

# Exploring Religious Pluralism in the Classroom: How to use religious education in schools to combat extremism

June 2024

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## 1. Introduction

The shockwaves sent out by Hamas' brutal attack on Israeli civilians on 7 October, combined with the scale of Israel's military response, did not take long to reach Britain's shores. These events have unsettled inter-communal relations in Britain in a way not seen since the invasion of Iraq some 20 years before. As yet, Britain has suffered no major terrorist incident in consequence of the events of 7 October and thereafter. However, along with their American and European counterparts, the British police and security services have reported a huge increase in Islamist online propaganda, as well as in anti-Semitic and anti-Muslim incidents since that fateful day.<sup>1</sup>

It could, therefore, be just a matter of time before the streets of Britain once again are faced with disturbing levels of social incohesion, if not domestic terrorism, because of racial and religious differences between its citizens. Once again, in face of such a danger, the government has responded by impressing on British citizens the need to embrace what it has chosen, yet again, to call 'British values', which are said to be: democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty, and mutual respect and tolerance of those of different faiths.

While there is nothing wrong with anyone, or indeed everyone, subscribing to these values, there well could be in dubbing them 'British values'. This is because so calling them carries the distinct implication these values are not shared by those who are not British. Since these days many British citizens were born outside the UK, or else their parents were, in calling these values British ones, it is implied that such citizens, or at least their parents, do not share these values and stand in need of having them inculcated in them before being able to become domiciled here. If that, indeed, were not the clear implication of dubbing these values 'British' ones, why else, since 2014, have all publicly maintained schools in Britain been tasked with the responsibility of promoting them as British values as part of Prevent, the government's counter-extremism and radicalisation strategy? Cannot the parents of today's schoolchildren be entrusted to inculcate these values themselves?

Even were there nothing untoward in state schools being required to promote this set of values in their pupils as part of their statutory responsibility for their spiritual, moral, cultural, mental and physical development, is not their having to present these values as British values deeply alienating, if not counter-productive, for those pupils of theirs born elsewhere

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<sup>1</sup> See Moench, M., 'U.K. Police Warn of "Unprecedented" Rise in Terrorism Threat Amid Israel-Hamas War', *Time* 20 January 2024.

or else whose parents were? This is especially so, if, as is typically the case with at least some if not all of them, the values in question are shared by the religions of the countries of origin of these pupils or of their parents.

That there is something deeply problematic in requiring state schools to promote these values as core British ones is, indeed, the view of Carol Vincent, Professor of Sociology of Education at UCL, and Myriam Hunter-Henin, Reader in Law and Religion and Comparative Law at UCL. In a joint article published in 2018, they observed that:

‘[T]he fixation on Britishness is likely to generate suspicion toward the “other”... Government data... shows hate crimes spike after terror attacks... The recent imposition on teachers of the legal duty to “prevent children from being drawn into terrorism” – known as the Prevent Duty – only adds risks of stigma.’<sup>2</sup>

Combatting religiously motivated violent extremism through what is taught in schools would stand a much better chance of success if it could draw on the religions of the young people whose immunisation against extremism and radicalisation is being sought. Religious education still remains a compulsory school subject whose resources for combatting religiously motivated extremism have hardly begun to be tapped.

The present essay proposes a way in which the teaching of religious education could be harnessed to combat extremism in a much more inclusive way than by insisting on presenting the appropriate tolerant and moderate values that we would like all our young people to acquire through their school years as somehow the special preserve of Britain and the British. My proposal is that the religious education curriculum should consider and discuss the play *Nathan the Wise*, written by the eighteenth century German playwright and man of letters, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, and especially that section of it given over to a presentation of the so-called ‘fable of the three rings’.

Those concerned today about the radicalisation of young British-born Muslims often speak of the need to develop an appropriate counter-narrative that will help to immunise them from the possible appeal of Jihadism and Salafism.<sup>3</sup> Yet however admirable such an aspiration might be, any prospect of success for the development of such a counter-narrative is immediately threatened if it is constrained to be framed, as the British government has lately demanded it be, as requiring Muslims to recognise the need to embrace British values. As many have noted, the requisite values in question are universal, and have long been espoused in moderate and mainstream version by all three Abrahamic faiths. Lessing recognised this fact early on, as have many others. But, much more than that, key thinkers in all three Abrahamic faiths have long recognised a theistic core at the heart of Plato and Aristotle and have sought to interpret their own religions in the light of it. Learning about these several ways that these religions have received such interpretations within their own faith traditions would foster much better inter-cultural understanding. Lessing’s parable of the three rings was intended to represent the three faiths in a way that enables their adherents to continue to accept all the tenets of their own faith, without compromising its own form of particularism, while fully recognising the equal reasonableness of adherents of the other two faiths doing precisely the same in connection with theirs.

<sup>2</sup> Vincent.C. and Hunter-Henin, M., ‘The Problem with teaching “British values” in school’, *The Conversation* 6 February 2018.

