Is Monotheism Particularly Prone to Violence?

A Historical Critique

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Abstract

This article draws into question the assertion that monotheistic religions are more likely to promote violence than other religious systems, particularly polytheisms, by critically examining three aspects of the argument linking violence and monotheistic religions: (1) it redresses the nearly complete absence of historical perspectives predating the Common Era; (2) it draws attention to the significant links between ancient polytheistic religions and violence; and (3) it argues that a rigid monotheism/polytheism distinction is often unhelpful in the analysis of ancient religions.

Introduction

The problem of religious violence is pressing for societies the world over, and proper interpretation of the phenomenon is essential to accurate and effective explanations and responses.[1] Despite the urgency of the problem and the lamentable abundance of data across centuries and even millennia, the often contradictory explanations of religious violence make it clear that further analytical clarity is imperative. On one hand, Rodney Stark argues, "When several powerful particularistic [i.e. monotheistic] faiths threaten one another, conflict will be maximized, as will levels of intolerance" (123), and Jonathan Kirsch affirms that "if there is only one god, if there is only one right way to worship that god, then there is

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[1] For the purposes of this article we can leave aside a precise definition of "violence." Although suicide and martyrdom should not be overlooked, I use the term here to denote "action that creates physical injury to others."

only one fitting punishment for failing to do so – death" (2). On the other hand, Jack David Eller suggests that religious movements of any stripe are no more violent than secular movements: "religions by themselves neither generate all violence nor promise all nonviolence (that is, many of the engines of violence are secular, including economics, politics, race, gender, and so forth)" (372).

This article critically examines three aspects of the arguments linking violence and monotheistic religions: (1) it redresses the nearly complete absence of historical perspectives predating the Common Era; (2) it draws attention to the significant links between ancient polytheistic religions and violence; and (3) it argues that a rigid monotheism/polytheism distinction is often unhelpful in the analysis of ancient religions. While the article is limited to the articulation of these critiques, the refinements it proposes should enable a clearer understanding of the varied ways that violence and religious systems interrelate.

A Further-Reaching Historical Perspective

In light of the fact that Judaism had its antecedents in the pre-Classical era (as the religion of Israel) and made significant contributions to the later monotheistic traditions of Christianity and Islam, it is striking that little attention has been given to the abundant data that predates the Common Era (on the relationship between Judaism and Islam, see Nasr: 428-30, 522-24; Homerin; for the relationship of Judaism to Christianity, see Cox: 414-19; Levenson). Still more striking is the fact that of the thousands of studies that explore the relationship between violence and religion, only a small fraction deal with *any* religion prior to the Common Era, whether Judaism or another of the dozens whose historical manifestations are well-known (e.g., Noegel; Meltzer; Lincoln; and Spronk). In the case of Judaism, it is much more common to begin with the post-exilic era, which respects the origins of Judaism as a concrete phase in the history of Israelite religion but hermetically cuts off the texts and practices concerned from their matrix, which extends centuries further into the past.

The 2009 issue of *Biblical Interpretation* constitutes a notable example that manifests both an abortive approach to Judaism and a disinterest in other ancient religions. While dedicated to "Violence, Scripture, and Textual Practices," it begins with "Early Judaism," essentially at the turn of the era.[2] Not only is that historical break arbitrary with respect to Judaism, but more surprising still is the decision to bypass the scribal tradition in the ancient Near East that extends back to the third millennium and was instrumental in the composition and transmission of texts that describe or promote violence in a variety of religious contexts (see Foster 2007 for a nuanced overview). The following survey, without attempting to be fully representative (much less comprehensive), draws on material spanning several millennia with provenances from across the ancient Near East in order to demonstrate that religion and violence have long been intimately linked.

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[2] This same limitation appears in another publication of papers from the same conference, the 2009/4 issue of the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion.*

Babylonia

Enuma Elish is among the best-known compositions from Babylonia, and is itself indebted to earlier compositions, especially the third millennium Anzu Myth composed in honor of Ninurta (Sparks: 316, citing Lambert). Composed on seven tablets in approximately the twelfth century BCE, Enuma Elish was written to promote the ascension of Marduk to the top of the Babylonian pantheon. Despite this specific goal, and indeed in order to attain it, the text also gives a good bit of attention to cosmology. After several generations of gods emerge from the primordial essence, Marduk appears on the scene and causes such a disturbance that some of the other gods, "finding no rest" amid this chaos, petition Tiamat to do away with Marduk. Tiamat leads a number of allies into battle against her enemies, but ultimately Marduk comes to meet her in single combat when others will not or cannot. When the two finally confront one another, the text is quite detailed:

> They locked in single combat, joining for the fray.
> The Lord [Marduk] spread out his net, encircled her,
> the ill wind he had held behind him he released in her face.
> Tiamat opened her mouth to swallow,
> He thrust in the ill wind so she could not close her lips.
> The raging winds bloated her belly,
> It cut her innards, it pierced the heart.
> He subdued her and snuffed out her life,
> He flung down her carcass, he took his stand upon it . . .
> The Lord trampled upon the frame of Tiamat,
> With merciless mace he crushed her skull.
> He cut open the arteries of her blood,
> He let the North Wind bear (it) away as glad tidings.
> When his fathers saw, they rejoiced and were glad,
> They brought him gifts and presents (Foster 2003: 398).

Having dispatched his foe, Marduk makes her carcass serve as the raw material from which he fashions the cosmos:

> He split her in two, like a fish for drying,
> Half of her he set up and made as a cover, heaven.
> He stretched out the hide and assigned watchmen,
> And ordered them not to let her waters escape . . .
> He established in constellations the stars . . . (Foster 2003: 398).

While violent in its own right as a religious text, in its historical context this cosmogony (like others of the same genre) had definitive ramifications for every Late and Neo-Babylonian king across half a millennium, for the king received his right to rule and his mandate from Marduk. Hence "as does the god, so does the king," with predictable consequences, and all in the name of the god.

Egypt

One of the earliest artifacts relating to the history of Egypt is the Narmer Palette, which depicts the legendary founder of Egypt about to smash the head of an enemy (see the image on the left below).[3]

Whether this image depicts an historical event or not is immaterial: its reuse by rulers from Egypt's earliest days down to the Common Era attests its propagandistic importance for the public as well as its ideological value for Egyptian royalty (Noegel: 14). The same ideology appears in numerous royal texts as well. We take as representative the fifteenth-century Annals of Thutmose III, which describe the king as

> "King of Upper and Lower Egypt, Lord of the Two Lands, . . . Bodily [Son
> of Re] . . . His majesty commanded that the [victories which his father Amun
> gave him be recorded as] an inscription in the temple. . ." (Hoffmeier: 8).

The scores of other royal annals discovered to date likewise attribute the Pharaoh's victories to the gods, making it clear that the military actions of the empire across centuries are instances of religious violence.

Neo-Assyria

Examples of religious violence are evident in numerous sources coming from the Neo-Assyrian Empire, and span nearly its entire existence from the dawn of the tenth century until its demise at the end of the seventh. Among the various reasons that Assyrian royal inscriptions give for state-sponsored violence against other entities is the will of the god

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[3] See Hall and Schulman. The image is in the public domain and is taken from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:NarmerPalette_ROM-gamma.jpg.

(Oded: passim). As an example, Esarhaddon (680-669) says of Abdi-Milkuti, king of Sidon, that he "did not fear my lordship (and) did not listen to the words of my lips, . . . trusted in the rolling sea and threw off the yoke of the god Assur" (Leichty: 15-17). Similarly, Assurbanipal (668-627) launches his Egyptian campaign because the Egyptian Taharqa "forgot the might of Ashur and Ishtar and the great gods, my lords, and trusted in his own strength" (Melville: 364).

Neo-Assyrian sources also link the behavior of the gods to the role of the king. This is especially evident in the appropriation, by several Neo-Assyrian kings from at least Sennacherib (704-681) onward, of material from *Enuma Elish*, modified for an Assyrian audience by replacing Marduk with Anshar, a primeval deity (Weissert: 191-202; Crouch: 21-28). During the last century of Assyria's existence, these facets of divine activity have a particularly strong bearing on the king in the most developed phase of Assyria's ideology of kingship, which established a strong parallel between god and king (Fales: 70). Since violent combat was inseparable from Anshar's = Assur's kingship, the same held true for the human king, who exercised his authority in the god's name.

