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**The Mosaic Distinction**  
**or, The Price of Monotheism**

**Translated by David Lorton**

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## Introduction

At some point in the course of antiquity—suggested dates range between the Late Bronze Age and late classical antiquity—there was a turning point, one that determined the world we live in today more decisively than any and all political changes. This turning point was the transition from “polytheistic” to “monotheistic” religions, from cult religions to religions of the book, from culture-specific religions to universal religions: in short, from “primary” to “secondary” religions that (at least, as they themselves saw it) did not so much evolve out of the primary religions as turn their backs on them in a revolutionary act.

The distinction between “primary” and “secondary” religions goes back to a suggestion by the historian of religions Theo Sundermeier.<sup>1</sup> Over centuries and millennia, primary religions developed historically within the framework of a culture, a society, and for the most part also a language, to which they were indissolubly bound. Among these primary religions were the cultic and divine worlds of Egyptian, Babylonian, and Graeco-Roman antiquity. By way of contrast, secondary religions are those which owe their origin to a revelatory, founding act; they are based on primary religions, but they typically distinguish themselves from them, branding them as paganism, idolatry, and superstition. All the secondary religions, which are also religions of the book, universal religions, and (perhaps with the exception of Buddhism) also monotheistic religions, view the primary religions as heathen. Although they have adopted many elements of primary religions by way of “syncretistic acculturation,” in their self understanding, they are stamped by the pathos of an “antagonistic acculturation,” they entertain strong concepts regarding anything incompatible with their truth (or, their orthodoxy). This change from primary to secondary religions had not only a theological aspect, in the sense of a change in the concept of the divine; as a change from culture-specific to universal religions, it also had a political aspect. From something that was indissolubly embedded in the basic political, linguistic, and cultural framework of a given culture, from something that was not only coextensive with that culture, but also synonymous with it, religion was transformed into an autonomous system that emancipated itself from this cultural framework and transcended all political and ethnic boundaries, with the result that it was able to

penetrate into other cultures. And not least of all, this change from cult religion to religion of the book had a media-technical aspect, for without the invention of writing and its subsequent employment in the codification of revealed truths, the change would not have been possible. All the monotheistic religions, including Buddhism, rest on a canon of sacred scripture. There was also a psychohistorical aspect, which Sigmund Freud in particular has depicted: the change to monotheism, with its ethical imperatives, its stress on the inner man, and its character as a “paternal religion” entailed a new mental attitude, with a new form of “spirituality” that decisively stamped the picture of western man. Lastly, this change also entailed, more generally, a change in the conception of the world and especially in the conception of man’s relationship to the world. It is this aspect of the change that has been the most intensively researched; Karl Jasper’s concept of “axial period” explains it as a breakthrough to transcendence,<sup>2</sup> while Max Weber’s concept of rationalization explains it as a process of demystification of the world.<sup>3</sup>

I call the crux of this change the “Mosaic distinction.” In my opinion, the distinction between one God and many gods is not the most decisive one, but rather the distinction between true and false in religion, between the true God and the false gods, between true doctrine and false doctrine, between knowledge and ignorance, between belief and disbelief. Once made, this distinction became blurred, and later was reintroduced, more or less intensely, with altered meaning. Therefore, we must speak not of a “monotheistic change,” with an unequivocal pre- and post-change, but rather of “monotheistic moments” in which the Mosaic distinction was made in all its keenness—in the First, or in the First and Second Commandments, in the story of the golden calf, in the dissolution of mixed marriages under Nehemiah, in the destruction of pagan temples in Christian late antiquity—only later, in the practice of religious life, with its unavoidable compromises, to be ever and again diluted or even forgotten. I shall treat this matter in greater detail in section 3 of Chapter One. Here, I am interested only in the problem of time. The Mosaic distinction was not a single historical event that altered the world once and for all, but rather a controlling idea whose world-changing effect developed in spurts over centuries and millennia. Only in this sense can we speak of a “monotheistic change.” The change did not coincide with the Mosaic distinction in any datable sense, and certainly not with the lifetime of any historical “Moses.”