<sup>3</sup> See Glazzard, A. (2017) *Losing the Plot: Narrative, Counter-Narrative and Violent Extremism* The Hague: International Center for Counter-Terrorism;  
<http://soc-for-ed-studies.org.uk/documents/ICCT-Glazzard-Losing-the-Plot-May-2017.pdf>

Set in Jerusalem during the Third Crusade, when the city was under the control of the Sultan Saladin and during a brief and fragile truce that he had negotiated with Richard the Lionheart, and therefore around 1191 CE, Lessing's play has four principal characters. Each is drawn from one of the three Abrahamic faiths, plus one deist who espouses only the tenets and precepts of the natural religion supposedly accessible to all through natural reason without need of any special revelation. The play ends with these four principal characters all joining together in an embrace of mutual amity and friendship, all potential friction arising from their different faiths having seemingly been totally transcended. I want to consider what possible lessons Lessing may have wished his audiences draw from the play as to how the adherents of the different Abrahamic faiths might be able to achieve lasting accord and how worthy of acceptance any such intended lessons might be today.

## 2. Synopsis of the play

At the play's centre is an exchange that takes place in the Sultan's Place between Saladin and a rich Jewish merchant named Nathan, who has been summoned there by Saladin, ostensibly on account of Nathan's reputation for wisdom, so that Saladin might put to him a question that he claims lack of leisure has prevented him from being able to reflect on for himself. The question is none other than which of the three Abrahamic faiths is the true faith, and what Nathan's reasons are for thinking it such. In reality, Saladin wanted to put this question to Nathan in the belief that he would feel unable to answer it candidly, and so, as a way out of his difficulty, he would offer Saladin money – of which Saladin was badly in need, on account of the costs of having to maintain his armies plus his prodigious charitable giving to the poor, which had jointly all but emptied his exchequer.

Lessing had derived the idea of the exchange from a story in Boccaccio's *Decameron* and had woven around it a complicated plot which, besides the Muslim Saladin and Jew Nathan, featured a representative Christian and a deist. The deist in the play is Nathan's eighteen-year-old adoptive daughter Rachel, whom he had so named after she was brought to him and placed in his care as a three-month-old baptised Christian baby, after her mother died giving birth to her, and her father, a Crusader knight with whom Nathan had been on friendly terms, had had to go off to battle where he fell shortly after placing his daughter in what at the time he envisaged would be only short-term care. Nathan, it turns out, had received Rachel three days after his own wife and seven sons had been burnt to death in a fire deliberately started by hostile Christians, and therefore Nathan had been reluctant to tell Rachel about her background. Rachel therefore believes Nathan to be her real father, of whom she is inordinately fond, as he is of her. Nathan has raised Rachel as neither Jew nor Christian, imparting to her merely such tenets and precepts of the deistic natural religion he considers to be accessible to all through reason and without need of any special revelation. Christianity is represented by a young Templar Knight, who had rescued Rachel from a fire at Nathan's home, after being brought to Jerusalem for execution, along with 19 other captive Templars, for having broken Saladin's truce, but whom Saladin had spared at the last moment and released into the city on account of the young Templar's striking resemblance to a long-lost younger brother of his.

Essentially, the play's plot involves Nathan's gradual discovery and eventual disclosure to its three other principal characters of their close relation to one another. The young Templar

and Rachel turn out to be not just siblings but also nephew and niece of Saladin, their father having been his long-lost younger brother, who, decades before, had fallen for and married their mother, converting to Christianity in the process, after encountering her in the Holy Land to which she had gone with her own brother, another Knight Templar. Their mutual relation had been unknown to all three until Nathan's disclosure of it in the play's last scene, ending in the mutual embrace of all four.

### 3. The Parable of the Three Rings

The initial exchange between Saladin and Nathan through which Saladin hoped to be able to extort money from Nathan begins by Saladin asking Nathan the following question:

'Of the three/ religions only one can be the true one. A man like you does not remain where chance of birth has cast him: if he does, he stays/ from insight, reason, choice of what is best./ So, share with me your insight. Let me hear/ the reasons which I haven't had the time/to ponder for myself. Tell me the choice/determined by these reasons... so I/can make that choice my own.'<sup>4</sup> (1843-1853)

Nathan immediately realises the trap that has been sprung on him. Should he name his own ancestral faith of Judaism as the true one, Saladin would feign anger at Nathan for having denied his own Muslim faith to be it. Yet should Nathan affirm Islam to be the true faith, Saladin would demand to know of Nathan why he had not converted to it. And for Nathan to name Christianity as the true faith would be to invite both responses from Saladin. Seemingly, therefore, Nathan was doomed however he answered Saladin's question, which was precisely why he had been asked it. Instead of a straightforward answer, therefore, Nathan responds by relating to Saladin the following parable:

A man in the East once received 'as a gift from someone dear to him' (1912-1913) a ring of 'priceless worth [with] the secret power' to make its wearer beloved by God and his fellows, provided that he trusted in the ring's power to do so. The ring's recipient resolved to keep it in his family by making provision for it be passed down to the dearest of his sons, with instructions that he in turn should bequeath it to his dearest son, and so on through the generations of their family. The ring was duly passed down in this way, until it came into the possession of a father of three sons who were equally loved by him, and to each of whom, therefore, he promised the ring on occasion of being alone with him. Drawing near to death and not knowing what to do about his promises, the ring's owner had two identical copies made, and then, before expiring, gave a ring to each of his sons, who upon his death immediately started to quarrel over whose ring was the authentic one. But, so Nathan concluded his parable by relating to Saladin, as the rings were indistinguishable: 'there was no way to prove which ring was true. Almost as hard now for us to prove the one true faith.' (1961)

Unsurprisingly, since it frustrated his plans by finessing his question, Saladin was decidedly unimpressed by this answer of Nathan's. Indeed, he was angered by it, rejecting the analogy between the three rings and three faiths on account of the manifest differences between the three faiths, even down, as he put it, to such details as the food and dress each variously

<sup>4</sup> All quotations from the play are lines from the following edition: Lessing, G. E. (1779) *Nathan the Wise* translated by Clennell and Philip, R. (1992) Milton Keynes: Open University.

prescribes, proscribes or permits. Nathan defends his analogy by pointing out that, while the three faiths do differ from one another in these minor details, they do not differ:

'on the grounds on which they rest.  
 For are they not all based on history,  
 Handed down or written? History  
 We take on trust, on faith. Is that not true?  
 In whose good faith can we most put our trust?  
 Our people's, those whose blood we share, and who,  
 From childhood on have proved their love for us,  
 Who never deceived us, save, perhaps,  
 When it was good to be deceived?  
 Can I believe less in my ancestors  
 Than you believe in yours? Or vice versa,  
 Can I demand of you that you accuse  
 Your own forebears of lies, just so that I  
 Don't contradict my own? – or vice versa.  
 The same is true of Christians, isn't it?'<sup>5</sup> (1975-1990)

Saladin is won over by this reply of Nathan's, as he is to the moral that Nathan eventually draws from the parable as to how adherents of the three faiths must treat one another in order to be true to what their own faith prescribes. Following their father's death and subsequent quarrel over which of them had been given the true ring, so Nathan goes on to relate to Saladin, who is now genuinely eager to learn how the story ends, the three brothers take their dispute to a judge to resolve, who tells them that, being indistinguishable, he could not say whose ring was the authentic one.

Recalling, however, that he had been told about the power of the authentic ring to render its wearer beloved by God and his fellows, the judge enquired of the three brothers which of them was loved by the other two, and, upon learning none was, the judge suggested that perhaps, their father may have lost the original ring and given to all three sons only inauthentic copies. His parting advice to the brothers, therefore, was that each should believe what their father had told him about the ring that he had given him: namely, that it was the authentic ring, which each brother should strive to prove by endeavouring to activate its latent power to render him beloved by God and his fellows by striving to make himself worthy of such love. Whoever had come into the possession of the rings a thousand, thousand years hence, the judge concluded his advice, should reappear before another, wiser, judge who might be able to say which of the rings was the authentic one. As Nathan put the judge's parting words of advice to the three brothers:

<sup>5</sup> Lessing, G. E. (1779) *Nathan the Wise* translated by Clennell and Philip, R. (1992) Milton Keynes: Open University, Act 3Scene 7, lines 1975-1990, p. 83.

'... [M]y advice is this: accept the case  
 Precisely as it stands. As each of you  
 Received his own ring from his father's hand,  
 Let each believe for certain that *his* ring  
 Is the original. Perhaps the father  
 Did not want to suffer any more  
 The tyranny of one ring in his house.  
 Certainly he loved all three of you,  
 And loved you equally. He could not injure  
 Two of you and favour only one.  
 Well then! Let each of you strive to emulate  
 His love, unbiased and unprejudiced.  
 Let each one of you vie with the other two  
 To bring to light the power of the stone  
 In his own ring. And may this power be helped  
 By gentleness, sincere good nature,  
 Charity and deepest devotion to God.' (2030-2047)

#### 4. The intended lessons of Lessing's play

In placing the parting words of advice into the mouth of the judge in his version of the parable, Lessing, who was a keen – and, for his day, very knowledgeable – student of Islam, had been deliberately echoing a verse in the Quran which explains why God deliberately chose to create religious diversity:<sup>6</sup>

'To each among you We prescribed a law and an open way. If God had so willed He would have made you a single people, but (His plan) was to test you in what He hath given you: so strive as in a race in all virtues. The goal of you all is to God; it is He that will show you the truth of the matters in which ye dispute.' (5:48)

Coming centuries after the two other Abrahamic faiths, Islam has always found it easiest of the three to affirm both other faiths to have been also founded on divine revelation, albeit, even though in its view both other Abrahamic faiths had come to incorporate profound errors

