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At the wish of his father, a devout Lutheran clergyman, the young Lessing matriculated at Leipzig University in 1746 as a student of theology. But with that independent-mindedness – not to say rebelliousness – which would characterise his behaviour throughout his life, he soon abandoned theology for secular subjects and the writing of comedies. This does not mean that he had no interest in religion. He in fact returned to it again and again, with the same mixture of respect and criticism which defined his relationship with his father; and when he eventually completed his studies a few years later at Wittenberg – nominally in the medical faculty – he spent much of his time writing ‘vindications’ or defences of Catholic and Protestant heretics of the Reformation period.

Even in his early years, Lessing identified himself with progressive Enlightenment thought, in particular with the rationalism of Leibniz and Wolff. He shared their view of the universe as the harmonious creation of a wise and beneficent designer, in which the tendency of all things is to strive towards ever higher levels of consciousness and perfection, while such evils as do exist are ultimately conducive to the good of the whole. In Lessing’s case, this rationalism was soon modified and supplemented by the scepticism of Pierre Bayle, author of the massive *Historical and Critical Dictionary*, whose biographical articles included numerous philosophers and religious thinkers of the past.¹ Bayle’s meticulous historical scholarship and destructive scrutiny of apparently established facts

¹ See Henry E. Allison, *Lessing and the Enlightenment: His Philosophy of Religion and its Relation to Eighteenth-Century Thought* (Ann Arbor, 1966), pp. 16–24; also H. B. Nisbet, ‘Lessing and Pierre Bayle’, in C. P. Magill, Brian A. Rowley, and Christopher J. Smith (eds.), *Tradition and Creation: Essays in Honour of Elizabeth Mary Wilkinson* (Leeds, 1978), pp. 13–29.

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and supposedly rational certainties left lasting marks on Lessing's own writings, and encouraged him to regard all doctrines, including those which he himself put forward, as no more than provisional. In addition, Bayle's powerful advocacy of tolerance, of what he called 'the rights of the erring conscience' (that is, of all sincerely held, though possibly erroneous beliefs, including those of atheists), reinforced Lessing's lifelong sympathy with persecuted individuals and religious or social minorities.

Intellectual development

Lessing's earliest philosophical writings, all of which remained fragments unpublished in his lifetime, are heavily indebted to rationalism. *The Christianity of Reason*, probably written in 1753, depicts a recognisably Leibnizian universe, with its scale of being, universal harmony, perfectibility, and cosmic optimism. But it goes beyond Leibniz in a decisive respect which testifies to the young Lessing's intellectual autonomy: for he constructs not only the universe, but also the Holy Trinity, by a process of rational deduction, and presents the universe itself as a necessary emanation rather than a freely chosen creation of the rational deity.² These ideas were not new. But they were certainly heretical. And the concept of necessary creation was uncomfortably close – too close for the work to be published – to the ideas of another rationalist philosopher, namely Spinoza, whose pantheism was at that time widely held to be indistinguishable from atheism.

The next three fragments in the present collection were written around ten years later, at a time when Lessing's work as secretary to a Prussian general in Breslau (1760–5) left him ample time for private study. During those years, he acquired an intimate knowledge of the patristic writers and of the early history of Christianity, thereby preparing the way for his theological polemics of the following decade. His interest in philosophy was also reawakened at this time when his friend Moses Mendelssohn sent him his collected *Philosophical Writings*, published in 1761, in which Spinoza (to whom, as a Jewish philosopher like himself, Mendelssohn felt a certain

² For further discussion of this question, see H. B. Nisbet, 'The Rationalisation of the Holy Trinity from Lessing to Hegel', *Lessing Yearbook*, 31 (1999), 65–89.

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affinity) featured prominently along with the German rationalists.³ But whereas Mendelssohn, in keeping with his own Jewish faith, clung firmly to the transcendental God of Leibniz, Wolff, and the Torah, Lessing's two fragments *On the Reality of Things outside God* and *Spinoza only Put Leibniz on the Track of Pre-established Harmony* are, at least by implication, more sympathetic towards Spinoza's monism. The third fragment of Lessing's Breslau years, *On the Origin of Revealed Religion*, is explicitly critical of all revealed religion, which it treats as a necessary evil, an unavoidable accretion on the universal natural religion prescribed by reason. This short fragment, more reminiscent of the Savoyard vicar of Rousseau's *Emile* (1762) than of Leibniz and Wolff, marks the high point of Lessing's religious radicalism. Though he regularly criticises and questions the revealed religions – especially Christianity – in his later writings, he is never again quite so unequivocally hostile to revelation as in the concluding paragraph of this Breslau fragment (p. 36).⁴

