LESSING'S SEARCH FOR TOLERATION: NATHAN THE WISE*

by

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Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729-81) was one of the most significant religious thinkers of the eighteenth century. In many ways, he was a child of his age. Lessing clearly was not an enchanted, uncritical Christian. He opposed dogmatism, creeds, and the belief in the supernatural power and of the superiority of any religion. However, Lessing's religious insights conveyed much more than the superficial rationalism of his times which itself created another kind of dogmatism.

Lessing was the first to begin to speculate historically on the significane of religion. "What education is for the individual, revelation is for the whole human race."(1) Religion, as viewed by Lessing, is a progressive revelation, better understood and illuminated by reason in the course of time. Lessing synthesized revelation and reason, and started a developmental, evolutionary, and perspective view of religion. This enabled him to consider that man's true worth lies in an endless striving after truth, although man may never fully attain it. Hence, toleration becomes a virtue, and a necessary one in terms of religious thought. This theme of toleration is well mainfested in Lessing's dramatic poem, *Nathan the Wise*.

The story of *Nathan the Wise* takes place in twelfth century Jerusalem. The plot is simple. Nathan, a rich Jew, having lost his wife and seven children who were burned by the Christians, has brought up an orphaned Christian girl Recha, in an enlightened, tolerant atmosphere. Recha's life is later saved from an accidental fire by a Knight of the Temple. This Templar's own life is in turn spared by Sultan Saladin. Unknown to these principals, they are in fact related by blood ties.

* G. E. Lessing, *Nathan the Wise,* translated by Guenther Reunhardt, Barron's Educational Series, Inc. Great Neck, New York, 1950.

(1) Lessing, *Education of the Human Race,* translated by John Dearing Haney, Teachers College, Columbia College, N.Y. 1908, p. 33.

It is important to elucidate at the outset that Lessing did not choose the persons of his drama as representatives of their particular religions. Nathan goes beyond the narrow boundary of the Jew's self-concept as God's chosen people by believing that "all countries produce good man." (Act II, scene 5) His spirit of toleration is revealed in the noted parable of the ring (Act III, Scene 7), which will be discussed later, and is manifested in the very fact that he brought up a Christian girl following the loss of his own family.

The Templar may be considered basically good, since he refused to kill Saladin who spared his life, rejected to deliver Nathan to the Patriarch of Jerusalem for inquisition, and finally learned toleration from Nathan. However, he bore an arrogant manner, fiercely scorned the Jews, and did go to the Patriarch to accuse Nathan of misleading Recha's heart. The very fact that he participated in a religious war shows that he accepted the religious fanaticism imposed by his Order.

After conferring with the Templar, the bigoted Patriarch of Jerusalem desires Nathan to be burned at the stake. The Patriarch also hypocratically wishes to spy upon and kill Saladin even though he himself lives in Jerusalem under Saladin's own protection. The concept of a universal God and the command of love taught by Christ are not represented by the Templar, much less by the Patriarch.

Saladin, the enlightened despot, is viewed as generous, charitable, and not desirous of war with the Christians. (Act II, scene 1) Neverthess, his toleration did not originate from any specific religion, and he spared the Templar's life merely due to the latter's resemblance to Salsdin's own brother.

Hence none of the characters is strictly representative of the three respective religions. Lessing had no intention of judging the relative merits of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. In particular, he did not attempt to portray Christianity as inferior to the other two faiths. He was not comparing religions, but rather individuals. There is a great difference between the truth of religion, and its individual believers. As Sylvester Primer has said, "The power of religion is not mechanical, but dynamical, and requires co-operation on the part of man, an inner activity of its possessor."(2) Thus toleration becomes important.

The demand for toleration is far from mere indifference. On the contrary, it recognizes that no man holds the absolute truth, and that each religion has a relative worth. True toleration can only be achieved by respect for this diversity.

(2) Sylvester Primer, "Lessing's Religious Development with Special Reference to His Nathan the Wise", *Publications of the Modern Language Association,* Vol. 8, 1893, pp. 335-379.