<sup>6</sup> Lessing's interest in and knowledge of Islam has been well documented by Silvia Horsch of the Osnabruk Institute for Islamic Theology. In an article on the subject published in 2007, Horsch writes: 'Lessing was a diligent reader of everything he could get hold of so as to inform himself about Islam. Besides [George] Sales' translation of the Qur'an (1734), Adrian Resland's *Of the Mahometan Religion in 2 Books* (1705) was of special importance to him. From the preface to his own translation of Marigny's *History of the Arabs under the government of the Caliphs* (1750), it becomes clear he was familiar with the work of what we may call today early Oriental Studies... His personal friendship with Johann Jacob Reiske, the eminent German Arabist, seems to have been particularly influential.' Horsch, S. (2007) 'Islam as Natural Theology in Lessing's Writings and in the Enlightenment', in (eds.) Joshua, E. and Vilain, R. (2007) *Edinburgh German Yearbook 1: Cultural Exchange in German Literature* London: Boydell & Brewer, 45-62, 50.

from which, in its view, only it was entirely free. The notion, however, that, besides the revelation upon which theirs was founded, other peoples may have received later divine revelations on which their own rival faiths have been based, is not one I can see orthodox Jews or Christians have reason to reject out of hand, since it contains nothing that precludes them from considering their own to be by far the truest faith. I am aware that Maimonides suggests that there was no need of any revelation after that of the Mosaic law, since it was perfect and sufficient to fulfil the purpose of perfecting the community of those who observed it, and thereby indirectly of all humanity who would in time be won around to it. Even so, however, should there be any value in religious diversity, as many have argued there is, I cannot see why God would not have chosen to supply revelations to other peoples on the basis of which their different faiths have been grounded, as has been claimed by both the twelfth century Yemenite chief rabbi Nathaniel Ibn al-Fayyumi and closer to home by Britain's former chief rabbi, Lord Jonathan Sacks.<sup>7</sup>

Being a keen and knowledgeable student of Christian theology as well as of Islam, having grown up the son of a Lutheran pastor and having studied theology at the universities of Leipzig and Wittenberg, Lessing would also have known that, contained in the sacred scriptures of all three faiths, were injunctions, that each purported had been divinely revealed, calling on their respective adherents to love God and their fellows.<sup>8</sup> As a close student also of Spinoza's, reportedly late in his life professing himself to be a follower of his, Lessing would also have been aware of Spinoza's view that love was the surest way to procure another's love in return, as well as to extinguish their hatred.<sup>9</sup> Regardless, then, of which of the three Abrahamic faiths is the one true or truest faith, I take it that the chief lesson Lessing wished to impart through his play was that all three faiths contained within themselves the wherewithal to bring their adherents into full concord with one another, provided only they were to act in accordance with their ordinances.

<sup>7</sup> The notion that there have been other, later instances of divine revelation besides those vouchsafed to the prophets recognised within their own religious tradition has been advanced by the twelfth century chief rabbi of Yemenite Jewry, Rabbi Nathaniel Ibn Al-Fayyumi, who observed, in his work *Bustan Al-Ukul* (Garden of Delights): 'Know, then, my brother, that nothing prevents God from sending unto His world whomsoever He wishes whenever He wishes... Even before the revelation of the Law He sent prophets to the nations... [like] Laban, Jethro, Balaam, Job, Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar. And again after its revelation nothing prevented Him from sending to them whom He wished, that the world might not remain without religion... The Koran mentions that God favoured us [Jews]... in many verses and also to the effect that the Torah has not been abrogated.' Ibn Al-Fayyumi, N. (1165) *The Bustan Al-Ukul* edited and translated by Levine, D. (1966), New York: AMS Press Inc., p.103-105 *passim*. More recently, the view that God has revealed Himself to those of other, later, faiths than Judaism has been espoused by the former British Chief Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks where, in his 2003 book *The Dignity of Difference*, he wrote: 'In the course of history, God has spoken to mankind in many languages: through Judaism to Jews, Christianity to Christians, Islam to Muslims.' Sacks, J. (2002) *The Dignity of Difference* London and New York: Continuum, p.55.

<sup>8</sup> Below are the injunctions to love both God and one's fellows as they appear in the respective sacred texts of the three Abrahamic Faiths. *Judaism*: 'Love your fellow as yourself' (Leviticus 19:18); 'Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord with all you heart and with all your soul and with all your might.' (Deuteronomy 6:4). *Christianity*: 'And one of the scribes came, and having heard them reasoning together, and perceiving that he had answered them well, asked him: Which is the first commandment of all? And Jesus answered him: The first of all the commandments is: Hear, O Israel; The Lord our God is one Lord: And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength: this is the first commandment. And the second is like, namely this, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. There is none other commandment greater than these.' (Mark 12:28-31, KJV). *Islam*: 'There are men who take others besides God, as equal: they love them as they should love God. But those of faith are overflowing in their love for God.' (Qur'an 2: 165); 'Say: "If ye do love God, follow me: God will love you and forgive you your sins."' (Qur'an 3:31); 'Serve God... and do good – to parents, kinsfolk, those in need neighbours who are near, neighbours who are strangers, the companions by your sided, the wayfarer (ye meet), and what your right hands possess.' (Qur'an 4:36); 'The expression "anything your right hands possess" means: "anything that has no civil rights, including captives or slaves, people in your power, or dumb animals with whom you have to deal."' (Commentary of Abdullah Yusuf Ali in Ali, A. Y. (2008) *The Holy Qur'an: Text, Translation and Commentary* New York: Tahrike Tarsile Qur'an, p.191, fn. 553.)

