

THE PRICE OF MONOTHEISM

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CHAPTER I

The Mosaic Distinction and the Problem of Intolerance

How Many Religions Stand Behind the Old Testament?

The shift from primary to secondary religion takes place in the Bible itself. Not one religion but two stand behind the books of the Old Testament. One scarcely differs from the primary religions that coexisted with it at the time in its adoration of a supreme god who dominates and far excels the other gods, without, however, excluding them in any way, a god who, as creator of the world and everything in it, cares for his creatures, increases the fertility of the flocks and fields, tames the elements, and directs the destiny of his people. The books and textual layers ascribed to the “priestly” traditional and redactional line are particularly shaped by this religion. The other religion, by contrast, sharply distinguishes itself from the religions of its environment by demanding that its One God be worshipped to the exclusion of all others, by banning the production of images, and by making divine favor depend less on sacrificial offerings and rites than on the righteous conduct of the individual and the observance of god-given, scripturally fixed laws. This religion is on display in the prophetic books, as well as in the texts and textual layers of the “Deuteronomic” line of tradition. As its name suggests, this “Deuteronomic” line has its center in Deuteronomy, the fifth book of Moses. This book breathes an unmistakably didactic and homiletic spirit that also animates other books and a specific redactional stratum. The texts ascribed to the

priestly tradition lack a clear center, such as that represented by Deuteronomy, instead being dispersed throughout the first four books of Moses. Despite that, they have an all the more conspicuous center in the temple of Jerusalem. These texts belong to the cult of the temple and are addressed to a professional sacerdotal caste of readers, whereas the Deuteronomical tradition is pitched at a much wider audience. "The Deuteronomium," writes Gerhard von Rad, "has something about it that speaks directly to the heart; but it also satisfies the head through its continual willingness to explain itself. In short, it is perfectly adapted to its readers or listeners and their capacity for theological understanding. This vibrant will to interpretation is entirely missing from the writings of the priests. Their task was essentially limited to compiling, selecting and theologically classifying the relevant material."¹ Whereas the priestly writings constitute a manual that serves as a foundation for the temple cult, the Deuteronomium is a prescriptive textbook and guidebook that purports to lay the foundation for the practical and social life of the entire community. Over and above these stylistic and functional differences, however, the two lines of tradition appear to derive from two different types of religious experience. Whereas the religion associated with the priestly writings aims to make its people at home in the world, to integrate all things human into the divine order of nature, the religion that announces itself in the Deuteronomic tradition aims to transcend the world, to release its people from the constraints of this world by binding them to the otherworldly order of the law. One religion requires its people to turn towards the world in rituals of cult and sacrifice, giving their rapt assent to the divine order of creation; the other demands, above all, that they turn away from the world by assiduously studying the writings in which god's will and truth have been deposited.

These two religions are not just placed side by side in the Hebrew Bible. Rather, they stand opposed to each other in a relationship of tension, since one envisages precisely what the other negates. That this antagonism does not break out into open contradiction is due to the fact that neither religion unfolds in its full purity and rigor in the writings of the Old Testament. The archaic, polytheistic religion that seeks to make its votaries at home in the world is accessible to us only in fragments, having been painted over by the monotheistic redaction. It cannot be reconstructed in anything more than broad outline, with the help of numerous

parallels drawn from neighboring religions. The post-archaic, monotheistic religion of world-redemption, for its part, is evident only as a general tendency in the books of the Old Testament, and does not come to full expression, in the severity with which it denounces other religions as idolatrous, until the writings of rabbinical Judaism and patristic Christianity that build upon those books. In the Hebrew Bible, both religions are able to coexist in this state of nonsimultaneous simultaneity, of a “no longer” and a “not yet.” Indeed, this highly charged antagonism within the Bible undoubtedly represents one of the secrets of its worldwide success.

In its relation to two quite different forms of religion—one polytheistic, the other monotheistic; one turned towards the world, the other turned away from it; one a cult religion, the other a religion of the book—the Hebrew Bible resembles a picture puzzle: first one picture, then another moves into the foreground, depending on how we look at it. Neither of these two readings can claim exclusive validity. Those who read the Bible against the background of religious history and present it, on the basis of numerous parallels, as a Middle Eastern religion like any other, as does Bernhard Lang in his recent book *Jahwe der biblische Gott: Ein Porträt* (Yahweh the Biblical God: A Portrait),² prove no less guilty of one-sidedness than those who read it in the light of its reception history, as I did myself in *Moses the Egyptian*: as the proclamation of the One God who, on the basis of the Mosaic distinction, posits his religion as the truth and consigns all other religions to the darkness of falsehood. Neither of the two images does full justice to the Hebrew Bible, but both are contained within it.

This dualism inherent in the Hebrew Bible, this Janus face, has not just caught the attention of theologians. A particularly striking example is Sigmund Freud’s book on Moses, which I discuss in more detail in chapter 4. Freud distinguishes between two Moses figures, an “Egyptian” and a “Midianite Moses.” One stands for a sublime monotheism, for what is referred to here as “counterreligion,” the modern stratum of the Hebrew Bible. The other is considered by Freud to have been a follower of the volcanic god Yahweh and the representative of a typical tribal religion; he therefore stands for the archaic stratum of the Bible.

