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Monotheism and its Vicissitudes

K. Daniel Cho

Abstract Challenging the claim that monotheism is intolerant, the author presents an original interpretation of Sigmund Freud's last book *Moses and Monotheism*. Freud is shown offering a theory of monotheism in which monotheism is not seen as exclusive, but rather as inherently equivocal.

1

Is monotheism intolerant? It would certainly seem so, if the media is any indication. Whenever the media reports on monotheism these days—whether it is a story about Christian conservatives fighting same-sex marriage legislation, a suicide bomber detonating an explosive in the name of Islam, or an Orthodox Jew censoring women's speech—it always seems it is because monotheism has reached a new low in intolerance. Of course, critics of monotheism will argue that there is nothing accidental about this inclination toward intolerance.¹ Monotheisms, they will point out, understand themselves to have an exclusive claim on the truth, a claim to which intolerance is integral and inevitable, for if a religion (or any system of thought, for that matter) understands itself to be the one and only truth, then it must, by necessity, reject, be intolerant of, all other accounts of the spiritual, the divine, and indeed the world itself, as so many falsehoods. Perhaps, monotheisms wouldn't be so problematic if this exclusive understanding of the truth (and of themselves) was purely a theoretical matter, but this is never the case. As the critics will argue, the exclusive understanding of the truth always finds its way to the world of practice, where it draws distinctions between peoples, practices, and cultures, holding one side up as normative and the other as aberrant. Indeed, as the critics will point out, it is from these practical distinctions that monotheistic truth draws its very meaning and power.² Perhaps, such distinctions were useful once upon a time when religions served as the common framework that knit disparate peoples and populations together into a single society, but now they are completely useless—or, worse than useless, dangerous and destructive. Relics of a bygone era,

monotheisms no longer have any place in a modern liberal society – or perhaps, even stronger, they are the very bane of that society – and therefore should be relegated to the dustbin of history. Or, so the critics claim.

If this were all there was to say about monotheism – if monotheism has become (or always has been) truly nothing more than a system of intolerance – then there would be no other recourse than to join the critics in their call for the end of monotheism (or indeed religion itself). But, I suspect, not everything has been said concerning monotheism. Certainly, intolerance is part of monotheism's story (an unfortunate part, to be sure), but it is not the whole story. There is, I want to claim, something more to monotheism, another part to the story that has yet to be told, which is worth pursuing. To make that pursuit, I want to turn to Sigmund Freud's last and most fascinating book, *Moses and Monotheism*, for it is in this strange book that Freud comes to a most relevant insight concerning monotheism, namely, that monotheism cannot be all intolerant because monotheism is not all: that is, monotheism is not a single univocal thing, but rather something dual or equivocal.

Before going any further into this insight of Freud's, I want to say a few words about the strangeness of the book itself. *Moses and Monotheism* is an odd book indeed. Freud began working on *Moses and Monotheism* in 1934, under a completely different title (*The Man Moses, A Historical Novel*). Dissatisfied with that book, Freud decided against publishing it. Yet he did not abandon the project altogether, but instead continued working on his Moses book over the next five years, under the growing shadow of Nazism, until finally publishing it (without any reference to fiction in its title) in 1939. In its final, published form, the book is comprised of three essays – the third of which is well over twice the length of the first two essays combined, begins with two prefaces and is interrupted halfway through by a third preface. Between the three parts of the book, there are numerous discrepancies – repetitions, gaps, omissions – discrepancies that have led some to consider *Moses* a mere eccentricity. The real stumbling block for most, however, are the preposterous, even offensive, propositions that Freud puts forward in its pages, the best known example of which is the infamous claim that the Jews had in fact murdered their leader, Moses.

A truly odd and problematic book, it is no wonder some simply dismiss *Moses* as a bizarre fantasy, a case of wild analysis, not to be taken as a serious commentary on the nature of monotheism. But I will caution against adopting such a reactionary – or, more accurately, defensive – posture, as it seems to me, keenly ironic that one would use fantasy as the pretext for rejecting a psychoanalytic interpretation of anything, much less monotheism.³ Indeed, as Freud himself argues, in *Moses*, an idea (whether it comes in the form of a memory, an analysand's speech, or a book) need not be grounded in empirical fact to

produce insights into the nature of a thing. Or, using Freud's own words, there is a difference between "material truth" and "historical truth,"⁴ and insofar as *Moses* does not correspond with the material truth, "it may be described as a *delusion*," but insofar as it makes us attentive to something in monotheism of which we were previously unaware, "it must be called the truth."⁵ Indeed, as I will argue below, it is precisely in the errors and discrepancies – in the very fantastical elements themselves – that *Moses* produces its insights. And if we attend to these *Einstellungen* or distortions, as Freud calls them (rather than use them to disqualify *Moses*), I believe we will find a fresh way of thinking and speaking about monotheism.

