

SCHOOL OF PHILOSOPHY – UNIVERSITY COLLEGE DUBLIN

PHILOSOPHIZING MONOTHEISM

A Workshop in Philosophy and Theology

ABSTRACTS

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10h – 18h



SPEAKERS

Itzhak Benyamini
Ward Blanton
Joseph Cohen
Aubrey Glazer
Maureen Junker-Kenny
Elad Lapidot
Mahdi Tourage
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Coordinated by Itzhak Benyamini and Joseph Cohen

ABSTRACTS

Three Modalities of Philosophizing Monotheism: Sacrifice, Election, Justice

Joseph Cohen, University College Dublin, Ireland

Raphael Zagury-Orly, Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design, Jerusalem, Israel

Our first question shall be: according to which modality are we to think the rapport between philosophy and monotheism? Indeed, this rapport has always been, in and throughout the history of Western thought, a complex one. From mutual exclusion to the efforts of synthesizing or conciliating both in one unifying discourse, to the numerous projects where one seeks to subjugate or contain the other, the alliance between philosophy and monotheism has never ceased to trouble philosophers and theologians alike. According to which idea and from which place can one maintain the singularities of both philosophical *logos* and monotheism whilst assuring the incontestable effects they both cause on each other? Undoubtedly, and in order to deploy our interpretative hypothesis, we will focus on the intricate dynamic between Judaism and Christianity and how this dynamic has surged in the history of philosophical thought. Consequently, our interpretative gesture will consist in developing three ideas – sacrifice, election, justice – by which is opened a certain address of both philosophical *logos* and monotheism. This address will show how and why both philosophical *logos* and monotheism incessantly read one into the other, inform and awaken each other whilst, at the same time, always fail to seize, comprehend or understand the singularity of the other.

Monotheism and Conversion.

On the Possibility and Necessity of Becoming Other

Elad Lapidot, Humboldt Universität Berlin, Germany

One of the most influential paradigmatic critiques of monotheism, as famously argued by Jan Assman for instance, points at the exclusive claim arising from the one-god doctrine (the "mosaic distinction") as the historical and conceptual source of anti-pluralistic intolerance and fundamentalist violence: The One leaves no place to Others. I will offer a critical reflection on this critique, first, by suggesting (with Derrida vis-a-vis Levinas) that the absolutization of the One is the very condition for the conceptual emergence and relevance of the Others: The One opens the space for the Others. I will develop this reflection more concretely by pointing at a central, perhaps constitutive phenomenon of monotheistic traditions, what is often referred to as the experience of 'conversion'. I will claim that conversion is the monotheistic *topos* where, not only the discourse of the one requires its discursive others, but the very identity of the one depends on one's

possibility of becoming other. These theoretical-conceptual elements will be further examined through a short comparative contemplation on Pauline and Rabbinic conceptions of conversion.

Cosmotheism or Ethical Monotheism?

Jan Assmann's Thesis on the Link between Monotheism and Violence in Exegetical and Theological Debate

Maureen Junker-Kenny, Trinity College Dublin, Ireland

The position that the absolute truth claim of monotheism has an inherent connection to violence has been the subject of renewed debate since the egyptologist Jan Assmann published *The Mosaic Distinction* and *Moses the Egyptian* in 1996 and 1997. There seems to be ample evidence for this claim in the history of religions and in the present. For Assmann, the counterfoil to biblical monotheism with its insistence on the one God who is distinct from the world and from humanity are cosmo- or biotheistic religions in Egyptian and Greek antiquity which were able to translate their gods to each other. Systematic theology has countered this claim with two arguments, one philosophical, the other ethical: 1) by pointing to the logic evident in the theological reconstruction of the faith experience of the unity of God, the level of thinking evident in unifying the concept of God into the one cause of creation and preservation can already be seen as a move against violence. Criteria are brought in that define what is worthy and unworthy in thinking the divine. 2) The trajectory of elevating the human person to partnership with God - a relationship missing in cosmotheism - entails a positive link to the rule of justice. But are such claims of a dispassionate, reflective distance in a calm reconstruction of the human experience of God not countered by metaphors and images of God in the biblical texts themselves which, for example, speak of a "jealous" God and recognize God's action in history especially in military victories? What is the biblical evidence for a development to an "ethical monotheism" (J. Wellhausen)? Can the historical enquiries of biblical studies support the point that monotheism has established criteria in the history of religions for what deserves to be called God?

Religion of the One, Religion of the Aqedah

Itzhak Benyamini, University of Haifa, Israel

Our conference in Dublin entails the possibility of "Philosophizing Monotheism", the possibility of working together on Critical Theology regarding the very concept of "monotheism" and the type of historical experience behind this dominant concept. As part of our joint venture, in my lecture I would like to present a theological and philosophical "precision" of sorts, while highlighting its

specificity, by attempting to be precise regarding a theological issue whose subject is "precision", taken under key terms like the "One", "Binding", "Sacrifice", "Self", and under the logic governing their relation to their surrounding theological system. By examining different philosophical and psychoanalytic possibilities (through a psycho-conceptual analysis in the wake of Derrida, Levinas, Lacan and Freud), regarding the conceptualization of the One and the faith in the One, I will offer and analyze the different and varied logics in play here, like the logic of "repressions", "inclusion", "supplement", and other inventions necessitated by the research. My goal is to understand the religious procedures taken to be monotheistic, including the conceptualization of the One, and the concept born out of a well-known Biblical story. These holy as much as transgressive concepts stand at the heart of the monotheistic dynamic, with different emphasizes for the different frameworks surrounding that very dynamic. This is "of course" the Binding ("Aqedah" in Hebrew), the act which knows how to harness and malign. It is this very "of course" that I want to examine. On the one hand, in the framework of the Biblical story the act of Binding serves to harness and damage the figures of God, the Father, the Son, the Mother and the Animal simultaneously. On the other, it harnesses and damages the three historical ramifications of that religious procedure which serves the One and which retroactively inscribes the terms "Judaism", "Christianity" and "Islam". Following a momentary and very personal affinity, that is existentialistic (and under a critical Jewish sensitivity), I wish to put a special focus on examining the logical relations between the conceptual brotherhood of "Judaism" and "Christianity".