Before this change, there were only historically evolved tribal and national “polytheistic” cult religions. After the change, along with some of these historically evolved religions, which continued to exist in various cultures, there were also new religions, all of them characterized by being monotheistic, revealed religions of the book, and also universal religions, though it can be questioned whether Buddhism is really a monotheism, or Judaism is really a universal religion, or even whether Christianity is really a monotheism and a religion of the book. But common to all the new religions was an emphatic conviction of truth. They all rested on a distinction between true and false religion, and on this basis, they proclaimed a truth that did not serve to complement other truths, but rather consigned all other traditional or competing truths to the realm of the false. This exclusive truth is what was really new, and its novel, exclusive character was also distinguished by the way in which it was communicated and codified. It understood itself as having been revealed to humanity; no path had led humankind to this goal by means of the experience accumulated over generations through its own efforts; and it was set down in a canon of holy scripture, for cult and ritual would have been incapable of preserving this revealed truth through the centuries and the millennia. It was from the world-encompassing power of this revealed truth that the new, secondary religions drew the antagonistic energy that enabled them to distinguish and exclude what was false and to spell out what was true in terms of normative structures of guidelines, dogmas, regulations, and doctrines of salvation. On the basis of this antagonistic energy, and out of its certain knowledge of what was incompatible with truth, this truth drew its intensity, its clear contours, and its power to orient and guide human action. For this reason, we can perhaps most aptly designate these new religions as “counter-religions.” These, and only these, religions had both a truth that they proclaimed and an opposing point of view that they combated. Only they knew heretics and heathens, false doctrines, sects, superstitions, idolatry, magic, ignorance, disbelief, and heresy, and what these concepts all could mean for that which they denounced, persecuted, and excluded as manifestations of untruth.

This essay will not anticipate a comprehensive treatment of the above-mentioned change from polytheism to monotheism, or from primary to secondary religions; rather, it will clarify and expand upon my position in the discussion of various critical questions and objections, as I represented it in my book

*Moses the Egyptian*. My purpose here is not to supplement, continue, or justify that book, but rather to involve myself in a more concentrated and comprehensive manner with questions that I dealt with only around the edges of that book, or more or less unconsciously, and which will be the central theses and themes of the present book. From the field of literary studies, we have learned that there is a distinction between “authorial intention” and the “meaning” of a text. I have been obliged to experience the justness of that distinction in my capacity as author of *Moses the Egyptian*. It was only as I read the reviews of this book that I was surprised to find the thesis of the Mosaic distinction developing into the semantic core, or, as it were, the central concern of the present book. *Moses the Egyptian* has been generally understood as a contribution to the criticism of religion, and more specifically, as a frontal assault on Christianity or on monotheism. At first, I thought that I could defend myself against this interpretation simply by indicating that this was not what I meant. What I had attempted was to shed light on a long unnoticed chapter in the history of the western understanding of Egypt. Well known and often treated have been the Renaissance enthusiasm for Egypt in the wake of the rediscovery of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, Horapollo’s book on hieroglyphs, and the obelisks of Rome, as well as the fascination with Egypt in the eighteenth century, with its sphinxes, obelisks, pyramids, and Freemasonic mysteries, and above all the “Egyptomania” of the nineteenth century following Napoleon’s expedition to Egypt and the resulting volumes of the *Description de l’Égypte*. Unnoticed, however, had been the chapter that centered, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, on the figure of Moses the Egyptian and culminated in the bold idea that biblical monotheism stemmed ultimately from Egypt and was a transcodification of the Egyptian mysteries. My intention was to portray this newly discovered chapter of the western recollection of Egypt, from its ancient origins to its continuing consequences in modern times, and perhaps, in my joy of discovery, I laid on the colors too thick. Essentially, I was attempting a historical or “mnemohistorical” reconstruction, not a contribution to theological controversy.

In the meanwhile, I have come to realize that this argument is entirely irrelevant. What matters is not the “subjectively intended meaning,” but rather that which is contained in a text, a potential meaning that is let loose in various readings of the text and in the interaction of text and reader, a realization that fully accords with the methodological starting-point of a “history of memory” in the book in question.

Even I did not inquire as to how biblical and other texts were subjectively intended, but rather as to what semantic potentials they were capable of letting loose in the course of their being read. And so now, four or five years after my extremely intense involvement with *Moses the Egyptian*, I wish to return, with gratitude, to the potential meaning that has in the meantime crystallized in various readings of the book and to engage myself above all with the questions that have been raised regarding the concept of the Mosaic distinction.

