

## Religious Transformation in the later Eighteenth Century (YDS 10-168/9)

### *The Rockwell Lectures, Rice, February 1974*

*Frei delivered three lectures in Rice University in 1974, which were advertised as 'Lessing and the Religious Use of Irony', 'Kant and the Transcendence of Rationalism and Religion' and 'Herder and the New Humanism'. It seems that the typescript of the first of these was later re-used in the preparation of his George F. Thomas Memorial Lecture on Lessing in 1978, and can be found amongst the drafts for that lecture (YDS 10-168/9). There is also (in YDS 13-198) a typescript that seems almost certainly to be the second lecture. Of the third, nothing survives – although it seems likely that Frei ran out of time and never delivered or even prepared it (see notes 3 and 4 below, which indicate that Frei spoke on Lessing for two nights, and that he deleted references to Herder at some stage in preparation).*

*The typescripts and manuscripts associated with the first lecture are in a very confusing state, although they divide into three groups, probably chronologically:*

- (i) a typescript with emendations, and some manuscript sheets, which together are likely to be a version of what was delivered in 1974;*
- (ii) more extensive manuscript additions and rewrites, which seem to be in places inconclusive, and which probably result from Frei's attempts to rewrite the material for publication (see the letter to Wayne Meeks, May 7 1974, in YDS 3-65);*
- (iii) an unfinished new typescript version for the George F. Thomas Memorial Lecture in 1978, incorporating sections from the earlier typescript.*

*Below, I begin with the first of these, then give the Kant material from YDS 13-198 which I believe followed it, then give the extensive manuscript rewrites. CPH 1974c(i) and 1974c(ii).*

### Lecture One: Lessing and the Religious Use of Irony

#### Introduction

A constant recollection of our traditions is for all of us a healthy not to say a vital matter. We remember that in Aldous Huxley's *The Brave New World*, complete control of the present and future depends either on the obliteration or the distortion of the past. None of us are ever quite sure why we want to study history, and certainly we don't want simply to repeat our traditions. But even when we are not wholly certain what the uses of history-writing are, we tend to have a dim appreciation of our own vital concern in what the historians are

arguing about. Even if we cannot put our finger on it, we know pretty well that we have a stake in the arguments of revisionist and orthodox historians about the circumstances that led to the cold war or to the concluding of the Japanese Peace Treaty or to the neutralization of Austria and to the present slowly resolving log jam in International Policy. The situation is similar with regard to what we call, sometimes rather derisively, intellectual history. Even if we do not know why we want to confirm or reject it, we have a hunch that it is worth revising, that a return to preoccupation with certain stretches of it will always add a vital dimension to our lives.

The late Lucien Goldmann, a great Marxist intellectual historian, left a kind of testament in which he made an urgent plea very similar to that of the sociologists of knowledge that came out of the Frankfurt School, for a revival of humanistic religion.<sup>1</sup> What he wanted was not a return to Christianity, which he thought was totally demolished in the Eighteenth Century, although for more profoundly historical and sociological reasons that the demolition squad could be aware of, but a wedding of a non-God kind of humanism, a religion of immanence rather than transcendence, with the forces of technological development. If there were no such wedding between humanism and technology, he thought, technology would devour us. He was neither the first nor the last Marxist who saw in his own creed and his own partial history-writing a bulwark of humanism against materialism. I cite him only as one example of a good many people from left to right on the political spectrum, who return again and again to the period of the Enlightenment.

What I want to do in these three lectures is to explore one relatively narrow but highly significant portion of the Enlightenment, not in order to set forth once again the fruit of its speculations, that contrast between its creed— if that is what it may be called — and what had gone before, but rather to indicate both a transformation and a continuity in the personal stance of free men who lived during this period and made significant contributions to it. For part of what I find to be the use of the past is the discovery of passionately held options in outlooks towards life, death, the world and man, on the part of men who thought of themselves as inwardly free, no matter what their external condition.<sup>2</sup>

There are at least three things that the<sup>3</sup> men we're going to talk about held in common. They were part of the German Enlightenment, they were much more conservative than their British or French counterparts, and finally, perhaps for that reason, they were not only deeply interested in religious questions but tried to utilize as much as possible of their religious past while changing it drastically. The chief figures of the British and French Enlightenment were also very much interested in religious questions, but generally they tried whether successfully or not to break with past religious convictions. By contrast Lessing and Kant<sup>4</sup> tried rather to transform those past

perspectives and by means of the transformation to hold on to as much as possible from the past. Rather than seeking to find new religious convictions, they sought to reinterpret or reform the old ones. It was in large part due to these efforts, and many more like them, that the slippery question of interpretation in matters religious became so important. Cardinal Newman was to discover three generations after these men lived that in a time of rapid change it is very difficult to judge what constitutes a reasonable and natural development in a cultural and religious organism and what is instead a foreign and cancerous growth within it. Where does interpretation or reinterpretation become a means for grafting foreign ideas on to what has been inherited and where is it merely a permissible extension of a heritage into modern times and conditions?

All three of our figures were optimists in their cultural outlook, even though not necessarily in their personal hopes. They were about the task of reinterpretation, let the chips fall where they might. Good was in any case bound to be the result.

### Lessing's Life and Work

Gotthold Ephraim Lessing was born in 1729, the son of a learned and quite orthodox Lutheran pastor. In 1746 he matriculated at the University of Leipzig and in accordance with his father's wishes began the study of theology.

Even then Lessing, who was to become the greatest dramatist and most learned critic of his period in Germany, indicated quite clearly that he thought the technical study of theology dry as dust, that he would devote himself to the study of literature. His love of the theater dates at least from this period in his life. But even then he already had a passionate interest in religious and theological questions quite in contrast to the academic study of philosophy and theology, which was to accompany him all his life. This was, of course, not surprising. He lived in a cultural world in which there really was no other way, no matter what one's particular religious convictions, for giving expression to one's profoundest concerns and one's outlook on the world except in the inherited theological forms.

His parents, disquieted by his worldly interests, brought him home for a period of three months. After that he returned to Leipzig as a student of medicine and philology. Once again literature and the theatre got into his blood. After a brief stay toward the end of 1748 he went to Berlin, the Mecca of enlightened thought in the narrow ambience of German culture, and stayed there with brief interruptions until 1755. During this period he worked as a critic, composed what is generally regarded as the first German bourgeois tragedy, *Miss Sarah Sampson*,<sup>5</sup> and collaborated in publishing ventures with the leading progressive literary editor in Berlin, Friedrich Nicolai, and in

researches into the philosophy of aesthetic sensibility with the philosopher Moses Mendelssohn. After some rather restless years, spent among other places in Breslau and then as drama critic in Hamburg, he settled down in 1770 as librarian to the Duke of Brunswick in the small town of Wolfenbüttel. He died in February 1781.

Lessing's career was an instance of a vocation sought by many a German writer in his day, a kind of search with which we are all too familiar in our own day. He wanted to be an independent writer. The usual ways of winning one's bread as a writer did not appeal to him. There were two and both were an assault on his integrity and his liberty. In Germany in particular there was the career of the University Professor, the scholar who finally makes it to full professorship and tenure, and then there was the position of a courtier, as the literate member or one of the literate members of one of the infinitely many heavily constricted and stifling, tiny little German courts with their provincial outlook and their tyrannical atmosphere. Wilhelm Dilthey remarks that the position at court without administrative responsibility, such as Goethe was to have, always proved devastating for the scholar and the poet.<sup>6</sup> But not only were there no other jobs for a man like Lessing, there was no other cultural context for a writer with his critical, theological, scholarly and dramaturgic interests. There was really no independent community to give him support. Lessing was a pioneer as an independent writer.

### Writing for Moral Action

He wrote for moral action, and that is really the one theme I have. Most of what he wrote has the sharp edge of reform on it. His prose style is more modern than that of the philosophers and even some of the literary writers who come soon after him. It has a quality that is at once lucid and conversational. In theological controversy his similes are extraordinarily skilful and as commonplace as they are striking; his interior dialogue – a favorite medium – crisp, blunt, to the point. It is the language of a man at home in his linguistic world; no ambiguities for him! It would be too much to say that his writings were didactic, but unquestionably his arguments (and much of his prose writing is argumentation!) is designed to instruct, and the instruction is practical. He writes for action, and not primarily for vague and speculative theory, although unlike British and French 'Enlighteners' he preserves a strong interest in metaphysical speculation. When he writes about theory it is in the service of shaping a personal stance.

His dramas, especially the comedy *Minna von Barnhelm*,<sup>7</sup> serve the same purpose, and he had already said the same things to the public, in *Laokoon* and elsewhere.<sup>8</sup> Georg Lukács, Peter Demetz and others have taught me to see Minna's striking rejection of theoretical or formal codes because they get in the

way of concrete and practical human behavior.<sup>9</sup> The play, taken one way, is a bit of pedagogy setting forth a paradigm case of a man's rescue from stilted moral theory by his fiancée's lively, warm and very personal humanity. Lessing's characters take on the kind of everyday concreteness and realism which Diderot had proclaimed as one of the goals of writing for the theater. (Lessing translated some of Diderot's essays,<sup>10</sup> as part of his angry rejection of Gottsched, the Wolffian critic and ruling taste-setter in the universities.<sup>11</sup>)

### *Aesthetic Theory and the Primacy of Action*

Lessing's aesthetic theory supported the same primacy of action or life-stance over metaphysical inquiry. The German critic Johann Winckelmann,<sup>12</sup> in a study of Laocoon, the statue in the Vatican Museum which depicted the death through strangulation of the Trojan priest and his two sons, by two snakes, had pointed out the fact that despite the terrible pain, there is no violent distortion in the facial expression of Laocoon. His explanation for the fact is that the artist gave expression here to the perfection of Greek wisdom that suffering is to be borne with dignity, self-control and strength of soul. It is the artist's duty to render the perfection and not the natural expression of man's nature. Violent facial distortion is not a fit expression of the Greek ideal of the proper bearing under acute suffering. To this explanation Lessing says no. He does agree with Winckelmann's observation that Laocoon's face does not give vent to violent pain but he disagrees with Winckelmann why this is so. The Greeks were as violent and as exhibitionist about their suffering as anyone else. Lessing seeks a more universal cause:

The Master worked toward the highest possible beauty under the assumed circumstances of bodily pain. It was impossible to combine the latter in all its distorting violence with the former. And so he had to tone it down; he had to soften the shriek into a sigh: not because shrieking betrays an ignoble soul but because it distorts the face in a repellent manner.<sup>13</sup>

If this is the classical ideal of the visual arts Lessing agrees with it. He is not happy with what he claims is the modern ambition to imitate the whole of visible nature, of which what is beautiful is only a very small part.<sup>14</sup>

Lessing eventually concludes that the limitations of literature and the visual arts are such as to make them fit for the depiction of two quite different aspects of things, and the scaling down of the statue's facial expression is an instance of the particular limitation inherent in the visual arts' *essential* or proper ideal of depicting beauty. Visual artists work with figures and colors in space; but the writer works with articulated sounds in time. The visual artist can express only objects which exist side by side, the poet only those that

follow upon one another. Bodies with their visual characteristics are the proper objects of painting. On the other hand, 'objects which follow upon one another are in general called action. Hence actions are the actual object of poetry.'<sup>15</sup> The painter can imitate actions but only indirectly through the depiction of bodies, and since the painter can only depict a single moment of an action he must choose the most pregnant one which makes what goes before and comes after most nearly intelligible. As imitative skill, painting can express ugliness; as a fine art it does not wish to.<sup>16</sup>

It is evident that Lessing, without wanting to do so, denigrates the visual arts, at least to some extent, and that he does so by elevating them to a lofty position on the pedestal of beauty. Violence is a matter of action and properly portrayed by the sequence in which it is involved. The elevating denigration of painting and the priority of literary art sunders the harmony or analogy between them which eighteenth-century commentators had asserted in the phrase *ut pictura poesis*.<sup>17</sup> That was one of Lessing's primary aims in the essay. For Lessing, literature is itself action as well as the portrayal of action. The truly poetic expression of human life is the portrayal of true human character in the great sweep of its most powerful passions and the ways they are acted out. And if literature is itself to be action and not only the depiction of action, its central core is drama, enacted narration. Drama and dramaturgy for the sake of the reform, nay the birth of German theater is Lessing's aim: and reform of the theater was part of the education and reform of German life. He had powerful ambitions.

#### *Drama and the Primacy of Action*

Lessing's drama was realistic because like Diderot he believed in presenting the real mix and confusion of human motivations and actions. But it was not realistic in the way that a Marxist would think of it, because even though he was very much aware of cultural and political conditions limiting and even entering into human relations, as he indicated not only in *Emilia Galotti*, but in *Ernst und Falk*, his dialogues about Freemasonry, he did not finally present social structure and the historical forces that lie behind them as the motivating power that drives human beings to do and suffer the things they are engaged in. Class structure was not what typified character.<sup>18</sup> Character was finally a basic, as it were irreducible manifestation of humanity, no matter to how large an extent one's religion, country, climate, etc. influenced it, and dramatic portrayal was one of the ways in which one both showed forth and helped to redirect the pivot of the inevitably active outlet of human beings; Lessing was a reformer. His ideal was so to depict and redirect human passions, actions and relations as to call upon the greatest possible degree of direct, unhampered human relations reducing social barriers between people as much as possible.<sup>19</sup>

### *Religious Theory and the Primacy of Action*

The task of the reformer, especially the enlightened critical reformer (intellectual and indeed scholarly but in no sense academic or specialized and alienated in the way the academic specialist of reforming tendencies is apt to be in our day) was to enlighten and thus to liberate. It was to reshape not only the active directions that the passions were to take but the theory that was to guide that reshaping.

To state a theory was in his view not to program an action but to articulate it. And in his day that was bound to involve a new discovery of the right theoretical religious context for the appropriate religious moral shaping of action and passion. Not that he was not interested in philosophical and religious speculation. He was, but it was an interest which was designed for and therefore subordinate to practice. Because he was in the richest and fullest sense a pedagogue of human character in society his theorizing took on a plastic rather than a rigid mold. In his day it was simply inescapable that the articulation of the theoretical context for reform would be in religious terms.

He needed plasticity in religious theory to fit the new shaping of humane passion and character. Therefore the rigidities and dogmas of any and every creed, because it was conceived apart from social and personal life, would be insufficient for life. Just as Lessing could not be content with inherited Lutheran orthodoxies whether of a more dogmatic or more pietistic kind, so he would feel restless with the similarly dogmatic rationalist creed of his friends and companions, specially those in Berlin.

If a person of rational and lucid turn of mind finds difficulty in explaining his views to the contrasting dogmatic positions of his day, he may well resort to irony as a means of self-expression. Irony was his instrument against every vapid and dogmatic enthusiasm, against hypocrisy and lofty elevated claims in the face of the actual ignorance of man concerning his ultimate surroundings. It was also a way of covering his tracks from the pursuit of the ever present censor who was on the lookout for disturbing religious opinions in that narrow atmosphere. In the last analysis it may well have been most of all the means to hold in balance contrary or contradictory convictions for which he could not find a full and final resolution, and a conscious or unconscious reservation about the ability to state linguistically what one really believes and, even if one can, a restless dissatisfaction about stating one's beliefs in any final way in the language of abstract concepts or theory.