Far from resulting from the shift to monotheism, the Bible thus still reflects in large measure a pre-monotheistic religious form. Yet

monotheism can already be discerned in the Bible as a general tendency. The texts compiled therein straddle this divide, bearing witness as much to the polytheistic point of departure as to the monotheistic end-state, and in particular to the conflicts that arose in the transition from one to the other. For the monotheistic religion by no means followed upon the archaic religion as the logical next stage in its development; the relationship between monotheistic and archaic religions is one of revolution, not evolution. My argument, then, is that the monotheistic shift, which lies between the two images combined in the biblical writings as in a picture puzzle and organizes their differences, takes the form of a rupture, a break with the past that rests on the distinction between truth and falsehood and generates, over the subsequent course of its reception, the distinction between Jews and Gentiles, Christians and pagans, Christians and Jews, Muslims and infidels, true believers and heretics, manifesting itself in countless acts of violence and bloodshed. A number of highly significant and central passages of the Old Testament already tell of such violence and bloodshed. This aspect is examined in more detail below.

Having lived for hundreds and thousands of years on the terrain of secondary religious experience and in the spiritual space created by the Mosaic distinction, we Jews, Christians, and Muslims (to speak only of the monotheistic world) assume this distinction to be the natural, normal, and universal form of religion. We tend to identify it unthinkingly with religion as such, and then project it onto all the alien and earlier cultures that knew nothing of the distinction between true and false religion. Measured against this concept of religion, the primary religions cannot fail to be found wanting: orthodoxy is unknown to them, they barely differentiate themselves from other cultural fields, and in many cases it remains unclear where exactly the boundary lines between divine and natural phenomena, charismatic teachers and normative principles are to be drawn. In these and many other respects, they are not yet “proper” religions. Against the background of this implicit and deeply rooted conviction (naturally, it is not a question of an explicitly formulated theory of religion), a concept such as “counterreligion” is bound to cause offense. What? The highest, purest, and most advanced form in which religion can appear to us, monotheism, is to be called not “religion” but “counterreligion”? How absurd!

What Is Truth?

I want to make clear how this term is to be understood with reference to the parallel case of science. Just as monotheistic religion rests on the Mosaic distinction, so science rests on the “Parmenidean” distinction.³ One distinguishes between true and false religion, the other between true and false cognition. This distinction, articulated in the principles of identity, noncontradiction, and the excluded middle (*tertium non datur*), is commonly associated with the name of Parmenides, who lived in the sixth century BCE. Werner Jäger rightly speaks of a “constraint on thinking” or cognitive straitjacket that is introduced here: “As he [Parmenides] repeats again and again, with increasing force, Being is, and Notbeing is not. That which is cannot not be; that which is not cannot be—thus Parmenides expresses the constraint on thinking that was established by his realization that a logical contradiction cannot be resolved.”⁴ In drawing a line between “wild thought”—the traditional, mythic modes of world production—and logical thought, which submits to the principle of noncontradiction, this constraint on thinking places cognition, validation, and knowledge on an entirely new footing. The new concept of knowledge introduced by the Greeks is no less revolutionary in nature than the new concept of religion introduced by the Jews and represented by the name of Moses. Both concepts are characterized by an unprecedented drive to differentiation, negation, and exclusion. Ever since there has been science, and with it a knowledge, based on the distinction between true and false cognition, that distinguishes itself from error and opens itself to criticism through its manner of reasoning, there have also been such distinctions as those between *muthos* and *logos*, wisdom and knowledge, which correspond precisely to the distinction between pagan idolatry and religion. Scientific knowledge is “counterknowledge” because it knows what is incompatible with its propositions. Only “counterknowledge” develops a regulatory code that establishes what is to count as knowledge and what not, that is, a second-order knowledge.

That is why the concept of an ancient Egyptian or Babylonian “science” is to a certain extent anachronistic: in the ancient Egyptian and Babylonian worlds, “knowledge” meant something quite different from what it did for the Greeks after Parmenides. Such concepts nonetheless do

their job tolerably well. We all know that the Greeks revolutionized the world by introducing a new, critical concept of truth, and we accordingly take references to a pre-Hellenic “science” with a pinch of salt. As far as religion is concerned, however, this consciousness is nowhere near so well established. Few would suspect that books about Egyptian or Babylonian “religion” use the word in a more or less metaphorical sense. Our concept of religion encompasses both monotheistic and pre-monotheistic religions in an utterly uncritical way. Yet by introducing the Mosaic distinction, the Jews revolutionized the world at least as decisively as the Greeks. They introduced a form of religion that stands out from all traditional so-called religions just as clearly as Greek science stands out from all traditional so-called sciences.

In many discussions in which I have taken part, this thesis has been branded “anti-Semitic.” The charge would perhaps be justified had I interpreted this transformation of the world as a turn for the worse rather than for the better, and had I wanted to castigate the Jews for putting an end to a Golden Age of primary religion by introducing the Mosaic distinction. But this strikes me as absurd—no less absurd, in fact, than had I wanted to reproach the Greeks for disenchanting the world and delivering it over to rational calculation through their invention of scientific thought. It is in my view self-evident that in both cases, in scientific thought no less than in monotheism, we are dealing with civilizational achievements of the highest order, and it has never occurred to me to demand that they be abandoned. I am advocating a return neither to myth nor to primary religion. Indeed, I am not advocating anything; my aim is rather to describe and understand. When I characterize scientific thought as counter-thought and trace it back to the Parmenidean distinction between truth and lies (or the existent and the nonexistent), it is to draw attention to the potential for negation that inheres in such knowledge, not to criticize and deplore. To put it bluntly, scientific knowledge is “intolerant.” The truths of science may well, for the most part, be relative and have a limited life span, but that does not mean that they are compatible with everything else under the sun, for they have their own criteria of validity, verifiability, and falsifiability, which they are obliged to meet. This has become so self-evident to us that it has become practically inseparable from our concept of knowledge. It is what we mean when we speak of “knowledge,” and,

with Claude Lévi-Strauss, we label a different kind of knowledge “wild thought” and “bricolage.”⁵