Towards this end, let me begin with a simple observation, one that anyone who has read *Moses and Monotheism* will no doubt have made: namely, that the number two recurs throughout Freud's book. There is the idea that two groups of people came together to form the Jews, the idea that two documentary sources (the so-called J and E texts) inform the Bible, and of course the wild idea that there were not one, but two Moseses.⁶ From this observation, it is not difficult to reach the conclusion that Freud's key insight in *Moses* is the presence of duality or equivocity in monotheism as such. That is to say, Freud does not deny that monotheism indeed has a tendency to become entangled with intolerance and exclusivity, but he also asserts that these logics do not comprise all there is to monotheism, that something of monotheism somehow always eludes their capture – or, as I put it moments ago, that monotheism is not one, but two. The task of this paper will then be to demonstrate how Freud brings equivocity out of monotheism, but for now, I only want to illustrate the form of Freud's thinking by turning to what is something of a sideline in his account: namely, Christian anti-Semitism.

After presenting Paul and Christianity as simultaneously a renewal and a departure from Judaism, Freud turns his attention to the topic of Christian anti-Semitism. The primary reason Christians hate the Jews, Freud claims, is that the Jews refuse to admit to having killed the primal father while Christians readily do so. But something as insidious as anti-Semitism, Freud suggests, must have "more than one ground,"⁷ and so, he gives five additional sources for it. The first four sources are: the Jews' status as permanent aliens, their unassimilable otherness, their claim to being "the first-born, favourite child of God,"⁸ and the practice of circumcision. What all four of these sources or grounds have in common is that they have to do with the attitudes or beliefs of individual Christians. They resent the Jews' otherness and find circumcision uncannily reminiscent of castration, for example. The fifth and final ground Freud gives, however, is different. It differs because it does not attempt to "read the minds" of individual Christians, but

rather calls into question the very category of Christian itself. He writes: “we must not forget that all those peoples who excel to-day in their hatred of Jews became Christians only in late historic times, often driven to it by bloody coercion.”⁹ They are, in Freud’s words, “misbaptized,” only possessing “a thin veneer of Christianity.”¹⁰ As such, their hatred of the Jews is in actuality a displaced hatred of Christians themselves for having forced Christianity upon them: “They have not got over a grudge against the new religion which was imposed on them; but they have displaced the grudge on to the source from which Christianity reached them.”¹¹

Many understand Freud to be a harsh critic of Christianity, and so the fact that he pursues the topic of Christian anti-Semitism, even at the cost of deviating from the mainline of his book, is not too surprising. In the same way, the first four sources that Freud finds are not unusual. However, the fifth reason—that is, that Christian anti-Semites are Christians “misbaptized”—stands out, as it runs completely counter to this standard image of Freud as a critic of Christianity. By clarifying that Christian anti-Semites only possess “a thin veneer of Christianity,” that they hold the mantle of Christianity wrongly, Freud actually *defends* Christianity by distinguishing between the Christianity of the anti-Semites and Christianity as such. That is to say, rather than use anti-Semitism to eschew Christianity altogether (as contemporary critics of monotheism are wont to do), Freud provocatively insists on a difference *within* Christianity, between Christianity “misbaptized” and Christianity as such. Because of this difference, or this twoness, it becomes possible to challenge Christian anti-Semitism. Anti-Semitism attempts to draw a distinction between Christians and Jews, which Freud wants to dismantle. However, he does not disrupt the Christian-Jew distinction of anti-Semitism by employing either of the tactics that we have come to expect in today’s critical literature: that is, either by introducing an external counter-force (such as secularism) or by simply “deconstructing” that boundary. Rather, he does so, in a highly original and indeed paradoxical, if not ironic, fashion by introducing equivocity within Christianity itself. The Christian-Jew distinction of anti-Semitism can never be so stable because Christianity is never quite itself. Because of this twoness—call it a constitutive equivocity—Christianity finds itself on *both* sides of the border of anti-Semitism, as both the subject of anti-Semitism *as well as*, paradoxically, its object, which enables Freud to find the possibility of solidarity where anti-Semitism only saw division: “Their hatred of Jews is at bottom a hatred of Christians, and we need not be surprised that in the German National-Socialist revolution this intimate relation between the two monotheist religions finds such a clear expression in the hostile treatment of both of them.”¹²

2

The idea of equivocity appears in *Moses and Monotheism* most explicitly in the form of a break between Akhenaten and Moses. Now, this claim will appear controversial as it goes against the way Freud's text has been traditionally understood. Traditionally, Freud has been understood as attempting to establish *continuity* between these two figures. For instance, Freud very clearly claims that Moses was an Egyptian, "a member of the royal house" and as such "close to the Pharaoh" and "a convinced adherent of the new religion, whose basic thoughts he had made his own."¹³ So, how could someone of such description be said to have broken off with Akhenaten?

To answer this question, I want to take a closer look, not only at the way Freud describes Moses and Akhenaten's relationship itself, but at how he describes their respective monotheisms as well. Or, to put it more precisely, I want to look at the *incongruity* between the way Freud characterizes these two men's relationship, on one hand, and their respective monotheistic projects, on the other. For while Freud does indeed describe the two men as close, he also points to an important difference between the Aten religion and Judaism, which calls that closeness into question. This difference has to do with the permissibility of idols and idolatry. Freud writes: "Jewish monotheism behaved in some respects even more harshly than the Egyptian: for instance in forbidding pictorial representations of any kind."¹⁴ This difference may appear minor, but it has profound implications on how we understand Moses and Akhenaten's relationship.¹⁵

To better grasp the implications of this difference, consider the context in which Freud evokes Akhenaten in the first place. Freud, as is well known by now, wants to suggest that Judaism originated in Egypt. But right away he recognizes a problem with this suggestion, namely, "the fact of there being the most violent contrast between the Jewish religion which is attributed to Moses and the religion of Egypt": "The former is a rigid monotheism on the grand scale" while the latter features "an almost innumerable host of deities of varying dignity and origin."¹⁶ So obvious—or, in Freud's words, "most violent"—is this contrast that Freud even suspects it of being "deliberate" and "intentionally heightened."¹⁷ Intentional or not, the dissimilarity between Judaism and Egyptian polytheism makes the notion of an Egyptian origin difficult to accept.