The Monotheism of Islam, Deferral of Certainties and Different Universalities

Mahdi Tourage, University of Western Ontario, Canada

This paper is a theoretical exploration of possibilities offered by the intrinsic indeterminacy of the *Shahada*, the first and foremost testimony of faith and foundation of Islam's monotheism. Using a Lacanian theoretical framework, I will argue that the *Shahada* formula "There is no god but the God/Allah" contains a kind of structural atheism that necessitates the negation of all certainties about God. A symbolic economy of exchange between God and humanity is precluded by the gap that separates the two. This irreducible gap prompts all that may be known of Allah to culminate in the repetition of "There is no god." Knowing God or God's will remain an open-ended creative process. This monotheistic model still assumes the existence of an absent-present God, but any knowledge about that God is perpetually deferred, like the Lacanian signified that incessantly slips under signifiers. Therefore, God is better perceived as the impossible-Real, a configuration that militates against all claims of finality, completion, and certainty. Perceived this way, the monotheism of Islam destabilized the dogmatic

determinism of Asha‘rite theologians, the First Cause/Prime Mover of Muslim philosophers, and the Perfect Man of Sufis. More importantly for our contemporary context, this formulation of monotheism undermines the religious claims and dead certainties of modern violent Jihadis.

In my reading of Islam’s monotheism through Jacques Lacan’s work I have two goals. First, I will question the contemporary Western theoretical turn towards religion that focuses mainly on the fashionable Pauline Christianity. Second, I will critique Muslim scholars who decisively and purposefully overlook theoretical works that specifically engage postmodern theories. I hope to open up ways of reimagining different universalities and globalizations in which neither Europe nor non-Europeans can maintain a spatial outside and an epistemological other against whom they can conveniently define themselves.

Doubts & Loves Sprout Justice In-Formation

Rabbi Aubrey Glazer, Beth Sholom Congregation, San Francisco, United States

If “dark matter” and “dark energy” as discovered by quantum physicists can describe only 5% of our Universe, then from a cosmological perspective 95% of life is lived in the shadow of doubt. Awareness of the physical world then arises from a deeper level of in-formational reality, which suggests that thinking is a co-creative act, so that the philosopher of monotheism is not merely a created existent, but also a co-creator of reality through in-formational consciousness. Monotheism must be philosophized anew, for as Hebrew poet, Yehudah Amichai sees: “...the place where the house used to be/That has been destroyed” if religion, as the house of being, is still to matter, allowing doubt itself to serve a force for illumination. To philosophize monotheism is to think anew from the Jewish mystical perspective that conviction (‘emunah) is impossible without doubt (safek). To philosophize monotheism is to disrupt such dichotomies, so that every manifestation of monotheism—Jewish, Muslim, and Christian—must re-examine and redouble its nascent creative hermeneutics to allow a space for more sacred doubt and uncertainty to bolster conviction in a symbiotic rather than conflictual dialectic. It is critical in philosophizing monotheism to excavate the radical roots of “doubt” (safek) in relation to the undergirding of “conviction” (‘emunah). By opening space within the godhead as “the origin of unknowing” (Reisha d’lo ityada) the contemporary critical theologian embraces uncertainty and unknowing. Doubts & loves then create an opening for justice in-formation to sprout, keeping the future open for the Abrahamic religions to philosophize monotheism anew from these quantum insights into an ancient cosmological quandary.

On the Divinity of the Automatic Gesture from Euthyphro to Derrida and Deleuze

Ward Blanton, University of Kent, United Kingdom

This presentation extends recent reflections on monotheism, global capitalism, and political aggressivity by considering monotheism as an historical series of gestures toward a self-moving “motion” which exceeds calculable technique or measurable intention. Following philosophical and religious indications in Plato, the Gospel of John, Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Derrida, we will attempt to take God as literally as we can imagine, indeed as a series of gestures toward an un-intended and un-made or non-technical movement which appears, for that reason, as self-making, self-moving-- or relatively untapped.

As Hegel could have put it, to grasp the cultural, military, and economic wars in which we are now swimming we need to understand the ways we remain aftereffects of an archive in which divinity was inextricably linked to a game wherein “spirit” was that which appropriates – through multiple and shifting gestures of “recognition” – what it claims not to be, what it claims it is not and cannot create, untapped energy or a new kind of surplus value.

Read this way, we are perhaps more religious than ever in all our gestures toward new markets or new sources of funding which might keep our sectors alive and our countries out of debt. At any rate, I will argue that despite the archival ubiquity of this serially repeated gesture in religious and philosophical texts, we have yet to process its aftereffects in our apparently endless cultural, military, and market wars to locate, name, and appropriate surplus value and untapped energy.