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Nathan the Wise: Dialogue without words

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The 'dramatic poem', *Nathan der Weise* [Nathan the Wise], was written in 1779 by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing in Germany. The scene is set in medieval Jerusalem, where Sultan Saladin rules and where the wealthy merchant Jew, Nathan, lives with his adopted daughter Recha, who is saved from a burning house by a Christian Templar knight. It is clear from the characters that the poem has the making of a fine example of interreligious dialogue. The culmination of the interreligious encounter in the poem is the account of what is now known as the parable of the Three Rings. The principle behind the parable has theological and socio-ethical implications that may guide us in understanding how religions can and ought to engage. This contribution presents a critical reflection of the Three Rings parable to add to the current debate on interreligious relations. The text of the poem is read from a theological socio-ethical perspective. The conclusion drawn from this reflection is that theological reasons may sometimes not be enough to ensure peaceful relations between religions. It may be that religions can together address socio-ethical challenges. Such co-action may transcend theological differences and mitigate interreligious dialogue.

Contribution: This contribution wants to critically discuss the dramatic poem 'Nathan der Weise' and determine how the Three Rings parable can contribute to current interreligious relations. The research addresses United Nations Sustainable Development Goals numbers 11 and 16, contributing to peaceful co-existence in sustainable communities.

Keywords: Lessing; *Nathan der Weise*; interreligious relations; dialogue; ethical behaviour; Jew; Christian; Muslim; pluralism.

Introduction

Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729–1781) was born as the son of a Lutheran minister and was destined to follow, like his brother, in his father's footsteps (Nisbet 2013:7). Young Gotthold Lessing studied theology, philosophy and medicine in Leipzig University. At university, he discovered his talent for writing plays. He was employed as a drama critic and became famous as an art critic. He spent time in Hamburg at the Hamburg Theatre and undertook several European journeys. He became acquainted with the philosophy of Baruch Spinoza and was initiated into Freemasonry in 1771 in Hamburg. He acted as Librarian in Brunswick, where he died in 1781 (Nisbet 2013:625).

As a result of his acquaintance with Moses Mendelsohn (Riches 1978:121), the Jewish–German philosopher, Lessing's interest in religious matters grew. As a child of the Enlightenment (compare Horowitz 1961:334), he believed that a civilised and rational society is characterised by religious tolerance. Truth can only be discovered and defended rationally (Horowitz 1961:334). During the latter part of his life, Lessing published pamphlets expressing his views on interreligious tolerance. The pamphlets were considered an attack on Christian orthodoxy, and because of public opposition, the pamphlets were eventually banned because of the controversial content. Lessing turned to playwriting to express his thoughts, resulting in *Nathan der Weise* being published in 1779, 2 years before his death. The Three Rings parable in the play provides some food for thought on interreligious relations.

Much has been published on the play *Nathan der Weise.* Tück and Langthaler (eds. 2016:8) state that Lessing's parable emphasises tolerance between Christianity, Islam and Judaism and elevates the competition on which religion contains the truth to the additional level of who is exceeding in doing good. Kuschel published extensively (2004, 2011, 2016) on the Three Rings parable, contributing to the analysis of and application of the implications of the parable to a current multi-religious context. In this regard, also compare the publication by Overath, Kermani and Schindel (2003), providing insights in the contemporary interpretation of the parable. Nisbet

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(2013:606), in his discussion of Lessing's life and works, emphasises that the play centres on the theme of religious tolerance.

This contribution is not an investigation of the parable itself but rather trying to indicate how interreligious dialogue should not be restricted to conversations but should include the religiously motivated praxis as a performative and demonstrative communication medium about and among religions.

Nathan der Weise

Nathan der Weise is a play consisting of five acts and 3850 lines (Tauchner 2020:219). The scene of the play is an early medieval Jerusalem where Sultan Saladin rules over a city inhabited by Jews, Christians and Muslims (Tauchner 2020:219). The long war of 1187 to conquer Jerusalem from Christian troops emptied the coffers of Saladin. A time of peace ensues the battle in Jerusalem. To replenish his resources, Saladin, advised by his sister Sittah, attempts to secure a loan or donation from the wealthy Jewish merchant, Nathan. Act 1 starts with Nathan receiving news that his adopted daughter, Recha, was saved from a burning house by a Christian Templar knight named Conrade from Stauffen. The sultan has pardoned this Templar knight because he reminded the sultan of his dead brother (Tauchner 2020:219). The Christian young man falls in love with Recha and plans to marry her. Nathan opposes the marriage and eventually discovers that the knight and Recha are orphaned brother and sister, children of the late brother of Saladin, Assad (Nisbet 2013:605). It becomes evident that the Templar knight is the sultan's nephew (Tauchner 2020:220). The implication is there exist close family ties between the Christian brother and sister and the Muslim sultan, with a Jew responsible for the upbringing of the Christian girl Recha. This might be a 'utopian suggestion' of what relations in a multireligious context could be like (Tauchner 2020:220).

