

Banging on the Open Door of Heaven

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In the “Luther year” of 2017, Suhrkamp Verlag published a book on the philosophy of religion by Peter Sloterdijk entitled *After God*¹. At the time, it was a rather thematically compiled collection of essays, lectures, and text passages that had already been published in different sources. Three years later, as can be seen from the afterword, the current work of Sloterdijk goes back to the plan to write “a short essay on the subject of ‘theopoetry’” (ix) for Jan Assmann’s eightieth birthday. This plan got entangled in what we can call, in a Gadamerian manner, an extension of the hermeneutical radius and—the result is a volume of almost three hundred pages in which Sloterdijk draws up a panorama of the history of ideas in religions from ancient Egypt to the present in 20 essays.

Unlike the case of its predecessor, this collection is a more coherent and structured work in which Sloterdijk particularly stands out with his unique hermeneutical instinct for breaking through common interpretation schemes in an unconventional and ironically distanced manner. Whether the book has what it takes to become a classic is something the history of reception will have to decide; what is certain is that with it, Sloterdijk once again proves to both his followers and his critics that the reputation of his work as a rich set of traditions of intellectual inquiry – in which the thinkers and traditions he relies upon animate his core of an astonishing range – is justified.

Making the heavens speak, which is divided into two main parts, begins with reflections on the representation of the gods in Greek theater (*Chapter 1*); “Athenian theater-engineers” developed the *theologeion* for this purpose, a *floating crane* with the help of which “divine apparitions from above” were made possible (5) – the associated idea of a divine address from above was also retained by Christianity. With Plato, according to Sloterdijk in *Chapter 1*, the process of creating a *theologeion* is further developed with the lasting consequences of “decoupling of fiction and truth” (18), which made it possible in Christian times to speak of the “true religion” (*Chapter 3*, 22).

After a short digression on Egyptian monotheism (*Chapter 4*), Sloterdijk addresses the “impact of the Platonic intervention” in Chapter five: the previously approachable God becomes the “best of all possible heaven dwellers”, who can only be conceived “in superlatives” (38). In Chapter 6, we are given a first outlook on Sloterdijk’s own meaning of this tradition: it is plausible to understand religions “as products of local power of imaginations” and *theologians* as “dramaturges who deal with the grammar of fables” (44) – however, this is no longer a revolutionary message today, but the almost “dominant opinion” among the “educated class today in western civilization” (44). However, following Sloterdijk’s intuition, the anthropological problem remains valid regardless of hermeneutical community’s corroboration – people’s questions about “who they are, where they come from, where they live, with whom and with what they share their existence, and what they were created for” are still asked in the awareness “that there is something about them that goes beyond themselves” (50). In this extended context, Sloterdijk sustains that “the seriousness of hell seizes upon the worldview of strict monotheists – and, with it, the perplexity of creating viable forms of totalitarianism” (*Chapter 8*, 56) are the wrong answer: Despite the evident poetic texture of the religious structures, their “strong characteristic” is generated by “doing everything in their power to avoid comparison with the myths, cults, and fictions of other cultures” (64). However, according to Sloterdijk’s thesis in *Chapter 8* and *9*, this state of affairs reveals not an “ontological” but only a “genre-theoretical” difference between laws and poems: “they do not come from separate stars is manifest in the fact that both of them thrive in consistently quoting, reciting, interpreting, and relaying” (68).

In the tenth chapter, the author parallels the “death of the gods” from the beginning of the modern era with the decline of many regional languages and dialects - although one should not underestimate the “haunting ability of emeritus gods” (76). As a theological example, in the eleventh chapter, Karl Barth's project of a dialectical theology is presented, which, according to Sloterdijk's interpretation, is based on an integration of the knowing subject into the object and *supersubject to be known*, God. In this manner, the author diagnoses that “Anyone who likes to run in such circles can become a theologian” (78).