To make the idea of an Egyptian origin more plausible, Freud must find a way to account for this violent contrast. It is at this point that Freud turns to Akhenaten. Akhenaten was a follower of the Aten religion, which was a sun-cult, but more importantly, a monotheism, "the first attempt of the kind, so far as we know, in the history of the world."¹⁸ As a monotheism, the Aten religion offers a readymade

explanation for how Judaism may have begun in Egypt. “This impression seems justified,” writes Freud, “if now, in making the comparison, we replace the Jewish religion by the Aten religion which, as we know, was developed by Akhenaten in deliberate hostility to the popular one.”¹⁹ The Aten religion would explain, not only how Judaism began in Egypt, but how it began there in contrast to polytheism. With this explanation in hand, all Freud must do is establish a link between Moses and Akhenaten.

But there is a problem with this explanation: namely, graven images. Akhenaten, it is true, would explain what is perhaps the most obvious difference between Judaism and polytheism—namely, the difference in the number of their respective deities—so it is quite understandable that Freud would want to bring Akhenaten into his account. But number is not the only contrast between Judaism and Egyptian polytheism that exists, nor is it, according to Freud himself, the most significant. An even more fundamental difference than number exists over the issue of graven images. Graven images in Judaism are, as it is well known, strictly forbidden while in polytheism “they proliferate,” as Freud puts it, “with the greatest luxuriance,” as if Egyptian polytheists possessed (or, perhaps, were possessed by) “the insatiable appetite...for embodying their gods in clay, stone and metal.”²⁰ And while the Aten religion differs with polytheism over number—thus serving as a possible explanation for how Judaism, a monotheism, could have grown up in the shadow of Egyptian polytheism—it remains absolutely indistinguishable from polytheism on the question of graven images, thus begging the question: if the Aten religion explains Judaism’s difference with polytheism on the question of number, then what explains Judaism’s difference with both polytheism *and* the Aten religion on the question of graven images?

Thus, a contradiction appears in Freud’s text. On one hand, Freud presents Moses as a close disciple of Akhenaten. On the other hand, he credits Moses with the prohibition on graven images, which suggests Moses opposed Akhenaten. What to make of this contradiction? The answer can be found in Freud himself. In his discussion of the myriad of errors and contradictions that supposedly can be found in the Bible, Freud offers a method of interpretation that does not consider such distortions or *Entstellungen* as evidence of the Bible’s unreliability, but rather as so many clues that another, counter-narrative lies “suppressed and disavowed hidden away”²¹ beneath the surface of the official narrative.²² The task of the reader is then not to simply point out or inventory all of the “noticeable gaps, disturbing repetitions and obvious contradictions”²³ that can be found throughout the text, but rather to use them to reconstruct that disavowed narrative, like a detective reconstructing the scene of a crime from the clues that remain.

The obvious point to be made here is that Freud's theory of *Entstellung* is not simply a Biblical hermeneutic, but a method for reading the contradictions of any text, including indeed those of *Moses and Monotheism* itself. That is to say, this contradiction in the way Freud presents Moses—namely, the contradiction between Moses as Akhenaten's disciple and Moses as inventor of the ban on graven images—should not be glossed over. But at the same time, it should not be taken as a reason to reject his account as such. The point is, rather, to take this contradiction as a clue that another narrative—a counter-narrative—exists, “suppressed and disavowed hidden away” within Freud's own text. What then is this alternative narrative? Allow me to offer the following possibility: let us retain Freud's original idea that Moses and Akhenaten were indeed close (after all, the point is not to dismiss the traditional reading of this text, but to supplement it).²⁴ In that case, I will suggest that at some point Moses became ambivalent towards his master and began to rebel against him and his religion. Eventually, Moses made an official break from Akhenaten by establishing his own monotheism, in which he sought to “[outdo] the strictness of the Aten religion.”²⁵ The centerpiece of Moses's monotheism was, of course, the ban on graven images, which was conceived as an expressed rejection of Akhenaten and his representational (or, to use Freud's own word, sensual) theology.

What may have caused Moses to become estranged from Akhenaten, one may wonder? To be sure, the suggestion that Moses drifted away from his master is not in itself all too surprising—after all, was it not Freud himself who taught us that a son will wish to usurp his father? Freud also tells us that Moses was “ambitious and energetic” with dreams “of one day being the leader of his people, of becoming the kingdom's ruler.”²⁶ So, perhaps, Moses's estrangement from Akhenaten was simply inevitable.