In the words of one of his most famous sayings:

If God held all truth in his right hand and in his left the everlasting striving after truth, with the risk that I should always and everlastingly be mistaken, and said to me 'Choose!' in humility I would pick the left hand and say, 'Father grant me that: Absolute truth is for thee alone.'<sup>20</sup>

Irony was his way of applying this utterly seriously meant cautionary note not only to others but to himself. I do not say that this is the secret but deliberate intention motivating his use of irony. I simply say that whatever his motivations irony worked to this effect for him.

## Lessing and Christian Orthodoxy

We see him most typically at work in the opening salvo of what was undoubtedly a deliberately planned campaign against Christian Orthodoxy which he began after he became librarian at Wolfenbüttel. He published over a period of years a series of fragments from the posthumous writing of a Deist scholar Hermann Samuel Reimarus, a huge, vigorously anti-Christian tract entitled *Apology for the Rational Worshippers of God*.<sup>21</sup> Its polemical cutting edge would not have been new in England or France by that time; but in Germany, despite considerable knowledge of English and French Deistic literature, it still aroused extraordinary excitement.

Reimarus' argument is very simply that the notion of a special or privileged revelation from God in the history of the Jewish people, Jesus and the earliest Christian church is self-contradictory and irrational as a theoretical argument. Beyond that, since that belief rests on an historical claim, the strength of that claim must be tested by historical evidence. The question then is: How reliable are the facts reported in the Bible? In this respect Reimarus was a good anti-Protestant Protestant, for he took it that the strength of Christian claims is as solid and certainly no stronger than the claim of the Bible to factual reliability. The sum of the Christian matter for him was the symbiosis of historical facts and the infallible authority of the Bible.

The whole project comes to a climax of course in its argument about the crucial miracle, the one that was the center of all religious agitation in the Eighteenth Century, the Resurrection of Jesus. And in the last of the fragments which Lessing was able to publish Reimarus claims that the whole thing is a hoax and a spiritual power grab on the part of the disciples who by twisting the doctrine of the Messiah into something it had never been intended to be in Jewish belief turned Jesus into the Son of God. They did this by claiming falsely that he had risen and made themselves the executors of His Testament and the authoritative representatives of His Divine Power. The outcry against this philippic on the part of the theological establishment was of course immense.

Why did Lessing get himself into this fierce argument? Why did he not stick, as his chief antagonist, chief pastor Johann Melchior Goeze (1717–1786) in Hamburg sarcastically urged him, to library and theater?<sup>22</sup> Especially since he shared Reimarus' views only to the extent of Reimarus' attack on miracle and the authority and inerrancy of the Bible. He knew perfectly well what he

was getting into. But given the fact that he was intensely serious about the moral education of human beings toward an ideal for which mutual respect for each other's humanity was the only fixed guide, he was bound to come in conflict with those for whom an authoritative religious creed put all those who did not agree in the wrong and made them that much less human.

## Protestant Religion

### *Revelation in History*

The creed that Lessing attacks had as its focus a particular style of outlook on life, death and destiny in which the absolute authority of the Bible went hand in hand with its absolute accuracy as a factual report of past events, particularly those which were regarded as the crucial happenings in history through which God revealed himself. Much of this reportage formed into one long historical sequence from creation to the end of the world, but even though the Old Testament, especially the reliability of the reports about creation and the flight of the children of Israel from Egypt was regarded as highly significant, the heart and center of the issue of the reliability of the Bible was the Resurrection of Jesus reported in the Gospel stories of the New Testament.

With the affirmation of a unique Divine self-revelation in history, both more sharply affirmed and more vigorously doubted as a specific factual datum by eighteenth-century thinkers than by those who had gone before, went two other beliefs that seemed vital to religious outlooks, or at least to religious theory.

### *Natural Theology*

The first of these was a natural theology, so called because the right use of human reason could arrive at it without the aid of the Bible or special revelation. It was an affirmation of an intelligent and at the same time good God who governed the world and men's affairs by disposing of them at once providentially through the orderly concatenation of natural causes and through the free will of men. Natural theologians affirmed, against what they regarded as the sinister fatalism of Spinoza, that the universe was not governed by an inevitable sequence of efficient causes which turned both men and nature alike into nothing but machines in motion. Rather, the Almighty has in the infinite outreach of his omnipotence and goodness created the best of all possible worlds. He is enhancing it steadily by shaping all things individually and together towards the ultimate purpose of implementing the greatest possible happiness among sentient creatures, especially mankind. And in the case of man, this governance is exercised through man's own free will, Divine purpose working itself out through human intelligence and purposeful activity. One

way this natural theology was theory, another way it was a pervasive mood, especially among middle range or school intellectuals.

### *Protestant Sensibility*

Much more profound as a religious perspective was a third aspect of the tradition which went more with the formal creed of biblical authority. Protestant religion was a deeply ingrained sensibility in Germany, more profound than the theological articulation in which it worked itself out. The very reverence for the Bible of which we have talked was due to the conviction that it was a guide, indispensable and vital, to shape one's life by. It not only proclaimed but effected in the human heart the religion it proclaimed. By reading it properly with a repentant and humble heart, one found how attached one had become to life in this world and worn down by its cares, how craven, distorted and selfish the affections in which one held one's nearest and dearest, how focused on one's self all one's thoughts and endeavors, even those that were seemingly most unselfish. By reading the Bible, furthermore, one found out – especially in the letters of Paul the Apostle – that the endeavor to transcend oneself, to gain freedom from these vices, only succeeded in miring one more deeply in them. Salvation lay not so much in the release of one's affections to full joy in eternal life and in other human beings, but in the prior realization that the heart was moved to sheer gratitude because it was touched from without, by God himself. Without our effort, without our work, without our changing, we were forgiven our sins and as a result our affections might be changed and flow freely. It was Jesus on the Cross who was substituted for man's sins; and in that event God justified sinful mankind in his own sight. Man's status was changed, before his affection was remolded, and only so could it be remolded.

There were those for whom this Gospel was an ardent religion of the heart. But there were others who were profoundly ill at ease with such direct appeal to the heart which led to the most intimate religious and emotional sharing among people. They were uneasy with the urgency with which those who had been saved worked over those who had apparently not. For these more restrained folk, the affection of the heart had to be guided and restrained by the affirmation of belief if it was not to be near-fanaticism. But whether it was the heart or the head that made the affirmations, they were in actual belief or articulation very much the same.

The Christian religion in its classical Protestant form was among other things a profound search for the integration of personality; and it is easy to see why a free spirit like Lessing who rejected the historical fact claims of the religion felt much more ambivalent about the guidance for human sensibility that went along with these fact and belief claims.

## Lessing's Stance

Given these three aspects to the tradition he wanted to reform, given his commitment to reshaping moral passions and actions, given his ironic ambiguity, how did he go about the fight he had so deliberately started?<sup>23</sup> Friend and foe were forever startled by his disconcerting skill at covering his own tracks. What did he really believe? When he praised religious orthodoxy about which he was much more ambiguous than about the fact claims of its creed, was it merely a sop, a deliberately misleading compliment? Did he take views of religious truths, long and passionately held by traditionalists, declare publicly that he wanted to uphold them, and did he then go on to interpret them in such a way that their integrity disappeared?

### *Esoteric and Exoteric*

Or perhaps less reprehensible but still painful, did he believe, as scholars have generally held he did, that there is an exoteric and an esoteric truth about any and all religion? If that was the case one could on the one hand claim that he was after all sincere about everything he said and on the other hand that the things he declared about religion he like any man of intelligence would expect his fellow intellectuals to take in some non-literal fashion. For public purposes and for the masses one said one thing, for private purposes and in reality one held another view. And yet one's integrity was not violated because the public symbol is the conveyor of the private truth to those who cannot yet see it in its essence and unadorned.

Such suggestions not only turned Lessing and his views of religion into an unwarranted romantic or idealistic philosophy which was to come a generation later. Further, they at once assert and question his sincerity, and in fact the more they asserted the more questionable it really becomes. But in matters of this sort motivation and integrity are hardly precise and locatable quantities. It is quite conceivable that Lessing could not state unambiguously what he believed at the level of theoretical explanation, especially with regard to the relationship between Christianity and a universal religious truth greater than Christianity. In that case his irony was not a polemical instrument simply nor one to help him cover his own tracks but the appropriate means of stating a reservation<sup>24</sup> that was built into any theoretical statement about religion, any dogma as an assertion of belief, any philosophical proposition as a statement.

### *Letter and Spirit*

The Bible does not make religious convictions true, rather genuine religious convictions show us what is meaningful within the Bible and how to sift out what is merely archaic and historical within scripture from what is religious. In short the letter is not the spirit and the Bible is not religion. Consequently

objections to the letter and to the Bible are not also objections to the spirit and to religion. For the Bible obviously contains more than is essential to religion, and it is a mere hypothesis to assert that it must be equally infallible in this excess of matter.

In order to oppose Goeze's position by an historical argument of his own, Lessing takes a further step. He sets up a counter hypothesis to that of the Bible's historical infallibility. He argues that the Christian religion was there before the Bible existed, and in effect it involved not only a personal life stance towards God and neighbors but a certain belief or rule of faith concerning what must be asserted about God, man and salvation. These things and more, that historical 'excess of matter' of which he has just spoken, came after some time to be embodied in the New Testament.

If there was a period in which it (i.e., Christianity) had already spread far and in which it had gained many souls, and when, nevertheless, not a letter of that which has come down to us had yet been written down, then it must also be possible that everything which the evangelists and apostles wrote could have been lost, and yet that the religion which they taught would have continued.<sup>25</sup>

This is an argument which Catholics had always asserted against Protestant affirmations of biblical authority, but it can also be used for another purpose than that of affirming the supremacy of the church's teaching tradition. And Lessing does indeed use it for that other purpose. To show that the Bible is not infallible does not demonstrate that the apostolic tradition that precedes and succeeds the Bible is. It may simply show that there is a peculiarly religious meaningfulness, in contrast to a literal and historically final truth, to what first the tradition and then the Bible had taught.

The religion is not true because the evangelists and apostles taught it; but they taught it because it is true. The written tradition must be interpreted by its inward truth and no written traditions can give the religion any inward truth if it has none.<sup>26</sup>

#### *The Reinterpretation of Dogma*

But if Lessing in this way defends a matrix of truth within historical Christianity which is far from coinciding with its actual literal and historical confines, this does not mean that he takes the dogmas detached from historical authority and finality and then accepts them at face value. He does not really tell us here just what the essence of Christianity is which he accepts as religiously meaningful or true. A few years later at the end of his life, in 1780, he was indeed to make an attempt to reinterpret the dogmas, for example that

of the Trinity and that of The Only Begotten Son.<sup>27</sup> But his reinterpretation was an almost casual speculative, 'what if we can see it this way' affair.

A few years earlier, in a short dialogue written in 1777, he makes the distinction, so common to rationalists, between the dogmas and the moral teaching of Christianity, obviously affirming the latter while suspending judgment at best about the former. 'For the dogmas of the Christian religion are one thing, practical Christianity which it affirms to be founded upon these dogmas is another.'<sup>28</sup> He goes on to ask if only that love is true Christian love which is founded upon the Christian dogmas, And the implied answer is obvious: No it is not.

And yet he never asserts that this is indeed the essence of Christianity. He was not simplistic. At other times he could join 'the dogmas' and 'practical Christianity,' opposing them both to revelation in history, etc. He knew that all moral sanctions in a religious context must have some reference to religious beliefs; he also knew that religious morals were dependent on wellsprings of motivation and affection greater than those of disinterested altruistic uprightness, although this in no sense deprecated the latter in favor of the former. He simply did not tell us what he thought the essence of Christianity was, at least not in the sense in which essence meant continuing religious meaningfulness or truth.

All we know is that in contrast to Reimarus, Lessing denied that it is the essence of Christianity to identify salvation with the acceptance of historical revelation, that is to say the revelation circumscribed by the history reported in the Bible. That is the teaching of certain dogmatic, ill-instructed Christian handbooks but not the teaching of Christ, not even, he says, the general teaching of the church.

#### *For or Against Positive Religion?*

Of the three aspects of Protestant Christianity (i.e., unique Divine self-revelation in history, natural theology, and the deeply ingrained Protestant religious sensibility) Lessing was firmly, and with bitter polemical antagonism, opposed to the first; mildly but rather prolifically opposed to the second; and ambiguous with regard to the third. And yet in the long run it is his attitude towards the third that became the most important. For if he was a reformer for whom reinterpretation in religious outlook was of ultimate importance, it was the sensibility represented by the third outlook that he wanted to reinterpret and therefore at once to leave behind and yet to appropriate in his search for something new and better in basic perspective on life, death, destiny, man and society.

Taken one way his fight against miraculous revelation through historical events was performed in the service of detaching the religion behind the supposed miraculous fact claims from those very claims, in order to let the

religion stand on its own feet. But taken another way it was evident that he also felt that in fighting the miracle-in-history belief grounded in the authority of the biblical accounts, he was also fighting the religion of the heart or dogmas of belief for which these supposed biblical facts were said to be the evidence. But in this latter respect precisely one has to return to his ironic stance and procedure. For the ambiguity of his stand on Lutheran piety and dogma was not only a matter of strategy, the ambiguity was clearly part of his outlook. Certain it was that he could not literally take it for his own religion. But whether it was to be cast out together with the historical miracles or be transformed was a matter he never made clear. And undoubtedly it was not much clearer to himself than to others; for his posthumously published last little tract on religion, *The Education of the Human Race*, hovers between telling us that the traditional or positive religions (specifically Christianity, the child of Judaism) are simply to be transcended into a new and final universal religion, and telling us that the continue to play a role even in the realization of any more ultimate religion than themselves. The process and aim of historical time casts an uncertain light on the question whether the positive religions are anachronisms or indispensable for the realization of a religion greater than themselves.

It is much the same in the parable of the rings.<sup>29</sup> There we have three religions (rather than two, as in *Education*) and, unlike in *Education*, they are not ranged in chronological sequence so that one takes up where the other leaves off. But in the parable also it is unclear whether or not each positive religion is capable in its own right of containing and manifesting the universal faith which is the goal of the whole religious quest of mankind.

This ambiguity about positive religion, so unlike the thought of the more radical French and British rationalists about religion, almost forces those acquainted with what happened after him in German culture to turn their heads towards Hegel, in whose thought also every historical stage in human culture and thought was to be overcome or transcended, but for who this transcendence also meant as it did for Lessing an abiding maintenance of that stage in all that came after it (*Aufhebung*). So then Lessing's detachment of the meaning of the Christian religion from its basis in historical claims founded on the authority was no mere maneuver to save himself from the censorship or from the scriptures of conservative state authorities. Nor was his ambivalence about the abiding meaning of that religion within the ambience of true universal religion an evasion of an honest choice.

#### *The Place of Explanatory Theory*

Reimarus's writings had contained a bitter attack on the claims of Christianity to a final and insuperable proof, based on an ultimate revelation contained in specific historical events authoritatively guaranteed by the accuracy and

inspiredness of the Bible. In contrast to Reimarus's own position, Lessing asserts that none of the arguments Reimarus set forth need affect the simple Christian adversely. For religion is not a matter of the validity of propositions explaining the universe and demonstrating the truth of their explanations. Religion is a matter of inward conviction and healing power in life.