<sup>9</sup> Spinoza: 'If anyone conceives that he is loved by another, and believes that he has given no cause for such love, he will love that other in return.' 'Hatred is increased by being reciprocated, and can on the other hand be destroyed by love.' 'Hatred which is completely vanquished by love passes into love: and love is thereupon greater than if hatred had not preceded it.' Propositions XLI, XLIII, XLIV, Part III Spinoza, B.(1677) *Ethics* translated by Elwes, R.H.M (1883) *Chief Works of Benedict De Spinoza* New York: Dover (1955), pp. 158-159.

As to which of the three Abrahamic faiths, if any, might ultimately be the true or truest, I believe that there was a second lesson that Lessing had intended his play to impart to those with ears acute enough to hear it which was considerably less congenial to the three Abrahamic faiths. This second intended lesson was that, ultimately, none of the three faiths is truest, since none contained any more by way of truth or sound moral teaching than was not also contained in the deistic creed of natural religion. This essentially comprised affirmation of the existence of a benevolent creator God to whom all will be ultimately answerable and who they have a duty to love, as they also do to love their fellows.

On this more jaundiced view of Lessing's of the three revealed religions, each had been devised by its respective and all-too-human founder as a means by which the tenets and precepts of natural religion could become adopted, disseminated and implemented in conventionally agreed on ways in specific historical societies. Certainly, that was how Lessing had portrayed these three faiths and their relation to natural religion some 15 or so years before he wrote his play *Nathan* in a brief essay entitled 'On the origin of revealed religion', written in 1763-1764.<sup>10</sup>

In espousing this view of the revealed religions as socially necessary evils that invariably tend to corrupt the truths that they shared with natural religion, Lessing had been writing under the immediate influence of having just read a twelfth-century philosophical novel entitled *The Improvement of Human Reason Exhibited in the Life of Hai Ebn Yokdhan*. Written in Marrakesh in 1161 by the Andalusia-born philosopher Abu Bakr Muhammad Ibn Tufail, this novel is among the most influential pre-modern works of world literature, although these days few seem to have heard of it, let alone read it. The novel narrates the life, and especially self-education, of its hero, after whom it is named. Hai Ebn Yokdhan is portrayed growing up entirely alone on an island in the middle of the Indian Ocean until well into his middle years, where he discovers for himself by pure ratiocination all the salient truths of natural religion, before finally being joined by the reclusive Asal who had gone to Hai's island from his own neighbouring one in quest of solitude. Asal eventually befriends Hai and teaches him language, and eventually brings Hai back to his native island where, after conversing with its inhabitants, Hai concludes them to be far too immersed in worldly desires to be able to appropriate religious truth in any higher form than as disseminated by their revealed religion which, though unnamed, is clearly Islam.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> It begins:

'\$1. To recognise one God, to try to form the worthiest ideas of him, to take account of these worthiest ideas in all our actions and thoughts, is the most comprehensive definition of all natural religion.

\$2. Every human being, in proportion to his powers, is disposed and committed to this natural religion.

\$3. But since this proportion differs in each individual... it has been thought necessary to counteract the disadvantages to which this difference can give rise... in his state of civil union with others.

\$4. That is: as soon as it was recognised as desirable to make religion a communal concern, it was necessary to agree on certain things and concepts... and to attribute to these conventional things and concepts the same importance and necessity which religious truths recognised by natural means possessed in their own right.

\$5. That is: out of the religion of nature... it was necessary to construct a positive religion, just as a positive law had been constructed, for the same reason, out of the law of nature. \$6. This positive religion received its sanction from the authority of its founder, who claimed that its conventional elements came... from God – albeit through the founder's mediation... \$11. The best revealed or positive religion is that which contains the fewest conventional additions to natural religion, and imposes the fewest limitations on the good effects of natural religion.' Lessing, G.E. (1763 or 1764) 'On the origin of revealed religion' in Lessing, G.E. (2005) *Philosophical and Theological Writings* Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, pp. 35-36.