A marked change in his attitude towards revealed religion can indeed be detected in the early 1770s, a change for which a number of factors were responsible. The death of his father in 1770 lent a new gravity to his thoughts on religion, which he had associated since his childhood with the parent whose stern piety he had simultaneously respected and resisted in the name of reason and enlightenment. His encounter, at around the same time, with a natural religion more extreme than his own in the work of H. S. Reimarus, whose consistent reduction of revealed religion to bad faith and priestcraft he found less than plausible, disposed him to look again, as he told Mendelssohn, at some of the prejudices – or truths – which he now feared he might have discarded prematurely.⁵

His change of attitude was, however, due above all to intensive studies of Leibniz, many of whose posthumous writings, including the *New Essays on Human Understanding*, had recently come to light in editions of his works published in 1765 and 1768; these editions revealed a more complex

³ See Moses Mendelssohn, *Philosophical Writings*, edited by Daniel O. Dahlstrom (Cambridge, 1997), pp. 100–11; also Alexander Altmann, *Moses Mendelssohn: A Biographical Study* (University of Alabama Press, 1973), pp. 33–40 and 50–3.

⁴ This and all subsequent page-references in the text, unless identified by an additional prefix, are to the present volume.

⁵ Lessing to Mendelssohn, 9 January 1771, in Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Werke und Briefe*, edited by Wilfried Barner and others, 12 vols. (Frankfurt-on-Main, 1985–2003), XI/2, pp. 144f. Subsequent references to this edition, identified by the prefix B, are included in the text.

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and diversified thinker than the author of the familiar *Theodicy*, with its systematic rational optimism. (Lessing's interest was also whetted by the knowledge that Leibniz had once held the same post as librarian to the dukes of Brunswick to which he was himself appointed in 1770.) What he now found most congenial in Leibniz was not so much his particular opinions, as the whole style and manner of his thinking, especially his readiness to recognise an element of truth in the most diverse philosophical and theological positions: since each monad views the universe from a different perspective, each will form a different, and inevitably partial, image of the whole. Lessing defines this strategy as follows in *Leibniz on Eternal Punishment* (p. 46):

In his quest for truth, Leibniz never took any notice of accepted opinions; but in the firm belief that no opinion can be accepted unless it is in a certain respect, or in a certain sense true, he was often so accommodating as to turn the opinion over and over until he was able to bring that certain respect to light, and to make that certain sense comprehensible [. . .] He willingly set his own system aside, and tried to lead each individual along the path to truth on which he found him.

Applied to the question of religious truth, this approach rules out the possibility that, for example, the doctrines of revelation are comprehensively false and those of rational religion exclusively true: all of them will embody a greater or lesser element of truth, expressed in more or less rational ways. Significantly, the unfamiliar works of Leibniz which appeared in Louis Dutens's edition (Geneva, 1768) of the *Opera omnia* [*Complete Works*] included defences of several Christian mysteries such as transubstantiation and original sin.⁶ In a similar spirit, Lessing now added his support, in the essay just quoted, to another Christian doctrine which Leibniz had defended, namely that of eternal punishment, extracting a rational sense from a dogma which rationalists such as J. A. Eberhard had dismissed as irrational: since the consequences of every action in a causally determined universe must be infinite and therefore eternal, the punishment which every sin incurs, in the shape of diminished perfection on the part of the sinner, must also be eternal.

⁶ See Georges Pons, *Gotthold Ephraim Lessing et le Christianisme* (Paris, 1964), p. 231; this work remains the most comprehensive study to date on Lessing's views on religion.

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There is, however, a fundamental difference between Lessing's and Leibniz's procedure. Leibniz, ever anxious not to offend Christian orthodoxy, had never claimed to demonstrate the truth of Christian doctrines, but only to defend them against rational attempts to disprove them. Lessing had no such inhibitions, contending in *The Education of the Human Race* that the rational content of revealed truths becomes progressively manifest over time, thereby superseding the original revelation; he then proceeds to extract a rational sense not only from the doctrine of the Trinity (as he had already done in *The Christianity of Reason* over twenty years earlier), but also from those of original sin and the atonement (pp. 234–5).