This criticism has taken two different directions. The one reproaches me for having introduced the Mosaic distinction, and the other for wishing to erase it. On the one hand (because I once brought together ancient Israelite, Jewish, and Christian religion under this concept), I am reproached for associating biblical religion with the making of a distinction, and, connected with this, an exclusivizing intent that is entirely foreign to it. On the other hand, the criticism is that I have questioned a distinction that is constitutive of biblical religion and of all western values that are based on it. Both reproaches, though they are diametrically opposed, imply a suspicion of antisemitism: the one sees an implication of intolerance in the concept of the Mosaic distinction, while the other sees, in the intent to erase it, a plea for a return to Egypt, a plea for polytheism, cosmotheism, and a remystification of the world. Rolf Rendtorff insists “that there is no Mosaic distinction . . . in the Bible,” and that I have thus ascribed to it a construction that is entirely foreign to it. Moreover, as Klaus Koch stresses, it is “an antithesis that is borrowed from modern religious theory: . . . is it suited for basic determinations of essence?” In historical reality, transitions were fluid, and polytheism and monotheism overlapped in various ways, and their distinction lacks any grounding in historical reality. The Mosaic distinction is a theoretical construction, one that had no existence in “real history, with its political, economic, and social factors.” Erich Zenger and Gerhard Kaiser go one step further when they understand this construction as a sort of “Fall of Man.” “The Mosaic distinction,” writes Erich Zenger, “is, according to Assmann, the Original Sin in the overall history of religion and culture. As viewed from Egypt, it seems as though sin came into the world with the Mosaic distinction.” It is thus historically untenable to ascribe the Mosaic distinction to monotheistic religion, it is theologically alarming to question this distinction and plead for its erasure. “Jan Assmann,” writes Karl-Josef Kuschel, “wishes to replace biblical monotheism with a cosmotheism,



thereby placing himself in a line of tradition that he himself describes with the labels ‘alchemy, kabbala, hermetism, neoplatonism, Spinozism, deism, and pantheism.’” Erich Zenger ascribes to me the “fundamental assertion” that “This (Mosaic) distinction has brought so much disaster and violence into the world that it must at long last be undone. The price that human history has until now had to pay for it is simply too high.”<sup>4</sup>

Both reproaches weigh heavily, and as I look back on certain passages in my text, I must acknowledge that they have a certain justification and that a basic engagement with them is worthwhile. Moreover, these have to do with problems that were not entirely clear to me when I wrote *Moses the Egyptian*. Indeed, I must confess that even now, I am unclear on a number of points (though not on the point of “antisemitism”). It is all the more incumbent on me to continue the debate that has begun. There is nothing further from my intention than to desire to replace biblical monotheism, in which I am intellectually and spiritually at home, with a cosmotheism that has opened itself to me only during my last decade of scholarly activity, but I also realize that such a scholarly opening is impossible without a certain amount of empathy and simple sincerity.

The chapters in Part One do not attempt to answer my critics (whereby I refer here not only to the critiques reprinted in the Appendix, but also to objections raised in discussions, reviews, and correspondence); rather, they deal with objections that have occurred to me on my own in the course of time, as well as points regarding which I believe I have learned more and have gone beyond the position I took four years ago. I have endeavored, however, to restrict myself to the thematic framework of my book on Moses. I must first and foremost thank my critics for what I have learned during the last few years. I feel that the critical reception my book has found in so many disciplines is a great gift, one that is all the more welcome in that I am not well-versed in most of the disciplines on whose preserves I so insolently poached in the book.

## Chapter One. The Mosaic Distinction and the Problem of Intolerance

### 3. Intolerance, Violence, and Exclusion

Many critics have declared the concept of the Mosaic distinction to be inimical to religion, and even to be antisemitic or antichristian, for in their eyes, it implies the reproach that monotheism brought hate, intolerance, and exclusion into this world.<sup>11</sup>

Needless to say, I do not believe that the world of primary religions has been free of hate and violence. Quite the contrary, it has been filled with all forms of violence and enmity, though many of these forms have been harnessed, civilized, or nearly even eradicated by the monotheistic religions as they came into power with all their transforming force, for they felt them to be incompatible with the truth they professed. In no way do I deny these facts. But it also cannot be denied that at the same time, a new form of hatred was brought into the world: hatred of heathens and heretics, of idolaters with their temples, rites, and gods. If we reject such considerations as “antisemitic,” we burden ourselves with new forms of ban on thought and discourse that dangerously restrict our reflection on history. Anyone who no longer dares to give an account of the path that he has covered or of the options he has excluded, out of anxiety that the arrived-at goal perhaps seems contingent, relative, or perhaps even less desirable vis-à-vis his point of departure, encourages a new form of intolerance. The capacity to historicize and relativize oneself is a precondition to any genuine tolerance.

