

## Introduction

### *Monotheism and Pluralism*

“Everything that destroys social unity is useless.”

Jean-Jacques Rousseau

“I came not to bring peace but division.”

Jesus Christ

Few phrases feel so pretentious and belligerent as “*the One True God*.” This monotheistic expression seems to capture the spirit of religious violence, if not the heart of intolerance and conflict itself. For pregnant in it we find belief not merely in one God, but “the belief in *only* one God,” who just happens to be my god, while the other gods are false, wrong, or maybe to be persecuted. And, with such an all-encompassing creed, we face what seems an intractable anti-pluralism, dangerously prone to turn a sense of religious supremacy into political violence and suppression of difference. Thus, monotheistic religion often seems to us, as Egyptologist and ancient historian Jan Assmann writes, less the opiate of the people and more “the *dynamite* of the people.”<sup>1</sup> That is, monotheism can appear as a uniquely absolutist “political theology” – how we imagine and represent political power’s relation to divinity<sup>2</sup> – that

<sup>1</sup> Jan Assmann, *Of God and Gods* (hereafter GG), 5.

<sup>2</sup> I refer to the species of political theology, as debated between Carl Schmitt and Erik Peterson, that attends to the imaginary of sovereignty, making this partly a subject of political science (Giorgio Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory*, 9). In this sense, the term includes analysis of how divinity and cosmic power relate (or not) and a sociology of how political and religious concepts interpenetrate one another. Such a mode of political theology can overlap with, but differs from, an alternate mode: confessional expressions of how faith calls believers to act politically.

conflates the religious Other with political enemies to be killed, repelled, or repressed into orthodoxy. Monotheistic political theology seems to evoke a monolithic, patriarchal imaginary that leads to imperial homogeneity and even the sterility of monocropping.<sup>3</sup>

Apologists of monotheism may refuse this line of thinking and instead remind us of how violent polytheistic religions were and construe monotheism as a bastion of universal tolerance, inspiring a benevolence that transcends partisanship, a loving erasure of the lines drawn up between enemies. In this view, a true monotheism stands above all “othering” and us vs. them thinking. But, the more this pacific universal benevolence is emphasized, the more biblical stories of violence and intolerance clang with dissonance. What are we to make of the immense violence flowing from the supposed historic font of monotheism itself – the Bible? We find there God’s command to Moses to murder idolaters, the Joshuanic conquests, Elijah’s slaughter of Ba’al priests, the Maccabean mercilessness, Revelation’s fantasies of a bloodbath, and so on.<sup>4</sup> Even if some of these scenes may never have happened, as many historians suggest, Assmann nonetheless urges that, compared to the ancient religions, it seems highly significant that monotheism “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.”<sup>5</sup> Why this dwelling, where does it come from, 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?”<sup>6</sup> Simply, is monotheism bad for us? Given the great anxieties about violence in a shrinking world, and the need for at least a modicum of pluralistic coexistence, it is not unreasonable that many conclude monotheism only makes things worse.

The suspicion that monotheism presents a unique threat to coexistence has deep roots – a history we will sketch at the beginning of Chapter 3. For now, we can simply note some modern objections. David Hume was

<sup>3</sup> An ecological analysis of the malignant imaginary of monotheistic homogeneity can be found in Solomon Victus, “Monotheism, Monarchy, Monoculture.”

<sup>4</sup> Ex 32–34; Deut 13:6–10; Num 25; 1 Kgs 18; 2 Kgs 23:1–27; Ezra 9–10; 1 and 2 Macc; Revelation *passim*. GG 116; Jan Assmann, *From Akhenaten to Moses* (hereafter ATM), 50.

<sup>5</sup> Jan Assmann, “Monotheism and Its Political Consequences” (hereafter MPC), 142.

<sup>6</sup> GG 109.