The concept of “counterreligion” is intended to draw out the potential for negation that inheres within secondary religions. These religions are also essentially “intolerant,” although again, this should not be taken as a reproach. Two hundred and fifty years ago, David Hume not only argued that polytheism is far older than monotheism, he also advanced the related hypothesis that polytheism is tolerant, whereas monotheism is intolerant.⁶ This is an age-old argument, which I had no intention of revisiting in my Moses book. Secondary religions *must* be intolerant, that is, they must have a clear conception of what they feel to be incompatible with their truths if these truths are to exert the life-shaping authority, normativity, and binding force that they claim for themselves. In each case, counterreligions have transformed, from the ground up, the historical realities amidst which they appeared. Their critical and transformative force is sustained by their negative energy, their power of negation and exclusion. How they deal with their structural intolerance is another matter. That is not my concern here, although I want to note in passing my belief that religions ought to work through the problem rather than attempting to deny that it even exists. Significant progress has undoubtedly been made on this front in recent years.

Science’s intolerance or potential for negation is expressed in two directions: in its capacity to distinguish between nonscientific and scientific knowledge, on the one hand, and between false and correct scientific knowledge, on the other. Myths are forms of nonscientific knowledge, but they are not for that reason erroneous. Scientific errors are instances of disproved scientific knowledge, but they are not for that reason mythic. We find something similar when we look at counterreligions. Primary religions are “pagan,” but they are not for that reason heretical; heresies are heterodox opinions and practices, but they are not for that reason primary religions, nor are they pagan.

The analogy between religion and science, as well as between the Mosaic and Parmenidean—or Socratic, Platonic, and Aristotelian—distinctions, could be spun out much further. But more is at stake here than a mere analogy. The new concept of knowledge has as its corollary that it defines itself against an equally new counterconcept, that of “faith.” Faith in this new sense means holding something to be true that, even

though I cannot establish its veracity on scientific grounds, nonetheless raises a claim to truth of the highest authority. Knowledge is not identical to faith, since it concerns a truth that is merely relative and refutable, yet nonetheless ascertainable and critically verifiable; faith is not identical to knowledge, since it concerns a truth that is critically nonverifiable, yet nonetheless absolute, irrefutable, and revealed. Prior to this distinction, there existed neither the concept of knowledge that is constitutive for science nor the concept of faith that is constitutive for revealed religion. Knowledge and faith, and therefore science and religion, were one and the same. Book titles like *Der Glaube der Hellenen* (The Faith of the Hellenes) (Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Möllendorff; Berlin, 1931) and *Der Götterglaube im alten Ägypten* (Belief in the Gods in Ancient Egypt) (Hermann Kees; Leipzig, 1941) are basically meaningless, since the gods of primary religions were not objects of faith in the new sense of this counterevidential (*quia absurdum*) holding-to-be-true, but the preserve of a plain and natural evidence banished by monotheism to the realm of idolatry and pagan nature worship. The ancient Egyptians, like all other adherents of primary religions, knew about the gods rather than believing in them, and this knowledge was not defined in terms of “true and false,” but allowed statements that, to our eyes, seem to contradict each other to stand side by side.

There are four simple or original kinds of truth: truths of experience (e.g., “all humans are mortal”), mathematical or geometrical truths (e.g., “twice two is four”), historical truths (e.g., “Auschwitz”), and truths conducive to life (e.g., “human rights”). The Mosaic distinction introduces a new kind of truth: absolute, revealed, metaphysical, or fideistic truth. This fifth truth type does not number among the “simple” or original truths; it represents an innovation. The four simple truths, particularly mathematical and historical truth, were at the forefront of the Greek scientific revolution; in monotheistic religion, by contrast, their place is taken by the fifth truth that enters into the world along with it: “Credo in unum Deum.”

Intolerance, Violence, and Exclusion

Many critics felt the concept of the Mosaic distinction to be hostile to religion, even anti-Semitic or anti-Christian, because in their view it

implies the charge that hatred, intolerance, and exclusion first came into the world with the Mosaic distinction.⁷

Naturally, I do not believe that the world of the primary religions was free from hatred and violence. On the contrary, it was filled with violence and aggression in the most diverse forms, and many of these forms were domesticated, civilized, or even eliminated altogether by the monotheistic religions as they rose to power, since such violence was perceived to be incompatible with the truth they proclaimed. I do not wish to deny this in the least. Yet neither can it be denied that these religions simultaneously brought a new form of hatred into the world: hatred for pagans, heretics, idolaters and their temples, rites, and gods. If we dismiss such considerations as “anti-Semitic,” we consent to discursive and intellectual fetters that restrict our historical reflection in a dangerous way. Whoever refuses to account for the path he has taken for fear that the goal at which he has arrived might prove contingent, relative, or perhaps even undesirable when compared with his point of departure, or the options he has rejected along the way, fosters a new form of intolerance. The capacity to historicize and relativize one’s own position is the precondition of all true tolerance.