In Act 3 Scene 4, Nathan enters Sultan Saladin's palace. The sultan has invited Nathan to his palace to discuss a possible financial loan. They engage in a deep and spiritual conversation. The sultan poses a question to the renowned wise Nathan as to what he thinks about the works of God, and which of the three world religions, Judaism, Christianity or Islam, is the most authentic religion. The actual question is which religion is, according to Nathan, the best religion (Act 3, scene 5). Nathan responds by reminding the sultan he is a Jew. The sultan responds by indicating that he is a Muslim and Christians live among them. Nathan reflects for a moment on the nature of the question and realises that it is a question of what truth is. Upon this question, Nathan realises it as a trap (Tauchner 2020:219), whereupon he responds by telling the Three Rings parable. Nathan then tells the following story.

There once was a man who owned a precious ring with an opal stone set in it. To ensure that the ring remained within his family, he intended to hand it down to his favourite son, who was expected to hand it down to his son and so forth. The father had three sons and he loved them equally. He did not know to whom he should entrust the ring, as all three sons were dear to him. The father then employed a jeweller who made two exact replicas of the original ring. Not even the father could distinguish the replicas from the original. On his deathbed, the father gives each of his three sons a ring.

Nathan then explains that the original ring could not be identified, so the true religion can no longer be identified. Saladin's response is that the differences between Christianity, Islam and Judaism can easily be identified. Nathan responds by indicating that all three religions were built on the same history, tradition and grounds of proof.

As the three brothers could not identify the true original ring, they inquired from a judge to determine who owned the original ring and who would be the household's true ruler. This section on consulting with a judge is an addition to Boccaccio's (1999) earlier version of the parable (Assman 2016:17; Nisbet 2013:608). Not even a judge could determine the truth as their father was no longer alive to testify in favour of the Three Rings. The solution Nathan suggests is that the ring should magically transform the wearer of the ring to live so humans and God find such a person acceptable. The sons had to live with gentleness, benevolence and forbearance. The acts of charity and humane love will prove that the ring's wearer possesses the true ring. Nathan adds that perhaps the three sons will discover that the original ring no longer exists, but the Three Rings are the same. The goal would then be that people should live according to the rule of love brought upon them by the ring.

Nisbet (2013:608) indicates that the judge's advice implies that religious disputes are pointless and may even be harmful. People should be judged by their good deeds and not by the truth of their religion. It would appear as if secular morality is valuable. Nisbet indicates that of the virtues that the judge in the parable finally recommends to the quarrelling sons (i.e. 'unprejudiced love', 'gentleness', 'sincere good nature', 'beneficence', and 'deepest devotion to God'), four of the five refer to morality rather than religious belief.

Upon his departure, Nathan asks the sultan if he may store some of his accumulated wealth for safe keeping with the sultan. In anticipation that the sultan wanted to borrow money from him, Nathan makes a generous gift to the sultan without the sultan having to ask for it. Nathan demonstrates the rings' power by acting benevolently towards the Muslim sultan.

An analysis of the parable

It is most probable that Lessing got his idea of the Three Rings parable from Giovanni Boccaccio, who had written somewhere between 1350 and 1355 *Il Decamerone* (*The Decameron*), wherein the account of the Three Rings is put in the mouth of the Jew, Melchizedek, who responds to a question by Sultan Saladin. However, the origin of the parable lies much further back in history than the 14th

century, according to Assman (2016:18). The question Saladin poses to Melchizedek has the potential to spark interreligious conflict. He asks about Melchizedek's views on the working of God. Which of the three great religions is the authentic religion intended by God for all humankind? Melchizedek then responds with the parable of the Three Rings, implying that all three religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, are based on the same beliefs (Ashliman 2023).

The main difference between Boccaccio's and Lessing's versions of the Three Rings parable is that Lessing makes the parable as told by Nathan end with the conclusion it has become impossible to distinguish the duplicate rings from the original ring (Ashliman 2023). In Boccaccio's version, the original ring remains among the three final rings given to each of the three sons, with only two duplicate rings. The final advice of the Three Rings parable, as told by Nathan, is that people belonging to these three religions should all live so their lives are agreeable to God and all humankind. The implication is that none of the three religions can claim authenticity, ultimate truth or originality unless adherents of all three religions live in peace and harmony, love towards God and love towards all humankind. The truth of the ring must be exhibited by the one wearing the ring. Only through acts of true piety and benevolence towards all humankind will the truth of the religion become evident (Assman 2016:15). For Nisbet (2013:606), the parable emphasises the moral and religious virtues essential to religious harmony, implying that the virtues are universal.

