

GERMAN FOUNDATIONAL MYTHS: A EUROPEAN AND TRANSCULTURAL READING

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ABSTRACT: Societies legitimate themselves through their foundational narratives, which provide meaning, orientation, and perspectives whereby the contingencies of historical processes are obscured and the complexities of economic, social and political processes are reduced. The complexity of German history with its discontinuities demonstrates a persistent desire for myth. Precisely for this reason, historical events are rewritten in an attempt to heal open wounds. Such foundational myths compensate for a lack of 'self-evident' national identity. In Germany, foundational myths proved highly influential during and after efforts towards national unity. Foundational myths can also become problematic and unreliable. In order to define the self, foundational myths are supposed to differentiate based on their negative antithesis. However, after the failure of their positive determinants, they must often be read in a different light. In the Third Reich, Jews were cast as the negative antithesis against which the notion 'Germanic' was defined. After the collapse of National Socialist ideology and the subsequent shame of being branded as perpetrators of an almost incomparable genocide, a philo-Semitic community emerged out of a once anti-Semitic people.

1. KLEIST: THE ALLEGORY OF THE DISMEMBERED CORPSE

Kleist's *Hermannsschlacht* (1808) reads today as a predecessor of what Herfried Münkler described as «asymmetric warfare» (2002: 48-57, 54). Hermann, the terrorist or partisan-in the words of Carl Schmitt (1963: 15) and Wolf Kittler (1987, *passim*)-Hermann speaks falsely, offers propaganda re-

plete with fictitious wartime atrocities, even ventures as far as to stage them or embellish the mistakes made by the Roman army in order to discredit them in the eyes of their own people. He plots a clash of cultures in which he intimates that the nation of civilization-the Romans-are arbitrarily cruel und devoid of any compassion. For example, in Herthakon a Roman allegedly slays a woman who has just given birth and her new born baby by smashing together their skulls. The story of young Hally appears even more gruesome; she was raped amidst the tumultuousness of war. In order to spare her from the loss of honour, her own father stabs her to death. Hermann has the corpse cut into fifteen pieces-as many pieces as there are Germanic tribes. One piece is sent to the leader of each. They recognise the allegorical significance¹ and act collectively, and thus defeat Varus and his Roman army in the Battle of Teutoburg Forest. The victim, transformed into myth, establishes the idea of unity of the empire. Friedrich Gundolf has described *Die Hermannsschlacht* as «the hymn of demonic hate» (1922: 118). It is through the symbol of the dismembered corpse that separate interests are united-out of recalcitrant tribes emerges one nation.

Myths explain the world in a non-conceptual manner by reducing the chaotic diversity of nature. Horror is thereby expunged, the world emerges more inhabitable, as Blumenberg would say, more humane (1990, passim). That in itself is an accomplishment, even if it is achieved through irrationality. For Plato, therefore, myth alone did not suffice.² But irrationality is not simply the antithesis of rationality. Both develop in connection with one another, rendering these phenomena more transparent and intelligible. What separates them is neither the presence nor absence of rationality, but rather a *modus operandi* of the mind. No one has captured this idea from a structural point of view more succinctly than Ernst Cassirer. Myth is inaccessible to analysis. Inherent in myth is the suggestion of totality. Mythical thinking abolishes «fixed boundaries» «between what is merely envisaged and what is actually perceived, between wish and fulfilment, image and the thing».³

1. Cf. Kleist 1993: 306, 345 f., cit. v. 1609, 2549.

2. For Platon, *Sophistes* 259d-264b, 268c-d; *Timaios*, 21e-23d; 29b-c; 51d-e; *Politeia* II 350e, 377a, c, 381e etc. see Brisson 1996: vol. 1, 2635.