Against the thesis that monotheism reposes on the distinction between true and false religion, my critics maintain that monotheism is the religion not of distinctions but of unity and universalism. It is instead polytheism that draws distinctions. Each people, tribe, and city has its own tutelary deity and finds expression for its differentiated identity in a correspondingly differentiated divine world. Each deity stands for a distinction. Monotheism cancels and revokes all such distinctions. Before the One God, all people are equal. Far from erecting barriers between people, monotheism tears them down. Thus Klaus Koch writes: “Polytheistic gods are essentially particular and regional. Because they are socialized in line with the community that worships them, they are dismissive, if not downright hostile, towards everything impure and foreign. . . . Consequential monotheism, by contrast, presupposes a deity accessible in all places and to all people. This entails an ethics that applies in equal measure to all, provided the monotheistic horizon is not restricted by a closed society of the elect. The more exclusive the deity, the more inclusive for humankind.”⁸ As Erich Zenger puts it: “Monotheism is universal, not particular,

in its address.”⁹ Hans Zirker stresses that monotheism, at its core, purports “to conceive of reality as a unity and to postulate a universal history for humankind. Monotheism has its primary meaning not in the mere claim that there is only one god rather than many, but in the way it defines the human world, which ought neither to be drawn into the strife of divine powers and the distribution of regional fiefdoms, nor riven in an insurmountable dualism of light and dark, ‘good’ Being and ‘evil’ Being, nor definitively pluralized in the self-affirmation of warring peoples.”¹⁰ That is a Christian conception. The real distinction that Christianity sets out to revoke is missing from Zirker’s list: it is the border between Jews and Gentiles drawn by the law, particularly through the mark of circumcision. Christianity rests on the universalization of the Mosaic distinction, which now applies not just to the Jews but to everyone else as well.¹¹

That is why objections of this kind were barely heard from Jewish quarters. Judaism is a culture of difference. For Judaism, it is utterly self-evident that monotheism draws a border and that the Jews are responsible for policing this border. Assimilation is no less abhorrent to Judaism than discrimination is to Christianity. For Jewish readers, the category of the Mosaic distinction is therefore not a problem, but something that goes without saying. In Judaism, the universalism inherent to monotheism is deferred until a messianic end-time; in the world as we know it, the Jews are the guardians of a truth that concerns everyone, but that has been entrusted to them for the time being as to a kind of spiritual avant-garde. For Christians, of course, this end-time dawned some two thousand years ago, putting an end to the need for such distinctions. That is why Christian theology has blinded itself to the exclusionary force of monotheism. Judaism is a religion of self-exclusion. Through its divine election, Israel isolates itself (or is isolated by god) from the circle of peoples. The law erects a high wall around the chosen people, a cordon sanitaire that prevents any contamination by, or assimilation of, the ideas and customs of the environment. This act of self-isolation has no need to resort to violence, or at any rate to persecute those who hold differing beliefs. The massacres recounted in the biblical texts—that of the worshippers of the Golden Calf, or that of the priests of Baal at the command of Elijah and Joshua—are an internal affair of the Jewish people; they are meant to wipe out the Egyptians or Canaanites who dwell “among us,” in our midst and in our own hearts;

they are directed inwards, not outwards. The “peoples” (*gojîm*) are free to worship whomsoever and howsoever they wish.¹² Christianity and Islam, by contrast, do not recognize this border, and they have therefore lashed out in violence again and again throughout their history. Whereas the Jewish people’s belief in its own election requires that it exclude itself, the Christian obligation to evangelize and the Muslim obligation to compel submission require that they both exclude the Other. In choosing Israel to be his people, god marks it out from all other peoples and forbids it to adopt the customs of the environment. By commanding Christians and Muslims to spread the truth to all four corners of the earth, god ensures that those who close their minds to this truth will be shut out. Only in this form does monotheism’s inherent potential for exclusion explode into violence.

These considerations are equally germane to the problem of tolerance. Intolerance stems from an incapacity or unwillingness to tolerate differing opinions and the practices that result from such opinions. This presupposes not just the distinction between what is one’s own and what is not, but an incompatibility between the two established through the distinction between truth and falsehood. Tolerance rests on the same presuppositions. I can only “tolerate” something, in the strict sense of the word, that runs counter to my own views, yet which I can afford to tolerate because I am powerful or generous enough not to have to treat it as a threat. It thus makes no sense to talk of “tolerance” with regard to the polytheisms of pagan antiquity, since here the criterion of incompatibility is missing; as far as other peoples’ religion is concerned, there is nothing that would need to be “tolerated.” That is why I prefer to speak of “translatability” rather than tolerance, by which I allude to the practice, documented since Sumerian times, of translating divine names—first from one language into another, then from one religion into another as well. Other peoples’ religions were felt to be basically compatible with one’s own. This is not to say that the peoples who felt this way refrained from violence in their dealings with each other, nor that violence first entered into the world with the Mosaic distinction. It simply means that political violence was not theologically sanctioned, at least not in the sense that those who followed a religion considered to be false had to be converted with the sword. When the Assyrians, for example, referred to the god