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among those who suggested, in *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 (c.1780), echoed in Comte's lamenting its irreconcilability with benevolence (c.1891). 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.<sup>7</sup> Monotheism "reduces all other gods to idols" and "all other worshippers to abominations," salted for destruction.<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup> Steven Pinker's *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined* (2011), used by the United Nations to structure its Human Security Report (2013), opens and frames his book by emphasizing how the Bible is "one long celebration of violence."<sup>10</sup> And in proportion to our shedding of its murderous superstitions, the world becomes more pacific in adopting "modern principles" like "nonviolence and toleration," and "Enlightenment rationality and cosmopolitanism."<sup>11</sup>

How are we to think about monotheism's ostensible threat to pluralism, tolerance, and diversity today? In a world in which the liberalism of tolerance seems to be overwhelmed by storms of backlash, where myopic stubbornness is a constant fuel on the world's fires, wouldn't we do well to finally throw monotheism overboard? The words 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

<sup>7</sup> See also Robert Gnuse, "Intellectual Breakthrough or Tyranny?," 87. For other "monotheism and violence" literature, see Renée van Riessen, "A Violent God?"; Daniel Timmer, "Is Monotheism Particularly Prone to Violence?"; Stephen G. Nichols, "Doomed Discourse"; Peter Sloterdijk, *God's Zeal*.

<sup>8</sup> Regina Schwartz, *The Curse of Cain* (hereafter CC), 33.

<sup>9</sup> E.g., Christopher Hitchens, *God Is Not Great*; Arjun Appadurai, "Dead Certainty." Or, "Surely there is no point more redolent of potential violence than this kind of spiritual certitude itself" (Douglas John Hall, "Against Religion," 30).

<sup>10</sup> Steven Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature*, 6.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 11f, 17.

single path.”<sup>12</sup> Or, the famous bumper sticker that aligns the symbols of major world religions to form the word, “Coexist.” Should not our coming to peaceful terms with a plural world necessitate the tolerance of many gods or a reduction to none?

But the critique of intolerance has grown more complex and spread beyond monotheism: a deepening critique of liberalism and secularism as harboring intolerance has gone mainstream. By “liberalism,” we can consider the Belgian political theorist Chantal Mouffe’s broad definition: the political traditions emphasizing the rule of law, tolerance, inclusion, universal human rights, and respect of individual liberty.<sup>13</sup> Among liberalism’s many layers, I share with Mouffe a particular interest in the widespread emphasis on a tolerant inclusivity aimed at overcoming exclusion and forming a “common belonging beyond all differences.”<sup>14</sup> And by secularism I mean a species of liberalism, which, in seeking to diminish exclusivity, aims to construct a religiously “neutral” and open public space. But liberalism and secularism, so the critique goes, far from diminishing oppressive authoritarianism, are in fact the new intolerant regime. The cases of lodging this critique range widely. Consider France’s controversial headscarf and burkini bans and the critique 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 a despotic “regime of tolerance” that silences any opponents in violent mobs – whether in political correctness discourse, the #metoo movement, or cancel culture.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, we have seen recent considerable waves of right-wing populist backlash against liberalism, in widespread resurgent nationalism, anti-globalist revolts, and rising authoritarianism. The ubiquity of the latter has evoked a wave of scholarship suggesting the “liberal world order” may be headed toward global failure.<sup>16</sup> If liberalism, a chief framework for thinking about “tolerance” is so profoundly

<sup>12</sup> Symmachus, *Relatio*, 3.10.

<sup>13</sup> Chantal Mouffe, “Religion, Liberal Democracy, and Citizenship,” 319.

<sup>14</sup> Chantal Mouffe, *Agonistics* (hereafter AG), 22; 20.

<sup>15</sup> E.g., Jonathan Chait, “The ‘Shut It Down’ Left and the War on the Liberal Mind”; Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt, “Better Watch What You Say”; N. D. B. Connolly, “Charlottesville Showed that Liberalism Can’t Defeat White Supremacy. Only Direct Action Can.”

