BREAKTHROUGH OR TYRANNY: MONOTHEISM'S CONTESTED IMPLICATIONS

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ABSTRACT

Modern scholars often have pointed out that the emergence of monotheism has occasioned repressive behavior in history, including the suppression of women. The author seeks to distinguish between what monotheistic faith should inherently do, create egalitarianism, as opposed to how monotheistic faith has been used by political powers to create oppression. To this end, the author refers to metaphors previously introduced into the discussion by other scholars, which speak of "monotheism from above" as opposed to "monotheism from below." The author also believes that monotheism, especially the Judeo-Christian tradition, is on an evolutionary trajectory, ever unfolding the egalitarian implications of its own message, and ultimately it may evolve and transform society so as to preclude its use as a tool of oppression. Thus, the author seeks to respond to some of the issues raised by critical scholars concerning the inherent repression of monotheistic faiths.

I

Modern scholars recognize that monotheism did not emerge among the Israelite people until the Babylonian Exile of the sixth century BCE or even later. The classical prophets, as well as significant religious reform movements such as those of Hezekiah and Josiah, may have provided the preliminary stages necessary for the emergence of monotheism among the people during the exilic years without being monotheistic per se.[1] The view that polytheism was regnant among

[1]Among the many scholars who have contributed to this new paradigm, the following are significant: Othmar Keel, ed., *Monotheismus im Alten Israel und seiner Umwelt*, Biblische Beiträge 14 (Fribourg: Schweizerisches Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1980); Bernhard Lang, *Monotheism and the Prophetic Minority*, SWBAS 1 (Sheffield: Almond, 1983); Mark Smith, *The Early History of God* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1990); idem, *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); Rainer Albertz, *A History of Israelite Religion in the Old Testament Period*, 2 vols., trans. John Bowden, OTL (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1994); Walter Dietrich and Martin Klopfenstein, eds., *Ein Gott allein?*, OBO 139 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1994); Diana Edelman, ed., *The Triumph of Elohim* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996).

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Israelites until the exile has been supported by both archaeological discoveries and by a fresh look at the various texts in the Bible that testify to the diversity of religious belief in Israel and Judah.[2] The breakthrough in our scholarly paradigms emerged as scholars were willing to look at all the information in a new way, especially the biblical texts. Now we speak of preliminary stages in the development of monotheism to the time of the exile, or even as late as the Maccabean period.[3]

It is also acknowledged that religious thought of the ancient near east provided raw materials for sensitive religious thinkers in Israel, both in the pre-exilic era and especially during the exile. Israelites did not evolve up from a simple set of beliefs to monotheism; rather, they inherited a complex set of ideas, many of which were already advanced, and they amalgamated them into their own distinctive worldview in what scholars have characterized as a reconstruction, reconstrual, or reconfiguration of the thought of cultures that preceded them.[4] One may describe this process as part of an evolutionary development, which had gone on in the ancient world for many years. However, an evolutionary leap occurred with the full fruition of Israelite thought in the Babylonian exile.

In this era, similar religious, intellectual, and literary-artistic breakthroughs were being made in a cultural arena from India to the Balkans.[5] Karl Jaspers coined the term "Axial Age" to characterize this age of revolutionary development (800 BCE to 400 BCE),[6] and subsequent authors have used the concept (and sometimes called it the "Axis

[2]This transformation was summarized by Robert Gnuse, *No Other Gods: Emergent Monotheism in Israel*, JSOTSup 241 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 62–128.

[3]Giovanni Garbini, *History and Ideology in Ancient Israel*, trans. John Bowden (New York: Crossroad, 1988), 52–132; Herbert Niehr, *Der höchste Gott*, BZAW 190 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1990); Philip R. Davies, *In Search of 'Ancient Israel,'* JSOTSup 148 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1992).

[4]John Hayes, *Introduction to the Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1971), 136; J. R. Porter, "Old Testament Historiography," in *Tradition and Interpretation*, ed. George Anderson (Oxford: Clarendon, 1979), 131; Walter Brueggemann, "A Shape for Old Testament Theology," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 47 (1985): 28–46; Patrick Miller, "Israelite Religion," in *The Hebrew Bible and Its Modern Interpreters*, ed. Douglas Knight and Gene Tucker (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1985), 207; Frank Frick, *The Formation of the State in Ancient Israel*, SWBA 4 (Sheffield: Almond, 1985), 193–94. Most recently William Dever, "How Was Ancient Israel Different?," in *The Breakout: The Origins of Civilization*, ed. Martha Lamberg-Karlovsky (Cambridge, MA: Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University, 2000), 67, has cleverly characterized this Israelite intellectual achievement as a "mix" or "configuration" of the "traits" of those predecessor cultures.

[5]Gnuse, *No Other Gods*, 210–18.

[6]Karl Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History*, trans. Michael Bullock (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953), 1–26, 44–60 (Ger. orig., 1949]).