Judah

The transmission of the Hebrew Bible involved scribes in Persian-period Yehud, a small Jewish community that returned from Babylonian exile and had to begin life anew after the nearly complete destruction of their homeland. The texts transmitted by the Jewish scribes run the gamut in terms of the relationship between the monotheistic religion they promote and religious violence. The most (in)famous example is surely the book of Joshua, which describes a divinely-ordered and divinely-enabled war intended to extirpate or exterminate the various groups in Canaan upon Israel's arrival in the late second millennium. Texts that portray a later period in Israel's history attribute similar functions and roles to Israel's king, as in Psalm 2:

> Why are the nations in an uproar and the peoples devising a vain thing? The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers take counsel together against YHWH and His Anointed, saying,
>
> "Let us tear their fetters apart and cast away their cords from us!"
>
> He who sits in the heavens laughs, the Lord scoffs at them. He will speak to them in his anger and terrify them in His fury, saying,
>
> "But as for me, I have installed my king upon Zion, my holy mountain."
>
> "I will surely tell of YHWH's decree: He said to me,
>
> 'You are my son, today I have begotten you. Ask me, and I will surely give the nations as your inheritance, and the ends of the earth as your possession. You shall break them with a rod of iron, you shall shatter them like pottery.'"
>
> Now therefore, O kings, show discernment; take warning, O judges of the earth! Worship YHWH with reverence and rejoice with trembling. Do homage to the son, lest he become angry and you perish in the way, for his wrath may soon be kindled. How blessed are all who take refuge in him! (Author's translation).

More peaceful, even pacifistic, positions are not lacking from the Hebrew Bible, however. Especially notable is the prophetic book of Nahum, which opposes Judah's God to the violent Assyrian empire and its gods. Despite the combative nature of its message, it does not promote Judean violence against Assyria or any other nation, and is content to leave retribution up to the nation's deity. Strikingly, Nahum promotes non-aggression with reference to at least three elements of ideology that Assyria used to promote military violence against other nations (Timmer): 1) Nahum gives no role whatsoever to the Judean king, whereas the Assyrian king was the gods' representative on earth, and so had a role that was almost divine, especially in battle (Parker: 363); 2) Nahum implicitly accepts Judah's very limited territory, while Assyrian ideology made monarchs responsible for extending the empire across the globe; and finally, 3) while Nahum condemns Assyria for its excessive violence and cruelty, it gives a free pass to all other nations, including those who had left deep scars on Israel and Judah in the past. This is quite different from Assyrian ideology, which condemned all surrounding nations for refusing to submit to Assyrian hegemony, and for being non-Assyrian (Zehnder: 546, 554).

The Forgotten Link between Polytheism and Violence

Regardless of the nature of the relationship between the early religions surveyed above and those which followed upon or derived from them, it is clear that one cannot overlook this dimension in a holistic analysis of religious violence. This leads us to the second facet of our critique: the data from the ancient Near East gives no indication that polytheistic religions were significantly less violent than their monotheistic counterparts. Given what has been said above regarding Babylonia, Egypt, and Neo-Assyria, it suffices to note that per the term's commonly (but not universally) accepted definition, all three contexts were consistently polytheistic and promoted violence no less effectively or directly than did Israelite "official" monotheism (taking for granted the latter reality).[4]

Babylonia

In the case of the Babylonian text *Enuma Elish*, considered above, both the text itself and the national and religious settings in which it was highly esteemed held to the existence of numerous deities. *Enuma Elish* remained an important text until the end of the Neo-Babylonian empire in the sixth century, but is hardly the only witness to that empire's reverence for various divinities. Nabopolassar (626-605) introduces himself as one who from his very infancy sought to honor the gods and so merits divine oversight and help in his military campaigns:

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[4] Note the claim that "true monotheism" was "completely unknown in Mesopotamia" (Bottéro: 42). Although many argue that Israel's origins were polytheistic, the difficulty of linking the monotheism-promoting biblical texts (often dated, at least in their final form, to the exilic period or later) to an earlier stage of Israelite religion only very partially accessible by archaeology suggests it is better avoided. It is beyond doubt, on the other hand, that Israelite and Judahite *practice* in the Iron Age was highly varied and often syncretistic or polytheistic (see Stavrakopoulou and Barton). Our focus on religious violence allows us to bypass popular expressions of religion that would have had a negligible effect on state-sponsored violence in favor of the officially-sponsored texts transmitted in the biblical tradition since they originate from the same matrix as the violence itself, i.e. the state.

> [Shazu] caused Nergal, the strongest among the gods, to march at my side; he slew my foes, felled my enemies. The Assyrian, who had ruled Akkad because of divine anger and had . . . oppressed the inhabitants of the country, . . . with the mighty strength of Nabu and Marduk my lords I removed them from Akkad and caused (the Babylonians) to throw off their yoke (Beaulieu: 307).