Against the thesis that monotheism rests on the distinction between true and false religion, my critics hold that monotheism is not a religion of distinctions, but of unity and universality. It is polytheism that entails distinctions. Every people, every tribe, every city reveres its own deity and finds the expression of its differentiated identity in a correspondingly differentiated divine realm. Every deity stands for a distinction. Monotheism erases all these differentiations. All men are equal before the One God. Monotheism draws no boundaries, quite the contrary, it eliminates them. Thus, for example, Klaus Koch writes: “Polytheistic gods are essentially particular, regionally rooted, and associated with their circle of adorants, and thus dismissive of, if not inimical towards, everything unclean and foreign ...

Rigorous monotheism presupposes a single deity who concerns every man and who is accessible everywhere. It includes an ethics that is equally valid for all, for otherwise, a closed society of the elect shrinks the monotheistic horizon. The more exclusive the deity, the more inclusive humanity.’<sup>12</sup> Erich Zenger states, “From its onset, monotheism is not particular, but universal.”<sup>13</sup> H. Zirker stresses that the concern of monotheism is “to grasp reality as unity and to reckon with a universal history for humankind. Monotheism has its primary meaning not in the mere affirmation that there is only one God rather than many, but in its regulation of the human world: that it is not to be divided by conflict of divine powers or division into various autonomous regions, not to be torn asunder by an insurmountable dualism of light and darkness, of good and evil being, and not, finally, to be pluralized by an antagonistic self-affirmation of peoples.”<sup>14</sup> But such thoughts are Christian. The actual distinction that Christianity endeavored to erase, and which is missing in Zirker’s list, is the boundary drawn between Jews and pagans by means of the Law, and especially by means of circumcision. Christianity in fact rests on the universalizing of the Mosaic distinction, which is now valid not just for Jews, but for all men.<sup>15</sup>

Such objections have thus scarcely been raised from the Jewish side. Judaism is a culture of difference. For Judaism, it is entirely self evident that monotheism draws a boundary, and that Jews must maintain this boundary. For Christianity, the distinction is a horror, but for Judaism, the horror is assimilation. Thus, for Jewish readers, the category “Mosaic distinction” poses no problem, for it is something self evident. In Judaism, the universality inherent in monotheism is postponed to a messianic end-time; in the world as it is, Jews are the guardians of a truth that concerns all men, to be sure, but which has first been entrusted to the Jews as an avant garde. For Christians, this end-time dawned 2000 years ago, and there is no longer any distinction. Christian theology has therefore blinded itself to the exclusionary power of monotheism. Judaism is a religion of self-exclusion. Having been chosen, Israel (or God) excluded itself from the circle of peoples. The Law draws a high fence around the Chosen People, preventing any contamination by or assimilation to the concepts and customs of the surrounding world. Self exclusion requires no violence—at least, no violence against others. Thus, the massacres related in the biblical texts—of those who worshiped the golden calf, of the priests of Baal by Elijah and Josiah—refer to their own people, they were to eradicate the Egyptian or the Canaanites

“among us,” in our midst and in our own heart, they were directed inward and not outward. The “peoples” (*goyîm*) could worship whomever and however they pleased.<sup>16</sup> Christianity and Islam, however, have not recognized this boundary, and for this very reason, they have repeatedly directed their violence outward during the course of history. The Jews’ belief in their chosen status belongs to the principle of self exclusion, while the Christian call to mission and the Islamic call to subjection belong to the principle of the exclusion of what is foreign. When God chose Israel to be his people, he lifted them out of the circle of peoples and forbade assimilation to the practices of the surrounding world. But when God commanded Christians and Muslims to spread the Truth throughout the world, all who shut themselves off from this Truth were excluded. It was only in this form that the potential for exclusion inherent in monotheism became violent.