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Age").[7] Although there often has been debate as to whether this is an apt historical designation, I believe this characterization does describe the intellectual development of the first millennium BCE. I am, in particular, impressed by the significant development in the high religions (Upanishadic Hinduism, the Code of Manu, Buddhism with Siddharta, Jainism with Mahavira, Confucianism, Taoism, Achaemenid Zoroastrianism, and Second Temple period Judaism), the emergence of significant thinkers in the Greek world (Homer and Hesiod; the pre-Socratic philosophers; Socrates; historians such as Hellenicus, Hecateus, Herodotus, Thucydides, and others; tragedians, such as Aeschylus, Euripides, Aristophanes, and others; scientists such as Hippocrates, Pythagoras, and others), as well as important anonymous individuals in other societies, all of whom contributed greatly to the development of world culture. It appears to me that the emergence of empires in the first millennium BCE facilitated the spread of more extensive trade, and this also facilitated the spread of ideas that inspired advanced reflection in many aspects of human intellectual endeavor.

II

Biblical theologians often have characterized the rise of monotheism as a movement bringing human equality and respect for human life to the forefront in social values over the past two thousand years. Contemporary critical scholars have suggested that true monotheism did not emerge until after the Babylonian exile (586–539 BCE), and some authors have maintained that the emergence of monotheism is still occurring as we continue to unfold the social and ideational implications of monotheism today.

Some contemporary authors have declared, however, that monotheism in general is not a great intellectual and religious breakthrough, bringing human equality and justice to society, but rather is the source of repression and even violence. They postulate that monotheism has undergirded tyrannical governments, has been used to justify the institution of slavery, and has legitimated the radical subordination of women in patriarchal societies. The arguments of these authors have been presented cogently, and many of the points they have articulated are worthy of response.

Perhaps the best recent arguments have been presented by Regina

[7]John Cobb, *The Structure of Christian Existence* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1967), 52–106; various articles in Shmuel Eisenstadt, ed., *The Origins and Diversity of Axial Age Civilizations* (Albany: SUNY, 1986); and William Tremmel, *Religion, What Is It?,* 2nd ed. (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1984), 125–45.

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Schwartz, who declares that monotheism produces violence among people, not harmony.[8] Belief in one god implies that the one deity favors one chosen people and provides them with a special calling, which leads to exclusion and violence against others. This attitude has been passed from the Hebrew Bible to Christianity. The Bible cares for the well-being of the neighbor up to the point where the neighbor who is the "other" threatens "our identity." Monotheism binds people together so they do not fight each other for scarce resources but, combined with the "particularism" of the divine call, monotheism becomes oppressive when it "reduces all other gods to idols" and "all other worshippers to abominations."[9] Schwartz notes that God thus prefers some (Abel, Israelites) and excludes others (Cain, Canaanites).

Identity is connected to owning land, which reinforces human desire to possess, defend, and conquer. Monotheism thereby becomes political when land is bequeathed to a people by God and its possession is insured by obedience to that God, so that the people defend the land passionately to prove they are obedient. As Adam's sin cast him from the garden, so Israel's sins sent them into exile, but return and renewed obedience led Israel to possessiveness and xenophobia. The exodus frees the slaves, then subsequently leads them to the conquest wherein formerly oppressed slaves become the oppressors and feel justified by their appeal to a vision of manifest destiny.

Furthermore, Schwartz argues, kinship guidelines create a fictional identity against outsiders and justify exclusion. The racism of pure self-identity then emerges. It is no coincidence that biblical stories have justified the emergence of Western European nationalism. The memories of exodus, conquest, and king David's acts create a nationalistic particularity in the form of a tradition, and then memory of a past oppression justifies violence against others. Universalism proclaimed by monotheism could create a toleration of others, but often it generates an imperialism that seeks to obliterate the differences between peoples by absorbing them into "our one identity."

But within her critique, Schwartz encapsulates the response to her own thesis. She speaks of how the biblical text must be interpreted differently. Ethics are created by scarcity or the need for precious resources which must be shared by people for their self-survival. Monotheism proclaims that the resources are to be had by the chosen few and others are to be excluded. The biblical text must be plumbed so that an "ethic of scarcity" may be replaced by an "ethic of plenitude" in which all people share in the world's resources. She is correct: the biblical text

[8]Regina Schwartz, *The Curse of Cain* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).
[9]Ibid., 33.

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can proclaim such an ethic, and monotheistic universalism may generate toleration rather than imperialism. She observes that the "worship of one deity need not necessarily produce this violent notion of identity; but monotheism has been caught up with particularism, with that production of collective identity as peoples set apart."[10] Again she is correct. Monotheism must be freed from such particularity. The problem lies not so much with the biblical text, but with the way it has been used and interpreted. The greatest misuse occurs when it is taken out of its social and historical context, and especially when the values of those particular biblical texts are no longer seen as part of an evolutionary trajectory which "begins with" and "moves beyond" those ancient biblical texts of a bygone age.

