

Interpretation

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Although the German writer, critic, and dramatist Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729–1781) occupies a major position in the canon of German literature, his philosophical significance is less frequently acknowledged. This is particularly true outside of Germany, since only very few authors took up suggestions, such as those by Leo Strauss and Karl Jaspers, that the study of Lessing could be of more than historical relevance. The diversity of literary forms which Lessing employed and the various constellations, from antiquarian research to theological controversies, in which he exercised his polemical talent can be intimidating. To understand them properly requires a lot of contextual knowledge about the relevant fields of knowledge in the eighteenth century as well as about their rhetorical practices. In addition, the fixed notions that ascribe to Lessing the status of one of the most important German *Aufklärer*—“enlighteners”—may well be misleading. For what makes Lessing relevant may in fact be what *distinguishes* him from the standard operating procedures of enlightenment thinking.

The study by Hannes Kerber, a careful analysis of key issues in the debate initiated by Lessing’s controversial publication of the so-called Wolfenbüttel fragments in the years from 1774 to 1778, takes up the challenge of clarifying how Lessing could be said to have served philosophy by defending theological (Protestant) orthodoxy. But before I sketch Kerber’s tightly knit argument, which is based on close readings of extremely subtle polemical interventions by Lessing, an all too brief summary of the relevant events seems to be in order.

After taking up his position as librarian at the ducal library of Wolfenbüttel, Lessing intensified his study of theology, which issued in the publication

of important texts such as the manuscript of Berengar of Tours, a medieval theologian, on the eucharist that he found in the library's holdings. When the well-known Hamburg professor and scholar Hermann Samuel Reimarus died in 1768, he left behind a lengthy manuscript of a book called *Apologie oder Schutzschrift für die vernünftigen Verehrer Gottes* (Apology or defense for the rational worshipers of God; first complete publication only in 1972). When Lessing gained access to this manuscript through Reimarus's children (the exact details of how he got to know the manuscript and the extent of his knowledge of it can no longer be reconstructed in a fully satisfactory way), he was in a rather comfortable position: the Duke of Brunswick had exempted him from censorship for all publications drawn from the library. Lessing, after failing to interest publishers like Friedrich Nicolai in printing Reimarus's clandestinely written book, was able to publish a first fragment of it while alleging that he had found it in the library and suggesting it could have been written by Johann Lorenz Schmidt, the famous Wolffian translator of the so-called Wertheim Bible (which had been the cause of one of the most important theological debates in eighteenth-century Germany). While the first fragment, published in 1774, dealt with the toleration of deists and did not receive a lot of attention, the second installment of fragments, dealing with more critical issues of revelation, immediately led to a widespread debate with numerous rebuttals addressed to both the author of the fragments, introduced by Lessing as "the Unnamed Man" (*der Ungenannte*), and to Lessing himself. The first response came from an otherwise obscure schoolmaster called Schumann, but the most persistent and polemical responses were penned by a Hamburg pastor, Johan Melchior Goeze (1717–1786), widely considered a prototypical representative of theological orthodoxy. But this is precisely an evaluation that Kerber duly presents as problematic, showing in the course of his argument that Goeze's version of orthodoxy had in fact moved away from positions once held by the theologians of the Reformation.

The whole quarrel concerning the "fragments" thus entails making sense not only of one man's writings, but of many, or of at least three, main contributors to the debate: Reimarus as the "Unknown Man," Lessing as a self-described "lover of theology, but not a theologian," and Goeze, the supposed "orthodoxist." The following key quotation highlights what is at stake here. Lessing suggests that the debate about Christianity has not yet been concluded:

It is not true that all the objections have already been stated. It is even less true that they have all been answered. A great many of them, at least, have been answered as deplorably as they were stated. To the superficiality and ridicule of the one side, the other has not

infrequently replied with pride and disdain. Great offence has been taken if one side has equated religion with superstition; but the other side has not scrupled to denounce doubt as irreligion, and belief in the sufficiency of reason as infamy. The one party has disparaged every clergyman as a scheming priest, while the other has disparaged every philosopher as an atheist. Thus each side has turned its adversary into a monster so that, if it cannot defeat him, it can pronounce him beyond the law.¹

This statement provoked Goeze to suggest that Lessing did in fact launch “indirect and direct hostile attacks” against Christianity; and this was seemingly implied in Lessing’s claim that so far there had been neither among the critics nor the apologists of religion anyone who had been attacking or defending Christianity in a way that was adequate to the matter at hand.