I will, however, in the spirit of “the schoolmen and Talmudists,”²⁷ offer one other possible motive for their estrangement, a possibility that has the additional benefit of explaining why Moses's rebellion took the specific form of a new monotheism: namely, the possibility that Moses became disenchanted with the Aten religion itself. But if that was the case—if Moses did in fact become disenchanted with his master's religion—then what precisely in the Aten religion drew Moses's dissatisfaction? Here, once again, Freud offers the clue. When first introducing Akhenaten, Freud notes that the heretic king was not himself responsible for inventing the notion of a universal God—“For a considerable time,” he writes, “tendencies had been at work among the priesthood of the sun temple at On (Heliopolis) in the direction of developing the idea of a universal god.”²⁸ Rather, he was responsible for something else. As Freud explains: “He introduced something new, which for the first time converted the doctrine of a universal god into monotheism—the factor of exclusiveness.”²⁹

What was truly innovative in Akhenaten, what turned the Aten religion into a genuine monotheism, according to Freud, was this notion that truth could not stand side-by-side with other truths, that truth was exclusive, which meant that all other religions or gods had to now be rejected as so many falsehoods—or, as Freud puts it, “in assessing the new doctrine a knowledge of its *positive* contents is not enough: its *negative* side is almost equally important—a knowledge of what it rejects.”³⁰ In short, Akhenaten invented intolerance. That is why Akhenaten’s rule became characterized by “harshness and intolerance” and why throughout Egypt “temples were closed, divine service forbidden, temple property confiscated”:³¹ he could not abide the existence of alternative or rival accounts of the divine; they were for him falsehoods, and as such, they had to be eliminated. I want to suggest that it was precisely this exclusive or intolerant quality of the Aten religion that caused Moses to break with Akhenaten. Perhaps, when Moses saw the damage Akhenaten’s fanatical monotheism had done to his beloved kingdom (a kingdom that, Freud tells us, Moses dreamed of one day ruling), he took the decision to break with his master. However, instead of abandoning monotheism as a lost cause, Moses chose to leave Egypt with “a Semitic tribe which had immigrated into [Egypt] a few generations earlier”³² for the chance to reinvent monotheism. Moses believed that instead of promoting intolerance, divisiveness, and exclusivity, instead of promoting legalism and absolutism, monotheism, at its best, could promote “the idea of a single deity embracing the whole world, who was not less all-loving than all-powerful, who was averse to all ceremonial and magic and set before men as their highest aim a life in truth and justice,”³³ in the best possible senses of those terms. But for monotheism to actualize this potential, it would need a new starting point, and that new starting point would be the prohibition on graven images.³⁴

3

For some, the Mosaic ban on graven images, which is codified in the second commandment of the Decalogue, may appear to be a rather minor feature of Judaism, but, for Freud, “the compulsion to worship a God whom one cannot see”³⁵ is Judaism’s defining feature. As Freud tells it, the ban put Moses on a very different trajectory than Akhenaten. Rather than lead to ever increasing levels of intolerance and violence toward nonbelievers, Freud argues that the ban on graven images initiated, what he calls, *the advance of intellectuality*, “a triumph of intellectuality over sensuality,”³⁶ which “helped to check the brutality and the tendency to violence which are apt to appear where the development of muscular strength is the popular ideal.”³⁷

Though Freud is clear that the ban on graven images led to the so-called advance of intellectuality, he is less clear on what the advance of intellectuality actually was. Clearly, it was a transformation of some sort—Freud describes it as “a permanent imprint”³⁸ of character—though a transformation of what precisely, remains unclear. Freud also claims the advance resulted in, among other things, a “rejection of magic and mysticism,” an appreciation for “the possession of the truth,” “a high opinion of what is intellectual,” and a “stress on what is moral”³⁹—all traits that, according to Freud, made the Jews more civilized and less violent. Freud also suggests that this advance led to an “inclination to intellectual interests,” which gave the Jews a kind of inner strength that “held the scattered people together” after the Romans destroyed the Temple.⁴⁰ But for all that is known about its effects, the advance of intellectuality itself remains something of a mystery.

This ambiguity has to do with the German word, *Geistigkeit*, which James Strachey, the translator of the Standard Edition, renders as *intellectuality*. “The obvious alternative,” Strachey writes, “would be ‘spirituality’, but,” as he explains, “in English this arouses some very different associations.”⁴¹ Adding another layer of complication is the fact that *Moses and Monotheism* was translated into English once before it appeared in the Standard Edition by Katherine Jones, and in that edition, Jones translates *Geistigkeit* as *spirituality* without so much as a note.⁴² Whatever “associations” Strachey fears readers will make while reading a book about religion, Jones appears to invite. So, *Der Fortschritt in der Geistigkeit* was either a transformation of the intellect or it was a transformation of the spirit, and the translators do not seem to agree as to which it is.

Without this consensus, Strachey advises that it would be best for readers “to examine Freud’s own account of the concept” and “to form one’s conclusions on that.”⁴³ Richard Bernstein has done exactly that. In his very important book *The Legacy of Moses*, Bernstein approaches the question of *Geistigkeit* by focusing on the contrast Freud draws between it and sensuality or *Sinnlichkeit*. “‘*Sinnlichkeit*’,” Bernstein writes, “is the standard German term for referring to the senses and to what can be known by sensory perception.”⁴⁴ Based on this contrast, it seems that Freud is trying to draw a contrast “between the ‘lower’ form of knowledge that is grasped by the senses and a ‘higher’ form of abstract intellectual (spiritual) knowledge,” which would put Freud right in line with the tradition of German Idealism, which saw Judaism as promoting “intellectuality over sensibility.”⁴⁵ Based on Bernstein’s study of the context, it would seem Strachey is quite justified in his choice of translation (although Bernstein, for his part, cautions that the English cannot fully convey “the power and dynamic quality of the German”⁴⁶).

