

**Peter Sloterdijk.** *In the Shadow of Mount Sinai*. Polity Press 2015. 80 pp. \$45.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780745699233); \$12.95 USD (Paperback ISBN 9780745699240).

Before the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks, Mohammed Atta and his co-conspirators performed a series of devotional exercises, trying to work themselves up into the self-disciplined state of mind that would enable them to compel the submission of a whole jet-plane crew and their fellow passengers to their conspiratorial scheme, although they were armed only with box-cutters. What enabled the September 11<sup>th</sup> co-conspirators to carry out their terrorist scheme is what Peter Sloterdijk, in *God's Zeal: The Battle of the Three Monotheisms* (Polity, 2006; hereafter *GZ*), calls religious zealotry, which, Sloterdijk claims, is characteristic of the three Abrahamic religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—and which drives the sacrilegious violence of the international war on terror. Sloterdijk's argument addresses the difficult question of what motivates the Muslim *mujihadeen* terrorists and the Islamist suicide bombers and compels them to carry out their suicidal attacks. But whether those motivations are really explained by Sloterdijk's analysis of the clash of monotheisms is a question that has bothered his critics; and so, a decade later, he has revisited his argument in the drastically changed context of the November 13<sup>th</sup> Paris massacres and the March 22<sup>nd</sup> Brussels terror attack, which have brought the war on terror uncomfortably closer to home for Western European philosophers.

In *In the Shadow of Mount Sinai* (hereafter *SMS*), Sloterdijk's sequel to *GZ*, he evidently drops the controversial clash-of-monotheisms thesis, and, instead, argues that the zealous violence of the contemporary terrorists is driven by the ethno-genesis of all strictly exclusive groups, which enforce solidarity through strict adherence to a covenant between their self-selected members, whilst ostracizing or eliminating outsiders and apostates, as traitors to this strictly-enforced clique. But Sloterdijk's argument is still dependent upon his claim that what he calls 'The Sinai Schema'—that is, the Mosaic covenant between the Ancient Israelites tribes and the Midianite God, *Yahweh*, sanctified by the covenant sacrifice (Exodus 24:1-8), and sealed by the slaughter of those Israelites who committed apostasy by worshipping the Golden Calf (Exodus 32:1-29)—is the prototype of all these strictly exclusive ethno-genetic schemes, suggesting that the clash-of-monotheisms thesis still underwrites Sloterdijk's argument. And this stubborn focus on the religious zealotry of the three Abrahamic monotheisms also raises the question of whether his analysis is really capable of explaining the specifically religious motivations of the Jewish zealots, Christian crusaders, or Muslim terrorists, who carry out the shocking acts of self-sacrificial martyrdom which are characteristic, not only of the First and Second Jewish-Roman Wars of 68-73 CE and 132-135 CE, or of the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> century Christian Crusades, but also of the 21<sup>st</sup> century international war on terror.

In *GZ*, Sloterdijk takes his cue from Jacques Derrida's statement that '[t]he war over the "appropriation of Jerusalem" is today's world war' (*GZ* 2), which Sloterdijk construes to refer to the clash of monotheisms between the three Abrahamic religions that, he argues, drives the contemporary war on/of terror. The three monotheisms, he contends, are inevitably disposed toward conflict, firstly, because of their stringently monolithic thinking of 'God' as 'the One and Only' (*GZ* 24), and, secondly, because of their strictly exclusivist pretensions to total membership in a religious community, from which apostates and outsiders are eliminated. Further, Sloterdijk argues that these three monotheisms are Freudian reaction-formations, motivated by the need to transcend the excessive stress created by catastrophic situations—the Israelite *Exodus*, the Christian Crucifixion, the Mohammedan hijrah—which then result in the compulsively repeated, ritualized behaviors believed to ward off further catastrophes (e.g., sacrificial ritualism) (*GZ* 5-15), but which also result in the post-traumatic stress reactions known as berserker warrior-frenzies: pathological

episodes of zealous violence, directed against infidels and apostates from these strictly exclusive cliques. Although Sloterdijk doesn't state directly that these self-destructive, violent behaviors are characteristic of the three monotheisms, his argument implies it; but the examples he cites to substantiate this claim are drawn from specifically *non*-monotheistic sources—'the wrath of Achilles' in the *Iliad*, 'the ecstatic rapture of the Vedic warriors or the battle rage of the Germanic heroes' etc. (GZ 7)—thereby undermining his basic argument. The French Revolutionary Terror (GZ 26-7, 39, 153) and Soviet and Chinese Communism (GZ 66-7, 142-9, 153-4) are also cited as examples of religious zealotry, although they were explicitly *anti*-religious phenomena, even if certain elements of these sacrilegious movements—the French Revolutionary cult of the Supreme Being, the Stalinist, Maoist, and Robespierrian personality cults, the Chinese Cultural Revolution etc.—may superficially resemble religious zealotry.

Sloterdijk finesses this problem by arguing that the three Abrahamic religions are really 'counter-religions' (GZ 153), founded upon their attacks against pagan polytheism; but the argument appears contrived. Although Sloterdijk warns against 'the risk of becoming a zealot oneself in the fight against zealotry' (GZ 108), his attempt to deconstruct what he calls 'the matrix' (GZ 82-104) of monotheistic thinking risks becoming monolithic itself. 'The long-term goal' of Sloterdijk's anti-zealous zealotry 'must lie,' he writes, 'in dissolving the time-honored matrix in which [a] monovalently conceived being [i.e., God] is necessarily and compulsively joined with the positive values of the bivalent[ly] conceivable statement' [e.g., good vs. evil, right vs. wrong etc.] (GZ 109), although what relevance this bewilderingly abstract statement has to the zealous violence of terrorism remains frustratingly unclear. And Sloterdijk concludes, with unnecessary redundancy: 'In this situation, the path of polyvalent thinking [the path of *many* paths?] is the only [the *only*?] viable one' (GZ 111); 'the path of civilization [i.e., *Western* civilization?] is the only one still open' (GZ 132); and finally: 'I shall repeat it like a credo ... the path of [Western] civilization is the only one that is still open' (GZ 160)—thereby excluding the non-Western world from the secular Western civilization which he offers as the only solution to the religious violence of the clash of monotheisms, and leaving non-Western believers no choice but to accept secular Westernization, or to continue to face the sacrilegious violence which is the West's response to the religious zealotry of its stereotyped enemies.