Even more striking is the divine variety attested in Nabopolassar's subsequent depiction of Babylon as the meeting point of earth and heaven thanks to his restoration of its Imgur-Enlil temple:

> the wide enclosure of the Igigi, the spacious courtyard of the Anunnaki, the staircase to heaven, the ladder to the nether-world, the station of Lugalirra and Meslamtae, the outdoor shrine of Ishtar the great lady, the place of the throwing-stick of Dagan the hero, the temple of the divine protection of Anu and Enlil, the shrine artfully designed by Ea the lord of Eridu . . . (Beaulieu: 307).

In the same vein, Nabopolasser's son Nebuchadnezzar II (605-562) affirms the legitimacy of his reign by claiming that "Marduk . . . entrusted me with the rule of the totality of peoples, Nabu . . . placed in my hands a just scepter to lead all populated regions aright and to make humanity thrive" (Vanderhooft: 35). Again, it is not the multiplicity of divine names but the distinct identities, roles, and responsibilities of the deities named that argues for their multiple forms even as it recognizes their typically unified purpose.

Egypt

In Egypt, both royal and popular sources evidence a worldview in which various gods coexist (Baines). Major deities like Atum-Re, Ptah, and Amon dominate Egyptian texts (state religion), but scores more were worshipped at local sanctuaries (popular religion). The overall system grew more complex with time, in part because "by the early New Kingdom, deification of the living king had become an established practice, and the living king could himself be worshiped and supplicated for aid as a god" (Silverman: 64-66). In addition to illustrating the historical dynamics that characterize the religions under review here, this latter point illustrates the difficulty of describing Egyptian religion as monotheistic or even henotheistic, even during the reign of the iconoclastic Akhenaten.

This latter king (ca. 1350-1332) gradually elevated the god Aten above all others and eventually suppressed the cults of some other gods (Van De Mieroop: 201-202). The Hymn to Aten, composed during Akhenaten's reign, expresses the deity's unique standing this way:

> How many are your deeds.
> Though hidden from sight,
> O sole God, beside whom there is none!
> You made the earth as you wished, you alone,
> All peoples, herds, and flocks;
> All upon the earth that walk on legs,
> All on high that fly on wings,
> The lands of Khor and Kush,

The land of Egypt (Lichtheim: 46).

The third line in the above citation is particularly salient, as are the attributions of every facet of creation to Aten. In addition to textual artifacts, the founding of Amarna, an entirely new city dedicated to the cult of Aten, bears witness to the scale of this religious innovation. The latter portion of Akhenaten's reign also witnessed the erasure of the phrase "Amun-Re, King of the God" from a variety of public and official settings. Still, some other gods' cults continued to thrive during the Amarna period, and a few decades after Akhenaten subsequent pharaohs began the systematic removal of Akhenaten and his reforms from Egyptian life and memory. Despite this apparently bipolar contrast, the question whether Akhenaten had indeed articulated a monotheistic theology remains vexed (in favor of Amarna-period monotheism, see Assmann; for a different view, see Baines).

Neo-Assyria

In Neo-Assyria, a variety of sources attest to the recognition of a variety of gods, each of whom possessed his or her sphere of influence and character. The invocation offered to the gods by Shalmaneser III (858-824) shows that this view was the perspective of official religion:

> (O) divine Ashur, great lord, king of the great gods; (O) divine Anu, king of the Igigi-gods and the Anunnaki-gods; (O) divine Enlil, sovereign, exalted (one), father of the gods, creator of everythi[ng; (O) divine] Ea, king of the apsû, decider of destinies; (O) divine [Sin, the wise], king of the crown, exalted in radiance; (O) divine Adad, powerful, awesome, lord of plenty; (O) divine Shamash, judge of heaven and earth, governor of all; [(O) divine Mardu]k, sage of the gods, lord of omens; (O) divine Ninurta, warrior of the Igigi-[gods] and the Anunnaki-gods, mighty god; (O) divine Nergal, [perf]ect one, king of battle; (O) divine Nusku, bearer of the holy scepter; god of deliberation; (O) divine Ninlil, spouse of Enlil, mother of the [great] gods; (O) divine Ištar, first (in) heaven and earth, who is perfect in the rites of battle: (O all you) great gods, deciders of destinies, who have made my sovereignty great, (listen). (Strawn: 291)

