

# German essays - enlightenment and religious tolerance



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## **Enlightenment and Religious Tolerance in Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's *Die Juden* and *Nathan der Weise*.**

Because of the impact of the intellectual revolution, the eighteenth century is frequently referred to as the 'Age of Reason'. More specifically, the term 'Enlightenment' is used because a major feature of this era was the mind's emphasis on using rationality as a framework within which to view major philosophical issues. According to Benson and DiYanni, 'the Enlightenment continued an emphasis on secular concerns that began during the Renaissance and continued with the rise of scientific and philosophical thought during the seventeenth century' (2005: 397). During this epoch, superstition came to be replaced with logical thought and analysis. These influences can be seen in the works of Gotthold Ephraim Lessing.

Lessing is considered by many to be a major representative of the Enlightenment Era. He was well known as a dramatist, critic, and philosopher during this time frame in Germany, and his works remain popular and influential even in contemporary times. In terms of religious tolerance, Lessing's philosophies are perhaps best represented by two of his dramatic pieces, *Nathan der Weise*, or *Nathan the Wise*, and *Die Juden*, or *The Jews*. According to one scholar, these two plays by Lessing 'are instructive examples that demonstrate, when read in light of the historical specificity of their context, the force of critical thinking that drove Lessing' (Goetschel 2003: 63). Lessing's impact is still felt today. According to Garland, *The Jews* 'had shown [Lessing's] deep antipathy to the unreasonable hatred directed against that people' (1962: 191).

In the eighteenth century, the ideas introduced by the Enlightenment had far-reaching effects on Western society. In fact, many of those ideas remain influential to this day. Formerly, much of Europe had been plagued by archaic prejudices towards those whose religious faith was considered to be a minority. This theme is nowhere more evident than in Lessing's plays, *Nathan the Wise* and *The Jews According to Goetschel*, both of these works are evidence of 'Lessing's critical concern to rethink both the claims of Christianity and the groundwork of modern national identity' (2003: 63).

Gotthold Ephraim Lessing was born in the quiet country town of Kamenz. His father, Johann Gottfried Lessing, was an educated man, but he was not wealthy. He worked as an assistant pastor in Kamenz. It was from him that the younger Lessing got his love of books, something that would last throughout his life. Lessing attended the University of Leipzig. Leipzig was a new world for the young man. It was far different from Kamenz. In fact, it was sometimes known as 'Little Paris' because of the level of sophistication that existed there (Garland 1962: 7). Lessing's early literary works included *Damon* and *The Young Scholar*. Neither of these works gave any indication that Lessing would eventually come to be known as the father of German literature, although *The Young Scholar* enjoyed a brief spate of popularity on the stage.

During his youth, Lessing exhibited a tendency to rebel against the status quo. This became particularly clear during his college days. Correspondence between him and his parents shows evidence of a young man of great curiosity, and one for whom a tried and true path would not suffice. His parents wished the best for him, naturally: a steady career that would bring  
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him stability and a modest amount of comfort. It was also hoped that Lessing, as the eldest, would establish himself in order to contribute to the education of his younger siblings. However, this was not the path that Lessing chose to follow. His adventurous spirit, combined with his youth, and the atmosphere of Leipzig, all combined to determine a path that would veer from his parents' wishes. These experiences led him to become a thinker and writer who was ahead of his time, as well as one of the finest minds of the German Enlightenment.

Lessing's Plays: Nathan the Wise and The Jews.

In many ways, Nathan the Wise can be considered a play that was ahead of its time. According to Wilms, this play is ' canonized not just in German literature, but also in the liberal Enlightenment reception of that literature and its tradition' (2002: 306). The central theme is the concept of brotherhood among mankind. Through the vehicle of drama, Lessing puts forth the message that people should be able to exist in harmony despite their religious denomination or group affiliation. For example, it should not matter whether one is a Jew, a Christian, or a Muslim; people should respect each other and coexist peacefully no matter what religious affiliations they have. Lessing's primary message in Nathan the Wise is that the main consideration should be the value of individuals as human beings, and that group membership is secondary to this. This is the concept that the character of Nathan proposes.

The role of money in this play merits some attention. Lessing uses money as a prop and as a theme. It is an integral part of the discourse of the play.

According to Graham, ' from the first moiment of the pla we are never  
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allowed to forget Nathan's association with money and the desirable goods that money can buy' (1973: 179). Money, and the power of money, are apparently very important to Lessing here. It is also significant to note that Nathan is rarely the recipient of money. He is rather, the giver. The suggestion that Nathan is 'wise' may play a role here. This may be yet another way in which Lessing underscores the value of giving rather than receiving. As Graham notes, 'the religious impulse of surrendering the grateful self to the giver of life reverberates in every one of these situations, in varying degrees of consciousness, and in every instance something of the same release of love is experienced and communicated' (1973: 185).