However, Bernstein is not the only scholar to have examined this question. Yosef Yerulshami, in his landmark reappraisal of *Moses and Monotheism*, Freud's *Moses*, also looks at the translation of *Geistigkeit*, and in his assessment, the word *intellectuality* is a poor choice of translation as it is "far too narrow and cerebral and, in the context of *M.M.*, often anachronistic."⁴⁷ Thus when he cites the passage on the advance of intellectuality, Yerulshami simply refuses to translate *Geistigkeit*, in recognition of the way "the German word hovers between intellectuality and spirituality."⁴⁸

I will not attempt to determine whether intellectuality or spirituality is the proper rendering of *Geistigkeit*, as I am also quite content to let the word continue hovering, to put it with Yerulshami, between its different valences. Indeed, it is quite possible that we are not meant to choose between these possible meanings, that Freud chose the word *Geistigkeit* precisely because of its undecideable nature. In that case, perhaps Freud wanted to speak to the various and disparate aspects of our person (to our minds as well as to our spirits, as it were) in order to reveal the false choices we often force ourselves to make when we place priority on this or that aspect of our being. Indeed, it seems to me quite possible that Freud chose the word *Geistigkeit* precisely to introduce or draw attention to the equivocity that constitutes our very subjectivity—that is, to put it more precisely, the equivocity that the advance of intellectuality introduced into our subjectivity, thereby constituting it. However, I do not wish to speculate any further on the spiritual or intellectual implications of *Geistigkeit*. Rather, I want to draw attention to a dimension of Freud's concept of *Geistigkeit* that has been hitherto overlooked.

Strachey, Jones, Bernstein and Yerulshami may all disagree on whether *Geistigkeit* is better translated as intellectuality or spirituality, but they all share the same assumption that at stake is a *subjective* transformation of some type. The advance of intellectuality may have been a transformation of the human mind or the human spirit—or indeed both—but it is a transformation of the human subject nonetheless. And yet, if we pay close attention to Freud's own explanation of the advance, we will notice that *Geistigkeit* does not simply have a subjective meaning, but an *objective* one as well.

In the section on "The Advance of Intellectuality," Freud gives a brief account of the origins of *Geistigkeit*. He writes, "Human beings," at some point in history, "found themselves obliged in general to recognise 'intellectual [*geistige*]' forces—forces, that is, which cannot be grasped by the senses (particularly by the sight) which none the less produce undoubted and indeed extremely powerful effects."⁴⁹ Notice that here *Geistigkeit* is presented, not as an aspect of the human subject but of the material world itself. The natural world is not all physical or material—it possesses an element of intellectuality or, if you

like, spirituality. The specific example Freud gives of this *Geistigkeit* of the world is wind: "If we may rely upon the evidence of language, it was movement of the air that provided the prototype of intellectuality [*Geistigkeit*], for intellect [*Geist*] derives its name from a breath of wind."⁵⁰ It would be too limiting to imagine this *Geistigkeit* of the world as a type of animism, as Freud indicates that wind is only an example, if the prototypical example, of an entire "world of spirits [*Geisterreich*]"⁵¹ that lies just beyond the reach of our senses. To make my claim even stronger: what Freud is describing here should not be imagined as having any correlation whatsoever with the human mind. Freud is not, for example, describing the *Geistigkeit* of the world as some kind of projection or stain that results when the human mind attempts to comprehend the world. The *Geistigkeit* of the world should not be understood in these correlative terms because Freud makes it quite clear that the *Geistigkeit* of the world existed even before human beings had the capacity for recognizing it and that its presence "obliged" us to recognize it in the first place. Indeed, Freud goes even further, suggesting that it was our discovery of *Geistigkeit* in the world that led us to discover the same quality in ourselves, and not the other way around: "This too led to the discovery of the mind [*Seele* (soul)] as that of the intellectual [*geistigen*] principle in individual human beings."⁵²

With this account of the advance of intellectuality in hand, it is now clear why, in Freud's account of monotheism, both the Egyptians and the Jews first reject monotheism. When Freud writes, "The Jewish people under Moses were just as little able to tolerate such a highly spiritualized religion,"⁵³ he should not be read in the weak sense as suggesting that the Jews simply had a distaste for Mosaic monotheism; he must be read in the much stronger sense as arguing that the Jews (as well as the Egyptians) lacked the very subjective capacity (whether that capacity is defined as intellectual or spiritual in quality) for grasping it. The Jews of course would eventually acquire *Geistigkeit*, which would enable them to adopt Mosaic monotheism, albeit belatedly, but that acquisition—or, to use Freud's word, advance—could only happen as a result of a direct and repeated encounter with the *Geistigkeit* of the world, an encounter that would always be too soon or premature. This is then how I claim Freud's notion of the advance of intellectuality must be understood: it was not simply an enlarging or enhancing of the intellectual (or spiritual) capacity of human beings, as if human beings always already possessed such a thing in the first place; but rather, it was much more radically the transfer of *Geistigkeit* from the objective world to the human subject as a result of a repeated encounter, and indeed a repeated traumatic encounter, with monotheism.