3. Cf. Cassirer 1994: 48, see also p. 51.

2. MYTH AND GENEALOGY:

«WHITEBEARD ON REDBEARD'S THRONE»

Furthermore, as Klaus Heinrich expresses in a pun, myth must spring up and spring away from its first upbringing: it is at once separate from its source and yet derived from it (1992: 11-26, here 14 f.). Mythical discourse therefore certifies itself with origins without actually having to attain them. Foundational myths revert back to tradition while nevertheless creating something new. Karl Phillip Moritz emphasizes this quality in his *Götterlehre*, the classical mythological text of the Age of Goethe. According to Moritz, embedded within myth is a historical core, but this core can appear unhistorical because it refers to a prehistory. Myth receives its «weight» from «the most ancient events» and not from the factual demands made by the modern, rational recording of history (Moritz 1967: 7 f.).

This concept is embodied pictorially in the Kaiserpfalz at Goslar. Hermann Wislicensus, who had taken over the project, placed as the central point of his pictorial arrangement an allegory completed in 1882: *The Resurrection of the German Empire, 1871*. In the axis of the west wall we see 'Father Rhine' and the legend personified, annexed provinces of Alsace and Lorraine, both of which bear their churches as insignias. And in a diagonal from top-right to bottom-left, we see those who played a central role of the modern salvation. Emperor Friedrich I (Barbarossa or 'red beard') points to Wilhelm I (Weißbart or 'white beard'), on whom the imperial crown is to be bestowed. Wilhelm I in turn recognizes the forging of the new empire at the hands of Bismarck. The pictorial programme, which unfolds over 50 canvasses, is framed by the fairy tale of Sleeping Beauty on the south wall and the legend of Kyffhäuser mountain on the north wall. According to the foundational myth, Wilhelm embodies Germany, as if it had awakened from a century-long slumber. The second allegory presents him as a new embodiment of the historical Friedrich I: «Whitebeard on Redbeard's Throne».⁴ Fairy tales and history, legend and actual power meet in this new representation that resulted from violent conquest. Wilhelm I. achieves that which his barbaric forefather Hermann wanted to attain as a partisan. Germany defines itself by subjugating France, perceived as the new Rome. Kleist had expressed this sentiment earlier.

Rationality no longer anatomizes; what is instead privileged is a regression to a briefly conceived synthesis that forms identities based on relation-

4. So Arndt 1977: 15-29, here pp. 17-19, 26. Cf. Gutmann 2002: 44-47.

ships of similarities. According to August Wilhelm Schlegel, this is one of, perhaps even *the* defining feature of Romanticism as a philosophical force (1971: vol. 6, 161). In 1844 Heinrich Heine also told the story of ‘Red Beard’, who waited in Kyffhäuser mountain in order to save Germany some day with his equestrian army. His beard, which over the centuries had grown into the stone table at which he sat, retained its original, flaming red colour. There he is waiting for the call to arms, one which would awaken the might of his army, as had happened at the Battle of Ikonion (1190), when Friedrich defeated the Mohammedans at the height of his power. In Heine’s account he is called upon to battle against the treacherous assassins who had sexually assaulted the so-called «faithful, wondrous, golden-haired virgin Germania» (Heine 1972: 447). Heine does not forget to mention the Battle of Teutoburg Forest and to sing of the mire «where Varus came to a standstill». And furthermore, even less flattering: «German nationality, / that proved victorious amidst this filth» (1972: 438-440).⁵ The ironic poet also claimed that he even wanted to «subscribe» to the Hermann Monument at Detmold. Heine thus perpetuates myth whilst simultaneously undermining it through the use of irony.

3. EDGAR REITZ: UNITY AS ROMANTIC SYNTHESIS

National foundational myths replace the interpretation of history that stresses salvation. Always through a successful conclusion, such myths promote a reconstruction of the past. A striking, recent example is the German History Museum in Berlin. Reunification determines the concept. The progression of history seems to follow this path logically. The period of National Socialism and the Holocaust appear here as unnecessary aberrations along this way.