<sup>11</sup> The novel ends by relating what Hai concluded about the islanders after having met and conversed with them about religious matters: '\$. 116. And afterwards, taking a view of the several ranks and orders of men, he perceived that every sort of them had... lost themselves in gathering up the little things of this world... And as for wisdom, there was no way for them to attain it, neither had they any share in it... \$. 117. When therefore he saw... that their merchandise and trading diverted them from thinking upon God... he was fully satisfied that it was to no purpose to speak to them plainly... \$.118. And when he understood the condition of mankind, and that the greatest part of them were like brute beasts, he knew that all wisdom, direction and good success consisted in what the messengers of God had spoken, and the Law delivered; and that there was no other way



## 5. Lessing's Nathan and Moses Mendelssohn

In order to be able to believe that, at the core of all three Abrahamic faiths, there lies a common set of theistic tenets and precepts that they share with the deistic creed of natural religion, it is not necessary to dismiss the several more distinctive additional parts of all three as mere human inventions, as Ibn Tufail and Lessing both seem inclined to have done. That was certainly not how the distinctive parts of his own ancestral faith were seen by Lessing's close life-long friend Moses Mendelssohn, upon whom Lessing is widely thought to have modelled the character of Nathan and to whom, in 1763, Lessing seems to have sent a copy of Ibn Tufail's novel.<sup>12</sup>

The two men had met as 24-year-olds a decade earlier at one of the many literary clubs that had sprung up in Berlin during the first half of the eighteenth century to discuss Enlightenment ideas. Mendelssohn, the then still wholly unknown young Jewish philosopher, had been taken there by one of his several Jewish mentors, the physician and scholar Aaron Solomon Gumpertz who had introduced him to the by then famous Lessing as a potential chess partner.

Some 10 years earlier still, as a 14-year-old boy, Mendelssohn had walked the 90 miles to Berlin from his small hometown of Dessau to continue his Talmudic studies with his teacher David Fraenkel, who had moved to Berlin to take up a rabbinical appointment there. Shortly after settling in Berlin, the young Mendelssohn immersed himself in the study of Maimonides' *Guide for the Perplexed* before proceeding to study the works of Locke, Shaftesbury, Spinoza, and Leibniz, as well as those of Plato and Aristotle. In order to read all of these works, he learnt, largely unaided, Greek and Latin, in addition to French, English and German. So accomplished a philosopher had Mendelssohn become by 1763 that he beat into second place that year in a prize essay competition held by the Berlin Academy on the question whether metaphysics admits of proofs as rigorous as those in mathematics no less formidable a fellow contestant than Immanuel Kant.

It was not just by winning that competition that year, and also acquiring in it from the King of Prussia the much-coveted status of a protected Jew, that made 1763 such a fateful one for Mendelssohn. For it was also in that same year that Lessing was to introduce Mendelssohn to a group of visiting young Swiss theology students whom Mendelssohn hosted in his home, where he told them of his admiration of Jesus of Nazareth as a moral teacher, subject to the proviso that he believed that Jesus had never sought to abrogate the Mosaic law for Jews or claimed to be anything more than a mere mortal. Among Nathan's visitors on that occasion was a young man named Johann Caspar Lavater who, a century later, was to be immortalised together with Mendelssohn and Lessing in a famous painting depicting that

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besides this... Whereupon ... he begged their pardon... and desired to be excused, and told them that he was of the same opinion with them, and went on in the same way... and persuaded them to stick firmly to their resolution of keeping within the bounds of the Law, and the performance of external rites... and that they should avoid neglect of [their] religious performances... For... he... knew that this tractable... but defective sort of man, had no other way in the world to escape, but only by this means: and that if they should be raised above this to curious speculations, it would be worse with them...\$119 So ... [Hai and Asal] took their leave and left them... returning to their island, till it pleased God to help them to a convenience of passing. And Hai Ebn Yokdhan endeavoured to attain his lofty station, by the same [contemplative] means he had sought it at first, till he recovered it; and Asal followed his steps, till he came near him... and thus they continued serving God in this island till they died.' Tufail, I. (1161) *The Improvement of Human Reason Exhibited in the Life of Hai Ebn Yokdhan*, trans. Simon Ockley (1708), pp. lxviii-lxix. <https://archive.org/details/improvementhuma00ocklqooq>

<sup>12</sup> Horsch, S. (2007) 'Islam as Natural Theology in Lessing's Writings and in the Enlightenment', p. 54.

visit, painted by the nineteenth century German Jewish artist Moritz Daniel Oppenheim. The reason their conversation was to be so immortalised was because, six years after it took place, Lavater was to publish a German translation that he had made of a defence of Christianity by the French Swiss botanist and theologian Charles Bonnet, who had purported to demonstrate in it the unassailable truth of Christianity. Not only did Lavater dedicate his German translation of Bonnet's work to Mendelssohn, but also in his editorial introduction to it he had challenged Mendelssohn either to refute Bonnet's purported proof of Christianity or else convert. Deeply embarrassed, Mendelssohn diplomatically replied to Lavater's challenge in a public letter that, while not meeting it directly, made it all too clear how unacceptable he found Christianity. This letter swiftly drew from Lavater a public apology for having so publicly embarrassed Mendelssohn. The parallel between Lavater's challenge to Mendelssohn and Saladin's challenge to Nathan is unmissable, the episode doubtlessly having weighed on Lessing's mind for having been responsible for introducing the two.