Lessing's philosophical position here is not one of relativism, for it does assume that there is such a thing as ultimate truth, even if complete knowledge of this truth, as he says in *A Rejoinder* (p. 98), is reserved for God alone, whereas human insights can never do more than approximate to it. But in so far as all of these insights are approximations, the truths we claim to possess are only relative truths, and in this qualified sense, Lessing is indeed a relativist. This attitude lends support to his lifelong belief in tolerance, and to the religious pluralism of his drama *Nathan the Wise* (1779), according to which each of the great monotheistic religions has an equally legitimate claim to truth, the precise extent of which can be determined only after an indefinite, and perhaps infinite, period of time. His open epistemology is likewise compatible with the qualified scepticism to which he had subscribed ever since his early studies of Bayle, and which is again evident in his polemics of 1778 against J. M. Goeze, whom he reminds that, since few passages in the Bible are ever interpreted in the same way by everyone, such credibility as the science of hermeneutics possesses can never be more than subjective (p. 141):

Which are the right concepts to which they [the biblical passages] *should* give rise? Who is to decide this? Hermeneutics? Everyone has his own hermeneutics. Which of them is true? Are they all true? Or is none of them true? And this thing, this wretched, irksome thing, is to be the test of inner truth? Then what would be the test of *it*?

The later Lessing accordingly discerns at least a heuristic value in numerous distinct positions, while declining to commit himself exclusively to any of them.

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Reimarus and the religious controversy

Towards the end of his years in Hamburg (1767–70), Lessing became friendly with the son and daughter of Hermann Samuel Reimarus, a respected orientalist and author of several works on philosophy and natural religion who had died early in 1768. Convinced that natural religion was alone sufficient, Reimarus had also proceeded, in a clandestine treatise entitled *Apology or Defence of the Rational Worshippers of God*, to attack the Bible in detail as a collection of lies and absurdities, accusing the apostles of secretly reintering the body of Christ and inventing the story of his resurrection and divinity in order to increase their own worldly influence. Lessing at once realised, when shown the treatise in confidence, that it surpassed all earlier attacks on revealed religion, including those of the English deists, in virulence and exhaustiveness, and he prevailed on Elise Reimarus, when he left Hamburg for Wolfenbüttel, to let him retain an early draft of her father's work.

He was already determined to publish it, but even in Berlin, where Frederick the Great tolerated religious dissent so long as it did not disturb the public peace, Lessing's publisher Voss refused to take the project on after the censor, while stopping short of banning it, declined to approve it explicitly.⁷ But when, in 1772, Lessing received permission from Brunswick to publish rare and learned materials from the Wolfenbüttel library without submitting them to the censor, he tested the water in 1774 by including a relatively innocuous fragment from Reimarus's work – a plea for the toleration of deists – in the periodical which he had meanwhile established in his capacity as librarian; he falsely claimed to have discovered the anonymous work in the library's holdings.⁸ Emboldened by the lack of public protests, he followed this up in 1777 with five more fragments, culminating in Reimarus's critique of the resurrection story as a tissue of contradiction and deception (LM XII, 303–428).

The crucial question all this raises is what exactly Lessing hoped to achieve by releasing such explosive material, whose author had himself declared that it should be withheld until the advent of a more enlightened age. It is certain at least that he did not simply endorse Reimarus's

⁷ Richard Daunicht, *Lessing im Gespräch* (Munich, 1971), p. 308.

⁸ Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Sämtliche Schriften*, edited by Karl Lachmann and Franz Muncker, 23 vols. (Stuttgart, 1886–1924), XII, 254–71. Subsequent references to this edition, identified by the prefix LM, are included in the text.

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position, for Reimarus's static vision of rational truth was incompatible with Lessing's dynamic view of truth and knowledge. His historical sense also told him that superstition and priestcraft do not fully account for the appeal of revealed religion to so many different ages and societies. His reservations on these and other accounts are plainly enough expressed in his editorial comments to the extracts from Reimarus which he published in 1777 (pp. 62–82). What he did agree with, however, was Reimarus's contention that the literal truth of the Bible is neither a tenable assumption nor a necessary article of religious belief.

