

## Monotheism, Intolerance, and the Path to Pluralistic Politics

Discussions of monotheism often consider its bigotry toward other gods as a source of conflict, or emphasize its universality as a source of peaceful tolerance. Both approaches, however, ignore the combined danger and liberation in monotheism's "intolerance." In this volume, Christopher A. Haw reframes this important argument. He demonstrates the value of rejecting paradigms of inclusivity in favor of an agonistic pluralism and intolerance of absolutism. Haw proposes a model that retains liberal, pluralistic principles while acknowledging their limitations, and he relates them to theologies latent in political ideas. His volume offers a nuanced, evolutionary, and historical understanding of the biblical tradition's emergence and its political consequences with respect to violence. It suggests how we can mediate impasses between liberal and conservative views in culture wars; between liberal inclusivity and conservative decisionism; and, on the religious front, between apologetics for exclusive monotheism and critiques of its intolerance.

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# Monotheism, Intolerance, and the Path to Pluralistic Politics

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## Preface

I wrote this book for a few reasons. First, I have grown to approach “faith” in a way that might be considered, in Paul Ricoeur’s terms, a “second naivety.” This involves an initial religious faith that eventually dies under the pressures of study, reflection, and experience. But, through patience and charity, one returns to the ashes of a destroyed faith and creatively retrieves the “rationality of the symbol,” excavating the truths that had been obscured or buried in one’s original naivety. My first naivety included a mild Catholic upbringing, then a deep dive into evangelicalism. But you could say my faith, in pointing me to pursue truth, paradoxically destroyed itself. This entailed rejecting numerous literalistic fundamentalisms and the harsh Christian supremacy that seems to come along with the tasteless, monotheistic idea of “the One True God.” But my pursuit of truth constrained me to dig for any profundity that may still glow from under the rubble. One of the many figures who aided such a patient retrieval for me was René Girard and his naturalistic theory of human evolution and religion.

But, second, while Girard provoked fresh rereadings of religious faith, it became apparent that his mimetic theory is best treated not as a new fundamentalism but as having its own limitations. This led me to initially conceive, in my doctoral work, that one task of a dissertation could be to comprehensively catalogue and weigh the critiques of Girard’s work. While my study of them was informative, such analysis remained passive. Further, the critiques of mimetic theory cover a dizzying array of disciplines: Girard was a raging generalist. I instead wanted to drill down into a specific topic within his oeuvre that provoked in me deep interest, but about which I had heard nothing: that “monotheism is a refusal to

divinize victims.” He similarly claims monotheism is at the root of an epochal change in our sensitivity to victims. Is this accurate and, if so, what does this mean? There are few topics of study that promise such perilous historical complexity as monotheism, and few as absolutely relevant to today as its relationship to violence, intolerance, diversity, and victimization.

I name that central trunk – of a theological second naivety and sifting Girard’s program – because, even while “Girard and monotheism” seems a sufficiently delimited topic, readers may find I’ve spared little temporal expense in exploring the many branches attached to it. Besides Girard, I draw upon political theory of liberal democracy; I give Freud a generous hearing; the thickest weeds of the study grow around historical monotheistic scholarship and Axial Age theory; and I conclude with a theological bricolage that attempts to point toward a faith that eludes my linguistic description. This is the price of touching a generalist’s theory. In that fray, the reader might be oriented by my brief *why I wrote this* up front, naming the simplest germs that spawned the whole. Further, that forecasts how my method will consciously violate conventional siloization between a religious studies, naturalistic analysis on the one hand, and – after deconstruction – a desire to constructively retrieve and theologically manage doctrines I have inherited.

While this book extends from my dissertation research at the University of Notre Dame, it has been restructured and enriched in content. I have treated Chantal Mouffe’s social theory more as a starting point for rethinking tolerance, which frames my exploration of monotheism. And besides renovating the entire work in light of later research, I reconfigured my chapters on categorizing religion, violence, translatability, and Jan Assmann’s political theory of polytheism.

Despite the changes, I still owe a debt of gratitude to those who helped shape this work in its earlier doctoral stage. I would like to thank Dr. Catherine Hillkert for her patient and generous guidance as my study evolved, and Dr. Cyril O’Regan, who kindly joined in the effort once my study took on a philosophy of religion dimension. I am indebted to Dr. Ann Astell for her Girardian guidance, Dr. Jason Springs for scholarly wisdom and introducing me to Mouffe, and Drs. Ebrahim Moosa and Ernesto Verdeja for their interdisciplinary, peace studies acuity.

I humbly thank Jimmy Haring for his specialist leads on monotheistic scholarship and his review of much of my work when it looked in even worse shape than you see here, offering insights that helped me find my center and burn the chaff. My affectionate gratitude extends to my wife,



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Cassie, for her suffering through and editing multiple drafts. Garret FitzGerald was generous to review my accuracy and lucidity with respect to Mouffe and help me hone my thesis. I thank Scott Cowdell, James Alison, and Terrence Moran for their guidance, edits, and suggestions on the project overall. And I extend my warm appreciation to Michael Yankowski for his being a vibrant intellectual sounding board, gracious spiritual support, and conversation partner throughout.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge my daughter, Amelia, whose accident and miraculous recovery in the middle of this study shed more grace and perspective on me than lifetimes of contemplation ever could. May we never cease our compassion until all children enjoy such transfiguration. And I join in giving thanks with Cassie and Simon, who also enjoyed with me the waves of gratitude as our family – along with all our friends and community – persevered in the face of death.

## Abbreviations

### JAN ASSMANN

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

### 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*

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## CHANTAL MOUFFE

- AG *Agonistics*  
DP *The Democratic Paradox*

## WOLFGANG PALAVER

- RGMT *René Girard's Mimetic Theory*

## REGINA SCHWARTZ

- CC *The Curse of Cain*

## MARK SMITH

- EHG *The Early History of God*  
GIT *God in Translation*  
TOBM *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism*

## ERIC VOEGELIN

- OH *Order and History, vol. 1: Israel and Revelation*  
SPG *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism*

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