Christopher A. Haw

Monotheism, Intolerance, and the Path to Pluralistic Politics
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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.

Christopher A. Haw is Assistant Professor of Theology at the University of Scranton.
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CHRISTOPHER A. HAW
University of Scranton
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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 Hilkert 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,
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
List of Abbreviations

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

Footnotes reserve publication information and subtitles for the Bibliography, which follows the Cambridge University Press convention of excising publisher names. After a first citation, footnotes resort to last name and shortened title.
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.”

That is, monotheism can appear as a uniquely absolutist “political theology” – how we imagine and represent political power’s relation to divinity – that

1 Jan Assmann, Of God and Gods (hereafter GG), 5.

2 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.3

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.4 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.”5 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?”6 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

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3 An ecological analysis of the malignant imaginary of monotheistic homogeneity can be found in Solomon Victus, “Monotheism, Monarchy, Monoculture.”
4 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.
5 Jan Assmann, “Monotheism and Its Political Consequences” (hereafter MPC), 142.
6 GG 109.
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. Monotheism “reduces all other gods to idols” 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), 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.” 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.”

How are we to think about monotheism’s ostensible threat to pluralism, tolerance, and diversity today? In a world in which the liberal ship 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

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9 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).
11 Ibid., 11f, 17.
single path.”\textsuperscript{12} 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.\textsuperscript{13} 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.”\textsuperscript{14} 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.\textsuperscript{15} 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.\textsuperscript{16} If liberalism, a chief framework for thinking about “tolerance” is so profoundly

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{12} Symmachus, \textit{Relatio}, 3.10.
\item \textsuperscript{13} Chantal Mouffe, “Religion, Liberal Democracy, and Citizenship,” 319.
\item \textsuperscript{14} Chantal Mouffe, \textit{Agonistics} (hereafter \textit{AG}), 22; 20.
\item \textsuperscript{15} 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.”
\item \textsuperscript{16} E.g., Patrick Deneen, \textit{Why Liberalism Failed}. For one exploration of this as a “theologico-political predicament,” see Paul E. Nahme, “God Is the Reason.”
\end{itemize}
fraying, we will need, in turn, to deeply reconceive and rebuild a contested root symbol of intolerance, monotheism.  

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.” In a different manner, William Connelly promoted a pluralism whose necessary religious implication is the dictum “there is not only one god.” 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.

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17 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.

18 H. Richard Niebuhr, Radical Monotheism and Western Culture, 30.

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.”

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.” 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.

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). But this Mosaic distinction

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20 GG 3; Jan Assmann, *The Invention of Religion* (hereafter *IR*), 79.
22 PM 1, 42.
23 Ibid., 12–3.
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.”\textsuperscript{24} 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.\textsuperscript{25} 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.\textsuperscript{26} 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

\textsuperscript{24} MPC 154f.
\textsuperscript{25} 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).
\textsuperscript{26} 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.27 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.28 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.29

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.”30 George Heyman retorts that this claim to the “defeat of violence is itself a form of

27 René Girard, The One by Whom Scandal Comes (hereafter TOB), 83.
28 Ibid., 39.
29 “The more Christianity made its influence felt, I believe, the more widespread rivalry and internal mediation became” (Ibid., 125).
30 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
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. Schillebeeckx urges that 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 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. 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 under-demonstrated argument for it. 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).

31 George Heyman, The Power of Sacrifice, 154.
33 René Girard, I See Satan Fall Like Lightning (hereafter ISS), 165, 169.
34 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.”

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.

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. 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

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36 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.
37 Atalia Omer, “Religious Peacebuilding”; Atalia Omer, “Can a Critic Be a Caretaker?,” 482.
values, Girard sees a by-product 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.

In sum, claiming that monotheism has destabilized civilization by doing away with the deep connections between divinity and politics reframes the intolerance problem in a fresh paradigm. Attending to the radical ambivalence of monotheism’s political consequences moves us beyond the tired, simplistic questions of “does monotheism cause violence” or “is it intolerant,” and turns instead to a more nuanced analysis and interpretation, less laden with pro- or anti-religious prejudice. We need an account of monotheism that avoids unfounded emphases on biblical monotheism as a triumphant, discontinuous break from the ancient near east; and yet we must also grasp monotheism’s radical implications for politics, social theory, and tolerance today. All of the above requires grappling with both political and theological paradoxes.