Lessing, however, had only written the play after becoming embroiled in a highly publicised spat with another Lutheran pastor. In 1770, Lessing was appointed the chief librarian of the Duke of Brunswick's vast collection of theological manuscripts, which he was granted license to publish freely and to comment on. Shortly after taking up that appointment, Lessing began to publish and publicly comment on fragments from the hitherto unpublished anti-Christian writings of a recently deceased Hamburg deist, with whose two children Lessing was a close friend. Lessing had smuggled these manuscripts into the library where he pretended to have found them and had published them as an anonymous work. His publishing these fragments, together with provocative comments on them, led Lessing into an increasingly vituperative series of public exchanges with Johann Melchior Goeze, chief pastor of Hamburg. Upon finding himself being worsted in the exchanges, Goeze successfully appealed to the Duke of Brunswick in 1778 to have Lessing's license to publish freely on theological matters rescinded. It was to evade that ban that Lessing had turned to drama, so as to continue to disseminate his highly heterodox theological opinions that were by no means shared in their entirety by his Jewish friend, Moses Mendelssohn.

## 6. Conclusion

Moses Mendelssohn certainly did maintain that *all* faiths, and not just the three Abrahamic ones, shared a common theistic core with deism on account of human beings, in his view, being naturally disposed by common sense to recognise the manifestly providential character of the world.<sup>13</sup> Mendelssohn also believed, in the case of his own Jewish faith at least, that to this common theistic core there had been added *through a genuine act of*

<sup>13</sup> As Mendelssohn was to put the point in his 1786 defence of Lessing from the charge, levelled by Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi, that late in life he (Lessing) had confessed to being a Spinozist: '[I]t seems to me that the evidence of natural religion is as clear and obvious, as irrefutably certain, to uncorrupted common sense that has not been misled as is any theorem in geometry. At any station of life at any level of enlightenment, one has enough information and ability, enough opportunity and power, to convince himself of the truths of rational religion. The reasoning of the Greenlander who, as he was walking in the ice with a missionary one beautiful morning, saw the dawn streaming forth between icebergs and said to the Moravian: "*Behold, brother, the new day! How beautiful must be he who made this!*" This reasoning, which was convincing to the Greenlander before the Moravian misled his understanding, is still convincing to me. For me, it has the very same power as the simple, artless reasoning of the psalmist: "He who planted the ear/Must He not hear; / He who formed the eye,/Must He not see?.../ He who teaches the son of man knowledge,/ The Eternal, also knows the thoughts of man." (Psalm 94:9 -11).' Mendelssohn, M. (1786) 'To Lessing's Friends' in (ed.) Gottlieb, M. (2011) *Moses Mendelssohn: Writings on Judaism, Christianity, & the Bible* Waltham, Massachusetts: Brandeis University Press, pp. 162-163.

*special revelation at Sinai* and not just by mere human invention, a complex body of ritual and ceremonial law had been designed to protect its intended recipients, the Jewish people, from what he also considered to be the perennial and ubiquitous human propensity to lapse into idolatry through mentally substituting something besides God for God and then proceeding to worship that substitute in God's place.

However, as we have also seen that Islam does, Mendelssohn also considered religious diversity to have been part of God's divine plan for the world. In his major great work *Jerusalem*, composed just a few years after Lessing's play, Mendelssohn was to implore various 'progressive' Christian contemporaries of his who had been calling for Jews and Christians to unite into a common faith: 'Brothers, if you care for true piety, let us not feign agreement where diversity is evidently the plan and purpose of Providence.'<sup>14</sup>

Nowhere does Mendelssohn explain why he considered religious diversity evidently a part of God's providential plan for the world. What his reasons were, therefore, must remain a matter of conjecture. Given, however, his known deep and abiding admiration for the rationalist metaphysics of Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz who considered the diversity exhibited by nature to be a necessary consequence of the world being the creation of an omnipotent, omniscient and wholly good God, it is safe to suppose that Mendelssohn considered religious diversity a part of the plan and purpose of providence for reasons that also stemmed from that same metaphysics.<sup>15</sup>

Even were Mendelssohn correct to suppose, as he did, the pure monotheism and complex ceremonial law of Judaism as especially well-able to protect Jews from idolatry, there is no reason to suppose he did not also consider religious diversity to be providential through its providing not just Jews but other peoples too with an additional independent source of protection against idolatry for a further reason stemming from Leibniz's metaphysics. Such has been the contention of Micah Gottlieb, a professor of Jewish Thought and Philosophy at New York University, and a foremost contemporary authority on Mendelssohn.<sup>16</sup> A consequence of this view of his which Mendelssohn did not hesitate to draw from it, given his belief in God's goodness, was that neither Judaism nor any other religion could possibly be the only way to salvation for all humanity. As he put it in a letter to the Duke of Brunswick:

'Since all men must have been destined by the Creator to attain eternal bliss, no particular religion can have an exclusive claim to truth. This thesis, I dared to submit, might serve as a criterion of truth in all religious matters. A revelation claiming to

<sup>14</sup> Mendelssohn, M. (1783) *Jerusalem* translated by Arkush, A. with an Introduction and Commentary by Altmann, A. (1983) Waltham, Mass: Brandeis University Press, p.138.