What does it mean to say that the material world possesses a spiritual aspect? The simplest approach to this question would be to read *Geistigkeit* as a kind of idealism. In that case, Freud would be read as

presenting this intellectuality as a kind of other worldly dimension, inhabited by the spectral concomitants of material objects. In fact, Freud appears to be describing exactly such a dimension when he makes reference to a *Geisterreich* or a “world of spirits.”⁵⁴ But what such a reading would miss is Freud’s insistence that this spirituality of the world, while immaterial (and therefore “cannot be grasped by the senses (particularly by the sight)”⁵⁵), is nonetheless *real* insofar as it produces “extremely powerful effects”⁵⁶ in the material world. As such, we do not accurately grasp Freud’s *Geistigkeit* if we think of it purely in terms of philosophical idealism, as if it were a kind of Freudian variation on Plato’s forms. Rather, Freud’s *Geistigkeit* names that aspect of the *material* world that is part of the material world but is itself paradoxically *immaterial*. Or, to put it another way, *Geistigkeit* is that part of the world that subtracts itself from materiality, that decompletes it, makes it not all.

4

In his discussion of Freud, in *The Price of Monotheism*, Jan Assmann begins with a retraction. In his earlier work, Assmann viewed Freud as a critic of monotheism, even going so far as to call him its “most outspoken destroyer.”⁵⁷ Assmann held this view because he saw Freud’s Egyptian hypothesis as a direct attack on the true-false distinction, which Assmann takes to be the defining feature of monotheism: “What seems crucial to me,” Assmann writes, “is not the distinction between the One God and many gods but the distinction between truth and falsehood in religion.”⁵⁸ “Moses the Egyptian,” the early Assmann argued, blurs the distinction between Israel and Egypt, thereby weakening the links between Israel and truth, on the one hand, and Egypt and falsehood, on the other, as Moses “embodies what is imagined to be common to Ancient Egypt and Israel.”⁵⁹

In *The Price of Monotheism*, Assmann reverses directions, claiming now that Freud was in fact attempting to present the true-false distinction “as a seminal, immensely valuable, and profoundly Jewish achievement.”⁶⁰ What prompts this change in Assmann’s position is the second commandment, that is, the ban on graven images. In his earlier work, the ban on graven images made little impression on Assmann, as he focused almost entirely on Freud’s Egyptian hypothesis, but in *The Price of Monotheism*, the ban plays the greater part in Assmann’s reception of Freud: “With the ban on images, the distinction between true and false in the divine world, and with it the distinction between reason and madness, enters religion for the first time.”⁶¹ According to Assmann, the second commandment does more than introduce intellectuality into the world; more importantly, it simultaneously identifies idolatry as a false form of religion. “Each and every image...bears

within it the potential to be worshipped as a god," Assmann explains.⁶² "This," he goes on, "would necessarily be an 'other god,' since the true god cannot be depicted."⁶³ Thus by outlawing the making of images, Assmann argues, Moses was, in some definitive way, rejecting all other gods as false gods.

I must admit, there is a certain logic to Assmann's account. Intellectuality and sensuality, as Bernstein has reminded us, do indeed form a dualism in Freud.⁶⁴ Moreover, sensuality is always portrayed as the baser member of the dualism—in Freud's words, it is "lower psychical activity"⁶⁵—while intellectuality appears as the nobler member, trading in "ideas, memories, and inferences,"⁶⁶ which can give the impression that Freud is simply describing the true-false binary in other terms.

However, I must quarrel with Assmann's characterization of Freud's project, for, though intellectuality and sensuality do indeed form a dualism in Freud, he never uses these terms as shorthand or synonyms for monotheism and polytheism or, even less, truth and falsehood itself. Quite the contrary, Freud always uses these categories to describe different aspects of *both* monotheism *and* polytheism. For example, as I have argued above, Freud does not present monotheism as a purely intellectual theological system. Rather, he presents it as a framework that is internally divided, possessing both intellectual and sensual elements—a division, I might add, that brings monotheism in closer proximity to polytheism by revealing their mutual affinity for sensuality. As well, with polytheism, Freud finds the presence of both sensual and intellectual tendencies: sensuality in the wide variety of idols and personifications of the divine, and intellectuality in Ma 'at, which is not a personification at all, but an abstraction of truth and justice. Thus to describe Freud's concept of polytheism as an exclusively sensual and therefore false form of theology is dubious at best. Indeed, the opposite appears to be the case, as Freud not only complicates how intellectuality and sensuality operates across both monotheism and polytheism, but he even opens up new lines of exchange between the two of them, citing Ma 'at, for instance, as an important idea that monotheism imported from polytheism. And this, I believe, is the overall aim of Freud's project: not to reinscribe the true-false distinction, much less to present this distinction as a Jewish achievement, as Assmann suggests, but to trouble and complicate the binaries that we create in order to distinguish self and other and to draw our attention to the porousness of the borders and walls we erect in an attempt to separate our truth from the other's falsehood, a porousness that will allow for flows and exchanges (and perhaps an entire economy) to occur between self and other.