Finding paradox crucial for interpreting monotheism, this study takes great interest in the paradoxes of liberal democracy, emphasized in Chantal Mouffe (b. 1943). Mouffe is a Belgian social theorist known for combining a “leftist populism” with, among other ingredients, the kernels of truth in Carl Schmitt’s infamous political theory. While partly sympathizing with various global waves of anti-liberal backlash – often rooted in the critique of neoliberal capitalism – Mouffe does not join in the call to abandon liberalism. Rather, she sees in liberalism great dangers amidst liberating potentials. This ambivalence stems precisely from liberalism being “incompatible” with the political sphere. For Mouffe, liberalism’s ideals cannot be perfectly instituted in this world without paradoxically turning into illiberal oppression. For liberalism to not turn into yet another intolerant regime, it requires, in my theological glossing of her political idiom, an intolerant anti-idolatry, an apophatic intolerance. That is, the Absolute must remain uninstantiatable; no one can lay claim to a monopoly on the foundation of society. This means that liberalism’s “intolerant” ideals of inclusivity must live in constant, unresolved tension with democracy’s unavoidable exclusions. This is the heart of her pluralistic theory, and its subtleties distinguish her from other more straightforwardly liberal theorists – like Rawls or Habermas – who have largely conceived of liberalism and democracy as compatible; in so doing they have promoted paradigms of inclusion and tolerance without sufficiently considering the exclusions, dangers, and intolerance latent within liberalism. And yet, Mouffe steers us away from those who would have us
abandon liberalism on account of its dangers. Her reading of liberalism is so remarkably akin to Assmann’s notion of monotheism that the resonances must be explored: namely, it is possible for a tradition to be born amidst expressions of intolerance and violence, to have a dangerous penchant for universalizing ideals, to be incompatible with every governing structure – and yet it can still be liberating and worth it.

Throughout my chapters, I will argue that monotheism’s intolerance toward politically representing the Absolute – and in Christianity’s worshipping the innocent Victim as that Absolute – helps birth an enlightened critique of any absolutist politics. This denied ancient 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, abetting chauvinistic universalism and underwriting religious violence. But an intolerance for “representing the Absolute” is also precisely what helps us critique and relativize all Absolutes and divinized political powers. In turn, a mature pluralism for today, I will argue, 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 concord that hides divisions under a naturalized status quo. Rather, a mature monotheism and pluralism disavow representing such an Absolute, answering with a more agonistic “can’t we just argue?”

And so this book does indeed offer something of an apologia for monotheism, that monotheism has deep consequences in the way we perceive political division and tolerance, but not at all on the usual grounds of emphasizing its pacific universalism and tolerance. Rather, in exploring the complex origins of monotheism’s intolerance amidst the ancient world’s political theology, we see the increased potential dangers and liberations that came with its emergence. This comparative work is particularly important in light of recent archaeological and biblical scholarship that has been dissolving the common treatment of monotheism as a sui generis historical breakthrough of incomparable uniqueness, which seems to fuel the monotheistic superiority-complex. Instead, a tidal shift in historical-critical scholarship over the last half century has shown biblical monotheism, far from being a sharp and simplistic break from ancient polytheism, to be far more pagan and polytheistic in its genetic origins.38 To speak honestly today of biblical monotheism’s “unique

38 Robert Gnuse, No Other Gods (hereafter NOG), 15, 23, 270, 275ff, et passim. He describes ancient Israel’s *novel reconstrual* of preexisting ideas (like divine intervention, a divine plan for people, social deities, social justice, exclusive veneration), while adding,
breakthrough” amongst any more than a choir of co-religionists requires more detailed comparative analysis of the ancient world than many theologians seem willing or prepared to do. The simplistic common narrative of monotheism’s singular revelation to Abraham or Moses, unlike any God known, which thereafter either improved the world with truth or destroys it with intolerance, needs to be reframed in light of a far more complex array of historical data. Overall, my approach attempts to move beyond simplistic attacks on monotheism’s intolerance, defending its tolerance, or repeating such dichotomies with respect to liberalism’s potentially hubristic universalism.

CHAPTER OUTLINE

In Chapter 1, I lay out the paradox of “intolerance” as analyzed in the work of Chantal Mouffe. Her understanding of the incompatibility between liberalism and democracy illuminates the complex relationship between pluralism and intolerance. Of crucial concern is how Mouffe’s pluralism requires what I describe as apophatic intolerance, a refusal to lay hold of the Absolute and a refusal of political closure and pure tolerance.

In Chapter 2, I introduce Girard’s mimetic theory with emphasis on his understanding of gods, “the victim mechanism,” and monotheism. What does it mean that monotheism interrupts archaic polytheistic religion by dividing God from the victim? This invites us to venture out into other monotheistic scholarship, like Assmann’s and its Freudian roots.

Chapter 3 begins the introduction to Jan Assmann through material that is shared between him and Girard: Sigmund Freud’s Moses and Monotheism. This text stepped into a multi-century discourse that tried to abolish the monotheistic distinction between “Israel” vs. “Egypt.” But, contrary to simplistic readings of Freud as the enemy of religion, he

“Contemporary authors need to relinquish the use of the word ‘unique’ when describing biblical thought ... [but rather] how old ideas were transformed” (266, 271). My argument largely concurs but will use “unique” as a shorthand for “novel reconstrual and transformation.” Others see the diminution of monotheistic-discontinuity as a welcome return to the best of nineteenth-century biblical scholarship, counteracting a “Barthian century” (Rainer Albertz, “Monotheism and Violence,” 375).

One can extend the critique to Christian theological method: “The obsession with discerning the uniqueness of the biblical text has served ... 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, 98f).