<sup>15</sup> Leibniz wrote: 'It follows from the supreme perfection of God that in producing the universe He chose the best possible plan, containing the greatest variety together with the greatest order... For all possible things have a claim to existence in the understanding of God in proportion to their perfections, the result of all these claims must be the most perfect actual world which is possible.' Leibniz, G. w. (1714) 'Principles of Nature and of Grace Founded on Reason', paragraph 10, in (ed.) . Parkinson, G.H.R. (1973) *Leibniz: Philosophical Writings* London and Melbourne: Dent Everyman's Library, p. 200.

<sup>16</sup> In a perceptive article in the *Journal of Religion* in 2006 entitled 'Mendelssohn's Metaphysical Defence of Religious Pluralism', Micah Gottlieb wrote in explication of why Mendelssohn claimed religious diversity to be part of God's providential plan for the world: 'Religious diversity reflects divine providence insofar as it helps assure proper religious representations of divine truth. In Mendelssohn's language, religious pluralism helps prevent idolatry... by help[ing] impress on people that any signs used to represent God are arbitrary and inadequate. In this way, the inclination to deify these symbols is weakened... [A]n intriguing implication... [is that] [m]aximum religious diversity is part of the providential design which one must not frustrate... Hence, Mendelssohn's theory yields the result that every individual has a duty to foster the existence and rationality not only of their native religion but of other religions too.' Gottlieb, M. (2006), 'Mendelssohn's Metaphysical Defence of Religious Pluralism', *Journal of Religion* 86(2), 205-225, pp. 219 – 223 *passim*.

show man the only way to salvation cannot be true, for it is not in harmony with the intent of the all-merciful Creator.<sup>17</sup>

Similar arguments in favour of religious pluralism to that which Michah Gottlieb imputes to Mendelssohn have been advanced in recent times by several rabbis and Christian theologians. These include David Hartman,<sup>18</sup> Alister E. McGrath, and Andreas Idreos, Professor of Science and Religion at the University of Oxford. McGrath argues that, without a plurality of genuinely rival faiths, there can be no genuine inter-faith dialogue without which adherents of the one and only true faith that he considers Christianity to be (but it could be Judaism or Islam instead) would lack as much incentive as religious diversity provides for always having to be attending to and refining their religious conceptions.<sup>19</sup>

I, for one, always welcome opportunities for constructive inter-faith dialogue, especially on the vexed issue of how adherents of the three Abrahamic faiths might best set about today fostering mutual concord and amity, not only with one another but also with co-religionists of a different denomination to them. I should like to end, therefore, by inviting the reader to join me in considering whether, as I have argued here drawing my inspiration from Lessing's play, the best prospects for adherents of the three Abrahamic faiths achieving such concord reside in their coming to recognise and abiding by the injunctions contained in the sacred scriptures of all three faiths that call on them to love their fellows as well as God.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Letter of Moses Mendelssohn to the Duke of Brunswick (date unknown but sent some time after 1770) in (ed. & trans.) Jospe, E. (1975) *Moses Mendelssohn: Selections from his Writings* New York: Viking Press, p.116.

<sup>18</sup> Hartman writes: 'The diversity of forms of worship and expression of belief and love for God reflects the boundless reality of a living God, a God who cannot be contained within any single cognitive and expressive framework... Revelation implies that God accepts our human limitations and recognises that human beings realise their potential only within particular communities.' Hartman, d. (2007) 'The Religious Significance of Religious Pluralism' in (eds.) Halbertal, M. and Hartman, D. (2007) *Judaism and the Challenges of Modern Life* London and New York: Continuum, 95-104, p. 96 and p.104.

<sup>19</sup> As McGrath put his argument: 'Dialogue is a pressure to constantly re-examine our doctrinal formulations with a view to ensuring that they are as faithful as possible to what they purport to represent... Dialogue is one pressure to ensuring that this process of continual self-examination... continues. It is a bulwark against complacency and laziness and a stimulus to return to the sources of faith rather than resting content in some currently acceptable interpretation of them.' McGrath, A.E. (1992) 'The Christian Church's Response to Pluralism' *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 35(4), 487-501, pp. 491-492.

<sup>20</sup> An earlier version of this paper was published by Civitas in June 2018. A still earlier version of the paper was first presented at a meeting of the London Society for the Study of Religion in February 2016.

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ISBN 978-1-912581-57-3

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