On the Catholic side, in the twelfth chapter, the *Enchiridion Symbolorum* becomes the subject of Sloterdijk's mildly ironic observation: “Denzinger's world” is a kind of “magic garden on whose bushes there blossom”, full of “but blossoms on the old, often cropped-back bush of orthopoetry” (87). Or in other words: “One cannot possibly do better than to study Denzinger–Hünemann if one wishes to find out what theopoetics sounds like when it strives to suppress the sense that it is composed of inspired poems or strategic fabrications” (91). The second main part, which begins with the 13th Chapter and which endeavours to support the thesis of an inner relationship between religion and “poetry” that has been developed so far, has a stronger narrative character. Sloterdijk once again refers to the *Greek pantheon*, a fiction that, in his view, strengthens the community, to which Socrates' contemporaries had “hardly a closer relationship with figures such as Zeus, Ares, Artemis, or Poseidon than today's Germans have with the federal eagle” (104). After centuries of dominance, Christianity, which has once again become a “minority *religio*”, is now approaching such a role as a “folk” construct (*Chapter 14*, 115). The “twilight of stabilities”, says Sloterdijk in *Chapter 15*, is also evident in the fact that a general idea of “a higher order of sovereignty” can no longer be identified (131). Sloterdijk also sees the trust in the incomprehensibility of God, who, despite all contingencies, has a “history of salvation” for man in mind - understood as a global expedition for salvageable souls adrift on the ocean of the world - as no longer viable (*Chapter 16*, 201) – here he refers to Job's complaint, which God answers “With arguments from nature as well as morality” in order to use them to “crush his would-be accuser to the ground” (147). Such a maneuver is only possible as long as people voluntarily step back from the “presumption of

questioning” and are not aware that “asking questions is the piety of thought” (147)².

In *Chapter 17*, Sloterdijk devotes himself in detail to various “poetry of exaggeration” using the example of hermits, pillar saints and various other types of “dolorists”, whose meticulously described practices are interpreted as acts of “permanent flight from the world” (174). The aspect of religious “propaganda”, which Sloterdijk defines as the “transgenerational incorporation of poetry”, is discussed in *Chapter 18*; here is also formulated the quote that gives the title: “Heaven could be made to speak only against the backdrop of a theology that had little respect for distinctions between insistence and intrusiveness, where inhabitants of the earth could not finally determine with certainty the properties of this heaven – apart from its unremitting ambivalence, which from time immemorial had prefigured itself in the perpetual heavenly alternation of day and night” (209). The summary can be found in the two final chapters: From a “pragmatic point of view,” there is “no ‘disbelief’ among capable individuals,” because “capability under everyday pressure” implies “an attitude to existence under guiding convictions” (Chapter 19, 307). For Sloterdijk, the “restless subject” of the present day is therefore particularly characterized by the “way of being of the wanderer”, even if the “The object of the search proves elusive and ungraspable, since it evades the ray of the seeker’s regard, so to speak” – “The great aspirations – truth, God, meaning, nature, happiness, wisdom, redemption, epiphany, etc. – lie outside the brain game of ‘attainment’.” (222). Religion, Sloterdijk concludes in *Chapter 19*, is not a structure or phenomenon that is capable of living in a world without sedimentation, and is therefore ultimately a “remainder of worldviews originating in civilizations variously archaic and great – it is what is left over, once one has subtracted out those manifestations of life now replaced by pragmatic and secular forms“ (230). The particular and surprising conclusion that Sloterdijk comes to on this basis consists in a double understanding of “religious freedom”: On the one hand, religion “has become absolutely free in the present” in the sense of its “complete release from all social functions” – it does not have to serve group psychological, political or therapeutic purposes, since modern societies have already replaced it with other entities (231).

As it is characteristic, Sloterdijk's work does not offer a finely detailed analysis of the history of philosophy that strives for historical contextualization, but rather a *tour de force* through centuries of global intellectual history. This is to be accepted and expected from a knowledgeable scholar and talented stylist such as him – but sometimes, particularly in the second part of the book, which is rich in referential material, one gets the impression that Sloterdijk acted purely on an hermeneutical instinct based on testing the „possible” itself, but nonetheless never without a *Grund*. For example, at the beginning of *Chapter 14*, where the path leads in seven pages from Karl Marx back to Montesquieu and on to the Dadaists, from them back to the French Revolution and Napoleon, from him to Nietzsche and Richard Wagner, from there back to the year 1492 and finally forward to the *Linguistic Turn*. In this context, some peculiarities of the history of religion, such as the “excesses” of the “religious virtuosos” – walled-in monks, Buddhist priests who mummified themselves while still alive (176) - seem to have been invoked in order to keep the frame aligned with his central thesis that religion is essentially an aesthetic phenomenon (“theopoetry”); along this line Sloterdijk intentionally does not even ask the „immanent” question, since he dismisses it as long since overcome, namely whether religions do not actually ultimately have in mind a universal hope for salvation, which must necessarily be supported by personal evidence.