Nisbet (2013:601) states that *Nathan der Weise* was a Jew suggesting a way to achieve 'amicable relations with adherents of the Muslim and Christian faiths' and that the suggestion by Nathan 'serves as a model of human brotherhood and interconfessional harmony'. From *Nathan der Weise,* we might find suggestions on how to align interreligious dialogue in current multireligious contexts.

Nisbet's suggestion, however, avoids a crucial question as to religious belief. It may be possible for religions to engage peacefully when dealing with ethical matters as there might be shared values, but what if the conversation is based on interpretation and application of religious belief? Beliefs may be divisive and even destructive in interreligious relations. To the matter of beliefs, the parable does not provide a solution.

Riches (1978:122) indicates that Lessing's reason to write so explicitly on religion (and not against religion) is because of conversations with Moses Mendelsohn as captured in a letter exchange between the two since 1771. After sending documents reflecting the deist ideas of Hermann Samuel Reimarus (an orientalist from Hamburg) (Assman 2016:20) to Mendelsohn, Lessing received Mendelsohn's comments and recommendation to read the book by the Scottish theologian Ferguson (see Riches [1978:121–122] for a detailed discussion). Reimarus was a radical deist who claimed that religion could be validated only through reason and nature and all divine revelations must be denied (Assman 2016:20). Lessing, from then on, continued with a more focused approach on writing on theology and religions.

Lessing did not write against religion but explained how it differs from the Bible (Assman 2016:21). The Bible may contain religion but is not religion. The Bible is a historical document: a product of human activity. Religion is something else (Assman 2016:21). As is clear from *Nathan der Weise,* Lessing does not oppose the existence of religion, but opposes the abuses and claims to exclusive authenticity, truth and validity made by religions resulting in the hegemony of religion over people who no longer question but accept the religious prescriptions for belief and practices.

For Assman (2016:15), the moral of the parable falls out in two issues: the truth of religion can neither be proven historically nor theologically but only in practice. The truth of religion becomes evident in its expression of acts and not in its dogmas. This statement might be problematic as this position negates the history of traditions passed on from one generation to the next as containing the truth. A combination of praxis and dogma might be a more acceptable criteria for evaluating the truth of religion. For Assman (2016:15–16), the second important point is that although religions may be based on revelations, these revelations are not exclusive and absolute. The truth of the revelation is grounded in the father's love and not in the ring's authenticity. According to Assman (2016:16), the result is that the concepts of truth and revelation must be redefined to not exclude other revelations. This requires a relativisation of one's version of the truth. For many religions, especially the three monotheistic religions mentioned here, the relativisation of one's own truth would be considered heresy and dissidence. Assman's analysis is a summary of what Lessing intended to communicate.

From the Three Rings parable, we can deduce two principles, which may assist in governing interreligious relations. Underlying the solution how to determine which of the three monotheistic religions is the authentic religion, lies an essential understanding of the following two principles:

- one common God
- one common ethical obligation

One common God: Lessing on Deism

In trying to understand what Lessing so explicitly wanted to communicate in such an implicit way, we will need to investigate Lessing's understanding of what religion is and what God is. It is important to understand Lessing's views from his context. Lessing's way of thinking has been determined and influenced by three key concepts: Enlightenment, rationalism and the search for truth.

Lessing lived during the time of the Enlightenment when reason governed all existence. Knowledge of and understanding of reality was mitigated through rational means. One cannot believe in something that is not proven rationally. Truth is discovered only by rational means, providing proof (Horowitz 1961:334). The search for truth is ongoing because there is no ultimate and absolute truth. The search for truth lies in the continuous search for truth (Horowitz 1961:334). This way of thinking influenced

Lessing's understanding of religion and how Christianity relates to other religions.

Nisbet (2013:604) mentions that Nathan echoes Lessing's belief that faith in the revealed religions depends on historical evidence and cannot be demonstrated by rational means.