5

Nowhere is Freud's use of this dualism to complicate binaries on better display than in his account of the origins of the Jewish people. When Freud reconstructs these origins, a curious inconsistency (yet another one of those textual distortions) emerges. At times, Freud will refer to the people who left Egypt with Moses in the Exodus as Jews. But, then, at other times, Freud will refer to these exact same people, not as Jews, much less as Hebrews or Israelites, but very precisely as "Neo-Egyptians,"⁶⁷ even stating his preference for this term. What is the reason for this discrepancy? It would be very easy to overlook this inconsistency or to explain it away simply as an error of language (i.e. Freud really means Jews when he writes Neo-Egyptians, and so on), but to do so, would be a mistake, as this explanation would miss Freud's larger point about the specific composition of the Jews as a political entity.⁶⁸ If Freud wants to call the people of the Exodus Neo-Egyptians, and not Jews, it is because he wants to draw attention to the composite nature of the Jews as a political entity. Freud will refer to the Neo-Egyptians as Jews from time to time because they do, in his account, form one part of what will eventually become the Jews. But, in his account, they do not become the Jews until they join a band of tribes living in "the stretch of country between Egypt and Canaan."⁶⁹

Special attention must be paid to this union, and in particular to the precise identity of these tribes with whom the Neo-Egyptians united, as these details play a decisive part in Freud's theory of the Jews. These tribes worshipped a common god, named Yahweh. "Yahweh," Freud tells us, "was unquestionably a volcano god," "an uncanny, bloodthirsty demon who went about by night and shunned the light of day."⁷⁰ Such a description is indeed unflattering, but more importantly, it is a far cry from the God of Moses, whom Freud describes as an abstraction that is "all-loving" and "all-powerful," "averse to all ceremonial and magic" and a promoter of "a life in truth and justice."⁷¹ That is to say, whereas the Neo-Egyptians had, by this time, experienced the advance of intellectuality, and thus began following intellectual religion, the tribes with whom they united were still engaged within a sensual theological framework. Thus, not only are the Jews, in Freud's account, a nation that "arose out of a union of two component parts,"⁷² but their union brought together (without synthesis) the two sides of the religious dualism, the intellectual and the sensual.

As should now be abundantly clear, the Jews, as well as Judaism, in Freud, never come to embody the whole truth, nor are they ever used to claim the true-false distinction as a profoundly Jewish project, as they do in Assmann, because the Jews, in Freud, are not a whole people in the first place, comprised fully of intellectual monotheists. Rather, as Edward Said has put it, the Jews are "Freud's profound exemplification of the insight that even for the most definable, the

most identifiable, the most stubborn communal identity...there are inherent limits that prevent it from being fully incorporated into one, and only one, Identity."⁷³

Care must be taken, however, so that Said (and Freud) is not misunderstood as suggesting that the Yahwehists somehow obstruct the Jews from forming one, and only one, Identity, as if such a thing as wholeness or purity were ever possible at all in the first place. The Yahwehists, in Freud's account, are not a foreign body that has become parasitically attached to the Jews, contaminating them with a foreign, and false, form of worship. Rather, Freud presents them as a *constitutive* part of the Jews as such. In other words, the Jews are the Jews precisely because they are "a union of two component parts,"⁷⁴ that is, a union of the sensual Yahwehists and the intellectual Neo-Egyptians. That is to say, if the Jews do not form one, and only one, Identity, if they are not a whole people, it is because they are constitutively so — equivocity is an inherent part of their composition. Or, to put it in yet a different, albeit paradoxical, fashion: the Jews' non-Identity is their Identity.

The fact that Freud imagines the Jews as bringing together intellectual and sensual religion without effecting their synthesis — that is, without absorbing these opposites into a third homogenous term — does not mean that he paints an idyllic picture of Jewish communal life. Indeed, the exact opposite is the case: Freud presents Jewish history as a series of antagonistic and tumultuous events, whether that is one side attempting to erase the foreign character of the other, the people forgetting their Mosaic commitments and the prophets emerging to call them back to those commitments, or the priesthood tendentiously rewriting Jewish history in order to fabricate a homogenous heritage. It means, rather, that life takes place in the midst of these differences and antagonisms. That is to say, communal life is possible *because* of constitutive equivocity, not in spite of it. The differences within a community do not prevent utopia, the other's foreignness does not prevent the people's wholeness; rather, it is the exact opposite: these differences, this foreignness, is precisely the stuff of life itself.

Notes

1. See, as examples, Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (New York: Mariner, 2008); Christopher Hitchens, *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (New York, Hachette, 2007); and Sam Harris, *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason* (New York: Norton, 2005). But even Jan Assmann, who certainly does not see himself as a critic of monotheism, recognizes exclusivity as the defining characteristic of monotheism and its singular contribution to world religion; he writes: "What all these religions have in common is an emphatic concept of truth. They all rest on a distinction between true and false religion, proclaiming a truth that does not stand in a complementary relationship to other truths, but consigns all traditional or rival truths to the realm of falsehood," *The Price of Monotheism*, trans. Robert Savage (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), 3.