It can be said that the true villain of Lessing's play is the insidious hatred that is passed down from one generation to the next. This hatred is a complex mixture of mistrust and ignorance and is so deeply ingrained in people that often it remains unquestioned, simply a part of life. Nathan the Wise is often considered a vehicle in which Lessing's theological beliefs are given voice. Lessing believed in freedom of thought and was a serious student of theology. In some ways, it appears that Nathan the Wise is a mixture of various theological ideologies, many of which also appear in Lessing's *Erziehung des Menschengeschlechts*, or *Education of the Human Race*, which was published in 1780.

According to Wilms, in *Nathan the Wise*, 'rationality successfully overcomes a series of obstacles and works its way into a traditional "Lebenswelt" dominated by prejudice that does not shy away from murder and even genocide' (2002: 306). The triumph of rationality here is a central theme of Lessing's work. He takes on the traditional themes of religious dogma in this <https://assignbuster.com/german-essays-enlightenment-and-religious-tolerance/>

play and shows how individuals can take a rational approach to them. The title of the play refers to the main character, Nathan. The play takes place in Jerusalem, where Nathan lives as a prosperous Jew. The time frame is in the twelfth century. In the play, it is significant that Nathan adopts an orphan. The orphan happens to be Christian, but this does not matter to Nathan, who simply takes her into his home because she was the daughter of a friend. Immediately we see that Nathan is the kind of character to rise above petty details, and to act in the interests of humanity above all else. Considering the time and setting, this is certainly no ordinary act.

Tension builds, however, when a suitor comes into the picture. Nathan is aware of the inherent danger in this situation. Should the identity of his adoptive daughter be made known, the results would most undoubtedly be tragic for all involved. This use of 'hidden identity' was common in the literary works of Lessing's time, and it is used quite effectively in this play. Ultimately, Lessing's message in *Nathan the Wise* is that humanity is far more important than religious affiliation. Lessing asserts that the worth of people should not be based on what religion individuals are born into, or on blood relations, but rather on the very fact that they are human.

According to Garland, anti-Semitism had lessened somewhat, but was still considered widespread during the period of time in which Lessing was writing. The theme of the play is that people cannot be judged by their religious affiliations. The plot of the play is simple, ostensibly to allow the theme to stand out. The character of the Baron is clearly full of strong anti-Semitic prejudices. Therefore, when he is attacked by robbers, he

immediately concludes that the perpetrators were of the Jewish persuasion, <https://assignbuster.com/german-essays-enlightenment-and-religious-tolerance/>

in keeping with his beliefs. It is of course ironic that the attackers are found to be Christian. Furthermore, they are employees of the Baron himself. As for the noble Stranger who rescues the Baron, he is revealed to be Jewish himself. This puts the Baron in a rather awkward situation, as he has promised the hand of his daughter to The Stranger in return for his gallantry. Of course, once the Stranger has identified himself as a Jew, the wedding is now unthinkable. According to Garland, 'Lessing's interest is clearly centered on the serious aspects of the play The moral is pointed not only by the action, but is also underlined by frequent passages of dialogue (1962: 111).

Here, as in *Nathan the Wise*, Lessing effectively uses the tactic of the 'hidden identity' to elucidate his point. Once again, the message is that humanity is far more important than religious affiliation. In *The Jews*, Lessing asserts again that the worth of people should not be based on what religion individuals are born into This is quite apparent when it turns out that the Baron's attackers are in fact the very servants on whom he relies. The person who saves him, The Stranger, turns out to be a Jew himself, which adds to the irony.

Lessing's attitude to orthodoxy is rather complex. Much of his beliefs in his early life were strongly influenced by his friend, the freethinker Mylius. Mylius befriended him in Leipzig. Several years older, Mylius had a great deal of influence on his young protégé In a letter to his father, written when he was twenty years old, we can see the evolution of the young Lessing's thoughts about religion:

' Time will prove whether he is the better Christian, who has the principles of Christian doctrine in his memory, and on his lips, often without understanding them, who goes to church and observes all the practices (of religion) just because they are customary; or he who has once prudently doubted and has reached conviction by the path of investigation, or at an rate strives to reach it. The Christian religion is not a thing which one should accept on trust from one's parents' (quoted in Garland 1962: 151).

Seeds of unrest and a pull towards independent thinking are apparent even at this early stage in Lessing's development. We can already see this tendency to be skeptical of church-goers whose actions are at odds with their stated beliefs. As stated earlier, anti-Semitism was somewhat less pronounced during this period, although it still clearly existed. The idea that people should not be judged by their religious affiliations seems to have already taken hold in Lessing's young mind.