As to Lessing's understanding of God, he does not deny the existence of God, but prefers to leave the potential of all religions to know God. (Nisbet 2013:216). This is aligned with the understanding of Reimarus denying that a single revelation can be valid for all people and all places (Nisbet 2013:614). Lessing subscribed to Reimarus' statement that all belief must be subjected to reason before it can be accepted (Riches 1978:131). A rational belief must subject all prejudices to rational scrutiny to discern what is valuable and contradictory to reason. Lessing subscribed to Reimarus' attack on Christian orthodoxy. For Lessing, religious truths do not rest on validation from logic but are validated by history (Horowitz 1961:335). Lessing despised dogmatic theology, priestly orders and institutional religious abuses (Horowitz 1961:337).

According to Nisbet (2013:610), Lessing treats natural religion more favourably than the three monotheistic religions. Through the play *Nathan der Weise*, Lessing expresses a negative evaluation of the revealed religions, particularly Christianity and Judaism. Lessing does not attempt to advance natural religion, but to point out that natural religion is the common ground for the three monotheistic religions to engage in harmony and tolerance of each other (Nisbet 2013:610). Lessing does not have a negative or hostile attitude towards religion. As to what he considers true religion, he prefers not to answer but leaves the question open (Nisbet 2013:613). This is, according to Nisbet (2013:614), typical of Lessing not to arrive at the point of truth, but a preference to continue the search for truth and question concepts and not establish new fixed truths (compare Horowitz 1961:334). Lessing wanted to free the mind from the hegemony of tradition and have people think for themselves (Horowitz 1961:335).

Lessing's critical questions about the nature of God, providence and human nature are not intended to be answered. Rather Lessing is striving to search for answers instead of providing answers (Nisbet 2013:610–611). The problem with truth and proof lies for Lessing in the source of evidence. The truth of our faith lies in the divine origin of our religions. The truth of faith depends on historical evidence, and the truth of the evidence depends on our faith, and our faith depends on the truthfulness of our ancestors. The point of *Nathan der Weise* is to demonstrate the truth of your faith through action (Nisbet 2013:612). Lessing does not suggest people to abandon their religion, but tolerate others while excelling in their conviction (Nisbet 2013:612).

The notion that the monotheistic religions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) derive their origin from revelation is contested by Lessing. Tück and Langthaler (eds. 2016:8) describe Lessing's challenge to religions as follows: how can Christianity, based on a particular revelation, claim to be the true religion for humankind if other religions believe differently? Lessing presents a solution by indicating that religions should focus on being humane and compete on who excels in love instead of striving to prove themselves as the true religion. This does not mean relativising one's own belief and merging Judaism, Christianity and Islam into one. It implies that all religions should be utilised as a source for being humane (eds. Tück & Langthaler 2016:9). In this way the fear of relativisation is allayed. As Lessing stated in *The Education of the Human Race (1780)*, the revelation did not present humans with something that they would not have arrived at through human reason. What revelation presents, humans achieved on their own through reason.

Lessing's understanding of interreligious relations reminds of pluralism. Pluralism recognises the validity and equality of all religions. No religion is considered inferior to others. According to pluralism, all religions possess knowledge of God, and every religion presents a valid mode of existence and a way to salvation. No religion can deny or exclude the other. According to a pluralist understanding, every religion's truth is imperceptible to outsiders (Newbigin 1989:14). There is no such thing as absolute truth, as truths vary. After investigating ways of interreligious relations, Ambrose Mong (2015) concludes that each religion's truth is valid within its cultural context. This means that no religion can claim its truth is real, while others are false (Objantoro 2018:2). John Hick (2004:11), a strong proponent of pluralism, famously declared that 'no one religion has a monopoly of the truth or the life that leads to salvation'. Paul Knitter (2005:109) refers to the pluralist position as 'the Mutuality Model, where Christians consider a more modest' approach when relating to other religions. Christianity needs to acknowledge that salvation is possible in more than one way. As Lessing would formulate it: revelation is not exclusive to Christianity; it just does not make (rational) sense.

One common ethical obligation

Knitter (2005:113) states that one requirement to find common ground for Christians to accept the mutuality model or pluralism is what he refers to as crossing one of three bridges, specifically the ethical-practical bridge. The needs and suffering of all humanity and the earth is the concern of all religions and traditions. While engaging on these ethical issues, Knitter (2005:113) believes that a more effective dialogue between religions is possible. By addressing ethical issues, people from different religions move closer and get to know one another better, as shared ethical responsibility is a pillar for interfaith exchange (Knitter 2005:134).

When thinking of interreligious relations, ethical spaces become a way of seeing each other (Cheetham 2013:149). An attempt at interreligious ethics was already suggested by Hans Küng at the World Parliament of Faiths in 1993 (Hollenbach 2021). Cheetham (2013:157) warns that neutral global ethics are not necessarily sensitive to particularities within different cultures and traditions. According to Hollenbach (2021), global ethics will improve 'hope for peace

and justice, while the lack of such an ethic could make it likely that we are headed for a clash of civilisations'.