But how do this man's hypotheses, explanations, and proofs affect the Christian? For him it is simply a fact – the Christianity which he feels to be true and in which he feels blessed. When the paralytic feels the beneficial shocks of the electric spark, does it worry him whether Nollet or Franklin or neither of them is right? Who cares about the right explanatory theory, i.e., about knowledge and faith in religion, provided the religion does the right things to human passions, affections and activities?

But Lessing was not consistent or at ease in saying that. For one thing he cared very much if a wrong explanatory theory came along. The doctrine of revelation through facts in history and the authority and inerrancy of the Bible was one such theory. It was not only factually wrong and philosophically absurd but religiously counter-productive. It led to a religious authoritarianism and religious slavery rather than to a reform of the human heart in accordance with inner freedom. It was a nefarious theory because it encouraged the passivity of the heart and thus toadied to the highest and yet most dangerous aspects of Protestant Piety: Reliance on a source outside ourselves to make us inwardly whole in the absence of a capacity on our own to do so. Factual revelation and scriptural authority were the very best, potentially most effective means of corrupting, caricaturing Protestant piety of all pieties. Inward surrender to God, reliance on him – which meant a great deal to Lessing – must not become the surrender of one's newly awakened inward freedom.<sup>30</sup>

But this, secondly, meant that he was not at all sure that he could affirm the inward piety of Protestantism, though it is far better than its protective, outer theory. Lessing finally did not pronounce on the place of positive religions in the quest toward universal religious truth. When Nathan is summoned before the Sultan to tell him which of the three religions, Muslim, Christian, or Jewish, is the true one, each excluding belief in the others, he silently ponders his own perspective. 'To be a hard-shell Jew won't do at all. But not to be a Jew at all will do still less.' Lessing never quite shed that dilemma, even though he was looking forward to the day when others could. But even further, he never resolved the question if the best of the traditional piety is worthy of preservation, because he believed in its gentle inwardness, its mending of the divided heart by surrender to God instead of to self, but disbelieved in what he saw as the inevitable other side of this piety: its terrible provincialism, its craven self-subordination to political and religious authority, its stifling of both inner and outer freedom.

Finally, Lessing cared about some kind of explanatory theory to account for religious phenomena because, unlike Ludwig Feuerbach two generations later, he did not believe that reasons in religion were simply the same thing as motives for behaving religiously. He did not wish to sever head and heart completely. Therefore he needed some sort of theory of God and the world, but the point is – only a tentative, provisional sort of theory. Whereas he insisted on a relation between religion and theology, he was tentative, ambiguous about the kind of theology one might want, the kind of doctrine of God, of history, of immortality.

He had a priority scheme: Doctrine or speculation, explanatory belief-theory was secondary, instrumental to right practice and to the kind of theory which was pedagogy because it reshaped disposition and practice. He needed above all a theory which would aid practice, a proper statement to reshape practice and he needed to inculcate what he stated: He must be a pedagogue for whom the theory was at the same time the training in its own practice! And speculation could provide none of this!

#### *The Development of Religion*

In the controversy with Goeze, Lessing also expressed two other views in partial disagreement with Reimarus, which later became commonplaces. But they were new in his day.

(1) If the essence of the aspect of religiousness in Christianity is indeed far broader than the historical religion that goes by that name, and if the latter appears first at a certain time and place in history, then man's religion as such is not the same 'natural religion' in all times and places. Rather, religion has a long, gradually developing history of its own. The universal religion in other words grows gradually out of the more primitive individual religions, as mankind itself grows. For God can only reveal as much of himself as man's state at a given historical point allows him to apprehend.

(2) Secondly, if the Christian scriptures are the product in writing of this historical process when it has reached a certain point, and if furthermore they were a natural product of certain fallible men whose religion was there before they wrote the book, then the book ought to be read with the same eyes and by the same canons of meaning and criticism as we read any other book. This allows him to deny Reimarus's argument that the story of the Resurrection is not only untrue but actually a deliberate falsification. But the grounds on which he does so are not by any means the infallibility of the Bible, but rather its fallibility. Granted the discrepancies between the various strands of Resurrection narrative, Lessing observes that the writers and the witnesses to the Resurrection are not the same, and that even contradictions among the witnesses would not necessarily be testimony to the untruth of the event itself. The conclusion leads him into a more general investigation of the historical

and literary sources from which the Gospels as we have them now in their final form had originated: He was one of the originators and first practitioners of New Testament source criticism. He contrasted John with the Synoptics, and traced the latter back to a common Aramaic source containing immediate reminiscences of the Apostles, preserved by the original Jewish-Christian community.

Christianity in general and the Bible in particular were thus reinterpreted, and the reinterpretation meant that the meaningfulness of the religion and the origin of the book both had to be naturally rather than miraculously explained.

(1) In the case of the religion, that natural meaning was actually a gradually developing natural process, which was as such identical with the Divine Revelation. Revelation thus came in his view to be identical with the gradual developing pedagogy of the human race through history toward the goal of virtue done for its own sake.

(2) In the case of the book (the Bible) the natural process simply precludes appeal to revelation, inspiration or miracle. The Bible is neither more nor less inspired than other serious texts; its inspiration is confined to its religious and not its historical content. The inspiration is identical with the spiritual outreach of the author.

#### *On the Proof of the Spirit and of Power*

Thus far then the reinterpretation, ambiguous as it is, of the religion of dogma or of the heart – the devout and traditional Protestantism of the period. We keep aside for the moment the other two aspects of his struggle with religion, the historical fact claim, with which he has already dealt, and the speculative theory of a natural theology. Both by the ardor of his attack on Protestant traditionalism, and his constant recurrence to the question of its reinterpretation he testifies to the importance of the topic. And so indeed theologians and other commentators have treated what he had to say on the subject. They have given it a kind of intrinsic, not to say technical valuation.

As for his attack on miracles and the factual infallibility and authority of the Bible, in all of which he agrees with Reimarus, his method is devastating—and always ironical. He always argues hypothetically and on his opponents' grounds, never quite disclosing what he himself holds. Lessing's best known theological work is a little missive entitled *On the Proof of The Spirit and of Power*, written in response to a cleric who had argued against Reimarus, has been taken as something of a classical statement of the problem of trying to relate historical reports and arguments drawn from them to claims of religious beliefs and existential faith.<sup>31</sup> And so it is. But much of it states only issues, not necessarily the way Lessing himself thinks about them all. He says in effect that not only are past reports of miracle very doubtful to those of us who have never seen any with our own eyes, but it is a category error to base

metaphysical religious doctrine, one's salvation or belief in the intrinsic truth of the religious teachings of Christ, on historical events even if they are factually true.

So what if Christ was resurrected in fact – a possibility he had conceded earlier. Even then, 'Accidental truths of history can never become the proof of necessary truths of reason' – a saying that has become famous. Just because a man has been raised from the dead does not mean that the divine nature is divided into Father and Son, and that my salvation depends on believing this.

This has been taken by theologians as a summary of the ongoing problem that one meets with if he tries to relate the destiny and teaching of the Jesus of history as reported in the Bible to the Christ of faith confessed by Christian Orthodoxy and moderate liberalism. (For necessary truths of reason, read 'faith decision some generations later' – in that form it became the pioneering statement of the 'faith – history' problem.) But most observers are agreed that Lessing's statement of the problem is confusing and difficult at best. And secondly, it is not as important as it appears at first glance in regard to what Lessing himself believed. In that respect, what is most interesting about it is precisely its illustration of Lessing's tactical procedure. He points out difficulties in his opponents' positions, and is quite reserved about his own belief. Thus the sentence that we have quoted in no way implies that Lessing himself equated doctrines and religious truths with 'necessary truths of reason'. No doubt there were issues of the relation between faith and history, between Christology and historical criticism to be resolved, but their juxtaposition in this fashion (accidental truths of history versus necessary truths of reason) is more a consequence of his opponents' adoption of Leibnizian school categories than of his own thoughts.

It was Leibniz who had first drawn a sharp distinction between truths or facts which we know only from experience and which are related to each other always accidentally, so that another or even the contrary factual result may be thought without contradiction, and truths of reason which are based on the principle of identity and non-contradiction so that here the contrary of an inference from the first position cannot be thought without self-contradiction. There is little evidence to indicate one way or the other what Lessing himself thought of this particular distinction as appropriate or inappropriate to the way one should state the relationship between man's historical experience and his religious convictions. It was his opponents who thought in these categories, as he rightly divined, who had to face the issue he had put before them – not he himself.<sup>32</sup>

### *Lessing and Neology*

The man before whom he put this uncomfortable dilemma of combining apples and oranges into one was not, like Pastor Goeze, a rigidly orthodox theologian

but a liberal, a man who belonged to the middle of the road faction: a Neologian. Lessing was most antagonistic toward them. Perhaps they threatened him because they undertook the very job he himself tried to accomplish, but did it in a way which he thinks lacks integrity. The liberal Christian theology of his day asserted the factuality of an historical revelation, and affirmed that it is the basis on which Christian belief must rest. But it denied the literal inspiration of the Bible, it denied for the most part but not consistently that Revelation was demonstrated through physical miracles, and it asserted that the chief dogmas of tradition Christianity, derived from Revelation, may also be shown to be supportable by reason. These Neologians affirmed revelation but denied the factual inerrancy and thus the absolute authority of the Bible, and asserted that far from being accepted historically, it should be rationally interpreted.

The result of this type of interpretation, Lessing thought, had neither the integrity of the old religion nor the integrity of sound philosophizing. In the name of the reinterpretation of Revelation, the Neologians had emptied Revelation of all distinctive content, proclaiming a fact that communicated no truth of any religious sort whatever. We recall that for Lessing the strength of orthodoxy was that it did communicate a significant complex of beliefs and sensibility by means of the factual historical claims involved in the authority and factual inerrancy of the Bible. But to insist on the authority of the Bible and on a revelation, and then sever from those the very content that had supplied their religious justification was to do something far worse than orthodoxy. Neology meant the evacuation of doctrine in the name of supposed interpretation.

Lessing himself was walking an exceedingly delicate line between interpretation and evacuation of the contents of the religious tradition. Why should he claim to have succeeded where the Neologians failed? True enough, he had cut the Gordian knot between historical revelation and the meaningfulness of the Protestant tradition on which they were hung. But this does not mean that once one gets past that issue into the inquiry of the meaning of the doctrines of the tradition his options were better than that of the Neologian. He might be fully as guilty of reinterpretation to the point of evacuation of the meaning of doctrine as he had said the Neologians were. There is little use in trying to set up criteria for what is right or permissible reinterpretation of an original concept and what goes beyond the recognizable limits. The task has always been notoriously difficult.

The evacuative procedure of the Neologians was usually the simple appeal that a particular tenet, concept or claim, for example that there is an everlasting hell, did not belong to the essence of traditional faith. That is why Lessing thought that finally they had very little left except a purely natural religion and one historical fact which they called Revelation but which revealed nothing

new but reiterated in a particular historical form the very religious ideas that were contained in natural religion. Instead, if we take the matter of eternal punishment, he believed that eternity, both heaven and hell, are states in which the progress of growth and purification begun on this earth is continued, and that neither of them is therefore an absolute, a static condition which totally and forever excluded its opposite. Very good, one may say, but the reinterpretation itself is simply an extension of a reasonable assumption or perspective upon the world in which God and history conspire to extend temporal educational processes for mankind past death and into an open future that embraces time and what we ordinarily pleased to call eternity. There is no warrant for this from either the complex of orthodox dogmas or the rule of faith which Lessing ordinarily thinks of as normatively constituting the Christian tradition. Why should he not be accused just as much as the Neologians of going beyond the limits of interpretation into evacuation or innovation?

To try to shed light on that matter we return to our earlier suggestion that his basic stance was that of a reformer who wrote for action rather than for purposes of speculation or meditation. No doubt he believed that there really were genuinely religious issues, issues of what people ought to believe in order to search genuinely after ultimate truth.

## Dramatic Pedagogy

### *The Primacy of Pedagogy*

Fundamentally Lessing wanted to shape the direction of human passions into action and the personal and social interactions of human beings towards humaneness, freedom and the greatest possible mutual tolerance. The three plays of his mature years indicate such concerns, especially the climactic *Nathan the Wise*, and as we suggested earlier, so does the aesthetic-literary theory which he formulated in *Laokoon* in 1766. And if anything this vision of a new human landscape moved Lessing with increasing consistency in the last decade of his life. In its service his reflection, philosophical, theological, aesthetic, literary, all played their role. But they were all subservient to the use of language as instrument in the modification of human behavior and disposition, both in personal and social intercourse. In this sense all the theory was an aspect of practice. Theory was primarily pedagogy.

Because disposition and behavior were described in theological language in his day, he was bound to do so too. Revelation and justification by faith were realities in the sensibility of German people in the Eighteenth Century, terms which described at once realities of the human disposition and realities of what was believed to be the real world. Lessing's task was to take the religious content he discerned in these terms and transpose it into a new

behavior pattern, a pattern in which activity rather than passivity would be the characteristic of true humanity. The sensibility corresponding to the notion of justification by faith alone in effect gave way in his mind to an inner surrender to the unknown, ultimately benevolent force of destiny. The obverse side of this is the love one has for one's neighbor. The notion of historical revelation gave way to the idea that this force of destiny is active in and through mankind's ongoing endeavor to become more and more fully human, more and more fully virtuous.

Reason wants to be exercised on spiritual objects, if it is to attain its complete enlightenment and to bring about that purity of heart which enables us to love virtue for its own sake.<sup>33</sup>

This is the aim of the education of the human race. This is the ultimate context into which religious terminology must become transposed. It is the context which supplies the meaning of theological language and provides the bridge from its earlier usage to its new and future usage. This final aim of a context for human activity is the ground on which one may claim that even though a traditional conception gives way to a new one in religion, the new is a reinterpretation of the old, and not like that of rationalists or Neologians an evacuation of the old. For, in fact, whether those who were using the language of traditional Christian religion knew it or not, that language, because it was at all times immersed in the ongoing education of mankind, tended towards this reshaping throughout the ages during which it was used. Life is pedagogy, history is pedagogy – and therefore all theory must be a servant to pedagogy and pedagogy in turn must evoke on a small scale what life and history do macrocosmically.<sup>34</sup>

#### *From Theory to Drama*

Lessing's pedagogical theory itself merged into the evocation of practice. Like all ambitious and subtle theories that are not merely expository of a state of affairs, its aim was to induce or evoke the change and the aim that it described. Quite self-consciously Lessing, at the climax of his bitter quarrel with Goeze when he had been forbidden by ducal decree to pursue his polemics in writing any further, climaxed the statement of his cause in the dramatic form of a verse play, *Nathan the Wise*, which set forth the liberated stance that was his goal. The tone and the form were just as important as the vision it was to evoke, indeed that vision was nothing without its invocation through blank verse and character portrayal, at once solemn and affecting, yet suited to the matter-of-fact, a prose poem celebrating the universal human family.

