunity—it might even need to be provoked—so as to more deeply pursue just relations.

Mouffe argues not for eliminating collective identities of us/them through reason or privatizing passions. Rather, the aim is to redirect “those passions by mobilizing them toward democratic designs, by creating collective forms of identification around democratic objectives.” Failure to recognize and name us/them political divisions is

1070 *AG*, xii.
1071 *AG* 7.

Niebuhr regards henotheism as defining the neighbor “as the one who is near me in my interest group,” the fellow within the closed society. By contrast, “in radical monotheism my neighbor is my companion in being.” He avoids a naïve optimism here by retaining the agonism of politics and the reality of enemies.

1073 *AG* 9.
again to fall into the liberal evasion of the political. Instead of evading any constructing of “us,” identity formation ought to be oriented toward clarifying and transforming conflicts. Mouffe thus affirms, for example, how a social movement like Via Campesina explicitly constructs a “them” in its rhetoric and action, opposing “big multinational agribusiness corporations.” By contrast, she is suspicious of “moralistic” approaches to global justice, often visible in charity events or mobilizing compassion, which avoid naming the structural, economic adversaries who abet global injustices. We must risk constructing and using “us” terms, even while allowing that construct to be provisional, with awareness of its potential for ossification.

7.6 Monotheism and Intolerance

In light of Mouffe’s theory, it is thus something of a misnomer to use “intolerance” as a simple term of derision, accusation, and critique—either of monotheism or liberalism. Consider Schwartz’s critiques of intolerant monotheism. She rightly cedes that monotheism, having complex and heterogenous roots, need not “necessarily” produce a “violent notion of identity.” And yet, in an unfortunate gesture, she explicitly equates

1075 AG 63.
1076 AG 64.
1077 Schwartz 31
monotheism with monolatry and henotheism, given their shared notion of exclusive allegiance. Unable to countenance their complex difference amidst similarity, monotheism becomes for Schwartz uniquely guilty for its exclusivist identity, defined as “not-Egypt.” Given this, monotheism becomes especially responsible for the poison of collective identity formation in our world. Her thesis is explicitly based on the claim that the origins of violence are in “identity formation,” full stop. “Violence is the very construction of the Other…defining ourselves against the Other sets in motion a cycle of violence that no legislation can hold.”

Monotheism is supposedly such othering par excellence. For Schwartz, we must instead “embrace multiplicity instead of monotheism,” preferring “not one, but many gods.” We must shed monotheism’s intolerance, its us/them identity formations, its monolatrous political genes, and imagine sociality in tolerant, open, universal, and limitless forms, embracing ethics, peace, and the promise of universalism (the latter of which she briefly admits might have some dangers). She envisions divinity as “not confining or totalizing but opening and proliferating: as a

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1078 Schwartz 17. She justifies the conflation based on the fact that there are so few strictly monotheistic utterances in the bible, and “since everyone uses monotheism to mean monolatry…I will stick to the customary usage.”

1079 She even treats the prohibition of kinship allegiances and exogamy as uniquely monotheistic violent identity-constructs (Schwartz 79).

1080 Schwartz 5, 37.

1081 Schwartz 176.

1082 Schwartz 38. “In the myth of monotheism, pluralism is betrayal” (46).
principle that does not circumscribe limits, but endlessly transgresses all possible limits.”

As for monotheistic “transcendence,” she sees in it no positive decompaction of God from the political sphere or eschatological proviso. Rather, transcendence is simply the symbol of scarcity, the “inaccessibility” of God (which is necessarily a bad thing), and an enforced separation between Creator and Creation. While she would settle for a more inclusive monotheism, she still prefers polytheism: “When the biblical text moves more explicitly toward polytheism, it also endorses a more attractive toleration, even appreciation of difference.”

Schwartz can be affirmed in her emphasizing the pagan roots of monotheism as well as her exposing its violent reception history. But I would add with Assmann a more nuanced exploration of intolerance and how monotheism’s dangerous price, compared with a polytheistic tolerance that contains violence, purchased us critical distance from the political. Mouffe likewise helps us see how opposing identity formation with the language of “limitless openness” evinces a liberal evasion of the political. We are mistaken to treat tolerance, openness, and inclusivity as polar opposites of exclusivity. Schwartz’s unconditionality-rhetoric simplistically regards inclusivity and limitlessness as good, and exclusivity/limits as bad. It cannot see how consensus is an exclusion and tolerance

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1083 Schwartz, *The Curse of Cain*, 33; x, 4. I see affinity with her argument when she admits that, the Deuteronomist’s “graphic depiction of violence against the Other” may in fact involve sympathetic depictions of the outcast. Thereby the text “invites us not to reject the rejected Other” (31).