Schwartz's critique is most seriously directed not so much against monotheism in general but against the particularities of covenant imagery, Israel's covenants specifically. These were forms of theological rhetoric directed to people in particular situations of existential need. The covenants were designed to elicit either repentance and renewed obedience (Moses) or the assurance of continued divine presence (Abraham). We must never theologize on the basis of biblical or theological rhetoric that was directed to a particular need situation without balancing it against other modes of theological expression. Biblical interpreters have always viewed the covenants of Abraham and Moses as particular covenants with a particular people in a particular social-historical setting. Of course, there will be the side effect of nationalistic rhetoric and particularism with those covenant traditions. As theologians, however, we must rather take our cue more from the universal covenants of Adam, Noah, and (for Christians) the New Testament covenant when we speak of covenant imagery today. Those latter examples are universal covenants made with all humanity. The nationalism that Schwartz finds offensive can be obviated by a stress upon their imagery. When properly understood and articulated, the theological images and ideas generated by more universal biblical covenants escape the harsh critique aptly issued by Schwartz.

Critique of the imagery in these stories, especially those with exclusivist undertones (the rejection of Cain, the conquest of the Canaanites, Ezra's expulsion of foreigners) is appropriate. But what Schwartz really attacks is a misuse of those accounts by modern believers who employ them literally to address contemporary issues and the generation of current values in the believing community. These stories must be understood critically as an earlier stage in the history of religious evolution. Both Jews and Christians view the narratives of the

[10]Ibid., 31.

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Hebrew Scriptures through the lens of later texts: Jews use the Talmud and Christians the New Testament as hermeneutical keys by which to appropriate the values of those older texts. In some instances, values expressed by those texts, such as violence and revenge, are discarded, precisely because those values have been transcended by later traditions of Christianity and Judaism in the respective communities of faith. Unfortunately, however, present-day political leaders sometimes appeal to the violence of those earlier texts to justify their wars of aggression). Schwartz forgets, as do many Jewish and Christian believers, that earlier and cruder values are surpassed by later revelation and human religious insight. There is an evolutionary trajectory, and the values of a rough-hewn early age are modified by the trajectory of religious development. The true problem lies with later believers who fail to use the later traditions to understand and reinterpret the primitive early elements and use that early material too literally. The problem lies with the inability to see the tradition generating process as truly an organic, ever-changing, evolutionary process.

Robert Goldenberg has directed his attention to particular critics who maintain that an inherent intolerance may be found in monotheistic movements.[11] He refers to the statements by Johannes de Moor that the fourteenth century BCE monotheistic religious reform of Pharaoh Akhenaten in Egypt created a frigid and oppressive religion, and the observations by Elias Bickermann that post-exilic Judaism and the Hebrew Bible undergirded monotheistic intolerance.[12] We can apply Goldenberg's observations to Schwartz's position as well. Goldenberg accepts the perception that pre-exilic Israelites were largely polytheists and that only after the exile were Jews truly monotheistic. He also considers the biblical text from the perspective of the exilic and post-exilic authors who generated it in its final form. Much of the pre-exilic biblical language that sounds monotheistic is really religious and political rhetoric praising God without necessarily advocating theoretic monotheism. Goldenberg concludes that the Jews had mixed attitudes toward other religionists from the biblical era through the rabbinic period. Some Jews condemned the religions of others, while other Jews believed that the peoples of the world worshipped the Jewish god indirectly (especially in the Hellenistic and Roman eras). Some Jews felt that the gentiles should be converted; others believed they should be left alone, as long as they did not convert Jews. With such mixed beliefs

[11]Robert Goldenberg, *The Nations That Know Thee Not* (New York: New York University, 1998), 1–108.

[12]Johannes de Moor, *The Rise of Yahwism*, BETL 91 (Leuven: Leuven University/ Peeters, 1990) 44; Elias Bickermann, *Four Strange Books of the Bible* (New York: Schocken, 1967), 91.

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one cannot characterize Judaism as an intolerant religion; Jews also sought alternatives to the intolerance demonstrated by some of their co-religionists. Goldenberg's thesis addresses only the issue of whether Jewish monotheism generates intolerance of other religious beliefs; it does not refute the arguments that monotheism can generate some form of tyranny for its own religionists or create an oppressive patriarchalism. Nonetheless, his presentation is valuable in addressing the question of monotheistic tyranny in a general way, for he demonstrates the diversity of opinion found in various texts on this one issue, a diversity that prevents us from viewing monotheistic Judaism as monolithic with regard to other religions.

III

Whereas Schwartz's critique was leveled primarily at the teachings of the Hebrew Bible, other authors have approached the topic of whether monotheism in general engenders tyranny. Genghis Khan reputedly said, "In heaven there is no-one but the one God alone; on earth no-one but the one ruler Genghis Khan."[13] This quote supposedly typifies what a number of authors and historians have suspected about the rise of monotheistic religious belief, namely, that the elevation of one deity in religious belief is analogous to elevating one ruler on the earth. The subsequent affirmation by that ruler that there is only one true god, and he or she worships that deity, will incline that ruler to forcibly convert other people. On an international level it means that a monotheistic state will absorb other peoples and nations into its own political and religious structures. The tendency to use some form of monotheism for political reasons has a long history. Historians have suggested that this political and religious imperialism occurred with the Achaemenid Persian Empire (550–330 BCE) and the Sassanian Persian Empire (100–600 CE) with Zoroastrianism as the imperial faith, and the various Arabic Empires (630–1918) with Islam. Jan Assmann describes the way in which as early as the fourteenth century BCE Pharaoh Akhenaten created an apparent form of "intolerant monotheism" with the cult of the sun god, Aton, in conjunction with religious and political imagery of universal dominion engendered by the Egyptian Empire in western Asia.[14] Nor has Christianity been exempt from being used to undergird

[13]Jürgen Moltmann, "The Inviting Unity of the Triune God," trans. Robert Nowell, in *Monotheism,* ed. Claude Geffré, Jean Pierre Jossua, and Marcus Lefébure, Concilium 177 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1985), 51.