When he had written to his friends in Berlin that he was at work on it as a prolongation of his quarrel with Goeze, his brother Karl replied for all of them

with a worried note. They feared a continued use of the weapon of irony, indeed its conversion to downright sarcasm. Lessing had quite the opposite in mind. 'It will be anything but a satirical work designed to leave the battleground with derisive laughter,' he wrote back. He said that on the contrary 'It will be as affecting a work as I have ever written.'<sup>35</sup> There was no room now for sardonic humor or sarcasm, nor for the irony, the indirectness with which Lessing had fought his way through battles with theological orthodoxy and liberalism, the irony that allows him his ambiguity about Christianity and its reinterpretation. He did not have to resort to those apt but at the same time exasperating and not always precise parables and metaphors he had inflicted on his infuriated opponents. He no longer fought his opponents on their own grounds while hiding his own true opinions. In the play he could leave irony behind as a means of communication, because drama is action— not merely depiction — and in action there is no ambiguity, not even the ambiguity he so frequently found both appropriate and inescapable in theoretical and speculative statement.

Lessing is the only theologian or anti-theologian who feels impelled to state his position in fiction. He cannot do otherwise. All his theoretical statements are in per force defective, inherently defective. Thus all his speculations, his natural theology, if that is not too misleading a way to describe his theoretical religious statements, have about them a hesitant, occasional, qualified or 'what if' character, e.g., in *Education*. Obviously there is no such reticence or hesitation in dramatic or literary language, just as there had not been when he attacked others polemically on their own grounds rather than on the base of his own positive convictions.

#### *Laocoon, The Education of the Human Race, and Drama*

Why this need to overcome theory practically? For a possible answer we return to his theory propounded in *Laocoon*. There appears to be a certain parallel between the visual arts and speculative theory, so that one may say that pure speculative, philosophical or theological theory is to religious pedagogy as painting is to poetry. The business of literature, Lessing had said in *Laocoon*, is action, sequence in time. The visual arts are confined to objects in space, in effect focused on momentary bodily expression or position. It is as though speculative theories, e.g., about the nature of God and life after death or reincarnation (which Lessing proposed speculatively) were thought objects in mental space; justified in part by their coherence with other components in a systematic mental or conceptual scheme, and therefore by a certain beauty and balance, in part by a kind of auxiliary sustaining relation they have to human action and to human interrelations. But whether it is justified by beauty of balance and coherence, or by virtue of its aid in shaping theories of reinterpretation of religion for human action, his speculative thrust tends to

have the dart-like and momentary character, the ambiguity which is so reminiscent of his ironic twists.

The ambiguous, tentative and provisional character of his speculative thoughts is perhaps most evident when he employs speculation in the service of his pedagogical theory of history charting the course of the education of the mind of the whole human race. For example, he says that just as the New Testament supplanted the authority of the Old, so now the authority of reason must supplant that of the New. And that requires among other things a rational reinterpretation of some of the speculative dogmas derived from the New Testament or the ancient Christian rule of faith. Lessing at once casts a backward glance at those doctrines and a forward glance at the shape they are about to assume in the future, always of course in the service of the education of the human race.

The development of revealed truths into truths of reason is absolutely necessary, if the human race is to be assisted by them. When they were revealed they were certainly not truths of reason, but they were revealed in order to become such.<sup>36</sup>

In this vein he defends the appropriateness of theological or philosophical speculation as one means for bringing the human heart through the exercise of reason to its highest aim, a love of virtue for its own sake. Speculation thus has no intrinsic but instrumental value. It exists for the reform of passion, action and human relation. In the service of such education Lessing is willing to make ambiguous and tentative stabs of speculative reinterpretation.<sup>37</sup> In each of the four brief instances he takes, the doctrine of the Trinity, of an eternal son of God, of original sin, and of the Son's satisfying atonement, the form is the same. 'How if ...' he asks and then goes on to delineate briefly and tentatively a suggestion converting the doctrine into a form of natural theology. But obviously he has little stake in the specific fate of his reinterpretation.

A doctrine like a picture can only catch one historical moment of articulation at a time. It can neither induce nor plot the line of continuity of an action. Speculation is useful if it provide service for action and for pedagogy toward action. It has a certain fitness, balance, harmony or coherence like that of a work of art. In a letter to his brother Karl, Lessing writes about the old Christian tradition and all its doctrines of grace, sacraments, salvation, justification by faith, Trinity, atonement and so on and so on.

We are agreed that the old religious system is false, but I cannot share your conviction that it is a patchwork of bunglers and half philosophers. I know of nothing in the world in which human sagacity has been better displayed and cultivated.

Nor does Lessing necessarily deny truth value to speculative philosophical systems about the relationship between God, man and the universe. He does not take refuge, as romantic philosophers of religion will do a few decades after him, in suggestions that speculation is simply a form of symbolizing our attitudes toward the unknown. Rather than that he will say about philosophical concepts of God, 'I perhaps do not so much err as that my language is insufficient for my ideas.'<sup>38</sup>

In regard to traditional religious doctrine he sometimes asserts their beauty and yet their falsity. At other times he asserts that in their case in contrast to that of philosophical speculations one may distinguish, not between literal and symbolical sense, but between exoteric and esoteric meaning. There is a certain overlap between these two senses and the progress of the human mind. What was once appropriately enough esoteric is now exoteric, and similarly the true but now esoteric sense will some day coincide with its exoteric meaning. For example an eternal hell, an absolute rigid and eternal state of continuing retributive punishment at the end of mortal time was once the exact or esoteric meaning of that doctrine. But now it is only the popular, exoteric sense, the esoteric being a continual education process after death in which there is as much chance for character development as there was before, and in which the state of either reward or punishment is neither unmixed nor eternally fixed. But some day even this now esoteric sense may become exoteric.<sup>39</sup> And so on toward ever greater mutual coincidence of the two kinds of meaning. In this particular doctrine, as Lessing speculatively and tentatively envisages it, the single true meaning may eventually be that every man is reincarnated again and again so that all the stages of mankind's historical progress from primitive to perfect spiritual growth may be recapitulated in his own life. He typically puts it in question form, and asks, 'Why should I not come back as often as I am capable of acquiring new knowledge, new skills?'<sup>40</sup> and in the face of those who object that this hypothesis would mean a huge loss of time he asks rhetorically and in a way that expresses the whole triumphal view which he seems to hold firmly even though he can only articulate it hypothetically and tentatively in this particular speculation: 'And what have I to lose? Is not the whole of eternity mine?' The doctrine is tentative, but that does not preclude its being true or beautiful, or even a sound, helpful implicate of the pedagogy of mankind.

Nonetheless it is no more than a projection of a provisional sort, whether exoterically or esoterically understood.<sup>41</sup> Religious theory cannot render an account of action in sequence of time. It can do so no more than visual arts can render physically the sequence of action. It is a construct in mental space<sup>42</sup> that catches a specific moment in time, softening all the rough edges, the incompleteness of thought and the paradoxes of reality into the beauty of the system and philosophical coherence. Into that moment speculative theory

gathers as much of what comes before and after as possible in order to present it as fully as can be, but that fact does not overcome its momentariness, the distinction in principle between system on the one hand, and thought as pedagogy toward action and reform on the other.

The logic of this distinction, imported from *Laokoon*, might take us even further. If the hypothesis is apt and the parallel applicable, even the didactic statement of reform, the statement of the reaffirmation and progress of the human race in its collective education which we call history, can not be as fitting as the actual depiction in literary form of a section of that story. Only the poet or rather the dramatist can properly set forth action and transition in time. And thus also he rather than the religious polemicist is the proper reformer of man's state.

### *Nathan the Wise*

In this way then Nathan the Wise becomes the perfect expression, the climax of Lessing's work. It is not a lecture clothed in theatre form,<sup>43</sup> but the merger of moral didacticism and fiction in which the interplay of action and character is indispensable and not a substitutable means for reshaping the reader or spectator into conformity with the lesson.<sup>44</sup> It is then, I think, no exaggeration to say that Nathan, the pseudonym, is a better spokesman for Lessing than Lessing himself. Only in that persona can Lessing say what he really wants to about persuasion to proper disposition and action, and only as that persona has he a certain autonomy from the author so that he can enact and speak fictively the truth on these matters without falling prey to the author's own ambiguities and ironies. In the more appropriate medium he tells us what the poet himself as philosopher can only state at second hand, the positive vision toward which all the religious polemic tended and which in principle was prevented from expressing properly, in the form of theological or any other theoretical statement.

*Nathan the Wise* is taken from medieval historical legend and its center, the parable of the three rings is from a story in Boccaccio's *Decameron*.<sup>45</sup> In Lessing's hands the story becomes the celebration of the discovery of the family of humanity under the symbolism of the mutual rediscovery of the members of the same blood family. The plot is basically simple, though complex in execution. Set in the days of the Crusades it brings together the large-hearted Muslim Sultan Saladin in Jerusalem, the scrupulously fair, generous and humane Jewish merchant Nathan, and a Christian Knight Templar. The Templar rescues Nathan's daughter from the flames engulfing his house during his absence. The knight himself owes his life to a special act of mercy on Saladin's part that stays the sword of execution because the Templar unaccountably reminds him of his long since dead brother. Through the machinations of the companion of Nathan's daughter, Recha, it is

discovered that Recha is actually a Christian girl whom Nathan adopted in her infancy, the daughter of a friend who was brought to his door by the servant of a knight, her father, who was to die in battle soon afterwards. To Nathan she seemed a gift from a merciful providence, the full force of whose inscrutable, terrifying side he had just experienced when Christian warriors killed his wife and seven growing sons.

Nathan's adoption of the girl exposes him to possible Christian persecution because he has brought up a presumably baptized child in the Jewish faith and thus endangered her eternal salvation. The volatile knight, eager to marry her, and angry at what he interprets as Nathan's refusal of the plan, moves toward conspiring with the authoritarian, rigid and intriguing Patriarch of Jerusalem to plot Nathan's downfall. The Patriarch is a figure obviously patterned after Pastor Goeze. Fortunately the plot comes to nothing as Nathan finds out not only that the Templar is the Son of Saladin's brother by a German noblewoman but that Recha is his sister. The family is reunited – Christian and Muslim at once – with the wise Jew as their spiritual guardian and the instrument of their mutual recovery.

Into this awkward trifle, Lessing pours a comic drama of glorious proportions, its center resting on the parable of the three rings. The external shape of the work was blank verse, a bold means, admirably suited to achieve the effect of moving reader or listener so that he would, as Lessing's friend, Elise Reimarus testified, waver between tears and laughter. Nathan is an instance of the sentimental, middle-class comedy, deeply influenced by Diderot's proposals to turn comedy into the realistic depiction of the mix of virtues and vices evident in private life and in the well-ordered and structured moral universe of bourgeois family existence. The play never allows any doubt about what is right and wrong in this universe, and even though it was for Lessing in his day a bold undertaking, it could be done in the confident assurance that his natural audience would share his vision of human benevolence, even though some of them might be startled to see a Jew as its social embodiment, a Christian minister its antithesis. The German Enlightenment was more conservative than the French, though even there the tribute to the Jew would have been unusual. The Enlightenment was not nearly as enlightened about the Jews, especially those who had a strong sense of their tradition, as its reputation would have us believe.

#### *Nathan as Pedagogue*

The vision of human benevolence, unhindered by all the particular conditions of origin and social surrounding, is precisely what Lessing sets before his audience – and yet on an intimate rather than a grandiose scale. Nathan is no universal hero, dramatically elevated above the status of the ordinary citizen, shown forth in the broadest sweep, in the intersection of public circumstances

with moral destiny. Nothing of the sort! He is a merchant engaged in his trade, with a proper yet not inordinate respect for money and profit, a tender, responsible, obviously authoritative yet rationally persuasive pater familias, and a man of largesse and self-respect who is capable of realistic human friendship because he respects others and tolerates their foibles, even as he appraises them and their motives with shrewd and detached insight and a degree of calculation about the consequences of his interaction with them. He is the middle-class human being prior to its fabled disintegration through self-hatred at the hands of Sigmund Freud.

The greatness of the play is the way in which its tone and sharply etched, realistic characters suit the modest, private setting, and the astonishing suitability of all these things with their modest proportions to the play's didactic aim, the vision of humanity as a spiritual family in which friendship, freely given and freely accepted, is a stronger bond than blood ties and especially – by implication – those cultural allegiances, whether religious or political, that usually insist on our unconditional loyalty.

There is a striking and crucial scene in which a lay brother now in the Patriarch's employ, reveals himself to Nathan as the servant who brought Recha to his door. It is a perilous moment for Nathan who stands to lose not only his daughter but his own life through the Patriarch's machinations. The lay brother is privy to his own secret as well as the Patriarch's intrigue. What, he asks, has become of the girl? – adding that, as far as he is concerned, nobody need ever know what happened back there. Nathan responds cautiously, and the lay brother simply appeals to his confidence. 'Trust me, Nathan!' Finally, there is nothing else to be done. It's not the only time Lessing resorts to this simple device, the direct appeal and the other person's name called out. When the personal risks are high, no personal security can be guaranteed, and one simply pleads with another for a radical change in outlook that involves a surrender to the risk and joy of the highest and most intimate level of personal relationship, be it that of friendship or of love.<sup>46</sup> At an equally crucial moment Minna von Barnhelm had appealed to her sullen fiancée: 'Look at me, Tellheim! What are you thinking about? Don't you hear me?' She was calling him back from the loftiest of conventional feelings, his rumination over his honor and his pain over the unjust damage to his reputation during wartime service in the army of a foreign state. Back to the immediate, personal relationship.

Nathan of all men is the right one to whom to make this appeal. He confesses to the lay brother not only the terrible fate of his wife and sons, of which he had never spoken to anyone, but his inmost thoughts about the ways of providence. That act allows him willingly to surrender to her natural kin the only person since then who has sustained his life and his capacity for love.<sup>47</sup>

### *The Vision of the Play*

The vision of the play, then, is the growth of the historical universe into a familial community of love. It is an utterly, utterly pre-Marxist, un-Marxian analysis of the structure of history and of historical movement. Well, so be it – there are times when naïveté is wiser than even the soberest realistic analysis.

The wisdom of the play's wiseman, Lessing's pseudonym, persona and spokesman, climaxes in the parable of the three rings: Not a smooth, unconflicted figure, he is always aware of his precarious status as a Jew but in the face of it, in the face of a terrible blow, he carries on as though in the hands of providence. A wise man, his wisdom in harmony with his merchant's life and his benevolence, his faith in providence is balanced by the reservation of ignorance ('I would pick the left hand and say, 'Father grant me that: Absolute truth is for thee alone.')

He knows that benevolence is the heart of all true religion. Which of the three brothers loves the others most? If none, the true ring has been lost.

But that much said, the rest is not superfluous: the history by which we receive our positive faith from the forebears is not despised – the 'grounds' may not be the same. The future is not simply one in which we now know that the judge of a 'thousand thousand' years later will do away with the differences. And Nathan himself, though a human being before being a Jew (Did we choose our forebears?), and having brought Recha up in a religion of reason rather than a specific creed, is by no means no-longer-a-Jew. He is in mid passage between *Stockjude* and pure natural religion (cf. Moses Mendelssohn). The positive external exists for the sake of the universal and inward. But let us not be *Schwärmer*, enthusiasts, in simple-mindedly envisioning the abolition of the positive.