Kerber begins with a discussion of the intricacies of the so-called “proof of spirit and power” for revelation (chap. 1, “The Anamnesis of Apologetics”) and offers an extensive discussion of Lessing’s famous distinction between “accidental historical truths” and “necessary rational truths,” according to which the former can never become proofs for the latter (44). Schumann had objected to this argument by suggesting that Lessing thereby only wanted to force revealed religion to be judged by reason or philosophy.

The defense of Christianity against the criticism going back at least to Spinoza took a form encapsulated in the term *Evidenztheologie* (“evidentiary theology”). Whereas contemporary theology sought to support belief in revelation by putting forth certain proofs, including miracles, Lessing was well aware of the fact that earlier Protestant theology had done nothing of the kind. In fact, as Kerber shows, in an extremely subtle and sophisticated argument, Lessing pointed to what he regarded as the “last resort” of belief in revelation, namely the teaching of the *testimonium internum Spiritus sancti*, a teaching that can with equally good reason be regarded as the most secure and also as the weakest safeguard for revelation. Its strength consists in the inability of philosophy to refute its testimonial for revelation as long as theology keeps silent about it. As soon as theology begins to speak about it, however, it is in danger of laying itself open to attacks from philosophy. The question arises whether keeping silent had ever been a viable option for theology.

The second stage of the argument pertains to Lessing’s “restitution of orthodoxy,” whereas the third stage looks at the “reduction of theology.” Since

¹ Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Philosophical and Theological Writings*, ed. and trans. Hugh Barr Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 63–64.

the debate could not be concluded in the form of a scholarly exchange—for the Duke of Brunswick had rescinded Lessing’s privilege of freedom from censorship and expressly forbidden any further publications on the issue without official permission—Lessing had to change tack if he wanted to continue his argument. He therefore reverted to his “old pulpit,” as he called it, namely, the theater, and proceeded to write *Nathan der Weise* as an “epilogue” to the debate.

The most complicated part of Lessing’s procedure may well be the restitution of the old orthodoxy, because it differs markedly from the then current orthodoxy prominently represented by the likes of Goeze. In fact, the Protestant theologian Goeze seems to have been unable to muster the necessary knowledge about church history to understand what Lessing’s point ultimately was. It should be stressed that not a few of Lessing’s contemporaries found it exceedingly difficult to follow his arguments, as they could not fathom the reason why Lessing argued in a more orthodox manner than the orthodoxy of his own day. This kind of irritation would persist through the long reception history of Lessing’s engagement with theology.

In addition to Lessing’s attempts at the restitution of an older form of orthodoxy, he even made use of a key concept derived from Catholic theologians, and especially the Fathers of the church. This was the *regula fidei*, a way of interpreting and presenting the Christian faith that pointed towards something beyond the Bible. The background for Lessing’s provocative move was politically complex. He not only had to keep in mind the legal situation concerning critiques of religion in the Holy Roman Empire of the German nation in which both Protestant and Catholic princes had their own interests at heart. He also had to counter Goeze’s very emphatically formulated notion that Christianity was firmly grounded on the Bible as the word of God in which every letter counted. Lessing, by contrast, was seemingly arguing from a Catholic position when he maintained that the church or Christianity could very well exist and live on even without the written word of God—the letter—that is, the Bible. For, as he argued, the church had already existed before the written texts of the canon, and for this very reason the notion that the spirit is the word, that the Bible is the foundation of Christianity, was untrue and untenable. Lessing thus attacked a principle that Goeze had to defend, namely, the verbal inspiration of the Bible. For on the basis of the dogma of verbal inspiration it was clear that historical Bible criticism in the manner of Spinoza could not be refuted. Only by firmly maintaining the notion of the inscrutability of God would it be

possible to defend revelation against the enlightenment versions of theology which tend to equate Christianity and reasonableness.

Lessing's position, in Kerber's thoughtful interpretation, is at the same time that of a philosopher and of a "lover of theology," not, however, that of a theologian. When Lessing musters his astonishing theological scholarship, he does so in order to strengthen belief against the enlightenment theologians' erroneous notion of theology as a foundational science of belief based on "evidence." Kerber has presented us with the most subtle reading yet of Lessing's contributions to the so-called *Fragmentenstreit*. And while following Lessing's attempts at the restitution of belief in the orthodox manner, Kerber has also offered us the most forceful restitution of Lessing as a philosopher since at least Leo Strauss's abortive attempts to write a book called *Eine Erinnerung an Lessing*.²

² See Leo Strauss, "Eine Erinnerung an Lessing," in *Philosophie und Gesetz: Frühe Schriften*, ed. Heinrich Meier with Wiebke Meier (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1997), 607–8.