[14]Jan Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian: The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 153. Assmann observes that in the famous Aton Hymn "the rays of the sun embrace all lands and bind them to the submission of the king, a change which obviously translates an imperialistic concept of universal rule into cosmic imagery" (178).

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political imperialism. Constantine the Great of Rome in the fourth century CE was the first to envision the use of Christianity as a tool by which to rule a united Roman Empire and marshal its resources in a great war of conquest against Sassanian Persia.[15] This pattern of Christian imperialism has been repeated throughout the history of western Europe up through western colonial expansion into the Third World in the past five hundred years. Jonathan Kirsch, in particular, has chronicled how monotheism came to power in fourth century CE Rome under Constantine and Theodosius I and how under these emperors it manifested its "dark side."[16] It would indeed appear that empire and monotheism go together.

A number of authors have been willing to engage in a discussion of whether monotheism inherently does produce imperialism, tyranny, violence, and even patriarchal sexism or whether these are aberrations of monotheistic faiths. They suggest that monotheistic thought in general may be seen to introduce both intolerance and openness into the communities through which it spreads.[17] The focus of a monotheistic faith in any historical period will be determined by the spokespersons who articulate the beliefs for the masses.

If monotheistic belief is state-sponsored, most likely it will emphasize the monarchical aspects of the one deity, thus emphasizing the legitimacy of monarchy as a mode of government. Furthermore, the state-sponsored monotheism will generate the analogy of one God in the heavens ruling all people as the ultimate parallel to one ruler on the earth ruling all his (or her) subjects. This is monotheism "from above," a religion imposed upon the subjects by the elite to legitimate their power. It uses what Assmann calls the "Mosaic Distinction," the proclivity to recall the religion of one's opponents, especially polytheists, idolatry or abomination, while one's own religion is the truth.[18] Ironically, Assmann sees this propagandistic tool first used by Akhenaten of Egypt in the fourteenth century BCE for political reasons, long before the emergence of Judaism or Christianity. This first monotheism or proto-monotheism was blatantly inspired "from above" for political reasons by Akhenaten, who may have equated himself with Aton, the

[15]Garth Fowden, *Empire to Commonwealth* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993); Roberta Harris, *The World of the Bible* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1995), 164.

[16]Jonathan Kirsch, *God Against the Gods: The History of the War Between Monotheism and Polytheism*(New York: Viking Compass, 2004).

[17]David Petersen, "Israel and Monotheism: The Unfinished Agenda," in *Canon, Theology, and Old Testament Interpretation*, eds. Gene Tucker, David Petersen, and Robert Wilson (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), 92–107; various essays in *Monotheism*, eds. Geffré et al.; Axel Michaels, "Monotheismus und Fundamentalismus. Eine These und ihre Gegenthese," in *Ein Gott allein*, 51–57; Rita Gross, "Religious Diversity: Some Implications for Monotheism," *Cross Currents* 49 (1999): 349–55 et passim.

[18]Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian,* esp. 1–22.

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sun god, the ultimate form of imperial political religion. Imperial monotheisms have arisen ever since and will continue to do so until the spirit of "real monotheism" or "monotheism from below" unfolds its fuller implications in human society to undercut the use of religion in such oppressive fashion (if such a day ever comes).

However, if monotheism is generated from the people, especially poor and marginal people, such as the ancient Jews or early Christians, the assumptions will be different. For them the reality of one God alone in the heavens implies that all people must worship that one deity and stand as equals before that one deity. This metaphor will be critical of kings and kingship, for the ideology undergirded by either polytheism (such as that of the Macedonian or Roman empires) or "monotheism from above" often places the king in a more direct relationship with the deity, while the monotheism of the people rejects such an exaltation of a mere human being to divine or semi-divine status. This is monotheism "from below," from the people. Some scholars might argue that the monotheism of the Jews was brought to the masses owing to the efforts of the scribal and priestly elite and perhaps abetted by the government in Jerusalem. Prior to the exile, the reforms led by Hezekiah (710–700 BCE) and especially by Josiah (625–609 BCE) implemented rather coercive methods to accomplish what appears to us as monotheistic reform. After the exile, the efforts of Ezra, such as the exclusion of foreign wives, appears rather abrasive. One might conclude that these reforms appear to be driven by a "monotheism from above," actions imposed by a ruling class sponsored by the Persian Empire. Nonetheless, in the great scheme of power politics in that age, the Judahite and post-exilic Jewish priestly leadership must still be accounted as part of the oppressed, small powers in the arena of gargantuan political forces, even when their religious reform was sponsored by those foreign powers (as with Ezra and Nehemiah), and even if at times the Jewish priests were seen as overly authoritarian by Jews underneath them. Their efforts can be seen as thus giving rise to a "religion from below," a religion of the masses or of oppressed and subjugated peoples. A "religion from below" is rooted in people, and people endure; hence, that form of religion has the ability to survive over the years. But a "religion from above" or "monotheism from above," while rooted in a powerful yet transitory political entity, will not endure, but will fade away when the empire collapses.