It is nevertheless clear from Lessing's challenge to believers to rally to the defence of Christianity, and from the extended metaphors of combat to which he resorts on more than one occasion (see pp. 64 and 95–6), that he both expected and intended to provoke a major controversy. But with few exceptions, those who responded to his challenge were not those at whom it was primarily directed. For his private utterances plainly indicate that he hoped above all to provoke the so-called 'neologists', representatives of a liberal theological tendency which arose in the middle years of the century and included such eminent clerics as A. F. W. Sack, J. G. Töllner, J. J. Spalding, and W. A. Teller.⁹ While not explicitly rejecting revelation, the neologists compromised with rationalism to the extent of glossing over or ignoring those revealed doctrines which could not readily be rationalised, such as original sin, the Trinity, and (as in Eberhard's case) eternal punishment. They in fact believed, as one commentator aptly puts it, that Christianity is true precisely to the extent that it is superfluous.¹⁰ To Lessing, this was half-baked religion as well as half-baked philosophy, inferior both to the older Lutheran orthodoxy and to the radical deism of Reimarus, both of which at least possessed the virtue of intellectual honesty. But as his friends Mendelssohn and Nicolai predicted, the effect of what soon became known as the 'Fragments' was not at all what Lessing had intended. The leading neologists and academic theologians kept well in the background, while the conservative wing of Lutheran orthodoxy, led by J. M. Goeze, reacted with a mixture of outrage and incomprehension to what they perceived as a mischievous assault on everything they stood for.

In retrospect, this result was hardly surprising. The neologists saw no compelling need to defend their theology of compromise against either

⁹ See Allison, *Lessing and the Enlightenment*, pp. 83–95; also Karl Aner, *Theologie der Lessingzeit* (Halle/Saale, 1929), pp. 61–143.

¹⁰ Allison, *Lessing and the Enlightenment*, p. 16.

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of the extremes they sought to avoid, whereas the orthodox clergy felt directly threatened. In the first place, Lessing's rejection of the sole authority of Scripture, of what he himself described as 'bibliolatry' (LM xvi, 470–2), denied the central principle of Lutheranism, and not even his appeal to the spirit of Luther against Luther's ossified legacy (pp. 117–18) could disguise the gravity of this attack. Secondly, Lessing's style of writing – non-technical, accessible, often entertaining, and explicitly directed not just at theological specialists but at the educated public at large – seemed to Goeze and others like him to undercut their authority with their own parishioners. Furthermore, Lessing's 'counter-propositions' (pp. 62–82) did not substantially counter Reimarus's challenge to the resurrection as the ultimate confirmation of Christ's divinity. And finally, Lessing's failure to define his own position, his posture of neutrality (p. 95) while simultaneously sowing doubt and inciting others to combat, could only strike those whose immediate concern was the spiritual welfare of unsophisticated people as irresponsible. 'Take care', Lessing would warn those of more advanced insight, 'take care not to let your weaker classmates detect what you scent, or already begin to see!' (p. 233). But he did not heed his own warnings – and it would have been utterly out of character for him to do so. It was all very well to invoke, as the ultimate refuge from doubt, the 'inner truth' of religion as something which even the simplest believer could immediately feel (pp. 62–3 and 115–16). But how could this be reconciled with his claim that this same truth is still largely inaccessible to the most advanced efforts of reason (p. 234)? Such statements were profoundly unsettling, as Lessing surely meant them to be; but he could hardly protest if those whose main task was not to unsettle but to reassure took grave exception to them.

The result was the greatest controversy in German Protestantism in the eighteenth century, if not since the Reformation era. Apart from numerous reviews of the 'Fragments' and of Lessing's own responses, around fifty books and articles appeared, most of them highly critical of the 'Fragments', and many of Lessing for publishing them¹¹. The first of these were from minor figures. Johann Daniel Schumann, headmaster and clergyman, to whom Lessing's first two replies are directed (pp. 83–94), attacked only the 'Fragments' and not Lessing himself –

¹¹ See Arno Schilson's editorial introduction to the controversy in B VIII, 960–3; on the chronology of the conflict and main publications by Lessing and his adversaries, see B IX, 760–7.