Assur in justifying the cruel punishment they inflicted on their apostate vassals, they did so not because these renegades persisted in worshipping their own false gods, but because they had become Assur's enemies by breaking the oaths of loyalty they had sworn in his name.¹³ Indeed, the very fact that foreigners could be taken under oath presupposed that their religion and gods could be made to harmonize with the Assyrian deities. The practice of translating deities had already become well established in Mesopotamia by the third millennium, facilitated by the diverse forms of communication between individual city-states that developed within this polycentrically organized space. Contracts with other states had to be sealed by oath, and the gods to whom this oath was sworn had to be compatible. Tables of divine equivalences were thus drawn up that eventually correlated up to six different pantheons.¹⁴ This would have been impossible had it been assumed that the gods worshipped by other peoples were false and fictitious. All contracts were concluded in the name of the gods of both contractual parties. Religion functioned as a medium of communication, not elimination and exclusion. The principle of the translatability of divine names helped to overcome the primitive ethnocentrism of the tribal religions, to establish relations between cultures, and to make these cultures more transparent to each other. That these relations sometimes involved violence and bloodshed is another matter altogether.

It is important to note that the principle of the Mosaic distinction blocked such translatability. Under monotheism, the "peoples" are still free to profess their faith in the one true god at the end of time,¹⁵ but the present forms in which they worship the Supreme Being are not recognized as being equally true. Jupiter cannot be translated into Yahweh. On the basis of this distinction, the Jews would have found it impossible to forge a pact with the Assyrians, since the conclusion of the pact under oath would have implied the equivalence and mutual translatability of Assur and Yahweh. The Mosaic distinction therefore has real and far-reaching political consequences, and I think it likely that these played a crucial role in its introduction. For the Jews, Yahweh could not be translated into "Assur," "Amun" or "Zeus." This was something the "pagans" never understood. After thousands of years of translational practice, the belief had arisen that all divine names referred to the same god. Varro (116–27 BCE) thought it unnecessary to distinguish between Jove and Yahweh, "since the names

are of no importance so long as the same thing is intended” (*nihil interesse censens quo nomine nuncupetur, dum eadem res intelligatur*).¹⁶ In his pamphlet against the Christians (*Alēthēs logos*), Celsus argued that “it makes no difference whether one calls god the ‘Most High’ (Hypsistos), or Zeus, or Adonai, or Sabaoth, or Amun, as do the Egyptians, or Papaios, as do the Scythians.”¹⁷ It first becomes possible to profess faith in a god when translatability is obstructed. One can profess faith only in a name, not in a “Supreme Being” ultimately identical with all the other gods, if not “with everything that exists.”

For the pagan religiosity of late antiquity, the name of god had been voided of meaning: first, because it was conventional, and second, because god, whom the pagans had likewise come to recognize as the One and Only in and behind the welter of names, had no need of a name anyway, since he was One, and a name is only required where one thing is to be distinguished from others (Asclepius §20, an argument adopted for Christianity by Lactantius).¹⁸ For Jews and Christians, on the other hand, the name of god plays a fundamental role that can decide over life and death, even if that name is presumed to be unsayable or hidden. *Qiddusch ha-Schem*, “sanctify the name,” is the term for martyrdom in Judaism, and the Christians pray: “Hallowed be thy name.” In doing so, both profess their unconditional belief in this god and no other.

For this form of intolerance, based on a new awareness of incompatibility, what matters is not that violence be inflicted but that it be endured. One must be prepared to die for one’s faith rather than agree to actions or beliefs known to be incompatible with true religion. What is important is thus not that divergent opinions and deeds are tolerated, but that one refuse to perform “intolerable” actions demanded by others, such as eating the meat of an animal offered in sacrifice to the Roman imperial cult. Most officials of the Roman Empire had little interest in creating martyrs and were prepared to grant all manner of concessions to the overly scrupulous, resting satisfied with minimal forms of compliance. Intolerance was far more prevalent among the ranks of their victims, who were inclined to regard the slightest concession on their part as evidence of “assimilation” and as a falling away from god. Only after the Christians had themselves come to power and Christianity was made the state religion of the Roman Empire was negative intolerance transformed into positive intolerance.

Their fastidious refusal to eat the meat of animals sacrificed to pagan deities then became a ban on carrying out such sacrifices.

Once it is realized that the intolerance inherent to monotheism, which flows directly from the Mosaic distinction, initially appears in a passive or martyrological guise—that is, as a refusal to accept a form of religion known to be false, and a concomitant willingness to die rather than yield an inch on this point—then the problem of “monotheism and violence” can be seen to have as much to do with enduring violence as with perpetrating it. The same can be said of hate. To say that hate came into the world with the Mosaic distinction in the form of hatred for the “pagans,” who were first recognized as despicable and excluded as such in the light of this distinction, is to tell only half the story. Of far greater importance than hatred for the excluded is the hatred nursed in their hearts by the excluded themselves. In the Babylonian Talmudic treatise *Sabbat* 89a, the question of the meaning of the word “Sinai” is posed. “Sinai” is so called, the answer goes, because it is the mountain on which hate (*sin’ah*) descended to the peoples of the world.¹⁹ The other peoples are envious of the chosen people who received the Torah on Sinai.²⁰ Today, this argument meets with the objection that it amounts to holding the victims responsible for their fate. But what else is martyrdom, if not the responsibility of victims for their fate? To be sure, the Jews murdered by the Nazis were not asked whether they professed faith in Judaism. But this should not blind us to the nature of faith, nor prevent us from seeing how inseparably this category is bound up with the Mosaic distinction.

