Introduction

At some stage in the course of ancient history—the dates proposed by the experts range from the late Bronze Age to late antiquity—a shift took place that has had a more profound impact on the world we live in today than any political upheaval. This was the shift from "polytheistic" to "monotheistic" religions, from cult religions to religions of the book, from culturally specific religions to world religions, in short, from "primary" to "secondary" religions, those religions that, at least in their own eyes, have not so much emerged from the primary religions in an evolutionary process as turned away from them in a revolutionary act.

The distinction between "primary" and "secondary" religions goes back to a suggestion made by the scholar of religion Theo Sundermeier.[1] Primary religions evolve historically over hundreds and thousands of years within a single culture, society, and generally also language, with all of which they are inextricably entwined. Religions of this kind include the cultic and divine worlds of Egyptian, Babylonian and Greco-Roman antiquity, among many others. Secondary religions, by contrast, are those that owe their existence to an act of revelation and foundation, build on primary religions, and typically differentiate themselves from the latter by denouncing them as paganism, idolatry and superstition. All secondary religions, which are at the same time book, world, and (with the possible exception of Buddhism) monotheistic religions, look down on the primary religions as pagan. Even though they may have assimilated many elements of primary religions in the course of a "syncretistic acculturation,"

they are still marked in their self-understanding by an "antagonistic acculturation," and they have strong ideas about what is incompatible with the truth (or orthodoxy) they proclaim. This shift does not just have theological repercussions, in the sense that it transforms the way people think about the divine; it also has a properly political dimension, in the sense that it transforms culturally specific religions into world religions. Religion changes from being a system that is ineradicably inscribed in the institutional, linguistic, and cultural conditions of a society—a system that is not just coextensive with culture but practically identical to it—to become an autonomous system that can emancipate itself from these conditions, transcend all political and ethnic borders, and transplant itself into other cultures. Not least, this shift has a media-technological aspect as well. As a shift from cult religion to book religion, it would have been impossible without the invention of writing and the consequent use of writing for the codification of revealed truths. All monotheistic religions, Buddhism included, are based on a canon of sacred texts. Then there is the further, psychohistorical aspect to which Sigmund Freud, in particular, has drawn our attention: the shift to monotheism, with its ethical postulates, its emphasis on the inner self, and its character as "patriarchal religion," brings with it a new mentality and a new spirituality, which have decisively shaped the Western image of man. Finally, this shift entails a change in worldview, in the way people make sense of their place in the world. The shift has been investigated most thoroughly in these terms, Karl Jaspers's concept of the "axial age" interpreting it as a breakthrough to transcendence,[2] Max Weber's concept of rationalization, as a process of disenchantment.[3]

I use the concept of the "Mosaic distinction" to designate the most important aspect of this shift. What seems crucial to me is not the distinction between the One God and many gods but the distinction between truth and falsehood in religion, between the true god and false gods, true doctrine and false doctrine, knowledge and ignorance, belief and unbelief. This distinction is struck and then erased, only to be reintroduced on later occasions in an exacerbated or attenuated form. Rather than speaking of a single "monotheistic shift," with an unambiguous "before" and "after," one could therefore refer with equal justice to "monotheistic moments" in which the Mosaic distinction is struck with all severity—the

first and second commandments, the story of the Golden Calf, the forced termination of mixed marriages under Nehemiah, the destruction of pagan temples in Christian late antiquity—before being watered down or even almost forgotten in the unavoidable compromises that determine the everyday practice of religious life. This is discussed in greater detail in chapter 1. For now, I want to focus on the problem of temporality. The Mosaic distinction is not a historical event that revolutionized the world overnight, but a regulative idea that exerted its world-changing influence in fits and starts, so to speak, over a period of hundreds and thousands of years. Only in this sense can we speak of a "monotheistic shift." It does not coincide in any datable way with the Mosaic distinction, and certainly not with the biographical particulars of any historical "man Moses."