Ethics is part of all religions. Compare Sundermeier's (1999:17) definition indicating that religion is expressed in rituals and ethics. Hans Küng (1991:87) proposes *humanum* as the basic norm for judging the authenticity of religion. With the concept of *humanum*, Küng implies what is given and what is given to do. The implication of Küng's suggestion is that only a religion that promotes humanity can be considered true and good. This is precisely what Lessing suggests with the principles expounded in *Nathan der Weise.*

Tauchner (2020:220) is of the opinion that the play *Nathan der Weise* is not only a directive to Jewish, Muslim, and Christian relations but also emphasises the intolerant nature of Christianity and its claim to possess the only revealed truth. It is not clear whether Tauchner is referring to the portrayal of Christianity during the time of Lessing or does he refer to the expression of Christianity in his own context. The play is a polemic against Christianity rather than a wishful suggestion of interreligious relations. Tauchner (2020:221) illustrates how Lessing depicts the Jews and Muslims as morally superior humans as opposed to merciless and villainous Christians. Kuschel (2011:91) points out that Lessing wants to emphasise the danger of religion regarding marginalisation and animosity towards others. Lessing would suggest that Christians should become nothing else than humans and forget about their faith. Humanity can be achieved in any religion (Tauchner 2020:221). The acts of mercy and charity towards others overcome the religious differences that may hamper interreligious relations. Religion aims to make a person a better human being (Tauchner 2020:222).

Lessing's ideas on religion is highlighted by his other significant works. In his essay *The Education of the Human Race (1780),* he states that through the development of religions the gradual improvement of morality becomes clear. The end result is a universal brotherhood and moral freedom beyond dogmas (Tauchner 2020:222). Whether one would still be able to refer to this as religion is an open question. It might just as well be referred to as humanistic ethics.

Knitter (2005:139) suggests that a shared concern among religions about the ethics of human and ecological suffering might be more productive – a shared ethical dialogue may lead to more effective religious dialogue. However, such a dialogue about ethics, according to Knitter (2005:140), requires that all participants in the conversation 'get their hands dirty'. The level of interreligious dialogue is no longer that of experts, scholars and leaders, but it becomes the conversation among ordinary people, the poor, the inflicted, the victims, and those experiencing suffering. The conversation is no longer about whose beliefs are correct and true, but how people and the environment can be helped, educated, assisted, supported, freed and fed (Knitter 2005:140).

The effect of such collaboration on ethical issues is no longer focusing on the importance or relativity of belief but a question as to how beliefs and practices can bring about peace, harmony, justice and unity (Knitter 2005:141). How religions accomplish these traits indicates the truth and goodness within such a religion (Knitter 2005:141), illustrating what Nathan professes in *Nathan der Weise.* The onus is on religions to live love, not to seek religious differences, but to seek opportunities to express love and concern.

Assman (2016:15) refers to this as the performative proof of religion as being true. Only by way of demonstration can religions claim to be relevant and truthful. The truth of a religion is not expressed in its dogmas but in its practices (Assman 2016:15). With this, Assman (2016:20) agrees with the biblical principle that people's adherence to a belief will become known through their actions: 'by their fruit they will be known' (Mt 7:16).

Recommendation

At the heart of dialogue lies interreligious dialogue (Swidler 2013:3). The reason for this statement is substantiated by Swidler (2013:3) by indicating that 'religion is the most comprehensive of all the human disciplines: an explanation of the ultimate meaning of life, and how to live accordingly'.

Religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices, as has been stated by the definition of Durkheim (2001 [1912]:46). Religion is expressed in ethics and rituals, as stated by Sundermeier (1999:17). Moral and ethical behaviour should be intrinsically considered part of religion.

Based on Lessing's suggestion in *Nathan der Weise,* actions and moral behaviour become the communicative component in interreligious dialogue. The importance of ethics in inrerreligious dialogue has already been stated by Hans Küng as indicated earlier. It is not the intention to infer from Lessing's play that ethics contributes to interreligious dialogue. The play merely emphasises and illustrates this claim. As mentioned at the beginning of this article, the purpose of this study is to emphasise that interreligious dialogue should not be restricted to conversations.

This suggests that interreligious dialogue can be a dialogue without words. When religions focus on the values, such as respect and charity and the expression of humaneness, religious-inspired actions speak louder than words. The particularity of religious beliefs remains intact and no longer becomes the terrain for controversy and competition as to which religion contains the truth. The plurality of expressions of love becomes the universal expression of the truth.

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