Edgar Reitz’s film chronicle *Homeland 3* replicates this pattern. The story is set during the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989, a highly symbolic, over-determined reunification. After broken marriages and careers as musicians, Hermann and Clarissa simultaneously rediscover each other at the very moment of this historical event and at the very site. The two are united as a couple, the nation may, even must join together as well; then the sequence is reversed, according to Hermann, for the historical moment exists only for the lovers: «this night, when history of the world waits with bated breath, I saw Clarissa

5. Cf. Hoock-Demarle 2005: 23, 25 f., 28, 30.

again... The images on television of the fall of the wall, our embrace in the hotel room, the kiss, the jubilation on the Kurfürstendamm-everything fit perfectly together in that moment and blended into an image of our newly-found love» (Reitz 2004: 17). Their bodies in entwinement are transfigured into *hieros gamos*.⁶ This condition reflects the idea of *unio mystica*-a union with the divine in the words of Bataille (1994: 86, 99). The disintegration of boundaries cancels the principle of individuation. Klages, drawing on Nietzsche, argues that in Eros «individual life sinks back into undifferentiated, elementary life» (Klages 1988: 56).⁷ It no longer seems to exist solely for itself, but simultaneously represents the collective 'All'.

Our contemporary hero, another Hermann, and Clarissa stand for the nation, now rejoined, in the sense of a romantic synthesis. The dismembered Hally is made whole in the image love and the Dionysian-erotic act. The two find each other even before they look for each other. Happiness falls to their lot, just as it does to the divided states, which no longer must live along side each another, separated by a wall. It is a *kairos* in the original sense of the word.

We can see here a true parallel to the frenzy of war, as in Kleist. Because the separation of the sexes-even if only for a short time-is removed through the reunification, so too must all other barriers that people have erected between each other likewise fall. Schiller, Eichendorff, and Wagner have conjured up such moments in their works. Romantic yearning tends towards the universal, the world-encompassing, even if it fails occasionally to transcend national boundaries. This paradox is even considered part of national identity.⁸

4. PRECARIOUS EUROPEAN MYTHS

Indeed, the history of myths is one of transgressing boundaries, traversing centuries as well as (national) literary boundaries. This applies even to genuine foundational myths. Hermann and even Germania have been transformed into symbols of a German nationality, to which France again and again juxtaposed itself as an alternative. Faust is a prototypical German hero and yet he has been appropriated by other national literatures. Shylock was one of

6. Cf. Maffesoli 1986: 46.

7. From Nietzsche 1988: 9-156, *passim*.

8. Cf. the extended German version in Preusser 2007: 159-191.

Shakespeare's creations, and yet the production history reveals entirely specific forms of his integration into national discourses. When these discourses become precarious, such as in Germany after the Holocaust, certain representational models get into a state of crisis-Kleist's Hermann is deconstructed in Peymann's staged version, the positive hero Faust becomes a proto-fascist Faustian,⁹ and the negative figure of Shylock is reinterpreted as the victim of foreign tyranny.¹⁰ Stereotypes are dispelled, and are turned into the opposite of what was originally intended. It is precisely at this point that myths can be read transculturally; they no longer adhere to the largely fixed schema of «hetero/auto-imagines», which has been established by conventional xenology or cross-cultural research.¹¹ In the first instance identities are created through these *precarious myths* (for example, the despicable Jew or an eternally striving figure such as Faust), but when presented with actual history they are nullified and thus become, as subverted and deconstructed mythemes, new sources of meaning.¹² As a result of this corrective, they generate new models of identity that impact national discourses, and establish them again, but in a changed form. Faust then becomes a disguised symbol of the failure of German hubris; Shylock then becomes a pure, creaturely victim, against which German identity can cast itself in a negative symbiosis.¹³

The point is to show how the contrast between cultures, with its conflict-laden clash, first produces a construction of the self that is later assumed as identity. The roles of victim and perpetrator become interchangeable. On the one hand, precarious European myths of Jews have, since the sixteenth century, established who should be excluded from European societies, and who or what figures as foreign or 'the other' in order to form identities in contrast (Shylock and Ahasver are two such examples). In so doing, identities have been constructed based on this negative referential point. On the other hand, the values of the Enlightenment itself are invoked through the figure of Nathan.