<sup>16</sup> E.g., Patrick Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed*. For one exploration of this as a “theologico-political predicament,” see Paul E. Nahme, “God Is the Reason.”

fraying, we will need, in turn, to deeply reconceive and rebuild a contested root symbol of intolerance, monotheism.<sup>17</sup>

It is common-enough sense to see monotheism as antagonistic to pluralism and that, instead, polytheism is the fitting analog to plural coexistence. H. Richard Niebuhr, for example, made such a connection, saying “pluralism of the gods has its counterpart in the pluralism of self and society.”<sup>18</sup> In a different manner, William Connelly promoted a pluralism whose necessary religious implication is the dictum “there is not only one god.”<sup>19</sup> But I will argue in this book that this simple equation between monotheism and anti-pluralism is mistaken and fails to grasp the paradox of intolerance. I aim to describe here a deeper connectivity between monotheism and intolerance that is deeply relevant to our fragile, critical concerns of pluralism and democracy today.

Central to the pluralistic theory one finds in Chantal Mouffe is the refusal to lay claim to any monopoly on the Absolute, on the foundations of society. This refusal deeply resembles what I find in monotheism as “apophatic intolerance”: a refusal to worship God as immanentized in any political representation. This crucial renunciation, that I argue monotheism and pluralism share, is increasingly important now that we have begun to take seriously the limits and dangers of liberal tolerance. Both monotheism and liberalism entail the potentials of universalist absolutism and intolerance; but both are of immense value, if only we can integrate their intolerance into civic practice and disposition. Central to that integration is the apophatic refusal of laying claim to a monopoly on the Absolute. My answer to the intolerance embedded in both monotheism and liberalism is not to simply get rid of it and double down on “tolerance.” Instead, we need to grasp the radical ambivalence – both dangerous and liberating – at the heart of monotheistic intolerance and its relevance to pluralistic coexistence today.

<sup>17</sup> My frequent use of the word “symbol” connotes how multiple meanings (story lines, references, implications, allusions, critiques, reception history) are “thrown together” and subsist within a word, story, text, creed, or image – oversaturating that sign. My use does not imply anti-realist referentiality, but rather the Ricoeurian sense that “symbols give rise to thought.” I take the early references to the Christian creed as a “symbol” as exemplary: the meaning and experience of what is signified exceeds the ingredients of the thrown-together sign.

<sup>18</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*, 30.

<sup>19</sup> William Connelly, *Why I Am Not a Secularist*, 154.

INTRODUCING RENÉ GIRARD, JAN ASSMANN,  
 AND CHANTAL MOUFFE

I make the above argument through interacting with a range of scholars in different disciplines, predominantly René Girard, Jan Assmann, and Chantal Mouffe. Let me briefly introduce them here.

Girard and Assmann 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. Jan Assmann (b. 1938) is a German Egyptologist who analyzes the epochal transformations in politics, culture, and religions of the ancient near east. He argues that the most consequential breakthrough from that time and place is biblical monotheism and its “Mosaic distinction.” This distinction originally concerns loyalty to or betrayal of Yahweh amidst the other gods, while it accrued in time a universal distinction between “true” and “false” religion. It is “Mosaic” in that it flows from the legend of Moses and his exodus from idolatrous injustice in Egypt. Ultimately, the Mosaic distinction concerns “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.”<sup>20</sup> This distinction is 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 1350 BCE).

Assmann insists the historic impact of the Mosaic distinction cannot be overstated. More profoundly than *any political upheaval*, it has radically reshaped our world and cognition, marking “a civilizational achievement of the highest order.”<sup>21</sup> Among its most consequential effects, he argues, is the novel separation of religion from politics, which had previously been almost indistinguishably intertwined. This Mosaic distinction, Assmann argues, has penetrated the Western psyche and is epistemologically impossible to escape, such that “we cannot live in a spiritual space uncloven” by it.<sup>22</sup> In this sense, it has been at least as consequential as the “scientific intolerance” that originated with Parmenides in Greece, with its principle of noncontradiction in logic (that knowledge of truth also includes knowledge of what is not true).<sup>23</sup> But this Mosaic distinction

<sup>20</sup> GG 3; Jan Assmann, *The Invention of Religion* (hereafter *IR*), 79.