Before this shift there were only tribal and "polytheistic" cult and national religions, which had evolved over time; afterwards, new religions emerged to rival and increasingly supplant these historically evolved religions, several of which still survive in various cultures today. These new religions are all monotheisms, religions of the book (or revealed religions), and world religions, notwithstanding possible quibbles about whether Buddhism is really monotheistic, whether Judaism is really a world religion, and even whether Christianity is really monotheistic and a religion of the book. What all of 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. This exclusive truth is something genuinely new, and its novel, exclusive and exclusionary character is clearly reflected in the manner in which it is communicated and codified. It claims to have been revealed to humankind once and for all, since no path of merely human fashioning could have led from the experiences accumulated over countless generations to this goal; and it has been deposited in a canon of sacred texts, since no cult or rite would have been capable of preserving this revealed truth down the ages. From the world-disclosing force of this truth, the new or secondary religions draw the antagonistic energy that allows them to recognize and condemn falsehood, and to expound the truth in a normative edifice of guidelines, dogmas, behavioral precepts, and salvational doctrines. 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. These new religions can therefore perhaps be characterized most adequately by the term "counterreligion." For these religions, and for these religions alone, the truth to be proclaimed comes with an enemy to be fought. Only they know of heretics and pagans, false doctrine, sects, superstition, idolatry, magic, ignorance, unbelief, heresy, and whatever other terms have been coined to designate what they denounce, persecute and proscribe as manifestations of untruth.

This book does not aim to provide an exhaustive account of the shift from polytheism to monotheism, from primary to secondary religions, that I have just described, but rather to clarify and further develop the position I advanced in my book *Moses the Egyptian* by confronting it with a number of critical responses and objections.[4] It is not my intention, however, to augment or defend that book, let alone to write a sequel. I want instead to deal in a more concentrated and comprehensive fashion with questions that concerned me only at the margins of the book or at the margins of my mind whilst writing it, but which the critical reception of that book first showed me to have been its central theses and themes. Literary theory has taught us to distinguish between the "authorial intention" of a text and its "meaning." As the author of *Moses the Egyptian*, I have been able to experience the legitimacy of that distinction firsthand. Only in the critical reception accorded the book did the thesis of the Mosaic distinction emerge, to my own surprise, as its semantic core, its chief concern. The book was almost universally understood as a contribution to the critique of religion, if not as a frontal attack on monotheism in general and/or Christianity in particular. Initially, I thought to defend myself against this reading by stating that such had never been my intention. I had set out instead to illuminate a previously obscure chapter in the history of the reception of Egypt in the West. The rage for all things Egyptian sparked in the Renaissance by the rediscovery of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, the hieroglyphic books of Horapollon, and the Roman obelisks, was widely known and comparatively well researched; likewise the eighteenth-century fascination with Egypt, with its sphinxes, obelisks, pyramids, and Masonic mysteries; and, above all, the "Egyptomania" that swept through Europe in the nineteenth century following the Napoleonic expedition to Egypt

and the volumes of the *Description de l'Egypte* that resulted from it. All but unknown, however, was the episode in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that centered on the figure of Moses the Egyptian, culminating in the audacious idea that biblical monotheism has its roots in Egypt and represents a transcodification of the Egyptian mysteries. I wanted to retrace this newly discovered chapter in the history of the memory of Egypt in the West, from its ancient origins right down to its present-day consequences; and it may well be that, carried away by the exhilaration of discovery, I overstated my case. In essence, however, I wanted to attempt a historical or "mnemohistorical" reconstruction, not to embroil myself in theological controversy.