Cultural conflicts do not have to become obstacles to unity and unification, but rather they can act effectively as productive processes in the negotiation of newer cultural forms and authorities. They can even form foundational narratives-even if only in the practice of reception or in the

9. Cf. Schwerte 1962: 8 f., 22 f., 149 f., 238 f., 240.

10. See Bayerdörfer 1997: 263-265, 269, 271.

11. Cf. Wierlacher / Albrecht 2003: 280-306, and Wierlacher (ed.) 2000.

12. See Vöhler / Seidensticker (eds.) 2005: 1-18. Cf. Preusser 2007: 199-214.

13. See Diner 1987: 185-197. Cf. the extended German version in Preusser 2009: 337-362.

reconfiguring of existing myths. Homi Bhabha's (2007, *passim*) definition of transculturality as a «third space» in which the *in-between* is primarily a creative process of translation and a sublimation of alteriority, has proved to be when considered in its entirety-an illusion.

5. SHYLOCK: ANTI-SEMITIC AND PHILO-SEMITIC READINGS

Frequently, myths construct new identities, insisting upon what is established ostensibly, and reinforcing fixed images of the self. Subsequently, they enter into the stereotypical foundational narratives and memorials of *national discourses*, such as in France and Germany in the nineteenth century.¹⁴ Thus, there is an abundance of homomorphic personifications that nevertheless are supposed to express allegorically what is most profoundly unique in the nation. For example, Marianne and Germania, Hermann and Vercingetorix are astonishingly similar, but are nevertheless supposed to reveal decisive difference between the neighbouring states. On the other hand, the notion of exclusion seems to be pre-programmed in the image of the Jew. Around Shakespeare's time, for instance, Jews had long since been expelled from Great Britain, as was also the case with the Reconquest of Spain.¹⁵

Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* (1596/97) has fairy-tale qualities¹⁶ and genuinely comedic elements,¹⁷ whilst tragic dimensions are above all attained through *peripeteia*.¹⁸ The play revolves around Bassanio's courtship, which Bassanio seeks to finance by a generous loan from his friend Antonio, the merchant of Venice. However, as Antonio's entire capital is invested in the shipping trade, which has yet to see success, Antonio borrows the necessary money from the hated Jew Shylock.¹⁹ The contract stipulates that should Antonio not be in a position to repay the sum in full on the arranged date, the moneylender may rightfully cut out a pound of flesh close to the heart. As a result of a mishap at sea, Antonio's fleet is almost entirely destroyed, his capital seemingly lost. Thus he must hand over his life to Shylock, who was eager

14. Cf. Hoock-Demarle 2005: 19-34.

15. Cf. Schwanitz 1998: 44.

16. Cf. Schabert (ed.) 1992: 466-472, here p. 467.

17. See Danson 1978: 170-195.

18. Cf. Kullmann 2005: 78-86.

19. Cf. Enzensberger 1977: 305-378, here pp. 328, 356, 359, 363.

for justice. The Jew goes to court to have his contract fulfilled and refuses to accept any late payment, even if larger. The matter is one of personal revenge for Shylock. In the fourth act, the judge's decision unexpectedly transforms Shylock from plaintiff to defendant. The demands made by Shylock for the fulfilment of his bloodthirsty contract are refused in the final seconds, and he himself becomes the condemned. It is the complexly drawn figure of the Jew that time and again engenders conflicting interpretations and stimulates updating for the contemporary stage.²⁰ In Germany, it is above all the issue of whether the play or its author can be described as anti-Semitic that has preoccupied many.²¹