According to Garland, Lessing was ' struck by the obvious divergence between the doctrine of Christ and the mode of life of many of those who passed as Christians' (1962: 152). He was very much aware of the hypocrisy inherent in many who claimed to be Christians. Even as a young man, he was easily incensed by intolerance towards religious practices. He seemed to have little respect for orthodox theologies that had little room for the beliefs of others. In the eighteenth century, as discussed earlier, the ideas introduced by the Enlightenment had far-reaching effects on Western society. In fact, many of those ideas remain influential to this day. Formerly,



much of Europe had been plagued by archaic prejudices towards those whose religious faith was considered to be a minority.

## Conclusion

The period of the Enlightenment in Europe signaled a change in thinking. As representative pieces, these two plays by Lessing are examples of these new attitudes towards religion. Because of the impact of the intellectual revolution, the eighteenth century is frequently referred to as the 'Age of Reason'. More specifically, the term 'Enlightenment' is used because a major feature of this era was the mind's emphasis on using rationality as a framework within which to view major philosophical issues. During this epoch, superstition came to be replaced with logical thought and analysis. These influences can be seen in the works of Gotthold Ephraim Lessing.

A recurring theme in the works of Lessing is the concept of brotherhood among mankind. Through the vehicle of drama, Lessing puts forth the idea that people should be able to exist in harmony despite their religious denomination or group affiliation. Whether one is Christian, Muslim, or Jew, is irrelevant. One's connection to a particular religious group should not affect the basic respect that people should feel for one another. People of different faiths and beliefs should respect each other and coexist peacefully no matter what religious affiliations they have. Lessing's primary message in *Nathan the Wise* is that the main consideration should be the value of individuals as human beings, and that group membership is secondary to this. This is the concept that the character of Nathan proposes.

This message is also present in *The Jews Here*, as in *Nathan the Wise*, Lessing once again makes it clear that humanity is far more important than religious affiliation. In *The Jews*, Lessing asserts again that the value of a person should be independent of what religion that person is born into. This is quite apparent when it turns out that the Baron's attackers are in fact the very servants on whom he relies. The person who saves him, *The Stranger*, turns out to be a Jew himself, which adds to the irony.

Lessing, as we have seen, is considered by many to be a major representative of the Enlightenment Era. He was well known as a dramatist, critic, and philosopher during this time frame in Germany. The fact that his works remain popular and influential even in contemporary times is a testament to his ongoing influence. In terms of religious tolerance, Lessing's philosophies are perhaps best represented by these two dramatic pieces. Each of these works is an example of the critical and independent thinking that drove Lessing from his early days at university in Leipzig and throughout his life. Lessing's impact is still felt today.

As discussed above, the ideas brought to the fore in the eighteenth century had a tremendous impact on Western society. The concepts introduced during the stage known as the Enlightenment had far-reaching effects. In fact, many of these ideas remain influential to this day. Many of the prejudices that had been formulated regarding religious affiliations were analyzed and found to be wanting. This theme is nowhere more evident than in Lessing's plays, *Nathan the Wise* and *The Jews*. Lessing's messages in both of these plays call into question both the claims of Christianity and the significance of the underlying national identity.

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Many people consider Lessing to be a major representative of the Period of Enlightenment in Germany. His influence is felt in many spheres: he was well known as a dramatist, critic, and philosopher during this epoch, and his works remain popular and influential even in contemporary times. In terms of religious tolerance, Lessing's philosophies are perhaps best represented by two of his dramatic pieces, *Nathan der Weise*, or *Nathan the Wise*, and *Die Juden*, or *The Jews*. In each of these plays, Lessing makes clear his belief that people should not be judged by their religious affiliations.

In *Nathan the Wise*, we find a complex mix of ideologies. These same ideologies are present in *The Jews*, although to a lesser extent. It can be said that the true villain in each of these plays is the insidious hatred that is passed down from one generation to the next. Lessing portrays this hatred as a complex mixture of mistrust and ignorance that is so deeply ingrained in people that often it remains unquestioned. Both *Nathan the Wise* and *The Jews* can be considered vehicles in which Lessing's theological beliefs are given voice. In the eighteenth century, the ideas introduced by the Enlightenment had far-reaching effects on Western society, and those effects are elucidated in these dramatic works. Much of Europe had been riddled with archaic prejudices towards those whose religious faith was considered to be a minority. Lessing focuses on these prejudices in an effective dramatic format. In terms of religious tolerance, Lessing's philosophies are strongly represented by these two dramatic pieces. In the eighteenth century, the ideas introduced by the Enlightenment had far-reaching effects on Western society. In fact, many of those ideas remain influential to this day. For readers today, these works continue to have an impact. Both of these plays

offer a close look at the evolving attitudes towards religion and society of that era.