1084 Schwartz 116.

1085 Schwartz 31
contains intolerance. It does not countenance the necessary boundaries and limits involved in democratic processes and struggle. Nor does she supply much of a critical awareness that the embrace of difference still takes place, politically, in the context not of unlimited openness but in a range of acceptable difference. Recognizing the contingency of that range—refereed as it is by the reigning hegemony—is crucial to what I’ve called apophatic intolerance. It is a necessary counter-balance to the beneficial, cataphatic intolerance of liberalism’s desire to create a society without exclusion.

Schwartz dreams, “what would happen if we were to base our ethics on a utopian condition, one presupposing an ideal of plentitude instead of the world of scarcity?” My answer is we would inevitably need to situate this laudable utopianism in relationship to the decisions and exclusions of democracy. This ideal of plentitude would, in practice, inescapably take on delimited and exclusive forms. Schwartz comes close to this when she acknowledges that “the work of law,” with its prohibitions and punishments, will have to “let ethics do other work.” But Mouffe reminds us that even ethics does not escape the political; for the very work of interpreting and naming ethics is political, just as it is the work of constructing a narrative and a we. “The ethical and the political are intertwined and depend on each other. Normative theory denies this. It places ethics outside or above the realm of the political.” Thus, Mouffe doesn’t treat “liberalism” as a cipher for ideals, morals, or norms—which then belong in the private realm—while politics deals with hard, objective facts. No moral or norm is sheerly universal and non-contingent; rather, norms

1086 Schwartz 34.
1087 Decreus and Lievens 689.
contain hegemony. Without this awareness, liberalism again evades the political. Any dream to “endlessly compose and recompose temporary and multiple identities,” still inevitably entails boundaries and decisions.

Openness in the pursuit of a victim-less politics is laudable, indeed it must be pursued with vigor. But it does not abolish political boundaries. It reconfigures them. Liberalism may help us draw our boundaries differently—perhaps for the better and with greater generosity. Liberalism may even help provoke conflict such that we might begin to transform it. But no political strategy offers a clean escape from exclusion. By analogy, theological attempts to abolish monotheism of its intolerance and its identity constructs seem to stem, at least partly, from an unrevised interpretive position Mouffe has called a liberal evasion of the political. This evasion, in turn, inhibits a clear-minded reception of monotheism today. Instead of trying to retrieve an unconditionally tolerant and open monotheism—as if the choice is whether to be intolerant or not—the more interesting question is how one excludes, how one is intolerant.

7.7 Conclusion

Exclusive monotheism has its roots in a monolatrous and henotheistic God of primary religions, in sometimes absolutist and imperialistic expressions of forced-unity. But mature monotheism ultimately means repurposing this absolutism, in both cataphatic

1088 Exceptions at pg 33, 88, where she briefly notes how universalisms are not an easy answer. “Violence is not, then, a consequence of defining identity as either particular or universal. Violence stems from any conception of identity forged negatively, against the Other, an invention of identity that parasitically depends upon the invention of some Other to be reviled” (Schwartz 88). My reading of Christianity considers its identity as precisely haunted by our negative scapegoating of the Other.

1089 Schwartz, 37.
and apophatic intolerance. Its cataphatic intolerance involves a vision of God outside the political sphere—or we might better say, a vision of God from under the political sphere, from the perspective of the victim. Monotheism thus opens a space from which all powers stand subject to prophetic critique. Through Girard’s theory, we have a framework for seeing how the victim is both a symbol of the foundation of society and “the Absolute.” Apophatic intolerance refuses to claim a monopoly on this foundation of society.