It is no accident that these three things go together. 1) the direct, face-to-face persuasion to personal trust; 2) inward surrender to the ways of an inscrutable providence (shall we say the final, unalienated acceptance of the ambiguous world of nature and society in which we live and move and have our being? a world that meets us here in the form of an unexpected neighbor?) 3) The free human being's practice of that surrender to providence in the bestowal of human affection regardless of all the divisions imposed on us by our differing conditions in nature and society. All theoretical explanation of man and the universe is useful to the extent that it aids in the formation of our being, all religion likewise.

Every particular religion will be judged good to the extent that it conduces and does not hinder this shape of life and belief, evil to the degree that it makes its own finality the indispensable condition of this shape of life and belief. In this day and time when we have no universal religion, do not even know when it will grow out of the particular religious traditions, when we are in transition demanding a new active humane stance, that religion is truest whose inward

sensibilities, moral sanctions and traditional doctrines may most easily be reshaped, reinterpreted in such way as to motivate the new, free human being whose freedom is his common humanity with all those with whom destiny casts him into a common world. By that standard every positive religion must be judged a dubious case. Each as a whole together with its various parts calls for that ambiguous stance, that irony at which Lessing was so expert in his treatment of Protestant Christianity. And yet each allows that non-ironic but highly ambiguous, theoretical reshaping into a universal religion that Lessing gives us in the portrait of religions he titles *The Education of the Human Race*. But each as a whole, and all three of them together stand forth unambiguously as fit if humble servants in the depiction of action toward an unknown future under the providence of God.

## Lecture Two: Kant and the Transcendence of Rationalism and Religion

### Introduction

Lessing dedicated himself to the reform of religion. So did Immanuel Kant – among many other things that he did. Lessing sought a reinterpretation of religious practice, of what it was and how to go about it, insofar as religious practice was at once the broadest and the most intimate field of human endeavor – the two ends of the spectrum of human life where man was most fully human. So did Kant. He sought to articulate a philosophy of religion that did not simply analyze religious concepts but asked what were right or useful religious concepts, right or useful religious practices – and how one used them properly. Much like Lessing, Kant was a reformer for practical purposes, not simply for belief theory, of traditional Protestant religion. Unlike British and French Rationalists, but like Lessing, he wanted to interpret or reinterpret Christianity.

In a nutshell, Kant's *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* was written to indicate how men might be converted; what the logic, the rationale of conversion is; and what it means to lead one's life in the community of the converted.<sup>48</sup> In the process Kant discovered among many other things that ordinary speech was inadequate to express certain facts or structures of human life, but unlike Lessing he did not have drama to help him express what conceptual descriptive language lacked. Instead he trenched, and trenched hard, upon a symbolic use of language that was to become the domain of Romantic thinkers who came after him – yet he himself did not cross the barrier that Herder crossed between two kinds of language-use, conceptual and expressive.

Like Lessing, again, he found speculative theory defective for the articulation of ultimate truth. But whereas this defect led Lessing to treat such theory qualifiedly, to apply it tenuously and ambiguously, and only in the service of pedagogy, Kant judged speculative theory altogether unfit though inevitable as an instrument for the discovery of true belief and true religious practice. And yet he could not abandon it: because it was the completion of man's reason.

### God before Kant

Kant's philosophy is frequently described as the apex of rationalist thought. He set himself the task of discovering the *limits* of human reasoning, and he

came up with some very definite answers, among them that our ideating processes (he called the tracing out of this process ‘transcendental dialectic’) exceeded our knowledge, so that there are certain ideas which we are bound to form but of which we can never have any knowledge. Now these ideas, which he called the ideas of pure reason or transcendental ideas, are three in number – God, the world and the self. It is important that before Kant these ideas had made sense in a certain way, but that for him they made sense in another way.

In a nutshell, you could say that these ideas were the topics of traditional metaphysics. Generally speaking they were either given to a kind of non-sensible apprehension or as ideas i.e. grasped directly by the mind, rather than the sense, or else they were *inferred* from sense data, the sensible experience from which we derive all our actual information. This was true especially of the idea of God, the ultimately real being, the intelligent mind who governs the universe. In either case the ideas were genuinely informative.

Note one detail in this way of treating the concept of God: Whatever we intuit or infer, even the very highest possible reality will come to us in a certain unity. Whether or not there is a being corresponding to the notion or concept of ‘God’, we can *think* the notion coherently. There is a certain fitness between the way we think, our conception, and the object of our thought, so that as thought-object at any rate it makes sense. Our thinking is a unitary process and hence – even with possible internal inconsistencies – the notion of God is one notion, even if it should turn out that the definable class ‘Deity’ has no members or a number of them, just as ‘unicorn’ is one notion, and ‘man’ is one notion. Perhaps one can reverse the procedure and say, just as there are unitary intellectual entities or objects, so our thinking about them takes place by means of unitary concepts. At any rate – there (p.4) is a real congruence or isomorphism between ideas or thought-contents and intellection.

Now this may be either obvious, abstract, or both. I mention it because with Kant it begins to become a very questionable assumption. And thereby hangs half of our story.

## Kant and Reason

Kant wanted to investigate our reasoning capacity with extreme rigor. He was a rationalist par excellence. First, against certain skeptics about reason he wanted to show in what the *possibility* of reasoning consisted. That is to say, unlike David Hume he believed that if your philosophy failed to explain the reliability of scientific procedure, especially the reliability of the law of cause and effect, it was so much the worse not for science but for your philosophy. Science worked, it was an actual (though not limitlessly applicable) use of explanation. The proper exercise of philosophizing is to explain the possibility from the actuality, i.e., to give an account of the necessary capacity to reason

which will account for its actuality rather than explain why it doesn't really work as well as it seems, why science isn't really reliable.

If the first task of philosophy is to show the possibility, the second is to show the *limits* of the same kind of reasoning, i.e., that kind of which science and common sense are paradigm cases, the kind of reasoning that helps provide you with informative and reliable knowledge of the external world, including your own and others' psycho-physical organisms. Kant called this kind of reasoning 'understanding', and wanted to pinpoint the limits of its applicability or capacity.

### Kant and Moral Action

In the third place he wanted to investigate the various different *uses* we make of our reasoning capacity, and which of them are so basic that we cannot explain them as functions of another use of what was for him admittedly the same reasoning capacity. He came up with two or three irreducibly different, though not necessarily unlinked forms of reason. The concept of 'judgment' is the link between the various uses.

Kant thought that there are three powers or 'faculties' of the mind of distinctively human being. The first is the *cognitive*, which is the instrument for gaining informative knowledge of the natural world. The second is the faculty or power of *feeling* pleasure or displeasure, the third that of *desire*. *Reason*, i.e., critical analysis, must be brought to bear on all three of these capacities, what their proper arenas are, and how to order each both internally and with regard to the other two.

The first of them allows us, as we have said, to know the natural world, its order, an order in which all data of experience are linked by natural, necessary causes. The second one is less important for our purposes. The capacity to feel pleasure and displeasure can be rationally analyzed into the power to make judgments of an aesthetic sort – when we organize our feelings under the principles of the beautiful and the sublime – and the power to make judgments of purposiveness, as when we think of nature as unified through an intelligence that is the ground of its empirical laws.

The third capacity is very important to Kant himself. The capacity of desire can be rationally analyzed into the power of natural inclination to quest after happiness, but here one encounters a universal principle of morality which legislates that while happiness is a perfectly natural desire it has to be adjusted to another and greater principle, that of virtue. Man has the capacity to do his duty, and to do one's duty is to be truly free and virtuous. We are not enslaved to our natural desires.

In other words, our desires and our moral capacity force us to live in a domain where our reasoning is employed in a way wholly different from its

employment in the natural sense-data world. In that world, the self itself becomes one of the sense data behaving in accordance with the laws of natural causality. About the self-in-the-natural-world, Kant has some interesting things to say, among them that we have no knowledge, within our experience of the natural world, of a permanent, unified Ego underneath the changing, diversified consciousness that we are within this world. The point is now that what we cannot *know* in the context of our experience of the natural world we must *assume* because we are bound to *enact* it in the world of desire and duty.

We are here in a totally different world of discourse, in the domain of a totally different functioning of our rational capacities. For whereas in the natural world the self is likely to be completely determined by natural necessity, in the domain of moral discourse and behavior, we are bound to be free, even though there is no natural explanation for it. Kant did not believe that you could demonstrate a metaphysically arranged gap or element of indeterminacy or randomness in the behavior pattern of selves as beings in nature which would allow you to infer that they are free. As for the status vis-à-vis nature of the self, the thinking subject or substantial soul, he reiterated again and again that it was a necessary presupposition – ‘transcendental unity of apperception’ – ‘I think’ – but could not become an object of informative knowledge at all. Combine that belief with his further argument that you can prove both that everything happens in accordance with the laws of nature, and its antithesis, that some things in the world come about by free causation or spontaneously, and it is obvious that the free soul is nothing more than a confused question in the rational analysis of what we can informatively know about the natural world in which we are ingredient. Kant separates discourse or the use of reason about the self in the world of sensible experience totally and completely from the use of reasoning about the self in the supersensible world, the world of moral action, where there is a law of our own being which commands us unconditionally to do our duty.

This is a law of the whole field of moral action, and thus a law of our own being insofar as we are part of that field. Thus it is a law at once given to us – we as it were enter into it every time we make a choice, whenever we act morally – but also a law we give to ourselves. To say we are free is to say we are unconditionally bound to obey the moral law as one we give to ourselves. This law assumes the form of an absolute imperative. We are bound to obey it, even if in fact we never do, because it is the law of our own being. The total unity of *Wille* and *Willkür*, of rational law and unbound spontaneity: a long tradition, but the latter now reaches for dominance in a way that has perhaps few precedents. If we are to be free, the imperative must come to us detached from our desire with its end- or goal-oriented quest. The imperative must say to us, ‘If you want to achieve such-and-such you must do so-and-so.’ It must say to us unconditionally, ‘Thou oughtst,’ and with that ‘ought’ goes the

morally logical implication that an ought given to us by ourselves rather than by eternal authority is one we not only must but can follow. The man may be perfectly right who said that there is no such thing as a good conscience, that having a conscience at all is to have a bad conscience; Kant would not necessarily object to that. But he would think it absurd to use ‘conscience’ in a way that would speak of it as unfree or enslaved. No matter how close to strangulation our freedom, to be human is to have a vestige of it, because that is our inalienable nature, our moral definition.

Virtue then is not the right form of the automatic pursuit of happiness or sound aims, but obedience to duty, acting from good intention or conscience. The singularity and greatness of man is that the good man can detach himself from that quest as a functioning moral agent, even though in itself, in its proper place, there is nothing wrong with the desire for happiness. Moreover, the voice of duty, the categorical imperative is never the form our desire takes. In that case we would not be free but simply follow our natural determination when we obey conscience. Virtue, doing one’s duty for duty’s sake, is freedom from determination only when it is heterogeneous from desire. Thus, there is a distance in principle, though not necessarily enmity between will and inclination, between obedience to the moral law and the actual content of desire.

## The Unity of the Moral Universe

One is forced to ask the questions: If the domain of moral discourse, the moral use of reasoning, is to have any unity at all, have we not to think of this unity as overcoming the tension or heterogeneity of two opposites:

- 1) the heterogeneity in principle between conscience and desire? And
- 2) between virtue and happiness?

If not, isn’t the universe of moral discourse at loggerheads with itself and thus morally absurd? Now, many thinkers after Kant were content to say, yes that would indeed be to affirm the irrationality of morality in the world of discourse about human action, and that is *in fact* the way it is – irrational.

Not so Kant: He said that the unadjusted heterogeneity between conscience and desire, virtue and happiness, would indeed make the moral universe irrational, but whenever we act morally we act in the rational moral faith (not in the knowledge) that there is a unitary, rational and not absurd moral domain – even when as observers or analysts we don’t believe any such thing. Moral intention/action has its own logic, its own rationale, as to what kind of universe it inhabits.

In that universe the harmony between conscience and desire, virtue and happiness is implemented in an unending progress toward the ideal condition, fulfilled in what Kant calls a postulate of practical reason, immortality, and in a

being in whom the harmony of happiness with virtue/morality is grounded – God, the Holy Will.

We observe that morality does not presuppose religion: A man does not need the idea of God to recognize his duty; and the ultimate motive of moral action is duty for duty's sake, not obedience to the commands of God.<sup>49</sup> But we also observe that morality inevitably leads to religion, because that is the only way in which the moral and natural orders can be harmonized, the moral law harmonized with the actually existing hum-drum, not to say corrupt world of everyday events and limitations.

Let us stress once more that the 'world' we have been speaking about is the environment or nexus in which moral agents are drawn together by their acts. It is well to remember that 'world' here has to an extent the meaning of 'life world', to borrow a famous term of Husserl's. Not only is it not the natural world, it is not even the world of the agent as his actions become ingredient in public consequences. One really has to speak here of an ideal world of pure motives and pure thoughts and decisions in interpersonal affairs, if one talks of the agent's world in Kant's thought. The reason for stressing the fact is that Kant, when talking about freedom, has an extremely limited field in mind, both in terms of action and in terms of human knowledge. His suggestion is that the *agent-self*, the noumenal self, is never an object of observation or knowledge. The self observed and known, whether by ourselves or another, is always the self already entered into a network of external relations, and therefore of imperfection. The agent's self-knowledge and knowledge of others as pure agent selves is not so much private as virtually non-existent. And indeed, then, moral agency is not really ever an instance of the use of reason as understanding, but reason as action, as inward action and decision. How this comes about, and what its implications are, are topics we turn to now.

## The Transcendental Ideas

We spoke of the *possibility*, the *limits* and the *uses* of rational capacities. Let us turn back to the use of reason as understanding or informative knowledge. Kant's great revolution in epistemology involved a very simple step: He purchased certainty of knowledge at the price of certainty of the status of the object of knowledge. All human knowledge involves the input of sensible or perceptual content and the form imprinted on it by the human intellect. All knowledge then is indirect, we never have the object of knowledge *directly* at hand to grasp. His successors nagged that fact to and fro bitterly seeking for some one instance of certain knowledge which is direct to the spontaneously ordering intellect. Some of them claimed that self-knowledge is an instance of that sort, viz., not that of the empirically given self but of the noumenal self which is not individuated because individuation is the result of embodiment

and sense experience, i.e., ingredience in phenomena. Thus the one certain and direct grasp that knowledge has is for Fichte not the self but selfhood, pure agency (in Kant's terms) logically prior to a specific self. That notion practically boggles the mind, but it could be – if certain limitations are removed – a consequence of Kant's soberest thoughts.

Again, recall that the *fact* of informative knowledge is utterly dependent for Kant on something being presented to the senses and the intellect. But the orderly, reliable shape of that knowledge is due to the intellect's forms of sensibility and understanding, the forms of space and time on the one hand, and categories of the understanding – quantity, quality, relation and modality under which all empirically given contents must be arranged. These forms and categories are certain and universal, we can rely on their always being appropriate and gaining us a common, public world of observation. But they are not derived from the observed world. They are logically independent of it. They are *a priori* conditions of all experience.

They work well when applied to empirical contents. But the human mind is more ambitious than that and seeks to apply them so as to unify all knowledge. Hence it inevitably creates the three unifying transcendental ideas (Self, World, and God) which are *neither* given as empirical data *nor* yet directly presented, like empirical data but non-sensibly and therefore purely intellectually, to the intellect. Their status is therefore that they are really *heuristic ideals for completing human knowledge and rounding it off in a perfect but absolutely impossible way*. Their status is neither empirical, nor transcendent (Wolff!) but *transcendental*.