Sharing the view with most of the Enlightenment thinkers, Lessing considered that no system of religious belief can be proved by universally valid arguments. Religion is false when it absolutizes itself as the only means for achieving the final truth. This is the distortion committed by orthodox religion, because it claims only its God as the right God, and tries to force its God upon the entire world. Hence the Patriarch can not be tolerant when he considers that reason does not belong everywhere. (Act IV, scene 2).

Lessing would not accept the supremacy of any religion. He had the Templar wisely observes that, "The worst superstition is to consider one's own superstition the more tolerable one." (Act IV, scene 4) And he spoke through Rocha, "Who owns God? What kind of a God is that who is owned by a man?" (Act III, scene 1) When man takes his God as the only true God, he is actually passing a judgment on God, since, "Submission to God does not depend by any manner of means on our concept of God." (Act III, scene 1)

Nevertheless, Lessing's meaning carried beyond the mere negation of orthodox religion. As stated in his *Education of the Human Race*, religious truth was revealed to men in stages, particular races and particular times must have a religion suited to them and their times. These change as they outgrow it, or as the times change. This historical view of religion does not only express Lessing's belief in a law of progress in human history, but also confirm the positive value of orthodox religion. In other words, while religion does not possesses absolute truth, it has a relative one. As Ernst Cassirer said, for Lessing, "The historical is no longer opposed to the rational. It is rather the way to the realization of the rational and the real, indeed the only possible place of its fulfillment."(3)

The truth of religion is a matter of comparative degrees rather than the possession of an absolute truth at any given moment. As Saladin told the Templar," I have never demanded that all trees should grow the same bark." (Act IV, scene 4) And since each religion possesses only relative truth but none holds the absolute truth, each is worthy of respect. They can coexist and mutually respect each other. Just like the appreciation between Nathan and the Friar, when Nathan said, ". . . . . What is making me a Christian (for you), that (also) makes you a Jew for me!" (Act IV, scene 7).

While each religion espouses only relative truth, the final truth is still a goal for man to strive for, although it can never be completely realized. It is the striving after truth, not the truth which a man possesses or believes he possesses,

(3) Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*, translated by Fritz C. A. Koelln & James P. Pettegrove, Beacon Press, Boston, 1955, p. 194.

which constitutes the worth of man. Since, "It is not by the possession, but by the search after truth that he enlarges his power, wherein alone consists his ever increasing perfection."(4) And even if absolute truth were revearled, Lessing would not have wished to apprehend it. He wrote in his famous lines: "If God held enclosed in His right hand all truth, and in His left hand the ever-active striving after truth, . . . and said to me: Choose! I would humbly fall before his left hand and say: Father give! The pure truth is for Thee alone."(5) Thus the possessor of the real ring, will be revealed only after the ring possessors vie in competition, and for a long time, until the time of the "children's children's children." (Act III, scene 7).

The truth of religion may be expressed in a certain form, in certain rites, however, those who consider the true essence of religion rests on the symbols and rites alone can never be tolerant. Faith inheres in the inner exprience, instead of the outside wrapping. The ultimate truth of religion cannot be shown by external demonstration, but only by internal conviction, by what it does, by the action. When Nathan tells the Templar that good men are everywhere, he does recognize the existence of the difference, "different in color, in garments, in shape, "yet," that difference is unimportant." (Act II, scene 5) To be good does not necessary sprung from any particular origion, nor does it essentially reside in any specific customs, or creeds Hence, " . . . the one must not criticize the other, . . . people must bear and forebear." (Act II, scene 5).

The inner trugh of religion lies in its moral effect on conduct. It is morality which constitutes the kernal of religion. As the Friar justifies Nathan's bringing up Recha, "Children need love, . . . more in those years than Christianity." (Act IV, scene 7).

This moral effectiveness of religion needs the cooperation from men. It is human to love and to be loved, which goes beyond the differences in the creeds and the dogmas. Thus Nathan chastizes the Templar's bigotry, "Are Christian and Jew first Christian and Jew rather than man? If in you I have found one more to whom it is sufficient to be called a man!" (Act II, scene 5) Also said Nathan, "The great man everywhere needs much soil, . . . only must a hillock not pretend presumptuously that it alone did not spring from the earth."