<sup>21</sup> Jan Assmann, *The Price of Monotheism* (hereafter *PM*), 13.

<sup>22</sup> *PM* 1, 42.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 12–3.

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harbors a unique intolerance that has saturated our civilization and has thus come at great 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.”<sup>24</sup>

And yet, crucially, Assmann’s emphasis on monotheistic intolerance is not a siding *against* it or an assertion that monotheism is essentially violent. 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 has made possible a liberating counter-power to the political sphere, and it is in fact worth its dangerous cost. This nuanced position has been almost entirely misunderstood by a wave of critics as eminent as Mark S. Smith and Joseph Ratzinger. The attempt to abolish the Mosaic distinction through emphasizing the “unity of all religions,” praising polytheistic tolerance, or downplaying the intolerance of monotheism, Assmann rejects as misguided.<sup>25</sup> Rather, we must sublimate this intolerance, through ongoing negotiation and reflection.

When one situates his work amidst other axial theorists and biblical scholars, as I do in Chapters 4–6, one finds that his *historical* points largely harmonize with adjacent scholarship. Where his work has been controversial on matters of monotheistic intolerance, my research agrees with the few who have found it as in fact setting a new standard of analysis.<sup>26</sup> His method avoids the noted extremes of rendering monotheism pacific or simplistically condemning it for its antagonism; he also interprets Jewish monotheism, for all its uniqueness, as more *unintentionally* developed than many other theorists give it credit. These nuances are useful not only for correcting imbalanced appraisals of monotheism but for carefully reconceptualizing intolerance today. In drawing on him, I do not ignore crucial thinkers like Eric Voegelin and others who have contextualized biblical monotheism for its political consequences. Yet Assmann gets focal attention not only for his being more up to date; he has centered intolerance and violence in a way that has attracted not only

<sup>24</sup> MPC 154f.

<sup>25</sup> Assmann adds, it “has never occurred to me to demand that [the Mosaic distinction] 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” (PM 13).

<sup>26</sup> Jens-André P. Herbener, “On the Term ‘Monotheism,’” 641.

my interest but also a widespread misunderstanding that warrants corrective. Although largely affirmative of Assmann's conclusions, I critically part ways with him in Chapter 7, finding his interaction with Christianity insufficient.

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 (1923–2015) treats monotheism's strict anti-idolatry as the *refusal to divinize victims* and a *devictimization of God*. Such an enigmatic claim spawned this study, as it invites serious investigation. To unpack the claim, in sum, he argues that polytheistic archaic religions safeguarded societies by "containing" violence in the double sense of the word: expressing and restraining violence.<sup>27</sup> Religion emerged not from credulous attempts at explaining mysteries of the universe, nor as a cognitive invention of priests, but in early humanity's experience and management of violence: gods were divinized scapegoats of group violence, misremembered in myths, creating a sacred pole against which groups fear, unite, expel, and respect.<sup>28</sup> But monotheism, Girard argues, involves an exit from and critique of archaic religion; it emphatically places God on the side of scapegoats, robbing society of its ability to effectively unite around the sacred. As such, Girard accords with Assmann that monotheism endangers the world. While for Assmann the danger (and liberation) is in the Mosaic distinction, for Girard monotheism endangers us 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 of archaic religion's containment of violence.<sup>29</sup>

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 demonstrated scientifically."<sup>30</sup> George Heyman retorts that this claim to the "defeat of violence is itself a form of

<sup>27</sup> René Girard, *The One by Whom Scandal Comes* (hereafter *TOB*), 83.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>29</sup> "The more Christianity made its influence felt, I believe, the more widespread rivalry and internal mediation became" (*Ibid.*, 125).