I have already mentioned that the antagonism characteristic of monotheism as a counterreligion, the exclusive and exclusionary negation by which it defines itself—“No other gods!”—is not just directed outwards, but also and especially inwards. Far more worrying than the paganism of others is the falsehood to which one’s own co-religionists are forever in danger of succumbing. The conflict between truth and untruth and the shift from primary religion to counterreligion is played out in the Bible itself. Monotheism relates the story of its own establishment as a history of violence punctuated by a series of massacres. I have in mind the massacre following the scene with the Golden Calf (Exod. 32–34), the slaughter of the priests of Baal after the sacrificial contest with Elijah (1 Kings 18), the bloody implementation of the reforms of Josiah (2 Kings 23:1–27), and the

forced termination of mixed marriages (Ezra 9:1–4; 10:1–17), to name only a few examples. Since the Enlightenment, these and other passages have been held against biblical religion by its critics as evidence of monotheism's inherent violence and intolerance.²¹ It would be foolish and superfluous simply to restate this critique; we have long since learned that these reported atrocities never took place in historical reality and that, at least in the case of Judaism, no pagans were ever subjected to violent persecution. But it seems to me that it would be equally foolish to explain away these passages with the aim of presenting monotheism as the religion of a tolerant universalism that transcends all differences. The fact that monotheism tells the story of its own foundation and consolidation by drawing on all the registers of violence must surely be of some significance. Here, too, a mnemohistorical change of perspective is called for. The question of how monotheism established itself *de facto* in Israel, whether through evolution or revolution, by means of gradual transformations or violent reprisals, will no longer stand at the center of the investigation. Instead, we must ask how this process is commemorated in the biblical texts themselves. As far as I can see, there is no historical or theoretical advantage to be gained by trying to deny the semantics of violence inscribed in the biblical texts. Monotheism is theoclasm. That is how it perceives itself, that is how it is presented in the biblical texts, and that is how it has been perceived historically. We would be better off reflecting on how to come to terms with this semantics of violence, rather than sweeping it under the carpet in our eagerness to extol monotheism as the religion of a universal brotherly love.

My aim is not to criticize monotheism but to venture a historical analysis of its revolutionary character, its world-transforming novelty. In this context, it is of decisive importance that the consolidation of monotheism is depicted in the monotheistically inspired passages of the Bible in a sequence of massacres. I am speaking here of cultural semantics, not the history of real events. Monotheism, in other words, is aware of its inherent violence and emphasizes the revolutionary shift that its consequential introduction brings about. I am not interested in peddling the cheap and “rather crude” (Zenger) thesis that monotheism is intrinsically and necessarily intolerant, but in demonstrating the power of negation that dwells within it, the antagonistic energy that translates the distinction between

true and false and the principle of *tertium non datur* into a sphere where they had previously been neither found nor even suspected: the sphere of the sacred and the divine, the religious sphere. Through this power of negation, monotheism acquires the character of a counterreligion that determines its truth by expelling whatever cannot be reconciled with it. Neither the Egyptian, Mesopotamian, and Canaanite religions, nor the archaic biblical religion itself can be classified in this sense as counter-religions, unlike the new religion, whose contours emerge most clearly in Deuteronomy and in the other books shaped by this tradition.

Constructions of the Other: Religious Satire

The Mosaic distinction refers, as I have already mentioned, to the distinction between true and false religion. My thesis is that this distinction represents a revolutionary innovation in the history of religion. It was unknown to traditional, historically evolved religions and cultures. Here the key differences were those between the sacred and the profane or the pure and the impure. Neglecting an important deity amounted to a far more serious offense than worshipping false gods, the chief concern of secondary religions. In principle, all religions had the same truth-value and it was generally acknowledged that relations of translatability pertained between foreign gods and one's own. The transition from primary to secondary religious experience therefore goes hand in hand with a new construction of identity and alterity that blocks such translatability. In place of what one could call a "hermeneutics of translation," there now appears a "hermeneutics of difference," which assures itself of what is its own by staking its distance from the Other, proceeding in accordance with the principle "Omnis determinatio est negatio."²²

What interests me here is what is new in this procedure. Every construction of identity inevitably entails a construction of otherness. There is nothing remarkable about that. The closer the ties that bind it from within, the more sharply a group will demarcate itself from the outside world. But that is only half the truth. Means of intercultural understanding are available to compensate for the gap between self and other that must open up if feelings of solidarity are to arise. All cultures elaborate hermeneutics of otherness and techniques of translation alongside their symbols of identity.

The cultural system of polytheism is one such translational technique. By disarticulating the sphere of the numinous into distinct roles and functions, it converts the divine world of a particular group into a format that makes it compatible with the divine worlds of other groups and cultures. Tribal religions are not mutually translatable in this way. In this respect, polytheism represents a major cultural achievement. As alien to each other as the groups may be in other respects, they can still see eye to eye on their gods. A significant change takes place with the Mosaic distinction, since here it is a matter of “counter”-identification, or, in the terminology of Georges Devereux, “antagonistic acculturation.”²³ The “pagan” is not simply “the Other,” but the product of a polemical construction. As I have already made clear, the Mosaic distinction bears primarily on one’s own religion, within which the distinction between truth and falsehood is drawn; it aims to stamp out pagan tendencies within one’s own group and culture. But there is a genre in the Bible that is also concerned with the religion of others, one that casts a deliberately uncomprehending glance at the religious practices of others and exposes them to ridicule in the harsh and alienating light of satiric description: the genre of religious satire.²⁴