Humanitarian love is actually much more realistic than supernatural love, hence Nathan criticizes Recha's dreaming of her angel savior, "Another human

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(4) Quated from Henry E. Allison, *Lessing and the Enlightenment*, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 1966, p. 135.
(5) Ibid.

being is still dearer to a human being than an angel." (Act I, scene 1) Men can love one another not only as fellow men, but even as members of one family, This brotherhood of man is manifested in the final union of the characters. When they discovered that they are related to each other by family ties. that the Templar is Recha's brother, and Saladin their uncle, hate disappears, and love appears. It is the real union of man.

The above discussed religious theme of *Nathan the Wise* is best exemplified in the parable of the ring. (Act III, scene 7).

Nathan, when asked by Saladin about his preferred religion, relates the parable. Saladin reasons in a typical either/or way, "If these three religions (Christianity, Judaism, Islam) though only one can be the true one." (Act III, scene 5) In light of this speculation, Nathan reflects: " . . . he wants truth. And wants it like that – so bare, so blank – as though truth were coin! Indeed as though it were ancient coin that was being weighed! That could still pass! However, such modern coin that is only made by stamp, that one only needs to count unto the counting board- that is not what truth is by any means." (Act III, scene 6) Here Lessing clearly expressed that religious truth cannot be weighed by external, factual means. Nathan answers Saladin's question by the parable of the ring. (Act III, scene 7).

The ring had the magic power of making the wearer beloved before God and man. This ring was kept within a family from generation to generation, and each possessor left the ring to his most beloved son, who hence became the head of the family. Finally it came to a father who had three sons whom he loved equally. Therefore he could not choose which one to pass it on. At last, he had an artisan duplicate two identical ring, and gave one to each son. After the father died, the three sons soon quarrelled bitterly.

Now "the genuine ring could not be proven, almost as unprovable as for us now – the true truth." Religion may well be distinguishable, down to clothing. down to food and drink. "Nevertheless not on the basis of their historical foundation. "For are not all founded on history? Written or handed down? "Historical basis is irrelevant to the truth of religion. The three rings all could be related to the father's unprejudiced love. In spite of this fact, the father is not each son's, exclusively.

Hence none of the external demonstrations proves the truth of religion, either factual or historical. The truth of religion is shown by its inner worth. In the parable of the ring, the magic power may decide the ring's genuineness. Thus when the three sons went to the judge, because none of them loved each

other, the judge considered that all three rings counterfeit.

Lessing did not stop here. The rings are false in a sense that there should be no more tyranny of one ring. What the sons should do, suggested the judge, is to zealously follow their father's "uncorrupted, unprejudiced love," that is, to assist the power of the ring "by gentleness, by heartfelt peacability, by charity, by fervent dovotion to God!" And the power of the ring may possible be manifested in the future.

The core of religion is morality. And the truth of religion is not a ready-made fact, but a result to be achieved. Its power has to be brought out by human efforts, and may not be immediately achieved. This task of moral action is shared universally by all religions, non of them should claim supremacy.

However, Lessing did not creat a new religion of morality. God is still the divine architect of the world.

In act III, scene 7, Nathan tells the Friar about his family disaster. He describes how he had lain in dust and ashes before God for three days and nights and angry with Him, sworn to Christendom the most implacable hatred. But when reason came back to him, he understood it was God's resolve, and called out to God, "I shall! If you only want that I shall want." Since "God *is*." And what God does would be the best. So when Recha was brought to Nathan, he thanked, "after seven already now one again."

While humaity has always been emphasized as an important theme of *Nathan the Wise*, God still remains through the whole play. The magic power of the ring maked the wearer to be loved not only by man, but also before God. And to assist the manifestation of the magic power, one has to be devoted to God in addition to love for one's fellow man. The whole structure of the drama is arranged to illustrate the divine guidance. Hence it is by chance that the Templar is saved by Saladin, and Recha by the Templar. It is also mere accident that the Templar is Recha's brother, and Saladin their uncle.

One important point has to be emphasized, however, is that all these are achieved by purely natural means. When Recha was dreaming of her angel, Nathan rejected the idea. He considered that, "It is the greatest of miracles that the true, genuine miracles can become so commonplace for us." The miracle takes place in daily life, and not beyond man's comprehension. It is in this manner, that all events in the play, just as in the actual world, seem to follow a divine plan.

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