For the human knower cognitive form is transcendental, it has nothing to do with experience, it is an *a priori* structure of universal and completely rational categories. The human intellect employs these transcendental structures spontaneously. Kant does not believe in the passivity of the intellect before the senses, as the British Empiricists did. But the intellect cannot provide its own material, hence is bound to piecemeal operation. It can never complete its knowledge, it can never see why any instance of informative knowledge should be *here* and *now*, or how it fits into a total complex of given things. In short there cannot be a deductive system of a positive knowledge of the world. But there *can* be a system of the coherence of rational operations, their possibility, limits and uses, provided these are never confused with what we discover in the world, provided the reasoner, the transcendental self, is never confused with the world of data, not even with himself within that world. Knower and known, subject and object, perspective and content can never be systematically unified; to think a thing is never the same as for that thing to be, even in the case of the self; they belong together, but they can never be shown to be the same thing, either by putting self and objects into the same empirical scheme, or by transferring objects into the self's transcendental status.

## God

Kant then is in the situation of having to have a concept of God but interestingly enough having to claim that this concept of God performs a purely regulative function for thinking, providing the ideal of an absolutely unconditioned unity, but having to insist also that this thought has no bearing on reality one way or the other. The reality of God is not subject to proof.

We cannot deal with Kant's treatment of the traditional proofs for the existence of God, but there is an interesting observation to be made: though Kant thinks that one cannot *prove* that an absolutely necessary being – in contrast to all of us who exist contingently – exists; though Kant thinks one cannot *prove* that a most real being exists, though Kant thinks one cannot *prove* that there is a first cause of all that is, and that he is not only the intelligent and wise world author but its moral governor as well – he has no doubt whatsoever that these are the appropriate *conceptions* of God – whether he exists or not.

But the point now is to recall that the determinate or in-formed object was only one side of the correlation of subject and object in the situation of informative knowledge. The other side, irreducibly other, was the spontaneous, form-bestowing or determining subject. This subject, because it can by definition never make the transition to the conditions of appearance whether as knower or as agent, but must remain inscrutably transcendental and spontaneous, is itself never given, never determinate but always *determining*. Identity as an intellectual subject can never become one of the 'determinate attributes' characterizing the concept of God as unconditioned determinateness qualifying an object.

It is well at this point to recall our early point that before Kant, when spontaneous ideation was thought to mesh perfectly with informative metaphysical concept, it was thought that the concepts could be grasped by the intellect coherently, and therefore in unitary form. What has happened in Kant is that this unity is gone. We have no warrant for conceiving in one unitary notion the activity of thinking and the absolutely determinate content of thought.

We cannot even draw an analogy in this respect speculatively from ourselves to God, because Kant has made it absolutely clear that the unity of the empirical self with the noumenal self can never be given in experience. Thus, then, God, in whom this heterogeneity between determinate objectivity and indeterminate, spontaneous subjectivity is raised to the absolute degree, must be grasped in two concepts between which there can be no unity: he is the unconditioned ground of all intellectual moral and physical structure, and he is equally the ground of all spontaneous intellectual activity.

Kant is fascinated by some of this speculative play: there is no indication that he ever said, Some of this is invalid as a concept, because one part cannot be combined with the other.

1) He didn't stress the spontaneous side – though there are indications that it was fascinating, and threatening.

2) He didn't really have to worry because conception and reality were far enough apart that he could select where he wanted to join them, and this turned out to be only in the moral realm.

3) He had a *critical* system, not a *metaphysical* one. That is to say, when you traced out necessary ideal projections of human thought, you didn't deal with the unity of reality, but only with the unity of conception. You could not show the unity of reality. Hence Kant *did not have to* do so. Given his proclamation of the limitations of human reason, he could claim that you need two aspects, contrary or at least unadjusted, in the notion of God, just as you could not show that perceptual content and conceptual form had a systematic unitary explanation or ground in which they inhered in a manner transparent to human reason.

Nonetheless, Kant had skirted an abyss, especially in the form that the conception of God as subject takes in the first Critique: Intellectual intuition, which, he says, we cannot even conceive since we are absolutely confined to sensible intuition. But we can think why we cannot think it. The absolute meshing of receptiveness with spontaneity, the embrace of the former by the latter, is mesmerizing. Where to know is to determine totally, to intuit is to intuit intellectually, i.e., spontaneously so that in knowing, what you know is not only immediately present but the act of thinking the object is identical with determining its shape!<sup>50</sup>

## Additions to the Lecture on Lessing

*This substantial addition was marked for insertion in the final part of the section titled 'Drama and the Primacy of Action' above. See note 19.*

Character was, for Lessing, finally a basic, as it were irreducible manifestation of humanity – no matter how much it was influenced by religion, country, social structures, climate, etc. Not that Lessing was a believer in free will. Lessing was quite explicitly a determinist. But the point is that his determinism was metaphysical (the exact argument he didn't state) and a metaphysical determinism is a convenient thing for its very ultimacy, its direct cause-effect connection between the most microscopic occurrence and what is ultimate and infinite, allows all sorts of *practical, intermediate indeterminacies* – cultural, moral and pedagogical, even though no *ultimate, theoretical* plasticity in the universe. The irreducibility of character as the determinant of action, the effective indeterminacy of any specific, intermediate, cultural environment, the priority he placed on the practical – on action and on a theory explanatory of and conducive to action, the integration of passion and affection with virtuous action that he sought for in the realm of practice – all of these together were nicely designed to make him a *reformer*. And his reforming ideal was to depict and through depiction redirect human passions, actions and relations. Direct, human relations in society, unhampered by social barriers were the guiding vision for reform, and unforgettable is its universality, its exclusion of virtually nobody – neither the aristocrat nor the servant nor the simple religious believer whom Goethe will call 'the beautiful soul'. It was a passionate elevation of humanity, in which drama was a teaching instrument and religion and philosophy were challenged an invited to serve the same cause as drama – a typical Enlightenment view, but raised to heights of extraordinary consistency. Others claimed, rightly or wrongly, to belong to the party of humanity: Lessing embodied it. Not for him Hume's all but basic distinction of all mankind into those like himself on the one hand and 'the vulgar' on the other.

I want to suggest, drawing on nineteenth-century commentators like Wilhelm Dilthey and Eduard Zeller, that for Lessing the essence of man is action. 'The vocation of man' (a great mid-eighteenth-century German phrase, used by Johann Spalding and later made famous by Fichte) 'is neither speculation, nor artistic vision, but praxis' to quote Dilthey.<sup>51</sup> And that is also the first and last word (though not those in between) about Lessing's views on religion. But Zeller, in a kind of classic oversimplification distorted the case, when he said that Lessing equated religion with morality. "The essence of

religion, the ultimate purpose of all religious activity, lies ... in its moral effect.’<sup>52</sup> No, one has to say: Lessing is not Kant. What is left out in this claim is first of all the significant religious bearing of metaphysical speculation for Lessing, which is not *simply* moral in its impact.

But more than that, the comment ignores that what is practical, the vision of the true person, includes for Lessing – more than for many Enlightenment figures – respect for and integration of the inward person, passions and affections, into the vision of the human being. Precisely this fact makes reformation and reinterpretation in religion a task to which drama is no stranger. Lessing’s polemical drive against various wings of religious traditionalism and modernism therefore climaxed quite naturally in a dramatic prose poem, which is at once a restatement of the previous theological argument and a positive statement of what he believes to be a truly religious disposition and life. Genuine religion and the truly religious life are rightly depicted poetically – for poetry alone, rather than *either* the visual arts *or* sheer didactic, conceptual language, is appropriate to setting forth action in time. Hence *Nathan* not *Education* is the truly, most precisely fitting statement of Lessing on religion. So it was neither mood nor propagandistic hope but strictest consistency in aesthetic, moral and religious principle when Lessing wrote to his brother that he hoped the play would be as affecting a piece as he had ever written.<sup>53</sup>

Turning from the manner of depiction to the depicted content, one has to say similarly that true religion is a form of act: In conceptual, systematic or theoretical language one may state its individual elements and belief claims and argue for or against fixed positions. But religion, precisely by its interpretation of virtuous rational action with sensibility, and their second-order reinforcement through speculation, is itself a practical act or artful (in the sense of *künstlerisch*, not *künstlich*, artistic, not artificial) practice.

Hence Lessing’s sympathies in religion are for his age and polemical engagement extraordinarily broad. And, to the doctrinaire Enlightenment figures, and the later commentators, his sympathies and his antagonisms have alike often been unexpected. Thus it is most striking that Nathan, the hero of the play, the paradigm of enlightened and sophisticated religious wisdom, should find kinship and sympathy and a kind of instructive understanding for what he is about among two of its simplest religiously naive characters. Striking, and certainly incredible for anyone coming from the British and French Enlightenment. ‘Pietism’, the beautiful soul, was for Lessing a universal phenomenon, admirable in a Muslim dervish as in a Catholic friar, ambiguous only when turned toward fanaticism by combination with the formal, final and exclusive beliefs of an orthodoxy, as in the case of Daja. Nathan can confide his hearts story to the simple, pious friar as to nobody else: ‘To simple piety alone I’ll tell ... It alone can understand the deeds true God-

devoted man can force himself to do.<sup>54</sup> But the other side of the coin is the same simplicity *gone awry*, as when Nathan's adopted daughter Recha describes Daja:

She's a Christian, and she must torment for love – is one of those fanatics who think they know the universal way, the one true way to God. And feel impelled to guide into that way each soul who's missed it. Nor can they indeed do otherwise. For *if* it's true that this alone's the right way, how can they look on with calmness as their friends go other ways which lead them to destruction everlasting.<sup>55</sup>

The pious affection, the sensibility is the same, but the difference is here it is integrated into a dogmatism tyrannizing over the affections, rather than humanism ennobling or freeing them. She loves for the sake of a dogma, a God of dogmatic exclusiveness and she enlists the great teacher of love in that cause rather than the cause of love itself.

I spoke of the primacy of the practical, in religion as in the related inquiry into the vocation of man. Speculation, far more than consideration of human sensibility, took a humble, distinctly second place to virtue and right sentiment.

In his later days, he makes speculative proposals as if he were a forerunner of Vaihinger's 'as if' philosophy. They are largely in the service of reinterpretation or reformation of practical wisdom; rob the notion of revelation of its miraculous, one time occurrence character, turn it into an historical process merging into and largely indistinguishable from the human community's immanently or naturally developing religious mind, call it *The Education of the Human Race*, and no speculative doctrinal element need simply be discarded. Like the revelation they supposedly represent at the conceptual level, notions like the Trinity, the substitutionary atonement of Jesus' death on the cross, original sin<sup>56</sup> become tentative, temporary, natural religious sign-posts – in the service of humanity's achievement of the virtuous life for its own sake, rather than for the sake of a future reward.<sup>57</sup>

*There is another lengthy insert, which seems to have been intended to replace part of the insert just given.*

Certainly, Lessing was against Supernaturalist orthodoxy, if that position meant resting the truths of Christianity on the inerrancy of the Bible and claiming the backing of evidence and internal biblical consistency for this belief. 'Orthodoxists' he called the supporters of this position, insisting (at least in public) that there is a difference between them and the truly orthodox,

who hold the content without the systematic justification of it on supposedly rational or evidential grounds.

Among the orthodox there was one group, in his day not quite as distinct as one or two generations earlier, for whom he felt a semi-outsider's sympathy. These were the pietists. To the extent that they held to the inerrancy and direct supernatural inspiration of the Scripture, he would have had to condemn them also. But in fact there was a difference, of which he was aware, between the claims to the historical inerrancy of the Bible and to its inspiration. The latter involved a direct religious bond between the mystical or spiritual meaning of the words, over and above their literal meaning, and the heart of the believer. This did not disturb him, though his sympathy for it would have been reserved. What bothered him most was the claim to the historical and dogmatic inerrancy of the Bible. One can, he said, believe Christianity (though what kind remained ambiguous) without the supporting evidence of miracles. One could even conceivably believe the resurrection of Christ (a belief he thought not wholly absurd, at least for one stage of religious development) *despite* the discrepancies within and between the different New Testament reports. What one cannot do, he thought, is to believe this miracle *on the basis* of an argument that the biblical reports are really in harmony and therefore without human error.

On this technical point he agreed with the great unnamed German deist, H.S. Reimarus, whose *Apology* he published as the *Wolfenbüttel Fragments*.<sup>58</sup> It is the opening wedge into a much wider and more significant agreement. But on the other hand, Lessing also distanced himself from Reimarus in significant ways. He agreed with him that a specific and immediate supernatural historical *revelation*, based on supposed facts, guaranteed by an inerrant Scripture is incredible. It is incredible, even if it is of a lofty character, to say nothing of the purported facts and content of a supposed revelation that are provincial and primitive. And he agrees of course with Reimarus in his passionate protest against the anti-rational authoritarianism and the exclusive truth claims involved in the orthodox stand.

Lessing's defense of these portions of Reimarus came to set the topic for theological argument in his own day – against Johann Melchus Goeze, chief pastor of the church of St. Catherine in Hamburg – and for generations thereafter. Even before Goeze intervened in the argument, Lessing had written a short essay 'On the Proof of the Spirit and Power',<sup>59</sup> which set forth the issues: not only are miracles merely historical proofs which fail to convince the present day observer, but even if they were to be convincing, they are totally heterogeneous from the metaphysical religious truths they are supposed to support. 'Accidental truths of history can never become the proof of necessary truths of reason.' Ever since then, this essay – on Lessing's own admission, one of his most sloppily written – has been cited as setting the crucial issues on

the thorny question of relating critical-historical judgments to judgments of faith concerning theologically significant facts, especially the question of the status of the historical person of Jesus of Nazareth in the Christian religion. Hegel, David Friedrich Strauss and Kierkegaard among them agreed that Lessing had stated the basic problem of faith versus history in this essay.

It was a pity that Lessing influenced theological thought in no other way, because what he had to say about religion was far more complex and important than this essay would indicate. On the other hand, it is worth indicating why the influence was so great. For while its immediate target was the 'orthodoxist' position, Lessing and Reimarus had in fact also managed to score a substantial hit on the position of the liberal or mediating theologians of his day, the so-called 'Neologians'. If anything, he had an even greater contempt for them than for the outrightly conservative view. The enlightened theology of the day had a jaundiced view of miracle, but held to a supernatural revelation as a historical fact nonetheless. The Neologians were beginning to accept the stirrings of biblical criticism but (Johann Salomo Semler!<sup>60</sup>) held to the reliability of central and religiously indispensable biblical facts. The *content* of revelation, they held, is the same in positive or exemplary form, as natural reason has known in any case: *God, morality and a future life*. (Mendelssohn!<sup>61</sup>) 'What', Lessing asked sarcastically, 'is a revelation that reveals nothing?' 'With orthodoxy ... one knew more or less where one stood; between it and philosophy there was a partition behind which each could go its own way without trespassing against the other. But what happens now? They have torn down the partition and, under the pretence of making rational Christians out of us; they have turned us into highly irrational philosophers.' If orthodoxy is impure water, he tells us, neology is liquid manure. The impure water, unsuitable as it is, ought not to be poured out until we know where to get better. With that, one would expect Lessing to go the way of Reimarus and of his own friends in Berlin, Moses Mendelssohn and Friedrich Nicolai<sup>62</sup> – and insist that a revealed religion is constituted by its claim to supernatural revelation, guaranteed by the unitary, infallible canon and its accurate reporting of the miraculous events. This is not only the *form* in which Christian truth-claims are clothed, it is their substance. Disprove the inerrancy of the Bible and you get rid of revelation. This then allows your turning to pure, natural, rational religion.

