

***God's Zeal: The Battle of the Three Monotheisms.* Written by Peter Sloterdijk. Translated from the German by Wieland Hoban. Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2009. viii + 166 pages. ISBN: 978-0-7456-4507-0. \$19.95 US, \$23.95 CDN.**

God's Zeal was originally written in 2007, a year that the German Ministry of Education had declared '*das Jahr der Geisteswissenschaften,*' or 'the year of the moral sciences'. As a philosopher and cultural critic, Sloterdijk took this opportunity to advocate expanding the realm of cultural studies to encompass religious phenomena. This book concerns many of the problems of religion previously charted by Karl Jaspers, Schmucl Eisenstadt, and Max Weber: namely, the historical emergence of a concept of transcendence and the resulting struggle over the symbolic order. However, Sloterdijk approaches this material from an entirely new direction. Jaspers and the Axial Age are referenced only twice, and this in parentheses. Instead, Sloterdijk employs a variety of disciplinary lenses ranging from psychology to computer science. Rather than reinventing the wheel, the result is a fresh and interesting take on religion and conflict.

Sloterdijk begins by considering possible sources of the concept of transcendence. Drawing on David Hume and Heiner Mühlmann, he presents seven "aspects" or theories of transcendence. Most of these explain religious ideas as "surplus phenomena" arising from confusion about or overreaction to natural phenomena. For instance, biological reactions to stress may appear to come from outside the individual, causing one to postulate the existence of invisible forces inducing the reaction. This theory plays heavily in Sloterdijk's reading of the history of monotheistic religions, namely the stress episodes of Passover, the Crucifixion, and the Hijra. Notably, the seventh aspect is not naturalistic but frames the transcendent simply as "the source of revelation." Sloterdijk acknowledges that this theory of faith is offensive, if not dangerous, and brackets his approach with a "blasphemy clause."

He proceeds to describe the historical formation of the three monotheisms. The emergence of a political order founded on transcendent revelation begins with Judaism. Christianity then expanded this transcendent authority from a nation to a universal

communio. Islam continued this process with the concept of the *umma*. Sloterdijk demonstrates how each new monotheism works to supplant the preceding ones. The next chapter outlines the “battlefronts” of this conflict. Sloterdijk counts no fewer than eighteen conflicts arising from the three monotheisms. This list includes conflicts between religions, persecutions of pagans, internecine struggles, and the unique varieties of atheism arising in reaction to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. He also dedicates a chapter to “the campaigns” in which he compares and contrasts the means and strategies by which each religion has historically maintained influence and “won” its conflicts.

The heart of the book appears in a chapter entitled “The Matrix.” Here, Sloterdijk describes how the concept of the transcendent creates an inherent potential for destructive zeal. The cultural matrix in which extremism arises is defined by “the rigid combination of a monovalent ontology and a bivalent logic.” For the zealot, the transcendent (God) may have only one interpretation. Sloterdijk describes this attitude as *secundum non datur* (there is no second possibility), in reference to Aristotelian logic. Intriguingly, he interprets the prohibition of images in Judaism and Islam as an aspect of this intolerance of polysemy. From this ontology proceeds a worldview in which everything is interpreted in terms of black or white, with God or against God.

In a chapter entitled “Pharmaka,” Sloterdijk observes that zealotry can never be eliminated so long as a concept of the transcendent exists. Instead, he raises the fascinating suggestion that zeal must be diverted into something less destructive. The long-term goal of this “de-supremacization” is to dissolve the matrix formed by monovalent ontology and bivalent logic. New concepts must arise that allow for the tolerance of “grey areas” in relationship to the transcendent order. Sloterdijk finds examples of such concepts within the history of each monotheistic tradition. In Islam, there was the invention of the *dhimmi* status, in which Christian and Jewish subjects could be tolerated under *sharia* law. Within Christianity, the doctrine of purgatory served to mitigate the either/or cosmology of heaven and hell. In Judaism, the tradition of Talmudic study fostered tolerance for multiple perspectives. From a Weberian

perspective, these “polyvalent” innovations represent the bureaucratization of religious charisma. However, for Sloterdijk they symbolize hope for peace and coexistence.

The concept of “diverting” zeal is elaborated on in a chapter entitled “The Parables of the Rings.” The title references *Nathan the Wise*, a play written in 1779 by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing. The story is set during the Third Crusade and emphasizes the relativism of God and the need for cooperation between Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The three religions are symbolized by three identical rings. One ring has the magical power to render the wearer “agreeable to God and men,” the other two are counterfeits. Each ring-bearer then attempts to prove his ring is magical by becoming as agreeable as possible. Competitive zeal is still present in this model, but it has been diverted into something benign rather than open conflict. Interestingly, communism is described as “the fourth ring.” Sloterdijk argues that the Enlightenment allowed the transcendent potential for zeal to spill out into numerous extremist ideologies. Thus, totalizing movements such as fascism and communism have their true roots in Western monotheism. Similar connections have been raised by Eric Voegelin and others. However, Sloterdijk suggests that extremist ideologies may also be diffused or diverted. He states in his conclusion that, “Globalization means that cultures must civilize each other.”

One key difference between Jaspers and Sloterdijk is that Jaspers attempted to form a historical model of transcendence in light of both Asian and Western civilizations. By contrast, Sloterdijk traces the potential for zeal directly to Judaism and, following Freud, possibly the Egyptian cult of Aten. There are only passing references to Asian thought. It would be interesting to see Sloterdijk’s model expanded to include, for example, Hindu extremism. Groups like the Bharatiya Janata Party seem to possess the same zeal Sloterdijk is describing. However, this cannot be historically traced to Western monotheism.

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