The tone therefore becomes more polemical when it comes to the corresponding claims of Christianity – which was thus shaped by Plato, Paul and Augustine – or even Islam: in the first centuries, the transmission of faith became an “introduction to the hard world made its mark upon them by way of beatings and irresistibly melodic liturgies” (192), and in the context of modernity it became the equivalent of political ideologies: “of slogans and suggestions, campaigns were organized to stimulate the flow of salivary streams and their mental equivalents in the conditioned masses of opinion followers, in accordance with Pavlov’s findings on dogs” (207). These are robust generalizations based on personal intuition, against which it would be pointless to argue. But – once again – the question can still be asked: what is the aim of the hope of religious people, and is it dismissed simply because a large

number of contemporary academics consider it to be unjustified? Sloterdijk seems to have overcome the necessity of this question by re-interpreting the old prejudice that “monotheism” means answering final questions with the “hellish seriousness” of definitive answers. Not all of his recipients who see themselves as religious will want to follow Sloterdijk’s hermeneutics. Nevertheless, even from an internal religious perspective, one should not too quickly dismiss the author’s final thesis that religion has become “free” in late modernity from the compulsion to serve society as a therapeutic or community-building authority as baseless: How often have we not lamented the absence or silence of the churches in the liminal/exceptional times we are currently experiencing? Sloterdijk, who wrote his book before the beginning of the present states of affairs, offers an illuminating change of perspective here: The dispensability of religion in times of crisis shows us that what was once understood as its constitutive function – community building, pastoral care, interpretation of meaning – has long been fulfilled by other authorities, “sometimes at a loss, but not infrequently with equal or better success” (234). In short: the “silence” of the churches is the ignoring of the addressees. This fact will have to be accepted as the new normal more quickly than some steadfast advocates of a “missionary pastoral care” would like.

In this context, reading a book by Sloterdijk is always an edifying, but also challenging break from the conventions of standard scientific literature. In this respect, it should not be ignored that from the point of view of the university pedant there is of course a lot to criticize – or to put it in Sloterdijk’s terms (a reality that becomes a normal situation in the biblical Gutenberg world, a normality pertaining previously only to the melting pot of Alexandria in late antiquity): “those who can read will ask questions” (217). Sloterdijk does not want to check the many references, theorems, and ways of thinking that he lets pass by in the manner of an interested and knowledgeable flaneur for consistency, or to appreciate them as independent systems with a legitimate interest in justification. His standpoint is that of a purely contemplative irony that does not want to take anything seriously because it knows itself to be the lesser evil “compared to the usual theological saying too much [...] and ultimately knowing everything better” (141). Sloterdijk’s gesture is just another (if impressive) type of the hubris he denounces: How, if

not as an ironist, can one still pretend to be a universal scientist today by bundling the plurality of one's own knowledge into a multiply broken unified narrative? Sloterdijk – and this is admitted without any irony – is one of the last of his kind: a hermeneut of the big picture and a brilliant stylist who creates a highly unconventional short compendium of the history of religion, only to ultimately point out the uselessness as the actual benefit of religion and anthropology. This final verdict then of course also applies to the work and the author himself. But if you assume that his reflections on “theopoetry” are more poems than laws and thus useless (useless on a second level, so to speak), you will be banging on an open door with Sloterdijk.

NOTES

¹ Sloterdijk, Peter. 2022. *After God*. Translated by Ian Alexander Moore. Cambridge: Polity Press.

² Martin Heidegger famously ended his essay on technology with the statement that “Questioning is the piety of thought” (Heidegger, Martin. 1977. *The question concerning Technology and other essays*. Translated and Introduction by William Lovitt. New York: Garland Publishing).

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