These considerations are also important for the problem of tolerance. Intolerance rests on the inability or unwillingness to put up with different views and with the practices that result from them. Above and beyond the distinction between the familiar and the strange, intolerance presupposes the incompatibility of the two, an incompatibility between true and false. Tolerance, however, rests on the same presupposition. Strictly speaking, I can only “tolerate” something that runs counter to my own views, and which I can thus only “put up with,” for I am capable of allowing myself—that is, I am strong enough or generous enough—not to experience that which runs counter to my own views as something dangerous. With regard to the polytheism of pagan antiquity, we cannot really speak of “tolerance,” for in this case, the criteria for incompatibility are lacking, and there is thus nothing to “put up with” in the religion of others. Therefore, with regard to the practice, attested from the Sumerians on, of translating divine names, first from one language into another and then from one religion into others, I have proposed to speak not of tolerance, but of “translatability.” The religion of others was experienced as something compatible with one’s own. This fact does not mean that the peoples in question were less violent towards one another, or that violence first came into the world with the Mosaic distinction. What is important is only that political power was not theologically grounded, in any event, not in the sense of subjecting others for the purpose of converting the adherents of a religion that was viewed as false. Thus, when the Assyrians made reference to the god Assur in connection with their fearsome punitive

actions against rebel vassals, it was not because these apostates clung to false gods of their own, but because they had been untrue to loyalty oaths they had sworn in the name of Assur and had thus become enemies of the god.<sup>17</sup> The fact that it was possible to swear oaths with foreign peoples rested on the conviction that their religions and their gods could be brought into harmony with the Assyrian gods. The rise of the practice of “translating” gods in Mesopotamia as early as the third millennium resulted from the many forms of interstate communication that developed between the individual city states in this polycentrally organized area of the world. Treaties with other states had to be sealed with an oath, and the gods invoked by the treaty partners had to be compatible with one another. Lists of equivalent deities were thus drawn up, ultimately correlating the gods of as many as six different pantheons with one another.<sup>18</sup> This would not have been possible had the gods of other peoples been viewed as false and fictitious. All treaty oaths were sworn in the name of the deities of the two participating parties. Religion functioned as a medium of communication, not of distinction and exclusion. The principle of the translatability of divine names served to overcome the primitive ethnocentrism of tribal religions and to enable cultures to relate with and be transparent to one another. That these relationships could sometimes be violent was another matter altogether.

What is important is that the principle of the Mosaic distinction blocked this translatability. Of course, the “peoples” are free to acknowledge the true God once at the end of time,<sup>19</sup> but their present forms of worshiping a highest power are not acknowledged as equivalent to the truth. Jupiter cannot be translated into Yahweh. On the basis of this distinction, it would have been impossible for the Jews to enter into a treaty relationship with the Assyrians, for swearing such an oath would have implied the equal rank and the mutual translatability of Assur and Yahweh. The Mosaic distinction thus had consequences for realpolitik, and I assume that with its introduction, it actually, and especially, came to this. For the Jew, the name Yahweh could not be translated as “Assur,” “Amun,” or “Zeus.” This is a point the “heathens” never understood. On the basis of the millennia-old practice of translating gods, there arose a conviction that all divine names designated essentially the same god. Varro (116–27 B.C.E.) held that it was unnecessary to distinguish between Jovis and Yao, “for names do not matter, so long as the same thing is meant” (*nihil interesse censens quo nomine nuncupetur, dum eadem res*

intelligatur).<sup>20</sup> In his pamphlet against the Christians (*Alethes Logos*), Celsus argued that “it makes no difference whether we call God the ‘Highest’ (Hypsistos), or Zeus, or Adonai, or Sabaoth, or Amun like the Egyptians, or Papaios like the Scythians.”<sup>21</sup> It was the blocking of translatability that first made it possible to “confess” only one God. One could acknowledge only a single name, not a “Highest Being” that in the last instance was identical with all the other gods, if not “with all that is.”

For the pagan religiosity of late classical antiquity, the name of God had become “smoke and vapor,” first, because it was conventional, and second, because God, whom the pagans also had long since come to regard as the single and unique one in and behind the plenitude of names, needed no name, for he was indeed One, and a name is only used when it is necessary to distinguish one entity from another (Asclepius, § 20, a conviction that Lactantius claimed as Christian).<sup>22</sup> But for Jews and Christians, the name of God, even if it was forbidden to say it out loud or it was regarded as hidden, played a fundamental role with decisive power over life and death. Qiddusah ha-Shem, “sanctification of the Name,” is the formulation for a martyr’s death in Judaism, and Christians pray, “hallowed be thy name”; with these formulas, both groups indicate unconditional acknowledgment of this and no other God.