Surprisingly, Lessing says no to this view also. In his antitheses to Reimarus, Lessing in effect argues a new basis for religion, Christian or otherwise. He distinguishes strikingly between the learned defender who makes a system out of his Christianity – a system of history, canon and revelation – and the ordinary practitioner and he implies quite strongly that the advantage is with the ordinary Christian and, in fact, that it is doubtful whether you can be both things together.

‘What does the Christian care for the learned theologian’s hypotheses, explanations and demonstrations? For him it is simply there, the Christianity which he feels as so true, in which he feels so blessed. When the paralytic experiences the beneficial shocks of the electric spark, what does he care whether Nollet or Franklin or either of them is right.’

In short, the letter is not the Spirit, the Bible is not religion. Consequently, objections against letter and Bible are not objections against the spirit of religion. For the Bible evidently contains more than belongs to religion; and it is a mere hypothesis that is must be equally infallible in this ‘more’. Christianity existed before evangelists and apostles had written ... no matter how much depends on these writings, it is impossible that the whole truth of religion rests on them ... The religion is not true because the evangelists and apostles taught; they taught it because it is true. The written traditions have to be explained from their inner truth, and all the written traditions cannot give to it an inner truth it does not have. This then, should be the general reply to a large part of these fragments ...<sup>63</sup>

Ludwig Feuerbach was to say sixty years later that religion is a matter of the heart, not of the head. For Feuerbach that was to involve a drastic reinterpretation or demythologization of all cerebral religious assertions. Lessing was more conservative, not as thoroughgoing in his demythologizing, but I want to emphasize again that for him too religion was a matter of the will and heart. The religious educator’s task was therefore that of broadening the heart’s ambience, weaning it away from its narrow moorings. As for religious theory – the head’s part in religion – it was secondary, not unimportant but secondary, with the one exception we have noted. It was to be reshaped also, but reformation or reinterpretation in this case was in the service of the prior, practical reformation.

Religious theory – theology if you must, is therefore in the first place theory for or explanatory *of* a practice, or theory just sufficient to *justify* the right practices, and only secondarily speculative or theological theory, theory for its own sake.<sup>64</sup>

Comparative rational analyses are always problematical, but we all know that social and political conditions in Germany in the second half of the Eighteenth Century were far more narrow and provincial than in England and France, the struggle of the middle class for power a more isolated and often far more inner-directed affair. And the spiritual or intellectual expression of that narrowness, that tyranny, was the far greater weight of conservative, in this case Protestant, traditionalism in Germany than in the other countries.

Wilhelm Dilthey, in what after more than 100 years is still one of the finest essays on Lessing, rightly said:

A new life feeling bore up Lessing and strove for full expression in his works ... But the German public of his time was stuffed so full with theoretical views based on theoretical systems and religious doctrines; ethics, theology and philosophical Enlightenment has so penetrated every pore of the nation that this new life-feeling, if it was not, as in Klopstadt, to agree with all these prejudices and thus become completely narrowly confined, had to argue its case with the theoretical bases of the dominant world-view.<sup>65</sup>

One couldn't simply break with the past! There was no working out of a *Lebens-* or *Weltansschauung* without a position toward traditional religion. Nay, worse: Even if one liberated oneself from it, one did so in terms, in thought and feeling patterns, molded by this context and conflict.<sup>66</sup>

I believe he would have found it impossible if the systematic, doctrinal, or speculative element either in religion or in his own outlook had been primary for him. But given the primacy of the practical, reform and reinterpretation were possible.

Especially among the Pietists one could admire a certain inward single-mindedness, a full commitment of the affections, and a harmony between that and a devoted, virtuous and charitable outward life. What they lack in worldly culture they made up in complete lack of duplicity and detachment from all glorying in the worldly tasks which they have to perform – even though they perform them with the utmost conscientiousness and lack of rebelliousness, even when they restrict the natural scope of the heart. And, typical of Lessing, they come from various religions. The dervish Al-Hafi in *Nathan the Wise* belongs to this brotherhood, but so does the Christian friar in the same play. When Nathan discloses for the first time the great secret of his past, he tells it to the friar: 'To pious simple piety above all I'll tell.' Why? 'It alone can understand the deeds true God-devoted man can force himself to do.'<sup>67</sup> But the other side of this coin is Daja, the nurse, who exhibits the ambiguity of this same piety, the desperate need to reform it when it is left in the hands of the old authoritarian and exclusive dogmatism which tyrannizes over the heart, the affections instead of humanizing, freeing and ennobling them.<sup>68</sup>

*Other fragments:*

Lessing remained a faithful pupil of the popular philosophy of the German Enlightenment his whole life. Small wonder. The chief spokesman of that

philosophy was Lessing's own dearest friend Moses Mendelssohn, and its cutting edge was to transform the speculative rationalism of the rediscovered Leibniz, Leibniz without Christian Wolff, or metaphysical passion, into a practical rationalism, into a description of *artige Mensch*, the 'pleasing' or 'agreeable' human being. We would not be going awry, I think, were we to recall more classical expressions and translate 'harmonious' or 'well-balanced' individual, provided we did not have too exalted a vision in mind. He is the Leibnizian monad who is the mirror of the whole universe, and even if windowless? He incorporates the whole universe in himself. Because he is a human being, his reason gives him not merely a sensate or confused but a clear albeit miniature representation of the whole. *Petits perceptions* as Leibniz called them, constitute our being and our membership of God's harmonious universe. Clear knowledge gives the highest pleasure and meaning to life.

The achievement of later popular philosophy is to convert Leibniz's thought of man's delight from a metaphysical to a moral content, that is to say to combine the eudaemonistic principle (happiness is the end of man) with the love of man or *virtue*. Only Kant was to reject the convergence in the moral life at least for this earth. In the popular philosophy of the later Enlightenment, particularly for Mendelssohn, man's vocation or determination, his striving for perfection is this conjunction. To accomplish it one employs philosophy, the harbinger and trainer of the proper disposition. 'The philosopher achieves the highest happiness and the highest perfection, if he philosophizes not from delight in what is true but out of friendship for man.' Leibniz's central engagements, metaphysical and speculative, became peripheral interesting only 'to the extent that they serve to understand man's true obligations and inclinations.'<sup>69</sup>

Lessing revered Leibniz, he echoed his speculative interests on many occasions and he particularly admired Leibniz's ability to see entrenched, contrary views as partial or implicit expressions of one great truth, each with its own little truth. But in another sense he also followed Leibniz at second-hand, because he adopted the popular philosophical conversion of Leibniz's philosophy into life wisdom, 'into the ideal of the pleasing, i.e. the sensitive and cultivated human being who from inmost necessity dedicates himself to his own perfection and that of his fellow men.'<sup>70</sup> But of course, Lessing, as we noted, was a pupil of this philosophy on his own terms. He struck fire from this flint. Lessing could follow the popular philosophy by urging mortal men to turn within, rather than to what is above them and unknown to them, but nonetheless could indulge in Leibnizian metaphysical speculations when he thought it proper. Was he therefore a *Gelegenheitdenker*, a man who thought about the problem of the moment alone, as he has often been called? Not necessarily, nor however was he a system-maker with a coherent theory. (H.E.

Allison exaggerates the degree to which Lessing held a self-conscious, consistent Leibnizian philosophy of religion, of universal truth.)<sup>71</sup>

He struck flint from the turn of popular philosophy of concern with the constitution of man, but this did not mean that he shared its bland, stiff vision of the *artige Mensch*. On the contrary, with his frequent antagonism toward the French stage (Diderot excepted), he saw its suppression of the natural and tempestuous emotions by a conventional stiff-upper-lip correctness, as an example of the shallowness of this ideal.<sup>72</sup> For Lessing, man's perfection, on the contrary, is the complete natural interpenetration of reason and sensibility.

Much of his latest and greatest drama serves to set forth – and so to teach – this moral ideal, to indicate the way it comes into being in real life, real history, for real human beings under real-life conditions. Moral improvement is one of the chief aims of poesy, (so he said, and it is surely true of his drama and his dramaturgy: I am *not* even trying to argue for or against Wolff's controverted thesis that in his *dramaturgy* Lessing separates poetry and morality completely.<sup>73</sup> And surely, moral improvement is also the content as well as the aim of genuine religion.<sup>74</sup> But moral improvement has a most unKantian relation to the well-springs of action, the disposition or the affections. We are indeed to *love* virtue for its own sake<sup>75</sup> rather than for the sake of an eternal reward. But one may suspect that 'love' is as important as the virtue loved, in a rich, full-orbed sense. One must never forget that the climactic expression of Lessing's combat with religious traditionalism and rigidity came in the form most natural to him, drama, and furthermore that he designed it not only to teach what a truly religious man is like, and what real religion is – but to do so in the most affecting manner possible.<sup>76</sup>

Lessing was a pedagogue of the most comprehensive style. His mission was to educate his fellow Germans. To educate was to give priority to the shaping of human beings. This priority of the practical was *not* to be achieved at the price of ignoring sensibility. What emerges from Lessing's reflections is a picture of rightly oriented human being as a richly endowed, increasingly free social being, agent and patient, living alertly in the world of his contemporary social and private relations, his reach extending to all humanity. He is kin to all that is human. He governs himself morally – the main use to which one's reason is to be put – but without any impairment of the depth and immediacy of the passions or the affections. Furthermore, the rightly oriented person, in whom rational virtue and the affections nourish each other, is also a person for whom there is no sense of distance, of disruptive chasm between his inner and his outer, social life – an important point in the Germany of that day. Such a person is perhaps not always guileless but he is basically at ease in his intercourse with others, governed by his concrete altruistic concerns rather than

rigid moral codes, philosophical or religious, liberal or conservative. He is a person at once of principle and yet flexible.

Such a generalized, abstract and prosaic description is probably not fair to Lessing the dramatist perhaps not even to Lessing the critic or the religious and philosophical thinker.

Yet it is pertinent, especially when one has to consider his very ambivalent writings about religion, where one is often more certain of what he is *Against* than what he is *for*, where one often cannot be sure whether he speaks *exoterically* or *esoterically* – or for that matter whether the two are related – and where one frequently wonders where the cutting edge of irony really lands, where one asks oneself how much of what he says in the midst of polemical exchange is meant straightforwardly and how much is ridicule, tongue-in-cheek, after the fashion of earlier fighters against orthodox establishments in England and France. Especially when he seems to argue in favor of Christianity insisting that he is arguing only against the *arguments* in its favor, not against the thing itself. The reader wonders where the real Lessing is, or whether he really had a fixed position.

Certainly he was against Supernaturalist orthodoxy if that meant resting the truth of Christianity on the inerrancy of the Bible and claiming the backing of credible historical evidence for this belief. Certainly he was, if anything, even more contemptuous about neology, the mediating, liberal theology of the day which insisted that there was a supernatural historical revelation but argued that the fact is philosophically defensible and its content intelligible to ordinary reason. But on the other side it *seems* in any case that he had almost equally grave reservations about the customary reduction of Christianity to a completely natural religion for which specific, positive religious tradition is nothing but the error of superstition. Similarly, he was at least publicly hesitant about the rational faculty as the only organ for the exercise of religious sensibility.

‘The more crisply,’ he said on one occasion, ‘the one man wanted to prove Christianity to me, the more doubtful I became. The more enthusiastically and triumphantly another wanted to trample it altogether under foot, the more inclined I felt to keep it alive at least in my heart.’<sup>77</sup>

Whatever we may note in his drama, his positively as well as polemically directed writings on religion are sheer pedagogy, not to say moral edification. He also had other interests in mind he wrote on religion. But one of my themes is the priority of the practical in his religious writing.

Now I believe Eduard Zeller exaggerated considerably when, in a great essay written over a hundred years ago, he understood Lessing to equate religion with morality, as though Lessing were Kant.<sup>78</sup> There was much more

than that to Lessing's views on matters religious. 1) In the first place, he engaged restlessly and constantly a priority ordering between practical religiousness and matters of speculative or theoretical ultimate religious truth claims. 2) He had a strong sense that even as practice religion affects more than moral outlook and action, it affects the most intimate inner disposition and sensibility. Indeed, it is the tandem relation between these two things, morality and the affections, related to but not reducible to morality, that makes for a proper balance in religion. 3) Finally, the previous consideration led to a third: Lessing was, after all, dramaturgist first, and not a systematic philosopher or theologian. The very relations between morality and sensibility, between morality and religion, and those between practical and theoretical elements in the religious outlook are bound to arouse one's curiosity about possible material relations, as well as structural parallels between Lessing's aesthetics, his dramaturgy, his drama on the one hand and his religious views on the other.

So far as my modest knowledge goes, in the avalanche of work on him surprisingly little has been said on this matter, especially on what I have called the structural parallels (please don't read too much high-powered modern theory into that phrase) between art and religion. As a preliminary first stab, I want to talk about one small aspect of this matter – Lessing's theory in *Laocoon* and his views on religion.

I said that Zeller oversimplified the relation of morality and religion. Nonetheless, I wanted also to say that there is a high priority of the practical in the aim of Lessing's writing on religion, as Dilthey rightly said.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Lucien Goldmann, *The Hidden God: A Study of Tragic Vision in the Pensées of Pascal and the Tragedies of Racine*, tr. Philip Thody (London: Routledge, 1964).

<sup>2</sup> [Added as a manuscript note on the typescript: 'Enlightenment is man's escape from his self-inflicted immaturity. Immaturity is the incapacity to make use of one's own understanding without someone else's tutelage. This is self-inflicted when its cause is not a lack of understanding but of the resoluteness and courage to make use of it without another's tutelage. Sapere aude! Have the courage to use your own reason. Enlightenment = courage = freedom within.']

<sup>3</sup> [The typescript originally read 'three men'; the change may indicate that Frei never reached Herder. See also the next note.]

<sup>4</sup> [The typescript originally read: 'Lessing, Herder and Kant' here. See previous note.]

<sup>5</sup> Lessing, *Sara; Minna von Barnhelm: Two Plays*, tr. E. Bell and A. Meech (Barth: Absolute, 1990); a German text is reproduced at <http://gutenberg.spiegel.de/lessing/sampson/sampson.htm>.

<sup>6</sup> Dilthey, 'Gotthold Ephraim Lessing' in *Das Erlebnis und die Dichtung: Lessing, Goethe, Novalis, Hölderlin*, 10<sup>th</sup> edition (Leipzig: Teubner, 1929), pp.17–174.