Some critical authors who compare polytheism and monotheism believe that polytheism with its attribution of diversity in the divine realm encourages toleration in the human realm, whereas monotheism generates intolerant devotion to one deity and commitment to particu-

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lar social values to which others must be converted.[19] In particular, Paul Ciholas differentiates the monotheisms in the following fashion. Old Testament or Mosaic monotheism offers an absolute and jealous deity who promotes violence, pagan philosophical monotheism seeks to overcome violence; Christianity seeks the unity of all and proclaims the violent death of Jesus as the end of violence, thus terminating the strong connection between violence and the sacred. In order to maintain this deep message of Christianity, Christians must cleanse themselves of the violence in their religion.[20] Though Ciholas' message is noble, his understanding of the God of the Hebrew Bible is most superficial. A deeper reading of the Old Testament demonstrates that under the imagery of judgment there is the ultimate image of a gracious God who cares enough to get angry in the first place.

Advocates of a so-called modern Neo-Paganism speak of a general providence of various divine forces rather than of a single deity, so they can acknowledge the truth to be found in all the world's religions. When many gods are operative in the universe, individual believers may live diverse lifestyles because each person could be excused from the demands of one god by claiming devotion to another. This would permit greater freedom of human actions. Monotheism, by contrast, demands submission of the will to one god and the ritual and ethical demands of that one deity. Polytheism thus is seen to permit greater diversity and human religious individuality. This tolerant spirit was supposedly found in the culture of the late Roman Empire.[21] Furthermore, zealous monotheists create an irony in their desire to convert and conquer. For if one worships one universal deity, rejects the religion of others, and hopes to conquer and convert them, this demonstrates that one fights for a particular religion and a particular deity, not a universal and loving god of all people.[22]

Defenders of monotheism, however, point out that not all monotheistic expressions lead to intolerance, violence, and tyranny. For example, Hellenistic philosophical monotheisms and Hindu monism

[19]This is best expressed in the writings of Alain de Benoist, *Vu de droite* (Paris: n.p., 1977) and *Comment peut-on être païen?* (Paris: n.p., 1981), whose ideas are critiqued by André Dumas, "The New Attraction of Neo-Paganism," trans. David Smith, *Monotheism*, 81–90.

[20]Paul Ciholas, "Monothéisme et violence," *Recherches de science religieuse* 69 (1981): 325–54.

[21]Odo Marquard, "Lob des Polytheismus: Über Monomythie und Polymythie," in *Philosophie und Mythos*, ed. Hans Poser (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1979), 40–58; Paul Veyne, "The Roman Empire," in *A History of the Private Life, I: From Pagan Rome to Byzantium*, ed. Paul Veyne, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 1987), 216; Fowden, *Empire to Commonwealth*, 37–60.

[22]Joseph Comblin, "Monotheism and Popular Religion," trans. Dinah Livingstone, in *Monotheism*, 91–99.

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both demonstrated a toleration of religious diversity.[23] Authors have observed that monotheism theoretically should encourage not only freedom of the deity (because of the lack of other gods) but also affirm freedom and equality of people in the human realm, as believers relate equally to that one deity. When the class system of the gods in the heavens disappears, the class system on earth disappears. One God in the heavens implies that there is one single universal basis for religious belief and human morality, which in turn becomes a standard to which all men and women adhere regardless of class or status.[24] Egalitarian values then surface in the literature which is produced.[25] One can observe such values in both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. But that does not excuse the biblical tradition completely from accusations that it can at times permit intolerance.

Constantine and others used the Christian movement for their own political purposes, even though that did not reflect the deeper spirit of Christianity. Christians contemporary with Constantine supported his actions, for it helped spread their faith. Combined political and religious imperialism often occurs in Christian history, and Christians have been willing to allow political leaders to use the Christian faith for repression in return for political favors for the institutional church. We have seen this in Nazi Germany, Communist Eastern Europe, and Latin America. We would like to believe that this is not true Christian practice, but it has happened too many times in history. Christians must become aware of the frequent oppressive use of their religious beliefs against other people and learn to live the spirit of the message they preach. Jürgen Moltmann has noted that if religious monotheism combines with absolutism in the church and state, tyranny results, and only atheism can rescue the human freedom that Christianity once proclaimed.[26] Is that not the ultimate irony?

Another response more sensitive to the dynamics of religious history would be to point out that there are different forms of monotheistic religious expression among believers, even within the same religious tradition in the same historical periods. One may observe religious devotees expressing beliefs that affirm human equality, dignity, toleration, and peace, while at the same time other adherents of the faith use the religion to justify their ambitions of imperial conquest. The piety of medieval monks, for example, existed alongside medieval rulers who

[23]Christian Duquoc, "Monotheism and Unitary Ideology," trans. Robert Nowell, in *Monotheism*, 61.