I have since come to realize that this argument is completely beside the point. What counts here is not the "subjectively intended meaning," whatever that may have been, but the potential meaning contained in a text, as it comes to be released through different readings and actualized in the interaction between text and reader—an insight, incidentally, that is entirely consistent with the methodological approach of a "mnemohistory" trialled in the book in question. For I, too, did not ask how biblical and other texts were subjectively intended, but rather what semantic potentials they were able to release in their readers. After five years or so of extremely lively debate surrounding *Moses the Egyptian*, I am thus grateful to take the opportunity to engage with the potential meanings that different readings have helped to crystallize. I would like, above all, to address the questions provoked by the concept of the Mosaic distinction.

My book has come under fire on two fronts. Some rebuke me for having introduced the Mosaic distinction, others for wanting to do away with it. In the first case, it is objected that I impute to the biblical religion (if I can summarize the ancient Israelite, Jewish, and Christian religions under that term) a distinction, and with it an exclusionary tendency, that is foreign to its nature; in the second case, it is objected, on the contrary, that I call into question a distinction that is constitutive for biblical religion, as well as for all the Western values that are based on it. Both objections, although diametrically opposed to each other, tar me with the brush of anti-Semitism: one sees an implicit intolerance in the concept of the Mosaic distinction; the other sees, in the demand that it be rescinded, a call for a return to Egypt, a plea for polytheism, cosmotheism, and a reenchantment

of the world. Rolf Rendtorff argues "that there is no Mosaic distinction . . . in the Bible," hence that I have foisted on the Bible a construction that is quite alien to it.[5] The Mosaic distinction is rather, as Klaus Koch insists, "an antithesis borrowed from modern theories of religion. . . . [I]s it at all suited to fundamental definitions of essence?" The transitions that took place were actually fluid; polytheism and monotheism overlapped in many areas, and their neat separation for analytic purposes flies in the face of historical reality. The Mosaic distinction is a theoretical construct without foundation in "real history, with its political, economic and social factors."[6] Erich Zenger and Gerhard Kaiser go a step further when they see this construct designating a kind of fall from grace. "According to Assmann," writes Zenger, "the Mosaic distinction is nothing less than the original sin of religious and cultural history. From an Egyptian perspective, it looks as if sin first came into the world with the Mosaic distinction."[7] If it is thus historically untenable to impute the Mosaic distinction (between true and false religion) to monotheistic religion, then it is also theologically dubious to call this distinction into question and to urge that it be revoked. "Jan Assmann," writes Karl-Josef Kuchel, "wants to replace biblical monotheism with cosmotheism. He thereby places himself in a tradition that he himself has described with the keywords 'alchemy, cabbala, hermeticism, neo-Platonism, Spinozism, deism and pantheism.'"[8] Erich Zenger ascribes to me the "fundamental claim" that "[t]his [Mosaic] distinction has brought so much suffering and violence into the world that it ought finally to be done away with. The price that human history has had to pay for it to date is simply too high."[9]

These are weighty objections. They are not without justification, as I am forced to admit with regard to several passages of my text, and they warrant scrupulous examination. Moreover, they bear on problems that were not entirely clear to me at the time I wrote *Moses the Egyptian*. Indeed, I must confess that some points are still unclear to me today, albeit not *in puncto* "anti-Semitism." It is all the more important to me, then, that I add my own voice to the debate. Nothing could lie further from my intention than to want to replace biblical monotheism, my intellectual and spiritual patrimony, with a cosmotheism that I have now spent decades of research exploring, although I am also aware that scholarly research of this

nature cannot be carried out without a modicum of empathy and simple respect.

This book sets out, not only to respond to objections raised by my critics in discussions, reviews, and letters, but also to engage with objections that have crossed my own mind over the years. In addition, they outline points where I believe myself to have advanced beyond the views I put forward four years ago. In what follows, I nonetheless seek to remain strictly within the thematic confines of my book on Moses. I have my critics to thank for whatever else I may have learned since it was published. I feel the critical reception afforded the book in so many diverse disciplines to be a great gift, one made all the more welcome to me by my own unfamiliarity with the terrain of most of the disciplines in whose preserves I have so impudently poached.