This form of intolerance, which rested on a new consciousness of incompatibility, had to do not with the exercise, but rather, with the experience of violence, that is, being determined to die for one’s belief rather than to be willing to perform actions or entertain convictions that were incompatible with true religion. It was thus not a matter of tolerating the views and actions of others, but of refraining, as intolerable, from actions expected of oneself, such as eating sacrificial meat as a token acknowledgment of the cult of the Roman emperor. It was thus less a case of the intolerance of those who acted, that is, the representatives of the Roman empire, who were prepared to make all possible concessions and would have been satisfied with minimal forms of acknowledgment, for they did not care about martyrdom; rather, it was a case of intolerance of making the offering, for the slightest concession would have been perceived as a break with God and an act of “assimilation.” It was only when the Christians then came to power, and when Christianity became the official religion of the Roman empire, that

negative intolerance became positive intolerance. Refusal to eat sacrificial meat then became a ban on making such offerings.

Once we realize that the intolerance inherent in monotheism, which necessarily arose from the Mosaic distinction, first made its appearance in a passive or martyrological form, that is, as the refusal to accept a form of religion that was recognized as false and to die rather than give way on this point, it turns out that the problem of “monotheism and violence” has as much to do with the suffering of violence as with the exercise of it. The same is true of hatred. That the Mosaic distinction brought hatred in the world, in the form of hatred of “heathens,” who were excluded and perceived as worthy of hatred only in the light of this distinction, is only half the truth. Far more decisive than hatred of the excluded is the hatred directed against the excluded themselves. In tractate Sabbath 89a of the Babylonian Talmud, the question of the meaning of the name “Sinai” is posed. Because it is the mountain, so the answer reads, from which hatred (*sin’ah*) descended to the peoples of the world.<sup>23</sup> The peoples were jealous of the Chosen People to whom the Torah was given at Sinai.<sup>24</sup> Nowadays, this argument is countered by the objection that it is tantamount to blaming the victim for his own fate. Is martyrdom anything other than the responsibility of the victim for his own destiny? Of course, the Jews murdered by the Nazis were never asked whether they confessed to Judaism. But that should not blind us to what “confession” means, or to how inseparably this category is part and parcel of the Mosaic distinction.

As already noted, the antagonism characteristic of monotheism as a counterreligion, the exclusive and excluding negation that defines itself as “no other gods!” works its excluding effects not only outwardly, but also, and especially, inwardly. It is not just a matter of the heathendom of others, it is first of all a matter of what is false in one’s own religion. The Bible itself records the conflict between truth and untruth, and the change from primary to counterreligion. Monotheism recounts the history of its imposition as a history of violence in a series of massacres. By way of just a few examples, I am thinking of the massacre that ends the scene of the golden calf (Exodus 32–34), the massacre of the priests of Baal at the end of their offering contest with Elijah (1 Kings 18), the violent imposition of Josiah’s reform (2 Kings 23.1–27), and the forceful dissolution of mixed marriages (Ezra 9.1–4; 10.1–17). Since the days of the Enlightenment, these and other passages have been cited by critics as proof

of the inherent violence and intolerance of the monotheism of biblical religion.<sup>25</sup> It is foolish and superfluous simply to repeat this criticism; we have long since learned that these atrocities depicted in the Bible never occurred in historical reality, and that, in the case of Judaism in any event, no pagan was ever violently persecuted. But it seems equally foolish to me to interpret away these passages and attempt to portray monotheism as the religion of a tolerant universality that erases all distinctions. There must be some meaning to the fact that in the biblical texts, monotheism tells the story of its imposition in all the registers of violence. Here, too, a mnemohistorical change of perspective commends itself. It is no longer a question of how monotheism in fact imposed itself, whether in an evolutionary or a revolutionary manner, in the form of gradual transformations or violent measures, but above all, of how this process was remembered in the biblical texts. I see no historical or theological gain in attempting to deny the semantics of violence that is written into the biblical texts. Monotheism is theoclasm. It views itself as such, it portrays itself as such in the biblical texts, and it has worked out as such historically. We would do better to consider how we are to deal with this semantics of violence than simply to deny it and to transfigure monotheism into the religion of universal brotherly love.