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- <sup>7</sup> See note 5 above, or note 8 or 33 below; a German text is available at <http://gutenberg.spiegel.de/lessing/minna/minna.htm>.
- <sup>8</sup> Lessing, *Laocöon, Nathan the Wise, Minna von Barnhelm*, ed. W.A. Steel (London: Dent, 1930); a German text is available at <http://gutenberg.spiegel.de/lessing/laokoon/laokoon.htm>.
- <sup>9</sup> For Demetz, see notes 18 and 33 below; for Lukács, see his *The Historical Novel*, tr. H. and S. Mitchell (London: Merlin, 1962).
- <sup>10</sup> [Denis Diderot (1713–1784), French dramatist.] Lessing, ‘Das Theater des Herrn Diderot aus dem Franzosischen’ (1759–60), in *Gotthold Ephraim Lessing: Werke und Briefe 5/1: Werke 1760–1766*, ed. W. Barner et al (Frankfurt a.M.: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1985).
- <sup>11</sup> [Johann Christoph Gottsched (1700–1766).]
- <sup>12</sup> [Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1717–1768).] Winckelmann, *Gedanken über die Nachahmung der griechischen Werke in der Malerei und Bildhauerkunst* (1755); German text (1756 2<sup>nd</sup> edition) available at <http://gutenberg.spiegel.de/winckelm/nachahm/nachahm.htm>.
- <sup>13</sup> Lessing, *Gesammelte Werke*, ed. Paul Rilla (Berlin: Aufbau, 1954–8), vol.2, p.217.
- <sup>14</sup> [Struck out in the margin: ‘He is going to be corrected by them, of whom Kant is the last (Shaftesbury, Brooke, etc., precede him.) – The sublime as aesthetic ideal and attraction, in addition to the beautiful.’]
- <sup>15</sup> Lessing, *Gesammelte Werke*, vol.2, p.281.
- <sup>16</sup> Ibid, p.322.
- <sup>17</sup> Horace, *Ars Poetica* 11.361.
- <sup>18</sup> Lessing, *Emilia Galotti*, in *Nathan the Wise, Minna von Barhelm, and Other Plays and Writings*, ed. Peter Demetz (London: Continuum, 1991), pp.75–136; German text at <http://gutenberg.spiegel.de/lessing/galotti/galotti.htm>; and ‘Ernst and Falk: Conversations for the Freemasons’ in Demetz pp.277–308; German text available at <http://gutenberg.spiegel.de/lessing/freima/freim001.htm>.
- <sup>19</sup> [See pp.154ff below for a substantial addition and revision Frei prepared for insertion here.]
- <sup>20</sup> Lessing, *Eine Duplik* (1778) in *Gesammelte Werke*, ed. Paul Rilla (Berlin: Aufbau, 1954–8), vol.8, pp.505ff.
- <sup>21</sup> See H.S. Reimarus, *Fragments*, ed. Charles Talbert (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1970).
- <sup>22</sup> Lessing’s writings in the controversy with Goeze are collected in *Werke*, Bd VIII: *Theologiekritische Schriften III (Goeze–Streit)*, ed. G. Goepfert (Munich: Carl Hanser, 1978); one letter can be found at <http://www.denktag.de/denktag2001/projekte/13/plaedoye/goeze.htm>.
- <sup>23</sup> [This is a manuscript addition, replacing a deleted section: ‘Indeed, there had to be a certain tentativeness to his theoretical religious beliefs precisely because of the priority of action. More than likely he could give better literary than didactic or philosophical articulation to what he believed. Belief was probably expressed in

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the developing setting of somebody's specific story than in the abstract frozen cross-section of a conceptual system. We may not be wrong in suggesting that there is a certain parallel between the function of the visual arts and the function of abstract statement in religious theory. A belief didactically set forth is a painting or representation in the medium of mental space. Sitting right and beautiful in itself it may have a hint of the fluidity and sequence of what comes before and after in the actual action of life but it cannot be its proper expression. That is left for literature, the depiction of life in time, the expression of passion and action. Thus Nathan the wise man in the play that bears his name may well set forth Lessing's convictions together with their ambiguities better than Lessing can do himself when he states them in the language of theology and philosophy. The latter, given the inappropriateness of the medium, gives only the illusion and not the substance of precision. Precision and reality of conviction lie in the fiction, the language of literature, not in the language of conception. Lessing's irony fits the distance between dramatic and theoretical expression.']

<sup>24</sup> [The remainder of the sentence originally read: '...with regard to the fitness of philosophical theory to express what only literature could express really concretely and precisely.']

<sup>25</sup> Lessing, 'Vorrede des Herausgebers', *Von dem Zwecke Jesu und seiner Jünger. Noch ein Fragment des Wolfenbüttelschen Ungenannten*; German text available at <http://homes.rhein-zeitung.de/~ahipler/kritik/lessing5.htm>.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> *The Education of the Human Race*. See in *Nathan the Wise, Minna von Barhelm, and Other Plays and Writings*, ed. Peter Demetz, pp.334ff; English text also available at <http://www.fordham.edu/cgi-bin/getdoc.cgi?108915.11837>; German text available at <http://gutenberg.spiegel.de/lessing/erziehnng/erziehnng.htm>.

<sup>28</sup> Lessing, 'The Testament of John' in *Lessing's Theological Writings*, tr. H. Chadwick, Library of Modern Religious Thought (London: A.&C. Black, 1956), p.60.

<sup>29</sup> In *Nathan the Wise*. See *Nathan the Wise, Minna von Barhelm, and Other Plays and Writings*, ed. Peter Demetz; German text available at <http://gutenberg.spiegel.de/lessing/nathan/nathan.htm>.

<sup>30</sup> [Added in the margin: '(Kant!) (Lessing here one of the greatest challenges to modern theology?)']

<sup>31</sup> *Nathan the Wise, Minna von Barhelm, and Other Plays and Writings*, ed. Peter Demetz, pp.309–313 or *Lessing's Theological Writings*, tr. H. Chadwick, pp.51–6.

<sup>32</sup> [Added in the margin: 'Jesus of history – Christ of faith; historical critical judgments – faith judgments ever since.']

<sup>33</sup> *The Education of the Human Race*, paragraph 80.

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- <sup>34</sup> [This last sentence replaced: ‘Reinterpretation of a religious view of reality and of the religiously articulated springs of human disposition action were bound to be the way in which Lessing formulated his pedagogical theory.’]
- <sup>35</sup> Lessing, ‘Briefe an Karl Lessing, 20 Oct 1778’ in *Gotthold Ephraim Lessing: Werke und Briefe 12: Briefe von und an Lessing 1776–1781*, ed. W. Barner et al (Frankfurt a/M: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1985), p.200.
- <sup>36</sup> *The Education of the Human Race*, paragraph 76.
- <sup>37</sup> Compare paragraphs 73–75.
- <sup>38</sup> Ibid, paragraph 73.
- <sup>39</sup> [Added in the margin: ‘How important for preaching office this hope: see Strauss, conclusion to *Life of Jesus*.’]
- <sup>40</sup> *The Education of the Human Race*, paragraph 90.
- <sup>41</sup> [This phrase replaces the sentence: ‘Right now esoteric and exoteric meaning, speculative religious theory and what is true, as well as its bearing on the reform of mankind in its quest for true humanity have to maintain their ambiguous relation; they do not coincide.’]
- <sup>42</sup> [The sentence originally began: ‘Speculative theory maintains its ambiguity, its provisional character, its tension between exoteric and esoteric meaning because it is no more (though of course no less) than a construct in mental space...’]
- <sup>43</sup> [The remainder of this sentence is a replacement for: ‘...but the perfect wedding of reflective theory and the pedagogical evocation of reforming activity, the merging of morals with the fiction of historical action and character. Thus certain transitions in time, for example Nathan’s hesitation as to whether he was still a Jew or not – so indicative of Lessing’s own ambiguous attitude toward the abiding usefulness or lack thereof of positive religion to the coming universal religion – can be dramatically represented as unities in transition, in a way in which they cannot be theoretically stated.’]
- <sup>44</sup> [Added in margin: ‘How typical of the Eighteenth Century, and how marvelous!’]
- <sup>45</sup> Boccaccio, *Decameron*, day 1, tale 3; see [http://www.brown.edu/Departments/Italian\\_Studies/dweb/dweb.shtml](http://www.brown.edu/Departments/Italian_Studies/dweb/dweb.shtml).
- <sup>46</sup> [Added in the margin: ‘Good Lord, it sounds like Bultmann preaching!’]
- <sup>47</sup> [The typescript ends at this point, but there are, included with the George F. Thomas materials in YDS 10-169 some isolated manuscript pages which I think form the continuation and ending of the lecture.]
- <sup>48</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Religion within the Boundaries of mere Reason*, ed. A.W. Wood and G. Di Giovanni (Cambridge: CUP, 1999).
- <sup>49</sup> Frederick Copleston, *A History of Philosophy 6: Modern Philosophy from the French Enlightenment to Kant* (London: Burns and Oates, 1960), II, p.135.
- <sup>50</sup> [The manuscript then degenerates into a collection of notes, and finishes half way down the page: ‘1801 “Intellectual intuition” (Man included in Godhood); (1) Which shall overcome which concept? Not much question – Subject tends to

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embrace object; the objective descriptions of God are symbols of God as subject; (2) New language needed, new conception; (2) [sic] ‘Faustianism’: man as virtually unlimited creator of his own world, especially his cultural world, out of that which he finds ‘accidentally’ given to him. The merging of divine and human in intelligent creativity; (3) It was the dry rationalist who had skirted, come close to the abyss beyond rationalism. Symbolism and Religious Conception in *Religion within Limits*.’]

<sup>51</sup> Wilhelm Dilthey, ‘Gotthold Ephraim Lessing’, p.147. See note 6 above.

<sup>52</sup> Eduard Zeller, *Vorträge und Abhandlungen geschichtlichen Inhalts* (Leipzig: Fues, 1865), p.325.

<sup>53</sup> Peter Demetz, *Gotthold Ephraim Lessing: Nathan der Weise* (Frankfurt a.M./Berlin: Ullstein, 1966), p.325.

<sup>54</sup> *Nathan the Wise*, IV.7.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid*, IV.4, 139.

<sup>56</sup> *The Education of the Human Race*, paragraphs 73–76.

<sup>57</sup> [The manuscript degenerates into notes at this point: ‘There is one exception to this tentative character of speculative religious ideas: The idea of Providence or God. Yet not easy to determine: A. (1) Against personal deity of arbitrary revealed kind; (2) Against designing craftsman deity of the mechanical universe of natural religion; (3) Against materialism like that of d’Holbach; (4) No trace of Hume’s agnosticism about the nature of the ultimate cause. B. For (1) Pantheism – both Spinoza and Leibniz; (2) Immanence of the divine within the world; (3) Causal determinism yet intelligent harmony; (4) Theodicy – acceptance, but also [*The remainder of this note is difficult to read*]. C. (1) Here [i.e. providence] speculation – not as in Trinity etc. – [is] immediately linked to the affection and to the virtuous, truly human life. (2) How – no real answer. I suspect he’d suggest no need for one: here theory should recede, this is simply and irreducibly the way the religious person talks – and no explanatory theory is adequate to or a substitute for the use of that language as a form of life: (*Nathan*, Act IV, Scene 1, 118). But apart from this one instance – God’s determining providence – all speculation is secondary for Lessing.’]

<sup>58</sup> See note 21 above.

<sup>59</sup> Lessing, ‘On the Proof of the Spirit and of Power’ in *Lessing’s Theological Writings*, tr. H. Chadwick, pp.51–56.

<sup>60</sup> [Johann Salomo Semler (1725–91), church historian and biblical critic.]

<sup>61</sup> [Moses Mendelssohn (1729–86), Jewish philosopher.]

<sup>62</sup> [Christoph Friedrich Nicolai (1733–1811), Enlightenment writer.]

<sup>63</sup> ‘Vorrede des Herausgebers’; see note 25 above.

<sup>64</sup> [Deleted at this point: ‘And with that we return to our earlier theme: the priority of the practical for Lessing but also the drastic independent evaluation he gave to that ??? of popular philosophy: rational moral virtue and the passions were his concern

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and the philosophy of religion was the concrete, social stage for a ??? to give embodiment to that informing ??? Rational, moral virtue was his concern and so was its fusion with the passions or affections, morality and passion were bonded together. Nature, he suggests at one point (6, 387) in the second conversation of Ernst and Falk, has made man for happiness in society, and all sure passions and needs lead us in that direction. And the fulfilment of that natural aim is the unification of people in that humanity which is theirs when they see each other united as equals, simply as human beings, regardless of nation, and especially of class (6, 39?) This, of course, is also the ideal of the Freemasons and rests, as Lessing puts it, “not on external connections which degenerate so easily into bourgeois arrangements, but on the feeling of mutually sympathising spirits.” (6, 406).’]

<sup>65</sup> Dilthey, ‘Gotthold Ephraim Lessing’, p.85. See note 6 above.

<sup>66</sup> [Marked for deletion: ‘Now with regard to that dishonest revelation and philosophy called Neology, it was easy enough to know what disposition to make. And to the extent that orthodoxy and Neology had a family resemblance, the fight against orthodoxy was also easy. But it was tougher, internally tougher, to the extent that orthodoxy and pietism, inner non-philosophically grounded faith and piety, resembled each other. To gain a stance toward this outlook or combination of outlooks, Enlightenment rationalism simply would not do. For it could only abolish them root and branch, intellectually as well as dispositionally. And Lessing wanted rather to reform or reinterpret – in the direction of his human ideal – than abolish this or these aspects of the tradition.’]

<sup>67</sup> *Nathan the Wise* IV.7.

<sup>68</sup> *Nathan the Wise* V.4, 139–40.

<sup>69</sup> Hans Wolff, *Die Weltanschauung der deutschen Aufklärung in geschichtlicher Entwicklung* (Berne: A. Francke, 1949), p.202. Chapter X is a brilliant exposition of the ‘popular philosophy of the later Enlightenment’.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid*, p.203.

<sup>71</sup> H.E. Allison, *Lessing and the Enlightenment* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1966), pp.121–35.

<sup>72</sup> Lessing, *Laokoon*; see note 8 above.

<sup>73</sup> Wolff, *Die Weltanschauung*, pp.219ff.

<sup>74</sup> Cf. *The Education of the Human Race*, paragraphs 79–85.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid*, paragraph 80.

<sup>76</sup> See Demetz, *Nathan der Weise*.

<sup>77</sup> [This extract stops in mid-page, though Frei added in the margin: ‘Faith – historical-critical judgments about Bible. Too bad that this is how the issue got posed by Lessing–Reimarus, and Goeze. For it determined theological discussion thereafter. Also gave notion about what Lessing’s chief contributions to the theological discussion were. (Wasn’t *Nathan* read in light of *Proof from Spirit and*

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*Power*, rather than independently or vice versa?): On this people like Hegel, Strauss, Kierkegaard agreed. But there is no sign that it was that drastic in its own right (apart from reforming religion) for Lessing – As a matter of fact ‘necessary truths of reason’ is not necessarily the status of religious truth for him, but only its status in a Leibnizian orthodox context such as his opponents have.’]

<sup>78</sup> Eduard Zeller, *Vorträge und Abhandlungen geschichtlichen Inhalts*, p.325: ‘The essence of religion, the ultimate purpose of all religious activity, lies ... in its moral effect.’ (See note 52 above.) See also references to the discussion in H.E. Allison, *Lessing and the Enlightenment*, p.181, n.61.

<sup>79</sup> Dilthey, *Dichtung und Erlebnis*, p.147.