[24]Dever, "How Was Ancient Israel Different?," 64–66.

[25]Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), 129 et passim.

[26]Moltmann, "The Inviting Unity of the Triune God," 51.

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sought to aggrandize power in the name of the same religion. Gentle Sufi mystics like Rumi, Abu-Yazid, and Al-Hallaj co-existed in Islam along with powerful Abbasid caliphs in Baghdad. The historian of religion must determine whose faith and actions truly represent the beliefs of the faith. Some would say that the actions of all represent the faith, others would say that only those who are faithful to the spirit of the religious tradition represent the faith. I am inclined toward the latter definition, with the additional clarification that those who represent the faith best are those who are most faithful to the spirit of the original message of the founding spokespersons and the sacred texts. Otherwise fanaticism and oppression can be inspired by either deliberate manipulation of the texts or unconscious misinterpretation (such as the justification of violence against other people). Religious spokespersons must be grounded in their texts and traditions to maintain continuity with the core values of their faith. This is reinforced by the indictment of sensitive religious leaders, such as St. Francis, who criticized their societies and especially the leaders for betraying the deeper values of the religious tradition in their concession to the economics and power politics of the age. Yet for a modern student of religion to pass such judgment is to make a very subjective historical decision that cannot be established to the satisfaction of critical historians, although it might sound most appropriate to religious adherents of the various faiths.

The sociologist of religion Rodney Stark, in a penetrating analysis of monotheistic faiths, attempts to undercut many of the facile generalizations people have made about monotheism and the western religions. Though he points out how the monotheisms of the west have been oppressive, his observations ultimately support the thesis I am arguing. Most significantly, he maintains that monotheists will be aggressive in general because of their belief that they hold ultimate truth. He believes that "particularism" is inherent in monotheisms. Monotheisms will promote conflict between theological factions within the religion and conflict with other religions. Yet the pattern of this aggression varies over the years. He notes in particular the historic persecution of Jews by Christians and Muslims, and indeed maintains that Muslims persecuted Jews as much as did Christians (even in supposedly tolerant Spain under Muslim rule). But he notes that persecution was almost non-existent from 500 to 1000 CE and then became intense during the years from 1000 to 1500 CE. The reason for this is that Islam and Christianity were in conflict with each other, and religionists in both areas determined to purge the unfaithful from their midst. Monotheisms are intolerant when they are in a period of stress or in singular competition with another religion or ideology. When there are many competing religious systems, such as in the pluralistic United States,

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monotheisms tend to be more tolerant, since they are in no position to dominate society under any circumstances.[27] My response is that Stark has unveiled the nature of triumphalistic monotheisms, rather than all monotheisms. He provides examples of intolerant Islam and Christianity and precisely those historical situations in which the religion and the social-political values of the state were tightly intertwined. He often points out how persecution occurred as a result of popular activity of the masses, and that the official leaders of the church such as bishops often desperately attempted to stem the tide of persecution. I would say that the religious elites understood the message of the faith and realized that such oppressive behavior was wrong, while the masses, being poorly educated, had come to connect their religious values with their own social-political, economic, and national agenda as well as their personal frustrations.

Students of religion who work with original texts, such as the Hebrew Bible, the Greek New Testament, the Qur 'an, and the Zend-Avesta—the texts of the monotheistic faiths—as well as sacred texts from the other high religions, do not find justification for the imperialism and oppression that adherents of those faiths sometimes undertake. Religious beliefs can be subverted and used for purposes contrary to the spirit of the original message of the faith as articulated by the founding spokespersons. Students of the sacred texts, such as biblical scholars like myself, intuitively make these observations and are more ready to make the judgment that sometimes expressions of a religious faith in history do not truly represent the spirit of that religious tradition.

Thus, scholars of the Bible affirm that the monotheism of the Hebrew Bible lacks pretensions to political empire, but rather encourages solidarity with all of humanity. This may be especially true for the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament as well because the believers who generated these texts were often the oppressed and victims of political systems in their own age. Hence, the prophets spoke of a universal deity who would bring a state of peace and prosperity to all people some day.[28]

There are monotheisms that are imperialistic, such as that used by Constantine, and there are monotheisms of peace and human unity. There are monotheisms "from above," defined by a monarch, pharaoh, emperor, or tyrant, who use the religion for their own political ad-

[27]Rodney Stark, *One True God: Historical Consequences of Monotheism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 31–259.

[28]Lang, *Monotheism*, 55; Gerd Theissen, *Biblical Faith: An Evolutionary Approach*, trans. John Bowden (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 71; Albertz, *Israelite Religion*, 2:425; Walter Dietrich, "Uber Werden und Wesen des biblischen Monotheismus," *Ein Gott allein*, 25–27.