My concern is not with criticizing monotheism, but with making a historical analysis of its revolutionary character as a world-altering innovation. To this end, it is of decisive importance that in the monotheistically inspired texts of the Bible, its imposition is portrayed as violent, and even as a series of massacres. I am speaking here of cultural semantics, not of a history of actual events. What I wish to state is that monotheism is aware of its inherent violence, and that it stresses the revolutionary change entailed in its rigorous application. To me, it is not a matter of the cheap and in fact “gross” (Zenger) thesis that monotheism is entirely and necessarily intolerant, but of pointing to its inherent power of negation, to the antagonistic energy that introduces the distinction between true and false and the principle of “tertium non datur” in a sphere in which it was not previously at home, and indeed was not even thinkable, the sphere of the holy, of conceptions of God, of religion. Through this power of negation, monotheism assumes the character of a counter-religion that determines its truth by excluding what is incompatible with it. Neither Egyptian, Mesopotamian, or Canaanite religion, nor even archaic



biblical religion itself can be classified in this sense as a counter-religion, but rather the new religion, whose contours emerge especially in Deuteronomy and in the biblical books influenced by this tradition.

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<sup>1</sup>Theo Sundemeier, in K. Müller and T. Sundemeier (eds.), *Lexikon missionstheologischer Grundbegriffe* (Berlin, 1987), pp. 411–423; see also idem, *Was ist Religion? Religionswissenschaft im theologischen Kontext* (Gütersloh, 1999).

<sup>2</sup>Karl Jaspers, *Vom Ursprung und Ziel der Geschichte* (Munich, 1949); see Aleida Assmann, “Einheit und Vielheit in der Geschichte: Jaspers’ Achsenzeit-Konzept, neu betrachtet,” in Shmuel Eisenstadt (ed.), *Kulturen der Achsenzeit II* (see n. 6), vol. 3, pp. 330 ff.

<sup>3</sup>Jaspers’ theorem of axial periods has a long history, one that finds little mention in Jaspers’ book. It is based on observations and reflections that go back to the eighteenth century. Anquetil Duperron, the Iranist and discoverer of the Zend-Avesta, already noted the contemporaneity and the parallelism of the processes of religious change from China to Greece in the first millennium B.C.E., and he spoke of a “grande révolution du genre humain”; see D. Metzler, “A. H. Anquetil-Duperron (1731–1805) und das Konzept der Achsenzeit,” in *Achaemenid History 7* (1991): 123–133. In the twentieth century, this concept of a (nearly) world-wide intellectual turning point was taken up prior to Jaspers by Alfred Weber, *Kultursoziologie* (Amsterdam, 1935), and after Jaspers by, in particular, Eric Voegelin, *Order and History*, vols. I–V, *Israel and Revelation* (Baton Rouge, 1956–1985). In the 1970s, this debate was continued in the American journal *Daedalus*; the most important volume appeared in 1975 under the title “The Age of Transcendence.” In the meanwhile, a circle of scholars centering on Shmuel Eisenstadt and Johann Arnason has pursued this problem in a series of conferences whose proceedings have been published in a series of collaborative volumes; see S. N. Eisenstadt (ed.), *The Origin and Diversity of Axial Civilizations* (Albany, 1986); S. N. Eisenstadt, *Kulturen der Achsenzeit: Ihre Ursprünge und ihre Vielfalt*, 2 vols. (Frankfurt, 1987); idem, *Kulturen der Achsenzeit II: Ihre institutionelle und kulturelle Dynamik*, 3 vols. (Frankfurt, 1992); and cf. also the conference papers and studies of Wolfgang Schluchter on Max Weber’s theory of the rationalization and demystification of the

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world, published in W. Schluchter, *Religion und Lebensführung*, 2 vols. (Frankfurt, 1988). As an Egyptologist, I have entered into these researches, not only with *Moses the Egyptian*, but already with *Ma'at: Gerechtigkeit und Unsterblichkeit im alten Ägypten* (Munich, 1990) and *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis: Schrift, Erinnerung, und politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen* (Munich, 1992), and examined the “great, radical turning point in the human race” of which Duperron spoke, from the point of view of a culture that existed before this change.

