



# IN THE SHADOW OF MOUNT SINAI

PETER SLOTERDIJK

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# **In the Shadow of Mount Sinai**

## ***A Footnote on the Origins and Changing Forms of Total Membership***

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# 1

## Narrowing the Battle Zone

Anyone planning to say something about a controversial matter such as the violent implications of what we call 'monotheism', both those proven and those merely asserted, would be well advised to follow a few rules of caution. Theology is demonic terrain. What Thomas Mann noted about music in his big Washington speech of 1945 about 'Germany and the Germans' applies no less to speaking about divine matters and about this-worldly and other-worldly things. The observation made in the same speech that music is 'the most remote from reality of all the arts and, at the same time, the most passionate' can be transferred without any noteworthy changes to the nature of many theological lessons. They often deal with the most distant and evasive factors, such as God, omnipotence, salvation and damnation, with a vehemence that only the most intimate motifs of passion can ignite. What music and theology have in common is that, when things get serious, they can both be closer to the affected person than the person themselves – as expressed by Saint Augustine in his confessional phrase *interior intimo meo* ('more inward than the most inward place in my heart').<sup>1</sup>

With this warning in mind, I would like in the following to jot down some reflections that can be read as footnotes to two of my religio-theoretical publications from recent years: *God's Zeal*<sup>2</sup> and *You Must Change Your Life*.<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, the deliberations below should also be comprehensible without reference to these books. Some of the theologians' reactions to *God's Zeal* reminded me that one evidently cannot raise certain topics without bringing them to life through such a discussion. It seems that, by



speaking of religious zeal systems in the monotheisms, I had aroused an inclination towards zealous rebuttal, or even the warding-off of demons, among certain readers, namely those from Christian theological circles. These 'rebuttals' generally proceeded from the allegation that I had indiscriminately ascribed to the monotheistic 'scriptural religions', namely Judaism, Christianity and Islam, an 'intrinsic' (thus the established debating term) or, differently put, an irremovable violent component, thus confusing the timelessly benign essence of these religions with their sometimes unappealing historical manifestations. The most determined opponents of this thesis they themselves had posited countered it with the claim that the aforementioned religions, Christianity in particular, wanted to be understood both in their nature and in their self-image as liberating and peacemaking movements. They had, however, been temporarily distracted from their authentic mission by heretical distortions and political instrumentalizations in the course of their respective histories.

In the light of the discussion's development, which was characterized largely by projections, misreading and apologetic interests – and augmented by the numerous, usually very interesting reactions to Jan Assmann's theses on the 'Mosaic distinction' published slightly earlier – I began to doubt that it would be productive to continue the debate as an argument over the correct use of the term 'monotheism'. Above all, the opposition cited *ad nauseam* between a purportedly violence-inclined monotheism and a purportedly violence-averse polytheism constituted a caricature that is best met with silence. In the following remarks, then, I will avoid the term 'monotheism' as far as possible<sup>4</sup> and focus instead on discussing the phenomenon of zealous and potentially violently manifested motivation with reference to certain religious norms without