CHAPTER NINE

DIALOGICAL THEOLOGY AS AN ANSWER TO THE APORIAS OF MONOTHEISM

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Behold, I put my words in your mouth
(Jeremiah 1:9)

Introduction

This collection of essays raises critical questions about monotheism as a historical form of religion. Various authors point to the phenomena of exclusion and violence produced by monotheism in the course of history.¹ The history of monotheism shows many aspects of history written by the victors. Feminist theology has pointed to the traditions which were sacrificed to the development of monotheism, such as the suppression of Asherah from the cult and the religious consciousness of Israel. I refer to the articles by Kune Biezeveld and Maaike de Haardt in this volume. It is undeniable that monotheism expressed itself in a monar-

¹ Is the word “monotheism” a suitable label for great world religions? Some authors have answered this question in the negative. See for instance the contribution by Etienne Cornélius to the special issue of Concilium on “Één God: Ontwikkelingen in de westerse cultuur noodzaken ons opnieuw na te denken over het historisch en theologisch monotheïsme,” [One God: Developments in Western culture force us to rethink historical and theological monotheism], entitled: “De vloeiende grenzen van het begrip ‘het uiteindelijke,’” [The fluid boundaries of the concept of “the ultimate”], in Concilium 21 (1985) 1: 10-20. The conclusion of Cornélius’s (religio-phenomenological) discussion is that irreconcilable formulations of the divine in various world religions may nevertheless go back to compatible experiences. The question, next, is whether other dilemmas than the dilemma of monotheism-polytheism are not more important in the present situation, for instance that of “personal or impersonal,” “objectivity or subjectivity.” See also the “Introduction” on page 7. Without entering into this here, I will try further on to justify the use of the term “monotheism.” See also Bernhard Lang, “Die Jahwe-allein-Bewegung,” in Der einzige Gott: Die Geburt des biblischen Monotheismus (ed. B. Lang; München: Kösel, 1981), 47-83.
chist and patriarchal image of God and thus gave an ideological foundation to various forms of patriarchal systems both within the Western world and outside of it. Should monotheism not be banned?

In this article I discuss whether, despite all pertinent criticism, we can nevertheless talk about an unrelinquishable element of truth in monotheism as it has been expressed in the biblical belief in God. In my view, the path of biblical monotheism extending to the New Testament and rabbinical literature can also be read as a counter-history against demonic powers, a counter-history which stayed alive in various ways in Judaism and Christianity. In the past few decades this has been particularly emphasised by political theology and liberation theology. In this way of reading, the truth of monotheism cannot be found in a teleological conception of world history as the unfolding of the Absolute Spirit (as Hegel believed), but in the historical discontinuities retained in the dialogical character of the scriptural texts. The dialogical (in the penitential psalms, in the Book of Job for instance) shows that there is a residue of unfulfilled, damaged history. The dialogical style helps us to see that God is not the regulatory principle of historical events but the presupposition of a resistance which holds its own in the historical conflicts of human beings.

In what follows I will take closer look at this dialogical style as an approach to talking about God. First I will offer some comments on the use of the term “monotheism” and will put my own contribution in a

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2 I follow here René Buchholz in his *Körper–Natur–Geschichte: Materialistische Impulse für eine nachidealistische Theologie* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2001). Buchholz borrows the term “Counter-history” from David Biale, who defined it as follows: “I mean by this term the belief that true history lies in a subterranean tradition that must be brought to light, much as the apocalyptic thinker decodes an ancient prophecy or as Walter Benjamin spoke of ‘brushing history against the grain.’” The historian who practises counter-history “affirms the existence of a ‘mainstream’ or ‘establishment’ history, but believes that the vital force lies in a secret tradition.” See Buchholz, *Körper–Natur–Geschichte*, 296. David Biale, *Gershom Scholem: Kabbalah and Counter-History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), 7.