<sup>30</sup> René Girard, *Evolution and Conversion: Dialogues on the Origins of Culture* (hereafter *EC*), 210. He clarifies that this superiority applies only to the *insight*, while *in practice*



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violence.”<sup>31</sup> 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. Schillebeeckx urges that we must focus on whether our “professed relationship with the ultimate, the transcendent – the ‘mystery’ – liberates or endangers humanity.”<sup>32</sup>

Against such a claim, the paradox in mimetic theory is pronounced: for Girard argues that the biblical inheritance both liberates *and* endangers humanity. Liberation endangers. Furthermore, he excavates where exactly we got this anti-ethnocentric conviction that the sense of superiority is wrong. It is not a universal idea, but it comes from historical contingencies that stem back to Judaism bequeathing us certain sensitivities – namely, directing our attention to the innocence of victims and, in my gloss, the monotheistic intolerance of representing the Absolute. We remain ethnocentric if we fail to see what a unique achievement anti-ethnocentrism is – and for Girard it is indeed a child of biblical revelation.<sup>33</sup> A proper genealogy of intolerance, then, will ask about how and why we have come to think it is morally superior to oppose any sense of superiority. This paradox runs parallel to a chief political dilemma today, of how to rid ourselves of intolerance without becoming intolerant in turn.

Whether or not one finds the accusation of Girard’s “biblical supremacy” resolved by his emphasizing the above paradox, my problem with his theory is more substantive. His weakness on the monotheism question is not in his failure to soften its tones of superiority but simply his underdemonstrated argument for it.<sup>34</sup> That is, he seems to engage in what Robert 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

only “recalcitrant minorities” in Judaism and Christianity successfully resisted contagious violence (*TOB* 37).

<sup>31</sup> George Heyman, *The Power of Sacrifice*, 154.

<sup>32</sup> Edward Schillebeeckx, “Culture, Religion, and Violence,” 179.

<sup>33</sup> René Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning* (hereafter *ISS*), 165, 169.

<sup>34</sup> Bruce Chilton argues that Girard declares the breakthrough of biblical revelation “with remarkably little argumentation” (Bruce Chilton, *The Temple of Jesus*, 18).

organization of the Hebrews made them, among all the peoples of the ancient world, the ‘chosen’ discoverers/inventors of monotheism.”<sup>35</sup> Exploring those peculiarities requires turning to monotheism’s emergence in the ancient context. In so doing I build a more intricate, historical account of monotheistic intolerance, finding common cause with Girard’s wishes later in life that he could rectify and rewrite his project within a larger time frame and global, interreligious context – or, as Raymund Schwager hoped, in relation to axial age theory.<sup>36</sup>

My effort to draw up an account of monotheistic intolerance that is sensitive to its dangers, but detects its liberative potentials, offers a more nuanced approach than one might find in “religion in public life” scholarship. I refer to methods that emphasize a simple “ambivalence” or “dual potential of religion.” In such approaches, “religion” at its best is good for society, as an ahistorical, universal vector of moral good; and it is only the corruption of otherwise good religion that courts violence.<sup>37</sup> But if polytheistic religions “contained violence,” as my research shows, the problem is much more radical. If monotheism, even in its “best” forms, robs us of some of the polytheism’s containment of violence, does it thereby “unleash” violence? We must be able to imagine how truth and goodness – even if in a religious form – can be socially deleterious. Meanwhile, we need to be able to conceptualize how the seemingly evil falsehoods of archaic religion – that is, restrictive taboos, prohibitions, hierarchies, and sacrificial violence, etc. – served as social safeguards that biblical religion is dissolving. Again, enlightenment may endanger us.

This more radically ambivalent hermeneutic of religion helps us read the deep history of violence differently than the critics of monotheism mentioned previously. For example, contrast Steven Pinker’s *Better Angels* and its modernist optimism toward violence’s Enlightenment-inspired decline, with Girard’s ambivalence-laden apocalypticism 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 of Christ 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

<sup>35</sup> Eric Gans, “René et moi,” 23.

<sup>36</sup> EC 43. That aim was only partially fulfilled in Girard’s brief work on Hinduism: René Girard, *Sacrifice*. See also Michael Kirwan, *Girard and Theology*, 40.

<sup>37</sup> Atalia Omer, “Religious Peacebuilding”; Atalia Omer, “Can a Critic Be a Caretaker?” 482.