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vancement, and there are monotheisms "from below," from the people crying for dignity, toleration, and peace. In ancient polytheisms the wars between peoples reflected the wars in the heavens between the gods, but the emergence of one God should spell the end of wars and oppression as well.[29]

Perhaps the spirit of the sacred texts from the writings of the three monotheistic faiths has yet to permeate the consciousness of believers in those faiths. I would argue that there is an evolutionary trajectory in the monotheistic process that still has to come to fruition. Coming to fruition would involve impressing upon the vast majority of religionists that human dignity and rights are intended for all people equally in a way that moves beyond the actual practices of the original communities which received the sacred texts. All three monotheistic religions proclaim rhetoric that affirms human equality, toleration, and a vision of peace. Cultures touched by those religious traditions have provided ever-evolving egalitarian expressions in theory and practice. One cannot deny monotheism its connection to theoretic egalitarianism and a vision of hope for humanity. When, ultimately, religion is no longer used to justify war, imperialism, conquest, and as the apology of one race of people for enslaving another, then monotheism will have actualized one of the most significant components of its ideological matrix. Then we shall look back and see that imperialistic monotheisms were merely an evolutionary dead end in the monotheistic trajectory. The monotheistic traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam proclaim the ideal rhetoric of equality, but at times they have been used as "monotheisms from above" by imperial empires and tyrannts. Someday it will be evident that these historical experiences were not true to the spirit of those three faiths. We shall perceive that Judaism, Christianity, and Islam were destined to be "monotheisms from below" which unite people by the power of the human spirit rather than by the sword. At that time they will have become most truly the heirs of the monotheistic breakthrough signaled by the biblical tradition.

IV

A particular critique brought to bear against monotheistic faiths is that they lead to the suppression of women. A religion with one god often will portray that deity as masculine, usually as a divine father, and thus exclude the feminine from the divine realm. If that one deity is zealous and demands that all people worship "him," then the feminine comes to be viewed even more negatively, especially if the targets of conversion by those monotheists include people who worship fe-

[29]Theissen, *Biblical Faith*, 71.

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male deities. Historically monotheistic faiths converted people who had female goddesses and high priestesses. With the subsequent exclusion of female gods from the heavens and their female priests from the temples on earth by the monotheistic victors, a very critical attitude toward the presence of women in the cult was assumed. The female goddesses were often patron deities for home crafts (such as sewing and weaving), animal and crop fertility, and sexuality. According to Tikva Frymer-Kensky, as the singular "male" deity absorbed the attributes and roles of female goddesses, often the resultant monotheistic ethos did not provide very much direction on issues of sexuality.[30]

Critics of monotheism declare that the polytheistic faiths with their inclusion of female deities were much more tolerant of women in the cult. This observation is supported by the existence of female votaries in the various polytheistic faiths. Some feminists even long for a return to polytheistic religion, the religion of mother earth, and the religion that gave women dignity. The work by Marija Gimbutas has received much popular attention in this regard; she suggests that at one time religion elevated the mother goddess, but that with the rise of a patriarchal religion there came the subordination of women.[31]

To these observations several responses can be made. First of all, it should be questioned whether polytheism or a mother-goddess-oriented religion gave women dignity in the ancient world, or whether such a religious revival of a feminine religion can give women more dignity in the modern world. In the ancient Near East the cult of Inanna/Ishtar in Mesopotamia and Isis in Egypt were extremely significant, but the status of women was still very poor in both those societies and "male leadership in earthly public affairs went uncontested."[32] Polytheistic societies no more broke the patriarchal assumptions than did monotheism.

It is sometimes pointed out that in the fertility religions where a female goddess is significant, it becomes possible for a young woman to obtain a respectful position in society as a priestess. One fortunate woman ultimately becomes the high priestess, and thus holds a very respected place in society. But this advancement is more comparable to the gladiatorial arena wherein one fortunate winner may obtain glory and fortune by surviving the melee of combat. Such advancement is hardly ennobling under such circumstances. Furthermore, the vast majority of women in society did not become priestesses; they simply

[30]Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *In the Wake of the Goddesses* (New York: Free Press, 1992).

[31]Marija Gimbutas, *The Gods and Goddesses of Old Europe* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1974).

[32]Erhard Gerstenberger, *Yahweh the Patriarch*, trans. Frederick Gaiser (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 93.

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remained the dutiful and subordinate wives of their patriarchal husbands. Religions with such female imagery did not liberate them, for not all women could become priestesses, and perhaps many did not want to be.

In Hebrew Bible studies, archaeologists and biblical scholars have observed the importance of the cult of Asherah as a mode of pious expression for women to articulate their religious feelings. The prophet Jeremiah speaks of devotion to Asherah by women at home which appears to be separate from the national religion practiced publicly in the Temple (Jeremiah 44:15–19). The emergence of monotheistic Yahwism obviously crushed this popular piety, although it took many years and much effort on the part of the reformers. This suppression of the Asherah cult may be perceived as a blow against women. But was it really? The cult of Asherah was a private woman's cult to be practiced at home, and it was somewhat separate from the state religion in which Yahweh ruled and Asherah was his consort (and thus subordinate to him). A private home cult that stands in opposition to the religion of the city-state or nation is not truly ennobling. It is really a concession to the inferior status of women, for it implies that they must practice this devotion at home, since it is not worthy of the official state cult. A monotheistic faith in theory (though not always in practice) brings everyone into a similar worshipful relationship with one deity regardless of race, class, or sex. A monotheistic faith in theory grants more dignity to women by including them in the cult rather then indirectly exiling them to a private cult on their own. (Even though I suppose one could argue that having a separate cult is better than being integrated into the same religion with men, I prefer not to think so.)