These complex dynamics help us see how monotheism is not simply about Oneness. It is in fact a division. It divides God from the cosmos and the political sphere, birthing a new kind of religion hiving off from the ancient primary religious compact with the political. It means living in paradoxical incompatibility between the “kingdom of God” and every earthly kingdom. This paradox is dramatized in the scapegoat king who de-centers one’s identity, praise, and allegiance from the earthly city, based as it is upon the exception—that is, seizing of the outside: as Girard writes, “he is the one that is the most outside yet also the most inside common humanity. He is the most divine and the most human...God is now on the side of the scapegoat victim.”

This becomes more comprehensible in light of Mouffe’s account of liberalism and pluralism. Her logic affirms how liberalism involves continual agitation toward the increased observance of human rights, even while this may provoke divisions, conflict, and agonism. At the same time, she has an apophatic edge, as it were, in negating any monopoly on the foundation of society. Neither my account of monotheism or Mouffe’s account of pluralism involves a transcendence that depoliticizes or leaves us entirely

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1090 BTE 50; Agamben, The Time that Remains, 105.
disoriented, without values, or identity. Instead of pluralism here meaning a mere “relativization,” identity remains ever oriented by the victims and originary exclusions at the foundation of every polity. But this orientation is counter-balanced with an awareness that any attempt to politically attend to “the victim” will nonetheless contain exclusions—it will be imperfect, hegemonic, and contestable, world without end. Nothing is more crucial than seeing reality from the perspective of victims, yet nothing more dangerous than holding a monopoly on that perspective. With an orientation beyond unitary political representation, both monotheism and pluralism mean patient engagement in the presence of conflicting plural values. Or, in theological terms, as Edward Schillebeeckx argued, the eschatological proviso does not only relativize the political sphere with an awareness of its contingent nature. This would only “throttle back the humanitarian impulse.” Rather, to divide the Absolute from the political, as I have put it, means precisely invigorating the humanitarian impulse while “orienting” it. 1091 This orientation, in my account, is the “exceptions” of any and every order—its boundaries, its exclusions, its victims. The image that comes to mind is the representation of a crucifix, which hangs perpetually before our eyes, silently uttering to all our hidden and unacknowledged persecutions today: “why do you persecute me?” But this word is eschatological in that its orientation toward the victim can be responded to, but it cannot be definitively resolved within history.

In terms of what this means for a person’s sense of belonging, it means, at least, resisting the compulsion to establish a final and complete identity. It means refusing to

fully constitute one’s self in identification with any political form. I hesitate to call this “mystical,” but it is indeed a refusal to fill the absence within, our mimetic instability. It means the contestability of any definitive political identity, always asking at whose cost our “unity” is achieved. For Mouffe, this means giving up any sense of belonging which conceives the self as part of a complete societal “body.” As we saw in cosmotheistic political theology, the state, the land, and the body of a slain victim together represent its “originary exclusion” and its unification. Egypt would reconstitute itself as a total body, composed of Osiris’ many parts. But for Mouffe, the “body” as a political metaphor is simply too absolutist. It immanentizes singularity in such a way that divisions are papered over. The political “body” symbol effaces important conflicts, and, as I have put it, flattens out the above eschatological leaven. It overburdens the political realm with more unity than what we can expect of it. Its absorption of alterity into oneness too easily forgets how all unities are founded on an exclusion.

My chapter on Jesus Christ affirmed how the body is indeed the site where politics is symbolized. But instead of seeing Christ’s nonviolence as the evacuation of the political, the body is reconceived as a site for engaged, active practice (with Barnabas’ land-sale in joining the body of Christ as just a small sample). I conceived this as transcending the rivalries of the political while not escaping them. The heavenly polis is similar to cosmotheism in that it unites around a victim; and it indeed involves visible practice in conduct and cult. The pilgrim Church is indeed, in one sense, conceived as the body of a victim. But, it is unlike cosmotheistic unity in that the image of a victimized body as the

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1092 DP 103.
foundation of the social order is transposed into a new register. It is no longer the symbol and foundation for an earthly city. The body of Christ as founding victim is here more the continued, transcendent, non-instantiable pressure of critique against every earthly city.