<sup>4</sup>According to Willi Oelmüller, “By recalling the original unity of the tolerant natural monotheism of the Egyptians, Assmann hopes to supply an alternative to the ugly consequences of the intolerant Monotheism of Moses, Jesus, and Mohammed and the three revealed religions”; see W. Oelmüller, *Negative Theologie heute: Die Lage des Menschen vor Gott* (Munich, 1999), pp. 12–21, citation on pp. 16–17. In any event, I do not speak of “natural monotheism” but of “cosmotheism,” by which I mean polytheism.

<sup>11</sup> The position imputed to me is represented by, e.g., Regina M. Schwartz, *The Curse of Cain: The Violent Legacy of Monotheism* (Chicago, 1997).

<sup>12</sup> See below, p. 229.

<sup>13</sup> See below, p. 216.

<sup>14</sup> H. Zirker, “Monotheismus und Intoleranz,” in K. Hilpert and J. Werbick (eds.), *Met den Anderen Leben: Wege zur Toleranz* (Düsseldorf, 1995), pp. 95–117, citation pp. 95–96, after J. Manemann, “Götterdämmerung: Politischer Anti-Monotheismus in Wendezeiten,” *Monotheismus: Jahrbuch Politische Theologie* 4 (2002): 28–49, 48.

<sup>15</sup> Eric Santner, *On the Psychotheology of Everyday Life: Reflections on Freud and Rosenzweig* (Chicago, 2001), who takes issue with *Moses the Egyptian* on pp. 3–6, distinguishes between “global” and “universal consciousness,” ascribing polytheistic translatability to the “global,” and monotheism’s human reference to the “universal” option. Since monotheism (as well as psychoanalysis) alienates me from myself, or discloses the alien in me, so runs the argument, it opens me vis-à-vis one who is alien. If we replace the word “alien” with “heathen,” we come closer to the matter. The meaning of “alienation” was first determined by monotheism. Since monotheism

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denounces the heathen in me, it opens my eyes to “the heathens.” Self-hatred and hatred of the alien mesh with one another, and hatred of the alien is not mitigated by the fact that it stems from self-hatred.

<sup>16</sup> Judaism has carried out no mission, but in antiquity, its model attracted many proselytes; see Rodney Stark, *One True God: Historical Consequences of Monotheism* (Princeton, 2001), pp. 52–59.

<sup>17</sup> On this point, see my essay “Gottes willige Vollstrecker: Zur politischen Theologie der Gewalt,” *Saeculum* 51 (2000): 161–174, in which I in particular discuss Egyptian and Assyrian theologies of power.

<sup>18</sup> On this point, see Richard A. Litke, *A Reconstruction of the Assyro-Babylonian God-Lists, An: Anu-um and An: Anus\_a Ame-li*, Yale Babylonian Collection (New Haven, 1998), and W. G. Lambert, “Götterlisten,” in *Reallexikon der Assyriologie*, vol. 3 (1957–1971), pp. 473–479.

<sup>19</sup> U. Duchrow sees in this fact an indication of the translatability even of monotheistic religion.

<sup>20</sup> Augustine, *De consensu evangelistarum* 1, 22, 30 and 23, 31 PL 34, 1005f = Varro, fr. I, 58 b; see Martin Hengel, *Judentum und Hellenismus*, 3d ed. (Tübingen, 1988), p. 472 with n. 19 and 477 with n. 33.

<sup>21</sup> Apud Origen, *Contra Celsum*, I 24, V 41 (45); see Hengel, *Judentum und Hellenismus*, p. 476.

<sup>22</sup> On this point, see the German edition of *Moses the Egyptian, Moses der Ägypter*, Munich 1998, note. 415.

<sup>23</sup> I thank Almut Sh. Bruckstein, who explained the passage to me.

<sup>24</sup> See S. Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, translated by K. Jones (New York, 1939), p. 116: “I venture to assert that the jealousy which the Jews evoked in other peoples by maintaining that they were the first-born, favorite child of God the Father has not yet been overcome by those others, just as if the latter had given credence to the assumption.”

<sup>25</sup> See, e.g., Regina M. Schwartz, *The Curse of Cain: The Violent Legacy of Monotheism* (Chicago, 1997).