The beginnings of this form are already to be found in the Bible, in Jeremiah 10, Deutero-Isaiah 44, and in several verses of Psalm 115.²⁵ The Psalm confronts the invisibility of the biblical god with the visibility of pagan images, which are revealed as fictitious, ineffectual and illusionary precisely in their flashy materiality:

Therefore should the heathen say, Where is now their God?
 But our God is in the heavens: he hath done whatsoever he hath pleased.
 Their idols are silver and gold, the work of men’s hands.
 They have mouths, but they speak not; eyes have they, but they see not;
 They have ears, but they hear not; noses have they, but they smell not;
 They have hands, but they handle not; feet have they, but they walk not; neither
 speak they through their throat. (Ps. 115:2–7)

Here the target is no longer “other gods” who arouse Yahweh’s jealousy, but mere “idols” (*atzavim*), false, fictitious gods created by the pagans themselves in their benighted state. The absurdity of this kind of image-worshipping religion is expressed still more mercilessly in Deutero-Isaiah’s satire:

They that make a graven image are all of them vanity; and their delectable things shall not profit; and they are their own witnesses; they see not, nor know; that they may be ashamed.

Who hath formed a god, or molten a graven image that is profitable for nothing?

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The smith with the tongs both worketh in the coals, and fashioneth it with hammers, and worketh it with the strength of his arms: yea, he is hungry, and his strength faileth: he drinketh no water, and is faint.

The carpenter stretcheth out his rule; he marketh it out with a line; he fitteth it with planes, and he marketh it out with the compass, and maketh it after the figure of a man, according to the beauty of a man; that it may remain in the house.

He heweth him down cedars, and taketh the cypress and the oak, which he strengtheneth for himself among the trees of the forest: he planteth an ash, and the rain doth nourish it.

Then shall it be for a man to burn: for he will take thereof, and warm himself; yea, he maketh a god, and worshippeth it; he maketh a graven image, and falleth down thereto.

He burneth part thereof in the fire; with part thereof he eateth flesh; he roasteth roast, and is satisfied: yea, he warmeth himself, and saith, Aha, I am warm, I have seen the fire:

And the residue thereof he maketh a god, even his graven image: he falleth down unto it, and worshippeth it, and prayeth unto it, and saith, Deliver me; for thou art my god.

They have not known nor understood: for he hath shut their eyes, that they cannot see; and their hearts, that they cannot understand.

And none considereth in his heart, neither is there knowledge nor understanding to say, I have burned part of it in the fire; yea, also I have baked bread upon the coals thereof; I have roasted flesh, and eaten it: and shall I make the residue thereof an abomination [*to'ebab*]? shall I fall down to the stock of a tree? (Isa. 44:9–19)

The text uses the ancient Eastern genre of occupational satire to ridicule the activities of idol-worshippers.²⁶ This genre operates by representing activities specific to certain professions as an otiose and absurd waste of time, a useless occupation that serves only to weary, pollute, and deform its practitioners, thereby excluding them from the community and its norma-

tive hierarchy of socially meaningful conduct. The activities of idol-worshippers are absurd because the idols they purport to influence are works of fiction, nonexistent gods, imaginary powers. Satire relies on a technique of alienation. The described activity or *modus operandi* is alienated to the extent that the particular presuppositions which make it meaningful are consciously disregarded. In this case, scant attention is paid to the fact that a piece of wood can never be worshipped *eo ipso* as a divine image, but must first be consecrated in an elaborate ceremony that brings it into contact with the world of the gods and fits it to become the temporary vessel of a divine spirit. The reduction to its mere materiality of a cultic image that can only “function” as such in the context of a highly complex semiotics²⁷ is an alienating trick that places all actions performed in relation to it in an absurd light.

Satire on the “folly of idol worship” receives by far its most extensive treatment in the apocryphal Wisdom of Solomon. Here, no fewer than four chapters are devoted to the theme, in the course of which a number of interesting distinctions are made. The text first deals with those who bow down before natural phenomena, worshipping god’s works instead of their author:

But deemed either fire, or wind, or the swift air, or the circle of the stars, or the violent water, or the lights of heaven, to be the gods which govern the world.
(Wisd. of Sol. 13:2)

For this, they are

the less to be blamed: for they peradventure err, seeking God, and desirous to find him.

For being conversant in his works they search him diligently, and believe their sight: because the things are beautiful that are seen. (Wisd. of Sol. 13:6–7)

These nature-worshippers, blinded by the natural evidence and beauty of creation, prove incapable of recognizing their creator. But at least they are on the right track, unlike those who place their hope in “dead things.” With that, the text has arrived at the idolaters, whom it characterizes using the satiric form already familiar from Isaiah:

But miserable are they, and in dead things is their hope, who called them gods, which are the works of men’s hands, gold and silver, to shew art in, and

resemblances of beasts, or a stone good for nothing, the work of an ancient hand.

Now a carpenter that felleth timber, after he hath sawn down a tree meet for the purpose, and taken off all the bark skilfully around it, and hath wrought it handsomely, and made a vessel thereof fit for the service of man's life;

And after spending the refuse of his work to dress his meat, hath filled himself; And taking the very refuse among those which served to no use, being a crooked piece of wood, and full of knots, hath carved it diligently, when he had nothing else to do, and formed it by the skill of his understanding, and fashioned it to the image of a man;

Or made it like some wild beast, laying it over with vermilion, and with paint colouring it red, and covering every spot therein;

And when he had made a convenient room for it, set it in a wall, and made it fast with iron:

For he provided for it that it might not fall, knowing that it was unable to help itself; for it is an image, and hath need of help:

Then maketh he prayer for his goods, for his wife and children, and is not ashamed to speak to that which hath no life.