2. Once again, Assmann finds himself in agreement with monotheism's critics: "The truth derives its depth, its clear contours, and its capacity to orient and direct action from this antagonistic energy, and from the sure knowledge of what is incompatible with the truth," *Ibid.* 3-4.
3. Many, such as, Yosef Yerulshami, Jacques Derrida, Richard Bernstein, and Jan Assmann, have convincingly demonstrated through their respective engagements with *Moses and Monotheism* the productive possibilities of Freud's odd book. See Yosef Yerulshami, *Freud's Moses: Judaism Terminable and Interminable* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991); Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1996); Richard Bernstein, *Freud and the Legacy of Moses* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); and Assmann, *The Price of Monotheism*.
4. Sigmund Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1939), 129.
5. *Ibid.*, 130, original emphasis.
6. As Freud himself put it: "Our findings may be thus expressed in the most concise formula. Jewish history is familiar to us for its dualities: *two* groups of people who came together to form the nation, *two* kingdoms into which this nation fell apart, *two* gods' names in the documentary sources of the Bible. To these we add two fresh ones: the foundation of *two* religions... and *two* religious founders, who are both called by the same name of Moses and whose personalities we have to distinguish from each other," *Ibid.*, 52, original emphasis.
7. *Ibid.*, 90.
8. *Ibid.*, 91.
9. *Ibid.*, 91.
10. *Ibid.*, 91.
11. *Ibid.*, 91.
12. Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, 92.
13. *Ibid.*, 28.
14. *Ibid.*, 25-6.
15. Freud himself warned that it might be easy to gloss over the question of idolatry: "Among the precepts of the Moses religion there is one that is of greater importance than appears to begin with," *Ibid.*, 112.
16. *Ibid.*, 18.
17. *Ibid.*, 19.
18. *Ibid.*, 20.
19. *Ibid.*, 26.
20. *Ibid.*, 19.
21. Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, 43.
22. Samuel Weber's *The Legend of Freud* eloquently reminds us of the importance and productivity of *Entstellung* in Freud's thinking and writing. Samuel Weber, *The Legend of Freud* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000).

23. Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, 43.
24. As opposed to a complement or a contradiction, a supplement, Kenneth Reinhard explains, "brings out something lacking in the other," "excessive," "or unthought by the other." See Kenneth Reinhard, "Universalism and the Jewish Exception: Lacan, Badiou, Rosenzweig," *Umbr(a)*, no. 1 (2005): 44. See also Reinhard's comments on Jacques Lacan's use of *avec* in "Kant with Sade, Lacan with Levinas," *Modern Language Notes*, no. 110 (1995): 785–808.
25. Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, 113.
26. *Ibid.*, 28.
27. *Ibid.*, 17.
28. *Ibid.*, 21.
29. *Ibid.*, 22.
30. *Ibid.*, 22, original emphasis.
31. *Ibid.*, 22, 23.
32. *Ibid.*, 60.
33. *Ibid.*, 50.
34. For some, Freud's (and my) recasting of Mosaic monotheism flies in the face of the first commandment, "You shall have no other gods before me." Of course, the point is precisely that monotheism is not one, but two, and so the possible existence of tension between the first and second commandments is entirely consistent with my argument. However, Kenneth Reinhard and Julia Reinhard Lupton have offered a stunning and provocative reading of the Decalogue that undermines this exclusive understanding of the first commandment itself. On their reading, the One of the first commandment has nothing to do with exclusivity; rather, it is about "a violent rupture that creates subjects and their world around a void, an *un* that un-does the primacy it speaks," 72, original emphasis. See Reinhard and Lupton, "The Subject of Religion," *Diacritics*, no. 2 (2005): 71–97.
35. Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, 112–13.
36. *Ibid.*, 113.
37. *Ibid.*, 115.
38. *Ibid.*, 85.
39. *Ibid.*, 86.
40. *Ibid.*, 115.
41. *Ibid.*, 86.
42. See, Sigmund Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, trans. Katherine Jones (New York: Vintage, 1967).
43. Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, trans. James Strachey, 86, note 1.
44. Bernstein, *Freud and the Legacy of Moses*, 33, original emphasis.
45. *Ibid.*, 33.
46. *Ibid.*, 31.

47. Yerulshami, *Freud's Moses*, 127, note 43, emphasis added.
48. *Ibid.*, 51.
49. Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, 114, original emphasis.
50. *Ibid.*, 114, original emphasis.
51. *Ibid.*, 114, original emphasis.
52. *Ibid.*, 114, original emphasis.
53. *Ibid.*, 47.
54. *Ibid.*, 114.
55. *Ibid.*, 114.
56. *Ibid.*, 114.
57. Jan Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian: The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 5.
58. Assmann, *The Price of Monotheism*, 2.
59. Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian*, 12.
60. Assmann, *The Price of Monotheism*, 86.
61. *Ibid.*, 103.
62. *Ibid.*, 97.
63. *Ibid.*, 97.
64. As Fredric Jameson reminds, the identification of dualisms is the first step of the dialectic; see Fredric Jameson, *Valences of the Dialectic* (New York: Verso, 2009).
65. Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, 113.
66. *Ibid.*, 113.
67. *Ibid.*, 39.
68. Graham Hammill offers a detailed account of the place of Moses in the broader political imagination; see Graham Hammill, *The Mosaic Constitution: Political Theology and Imagination from Machiavelli to Milton* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).
69. Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, 37.
70. *Ibid.*, 34.
71. *Ibid.*, 50.
72. *Ibid.*, 39.
73. Edward Said, *Freud and the Non-European* (New York: Verso, 2009), 53–54.
74. Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, 38.