Despite the arguments of S. Parpola, there is too much variety among the Assyrian gods in terms of their identities and functions to conclude that they should ultimately be subsumed under the rubric of one deity.[5] The question is "whether Assyrians thought of the divine as *primarily* multiple or singular in form, and as *primarily* fragmented or unified in purpose and action" (Porter 2000: 218). While royal Assyrian belief in a unified divine world shows some interesting variation over the last few centuries of the empire, texts that place one god (not always Assur) at the head of the pantheon consistently qualify that god's sway by making the other gods in the pantheon not only distinct but independent. As an example, the seventh-century hymn to Assur states that his decisions hold special authority but then affirms that "the gods Anu, Illil, Ea, Bēlet-Ilī and M[ull]issu heeded Aššur's authority in the

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[5] Parpola's attempts to establish Neo-Assyrian theology as the genesis of Trinitarian thought suggests that his analysis requires revision; see Parpola 1997, 2000. Noteworthy critiques include Porter 1999 and those listed in Pongratz-Leisten: 138 n. 41.

assembly room . . .” (Porter 2000: 268). In this case it is as clear that Assur is atop the pantheon as it is that the pantheon is indeed just that – an assembly of distinct gods, each with their own identity and will.

The Problematic Polytheism/Monotheism Distinction

Here we cannot even sketch the host of issues involved in the definitions of monotheism and polytheism, much less fully draw into question the distinction between them. However, at least two worrisome problems appear from a heuristic study of ancient religions. First, some of the criteria used to identify monotheistic religions are also present in polytheistic religions. For example, while Assur was a distinct deity among many others in Assyrian theology, he shares several characteristics that some have argued explain Israel’s monolatrous worship of YHWH: the god in question is a national god, lacks kinship ties to the other gods, and was perhaps worshipped exclusively in a time of crisis in the hope that he would respond to the worshipper (Lang: 54). If both one god among many (Assur) and a single deity without a pantheon (YHWH) satisfy the criteria, it is clear that the criteria for monotheism must be revised.

Second, some individual religions exhibit (at least at one point in their history) such a mixture of monotheistic and polytheistic characteristics that classifying them as one or the other is terribly reductionist. This complexity, already noted of the Amarna-period religious reforms led by Akhenaten of Egypt, appears in Neo-Assyria as well. I return to Neo-Assyria at this point precisely because the above discussion concluded (somewhat ambiguously) that Assyrian religion in this period was not monotheistic. More must be said, however; there is essentially data that supports both classifications. Even if the data are *predominantly* polytheistic, one cannot simply ignore the other data.

A first step toward clarity on this crucial question involves determining whether this complexity derives from different sets of data from the same period (Porter recognizes that she and Parpola analyze different sources), from data that spans various phases of a religion, or from different means of analysis (e.g., a focus on the deities’ roles in general versus their relation to the king; cf. Pongratz-Leisten). Second, we must resist the temptation to classify a given religion as being either monotheistic or polytheistic and should favor instead an articulation of the religion under consideration in terms that stay as close as possible to the thought and concepts of the sources that attest it. In the case of Neo-Assyria, the conclusion that the Assur hymn written for Assurbanipal presents “Aššur as ruler of all gods and supreme deity” *and* asserts that the other gods’ “joint approval” is required for Assur to assume that very role need not subsequently be forced into a monotheism-polytheism dichotomy that is ill-suited to it (Porter 2000: 268).

Conclusion

Because it seems certain that religious violence will remain something to reckon with, it is extremely important that we possess accurate, historically contextualized *interpretations* of religions so that our explanations and the policies that aim to curtail such violence are as effective as possible (Lawson and McCauley; Yamin). It is evident from the extant literature that essential details concerning religion in the ancient Near East have not yet made their way into popular discourse, or even into a significant number of studies that attempt to

bring the data under the optic of contemporary sociology of religion. The cases outlined above suggest that analyses of religious violence must reckon with the following points: (1) the necessity of including pre-Classical period religions in our analyses, whether or not those religions are genetically related to later ones; (2) that in the ancient world polytheism was no less capable of fomenting violence than was monotheism; and (3) that the categories of monotheism and polytheism have often been employed without attention to the stunning diversity that characterizes the historical manifestations of religions of both types and that consequently bedevils their satisfactory definition and classification (Koorte and de Haardt; Pongratz-Leisten: 162). If these observations are well-founded, their integration in the study of religious violence will facilitate accurate analyses of the phenomenon in the past and present, and thus promote self-correcting integration of the qualitative, interpretative side of the history of religions with the theoretical, comparative task of contemporary sociology of religion.

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