For health he calleth upon that which is weak: for life prayeth to that which is dead: for aid humbly beseecheth that which hath least means to help: and for a good journey he asketh of that which cannot set a foot forward:

And for gaining and getting, and for good success of his hands, asketh ability to do of him, that is most unable to do any thing. (Wisd. of Sol. 13:10–19)

But the text does not stop at ridicule and satire, rising instead to a tremendous malediction:

But that which is made with hands is cursed, as well it, as he that made it: he, because he made it; and it, because, being corruptible, it was called god.

For the ungodly and his ungodliness are both alike hateful unto God.

For that which is made shall be punished together with him that made it.

Therefore even upon the idols of the Gentiles shall there be a visitation: because in the creature of God they are become an abomination, and stumbling-blocks to the souls of men, and a snare to the feet of the unwise.

For the devising of idols was the beginning of spiritual fornication, and the invention of them the corruption of life. (Wisd. of Sol. 14:8–12)

Here, the concept of seduction is introduced with the word “snare.” Graven images are not just useless, they also seduce those who worship them to evildoing. As for the useless, fictitious character of the images, the

text points out that the cult of images is a secondary, derivative phenomenon: “For neither were they from the beginning, neither shall they be for ever. For by the vain glory of men they entered into the world” (Wisdom of Sol. 14:13–14). This argument is especially interesting, anticipating as it does the discussion of natural and original forms of religion that so preoccupied the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The introduction of the cult of images is traced back to two historical sources: the cult of the dead and that of the ruler.

For a father afflicted with untimely mourning, when he hath made an image of his child soon taken away, now honoured him as a god, which was then a dead man, and delivered to those that were under him ceremonies and sacrifices.

Thus in process of time an ungodly custom grown strong was kept as a law, and graven images were worshipped by the commandments of kings.

Whom men could not honour in presence, because they dwelt far off, they took the counterfeit of his visage from far, and made an express image of a king whom they honoured. . . .

And so the multitude, allured by the grace of the work, took him now for a god, which a little before was but honoured as a man. (Wisdom of Sol. 14:15–20)

This is no longer satire, but a nascent theory of religion whose theses on the origin of images are worthy of serious consideration. According to this theory, the origins of the cult of images are to be found in the cult of the dead and that of the ruler, in sepulchral statuary and political portraiture. At the time when this text was written, the world was full of statues of the Roman emperor. The obeisance paid these statues counted as a test of loyalty for subject peoples, who could continue to observe their own cults, customs and laws so long as they remained true to the Roman Empire. By worshipping images of the emperor, they publicly demonstrated that loyalty. Images arise on the one hand “from below,” from the wish of surviving family members to keep in touch with the departed, and on the other hand “from above,” from the need for representation perceived by institutions of government—their need, that is, for a visible presence throughout their entire realm.

The real virulence of this critique of religion relates less to the origin

of the cult of images than to its consequences. Here the text indulges in the most outlandish claims:

For whilst they slew their children in sacrifices, or used secret ceremonies, or made revellings of strange rites;

They kept neither lives nor marriages any longer undefiled: but either one slew another traitorously, or grieved him by adultery.

So that there reigned in all men without exception blood, manslaughter, theft, and dissimulation, corruption, unfaithfulness, tumults, perjury,

Disquieting of good men, forgetfulness of good turns, defiling of souls, changing of kind, disorder in marriages, adultery, and shameless uncleanness.

For the worshipping of idols not to be named is the beginning, the cause, and the end, of all evil. (Wisdom of Solomon 14:23–27)

The charge leveled against idolaters has undergone a drastic transformation. The second commandment and the story of the Golden Calf show no interest whatsoever in other peoples' religions. These are neither persecuted nor subjected to ridicule; they do not even appear on the horizon. What is at stake is one's own religion and the correct form in which it should be practiced. Graven images are not to be worshipped, because this would mean bowing down before other gods, and Yahweh, being a jealous god, would not look kindly on such infidelity. Whether or not other peoples choose to worship their gods in graven images is up to them. That is beside the point. Comparative critique of religion is not the topic of the decalogue. The Wisdom of Solomon, however, is a product of the Hellenistic age, written at a time of conflict between *ioudaïsmos* and *hellēnismos*.²⁸ Now the narrow perspective of yesteryear has expanded to a universalist position that not only rejects false forms of the Jewish religion, but demonizes and denounces all other religions as pagan. Only now is the theme of idolatry treated with the severity of interreligious and intercultural intolerance. The difference between Israel and other peoples is sharpened into the difference between truth and lies, blessing and curse. Only now does the concept of idolatry, in the sense of a universally valid criterion of true religion, first arise. This concept of idolatry stands and falls with exclusive monotheism, which no longer rests content with wor-

shipping Yahweh alone and worshipping no other gods but him, but categorically denies that other gods even exist. It thereby claims that all other religions worship imaginary and self-engendered pseudo-deities, and that through this aberration, they are sinking ever deeper into a morass of evil, mendacity, and crime. With monotheism as a “regulative idea,” the core of this critique is that idolatrous religions are completely lacking in ethical orientation.