A second significant point is the hard question about what were the true sources of women's inferior status when the monotheistic faiths first arose. Was the source of this subordination the religion, or was it a set of circumstances, already existing in society before the religion arose, circumstances so strong that it would take centuries or millennia for the monotheistic faith to overcome them. Here, I would make a number of points. First, women were subordinated in a patriarchal social setting long before monotheism emerged, and that patriarchalism governed so many aspects of culture and social structures that it was impossible to overturn it in a short period. The emergence of state structures in the ancient Near East with their concomitant social organization, literacy, and temple hierarchies embodied patriarchal values in the governance of society. This can be witnessed especially in the second millennium BCE Mesopotamian law codes of Hammurabi and others, wherein women become treated as the legal property of men and the control of various forms of female sexual

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behavior became subject to law and thereby the control of the state rather than the family or the clan. Women were economic commodities due to their ability to produce children and heirs capable of inheriting the family wealth. Second, in Israel in particular, the disintegration of kinship structures and the family under the economic pressures created by the monarchy and the Assyrian Empire from the eighth century BCE onward brought the greatest oppression to the most marginal people in society, including women. Third, priestly assumptions of purity were articulated by men who feared what they considered to be the essential identity of women, especially since menstruation and the flow of blood betokened something mysterious and dangerous to them. These assumptions existed among male priests in Israel long before monotheism arose, and they merely continued into the new worldview. The Hebrew Bible contains the memory of those assumptions that led to the subordination of women; they tended to be the generic assumptions of other cultures in the ancient world as well.[33]

The significant point I would make is that once any new monotheistic religion arises, there will continue to be old values from the previous age that endure. The monotheistic faith cannot remake society and totally change the minds of people all at once, especially in regard to matters which touch upon the life of the home. Monotheism plants seeds which will come to fruition in time.

The old values of the subordination of women continued through the first stages of the monotheistic emergence of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, but immediately religious articulations arose that stressed the dignity and value of women. Examples may be multiplied, but a few may suffice. One may observe the strong emphasis in the laws of Deuteronomy about the rights of women, and Deuteronomy takes shape in the hands of prophetic reformers at the time that monotheistic rhetoric begins to emerge in Israel. In the first generation of Christianity we hear Paul declaring that in Christ there is neither male nor female (Galatians 3:28). In early Islam the veil or clothing designed to hide women was not seen as denigrating them but ennobling them by providing protection (it is ironic that Muslims borrowed this idea from Christians in Syria.) The revolutionary evolution of monotheism takes time to unfold, and the liberation of women is one of those issues which takes time for monotheism to develop in the hearts and minds of people. It takes longer to radically change family values than social or economic values.

Men who appeal to the masculine identity of God miss the point of their religion. Monotheistic faiths only characterize God as masculine

[33]Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Patriarchy* (New York: Oxford University, 1986), 36–160; Gerstenberger, *Yahweh*, 88–91.

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in a symbolic way. When there is only one God, one does not have the luxury of assigning sex to different divine beings, so the one God becomes masculine by way of loose metaphor. Sometimes, as in the Hebrew Bible, God may be portrayed as both masculine and feminine, a clear sign that a monotheistic faith applies the metaphor of gender only in a very loose and symbolic fashion. An appeal to the masculine identity of God misses the point of much of the rhetoric found throughout monotheistic faiths, rhetoric that clearly speaks of the equality of believers, which is a far more significant theological and ethical message. Men too often have appealed to the obscure in their religion and ignored the obvious.[34] Gerda Lerner has noted that it was a "tragic accident of history" that monotheism emerged in a social setting with strong patriarchy, for the religious belief then unfortunately affirmed that patriarchy in many ways.[35] I would respond that ultimately monotheism also planted the seeds to undercut that patriarchy.

V

In recent years a number of authors have pointed out that the emergence of monotheism has occasioned repressive behavior in history, including the suppression of women. There is much truth in what they say. I have argued, however, that the role of monotheism plays in connection with oppressive political and religious behavior has to be interpreted in more nuanced fashion. At times those scholars who critique monotheism have made unfair overgeneralizations. Above all, we need to distinguish between what monotheistic faiths should inherently do, that is, create egalitarianism, as opposed to how monotheistic faiths unfortunately have been used by political powers to create oppression. For this reason, it is useful to employ metaphors previously introduced into the discussion by other scholars, which speak of "monotheism from above" as opposed to "monotheism from below." I believe that monotheisms that are true to the spirit of the founders or the primal original texts are "monotheisms from below," which encourage the development of egalitarianism, even though the full fruition of such egalitarianism may take centuries or millennia to unfold. I also believe, in particular, that monotheism, especially in the Judeo-Christian tradition, is on an evolutionary trajectory, ever unfolding the egalitarian implications of its own message. Over the years the Judeo-Christian tradition will increasingly seek to affirm human dignity and equality. In particular, this tradition has been struggling in recent years with the affirmation of greater rights and equality for women.

[34]Gerstenberger, *Yahweh,* 94, 110.
[35]Lerner, *Patriarchy*, 198.

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