In Girard’s terms, what is at stake in this is the instability of mimesis: our “lack of being” and the compulsion to stabilize this lack by polarizing upon a victim and refounding a new order. Agonistic pluralism in a Girardian key means embracing our lack of being, consenting to our interindividuality, and taking responsibility for our complicity in the inescapable social web of mimesis. It means learning to not join the mob even while mimesis and group association are inescapable. We do not here evacuate the symbols of exclusion but reposition them in tension with every hegemony—including the hegemony we may participate in or vote for. Just as Mouffe’s pluralism refuses any central unifying foundation, monotheism robs us of any divinization of the political order. It robs us of an eternal cosmic enemy “Seth,” a unifying pole who is feared, respected, and expelled as the divine enemy. Enemies and adversaries are rather secularized in monotheism, robbing us of any unified, political, immanent identification with the body of a founding victim. Christianity’s expression of this monotheism means not an escape from symbols of the divine victim but mystically identifies with the victim at eschatological distance (or “transcendent rivalry”). The photographic negative of henotheistic completion and unity, monotheism problematizes all unities of power by exposing and continually representing the founding murder of the political. As such, Girard is right to see how Christ “brings war not peace, disorder not order, because all order is suspect in a way: it always hides the one
whose blood was shed in order to reconcile us.” This is how monotheism is a refusal to divinize victims. But, given the inescapability of the political, we are also then continually haunted by the possibility we are victimizers without knowing it. This unknowing is well symbolized in the sheep and goats of Matthew 25’s parable, wherein relation to the victim within history is opaque and unknown to all. Revelation here unveils our opacity.

Identifying in Mouffe a secular resemblance to what I have called apophatic intolerance helps illustrate a certain manner of retrieving and confessing monotheism today. Given the way I have narrated monotheism, it would be mistaken to confess monotheism as an imaginative exercise for the credulous—trying to believe and live “as if” such a mythic One God lives on high. I’m not suggesting this sort of fideism—even if I have emphasized a certain inescapability of myth. Rather, apophatic intolerance here means something more like “as not,” which Giorgio Agamben sees in Paul’s messianism: the negation or hollowing out of every mythic Unity and supposedly naturalized power. Christian monotheism does not mean believing or pretending “as if” there is a big One God. It is about living as though all of the fictive elements that animate society’s “scapegoat mechanism,” all of its drives to Unitive Power, are “as not.” This means an apophatic awareness that unity is always contestable, always potentially hiding divisions; this means an intolerance of any final closure of the political, whether in liberal, Marxist,

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1093 BTE 141.

1094 Agamben, The Time that Remains, 2 et passim; 1 Cor 7:29f. “the time is short. From now on those who have wives should live as if they do not; those who mourn, as if they did not; those who are happy, as if they were not; those who buy something, as if it were not theirs to keep; those who use the things of the world, as if not engrossed in them. For this world in its present form is passing away.”
socialist, or whatever strategies. This “as not” does not destroy us versus them associations—which, again, would only construct a new one. In my Christian accounting, monotheism is not a universalist escape from exclusion, but co-identifying in Christ with the exclusion of God. In other words, if one of our problems of intolerance today is “identity forged negatively against the other,” the paradox of Christian “identity” is striking: “I have been crucified with Christ, and I no longer live, but he lives within me,” (Gal 2:20) decenters one’s identity precisely upon this negatively expelled “other.” This identity begins in repentance, which Girard defined as the admission that we may be persecutors without knowing it. This identity is indeed forged negatively against the other, but in reverse.

Even with a disavowal of the absolute’s representation in the political sphere, there remains the inescapability of the political. With this it is incumbent to imagine how such an unconditioned vision, whether in God’s universality or liberalism’s inclusivity, can navigate a world of the conditioned, in decisions and exclusions. The aversion to any political order founded on exclusion rightly operates in an unresolvable tension with the boundaries of democracy. We must paradoxically live between the impossible unconditional and the conditioned—innocent as doves and shrewd as snakes.

If the Mosaic distinction and Liberal distinction divide true and false, it is crucial to not to deride or abolish this intolerance but to ask what is the content and criteria of true and false. The monotheism I have advanced here paradoxically locates that criterion of true and false distinction on “the victim,” the founding exclusion. “True religion” unearths

\[1095 EC 198.\]
that foundation, the one on whom the political line of exception is drawn, and lays it bare in painful perpetuity. Christ crucified, as the “King” and victim-foundation of a heavenly city, means nothing less than thinking the exception with a passion.
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