Following from GZ, then, SMS, Sloterdijk suggests, 'can be read as [a series of] footnotes to two of my religio-theological publications from recent years: *God's Zeal* and *You Must Change Your Life*' (SMS 2), although in SMS, Sloterdijk swears he 'will avoid the term "monotheism" as far as possible[,] and instead focus on discussing the phenomenon' of violent zealotry 'with reference to certain religious norms' (SMS 4) which are characteristic of the three Abrahamic religions. But Sloterdijk finds this resolution—to avoid stereotyping monotheisms—difficult to keep, since, a few chapters later, he announces that he has 'finally arrive[d] at [the answer to?] the question of how monotheism and violence are connected' (SMS 27), although he again finesses the question by referring, not to the 'religio-theoretical construct called "monotheism,"' but to 'the covenantal singularization project' of ethno-genesis (SMS 28)—the formation of a community based upon a covenant exclusively sworn among its charter members—which, he argues, is characteristic of the three Abrahamic religions, and which he dubs 'The Sinai Schema'. The Sinai Schema, Sloterdijk argues, consists of 'the narrative triad of the sealing of the covenant' between Moses, *Yahweh*, and the Israelite tribes (Exodus 19:24), 'the breach of the covenant' in the Golden Calf episode (Exodus 32), and 'the restoration of the covenant' (Exodus 34) (SMS 33) through which the Israelite tribes 'adopt the mode of being of a zealous collective' (SMS 43) and acquire 'a new culture of total

membership' (*SMS* 44) in the *Yahweh* cult. But it is really the second moment in that tripartite scheme—the breach of covenant—which interests Sloterdijk, since it is Israel's apostasy in worshipping the Golden Calf which brings about the display of religious violence, in which Moses, speaking as "the LORD, the God of Israel, says" to the Israelites: "Each man strap a sword to his side. Go back and forth through the camp...each killing his brother and friend and neighbor." The Levites did as Moses commanded, and that day about three thousand of the people died' (Exodus 34: 16-18; cited in *SMS* 29). 'It would be a grave mistake,' Sloterdijk continues, 'to assume that the effects of the Sinai schema were restricted to the religious constitution of Israel,' since 'the basic structures of the Sinaite constitution were passed on to Judaism's religious successors, namely Christianity and Islam' (*SMS* 48-9). Sloterdijk's analysis of Israelite religious violence can then be extended to explain the virtual obsession with 'the problem of apostasy (*ridda*)' displayed by 'the *fatwa* committee of al-Azhar University in Cairo, which determined that "under certain circumstances, apostates must be killed as traitors to Allah"' (*SMS* 51): a *fatwa* carried out by the scarcely sacrificial killings of apostates and infidels by the self-appointed executioners of the Islamic State.

By Sloterdijk's argument, then, the September 11<sup>th</sup> conspirators, like the Islamic State militants, would appear to have been religious zealots, caught up in the clash of monotheisms between the three Abrahamic religions, carrying out their fanatical attacks against apostates from the Muslim religion. But that does not appear to have been the case. The September 11<sup>th</sup> conspirators, like Mohammed Atta, were self-disciplined individuals, carrying out a strict scheme of terrorist counter-attacks against specific sites that represented the Western institutions, which, in their minds, posed an existential threat to the Muslim nations: the White House, the Pentagon, and the World Trade Center. Further, the September 11<sup>th</sup> conspirators were following what they believed were the Prophet Mohammed's instructions for self-sacrificial martyrdom in Muslim holy war (*jihād*), which, they also believed, would not only cleanse and purge them of their apostasies, but would ensure their salvation in the Muslim heaven. The September 11<sup>th</sup> conspirators, in short, were carrying out a specifically Muslim (Wahhabi, Salafist) version of self-sacrificial martyrdom, which closely resembles the self-sacrifice of the Jewish Zealots or Sicarii who waged holy war against the Roman legions in the First and Second Jewish Wars, or of the Early Christian martyrs, like St. Ignatius and Polycarp, who accepted crucifixion in holy war against the Roman Empire.

But it is the specifically *Muslim* emphasis on self-sacrificial martyrdom, evident in the *Qur'anic surahs*, *Al-Anfal* (Spoils of War) and *At-Tawbah* (Repentance), cited by Mohammed Atta in his suicide note, which still promotes sacrificial violence against apostates (*takfir*) and infidels (*kafirs* or *kuffar*) and sacralizes violent death in Islamist holy war, that distinguishes the Muslim *mujihadeen* terrorists and Islamist suicide bombers from their Jewish and Christian counterparts. The difference between Jewish, Christian, and Muslim monotheisms lies in the extent to which they espouse sacrificial violence in the cause of holy war, or, contrarily, embrace specifically non-violent means of spiritual struggle and self-sacrificial martyrdom. And whether Sloterdijk's argument can account for these differences in religious zealotry characteristic of the three Abrahamic religions is a question still unanswered by *In the Shadow of Mount Sinai*.

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