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hence the relatively irenic tone of Lessing's responses; but Schumann's naive appeal to the miracles and fulfilled prophecies of Scripture did not begin to address Reimarus's basic objections. His second opponent wrote anonymously, but Lessing soon identified him as Johann Heinrich Ress, a senior clergyman and neighbour of his in Wolfenbüttel. On this occasion, Lessing's reply (*A Rejoinder*) is polemical – not because he was attacked himself, but because Ress dismissed the 'Fragments' by invective rather than by reasoned arguments, attributing wilful obtuseness and malevolence to the anonymous author, of whose intellectual stature Lessing was not in any doubt.

His third adversary, Johann Melchior Goeze, chief pastor of the Church of St Catharine in Hamburg and senior representative of the Hamburg clergy from 1760 to 1770, was a much more formidable figure. A prolific writer and seasoned controversialist, he was now the leading spokesman of Lutheran orthodoxy in Germany. Lessing had known and respected him in Hamburg for his scholarly interests (Goeze was an expert on German editions and translations of the Bible). But in his doom-laden sermons and implacable hostility to liberal theology, Goeze no longer had the public at large on his side, and it was partly for this reason that Lessing, in his usual spirit of contrariness, had defended him against the ridicule of enlightened opinion during his Hamburg period. Since then, Goeze had taken umbrage at Lessing's failure to reply to a bibliographical query, and although his initial response to the 'Fragments' was relatively restrained, he soon adopted the polemical tone for which he was renowned, accusing Lessing of 'direct and malicious attacks' on Christianity. This change of tone accounts for the parallel change of tone between Lessing's *Parable* (with its accompanying 'Request') and *Axioms* on the one hand (pp. 110–16 and 120–47), both of which were written before Goeze's full-scale denunciation began, and the 'Challenge' which Lessing added to the former work just as it went to press (pp. 116–19).

From this point onwards, the controversy became fiercely polemical and increasingly repetitive. Lessing's chief weapon in the eleven *Anti-Goeze* pamphlets which he now launched against his opponent – not included in this volume – is satire, and his main contribution to theology lies rather in the *Axioms* and *New Hypothesis* which preceded them (pp. 120–71). As the conflict intensified, his position grew increasingly precarious. From the start, Goeze made scarcely veiled attempts, as in most of his previous controversies, to incite the secular authorities (in the shape

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of the Corpus Evangelicorum, the body which represented Protestant interests in the Holy Roman Empire) to intervene against this latest threat to Lutheran orthodoxy. Lessing's response, as in his *Necessary Answer to a Very Unnecessary Question* (pp. 172–7), was to emphasise the importance of oral tradition, rather than the written word of the Bible, as the ultimate authority in matters of faith, in order to solicit support from the Corpus Catholicorum, which represented Catholic interests, if Goeze should succeed in mobilising the imperial authorities.

But the chief threat came from nearer home. Two local clergymen, J. H. Ress of Wolfenbüttel and J. B. Lüderwald, Lutheran Superintendent in Brunswick itself, had now become involved in the controversy, and Lessing, provoked to the limit by Goeze, now published the last and most virulent of his extracts from Reimarus's work, *On the Aims of Jesus and his Disciples*, in which the theory of the apostles' conspiracy and forgery of the resurrection was expounded in full (LM XIII, 215–327). This was the last straw. In July 1778, conservative elements at the Brunswick court prevailed upon the reigning duke to ban Lessing from publishing anything further in the dispute without the advance permission of the censor.

In the event, Lessing did publish several more items, including the *Necessary Answer to a Very Unnecessary Question*, outside Brunswick, despite the government's disapproval. In doing so, he may have reckoned on the more tolerant attitude of the duke's successor, Charles William Ferdinand, who was already effectively in charge and took over as ruler on his father's death less than two years later. And although the Corpus Evangelicorum did eventually call for punitive measures against Lessing, the new ruler at once reassured him that no such action would be taken. Lessing's postscript to the whole affair was not another polemic, but the drama *Nathan the Wise*, published by private subscription in 1779. With its moving appeal for universal tolerance, it shows remarkably little trace of the acrimonious dispute out of which it arose.

By this time, Lessing's health was failing, and there can be no doubt that the religious controversy, and the animosity which he encountered as a result of it, served to shorten his life. The damage it did was compounded by the death of his wife, after little more than a year of marital happiness, and her infant son shortly after the conflict erupted. As a result of these reverses and the problems he now faced with the censorship, he did not manage to respond publicly when some of the leading theologians he had hoped to involve, such as J. S. Semler and C. W. F. Walch, did eventually