There can be no doubt regarding the source of Shylock's need for revenge: Antonio had ridiculed him previously, spat on his coat, and insulted him. Unlike Shylock, the merchant lends money to Christians whom he had befriended without interest, a practice that impacted negatively Shylock's business. Moreover, at a business dinner that he attended only against his will, Shylock loses his beloved (and excessively-guarded) daughter Jessica, who is abducted from her father's home by the Christian good-for-nothing Lorenzo. Even his manservant, Launcelot Gobbo, leaves him in order to work for Bassanio, the friend of the merchant Antonio. Shylock thus loses everyone he holds dear, or who dwells in his house. Nevertheless, the contract proves excessive, as does the zeal with which Shylock seeks to adhere to the contract. The play obviously means to contrast the Old Testament idea of «an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth» against the New Testament notion of grace, which the court scene serves to illustrate.²² Shylock receives a taste of his own medicine. Because he trusts the letter of the law more than his own heart, it is in the disguised Portia that he finds the better sophist. He is allowed to cut the pound of flesh from the merchant's body. However, in the process he is not permitted to spill one drop of blood because the contract does not stipulate this precisely. Legally, the argument is highly questionable. In reality, it reveals the fact that those with the power dictate the law.

One could argue that the contract was immoral. However, the court's interpretation is an obvious perversion of the course of justice. Half of Shylock's possessions are given over to the city-state of Venice, whilst the rest is conferred to Antonio, who, after the death of the Jew, gives it to Lorenzo-the

20. See Sinsheimer 1960, *passim*, and Frenzel 2005: 843-846.

21. Cf. Hensel 1986: vol. 1, 184-188. Extended see Monschau 2003.

22. Cf. Schwanitz 1998: 138.

very man who stole Shylock's daughter from his house. According to Antonio's request, only if Shylock receives Baptism would the state's share of the fine be given back to him (4.1.350-353, 367-369, 378-382). However, his half of Shylock's fortune, upon his death, is also to be given to Lorenzo and Shylock's daughter (4.1.385-387).²³ Shylock also accepts this. Certainly no historically adequate reading would justify seeing Shylock as a broken man deserving of our sympathy. Rather, the invectives of Gratiano, Bassanio's devoted friend, could have expressed the Elizabethan public's mood. Today they sound like racist agitators. Only after the Holocaust is the play a tragedy: not for Antonio, but for Shylock. Philo-Semitic tendencies were already present in the eighteenth century. The desire was to read the famous speech of Act 1, Scene 1 as a call to an all-embracing humanity that goes beyond class and race.

I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes? hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions? fed with the same food, hurt with the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer as a Christian is? —if you prick us do we not bleed? if you tickle us do we not laugh? if you poison us do we not die? and if you wrong us shall we not revenge?²⁴

Objectively, the notion of a natural equality among characters within the text is decidedly absent. Shylock must be content to share a part of Christian grace. Through his forced baptism, the kingdom of heaven stands open before him, one that, as a Jew, would have remained closed to him. Apparently he loses everything; in reality, he has only lost his worldly possessions. As Shylock exits the stage-defeated-and the first act of the fifth scene begins in a joyful manner, no bitter taste remains for the Christians.²⁵ They have won-apparently by means of the law, and there seems to be a happy ending in store for all, even the one who has been defeated. Three couples have been formed by play's end: Bassanio and Portia, Lorenzo and Jessica, and (as the play is also a comedy) the lesser characters of Gratiano and Nerissa (Portia's waiting-maid).²⁶ One could only interpret Antonio's character as tragic; he loses more than merely a distant male friendship.²⁷ However, Shylock no longer appears.

23. Shakespeare 2003: IV.1, v. 350-353, 367-369, 378-382, 385-387.

24. Shakespeare 2003: III.1, l. 50-58.

25. Cf. Greenblatt 2004: 331.

26. See Holderness 1998: 31.

27. So Schwanitz 1998: 128.

His case has been dealt with. He has received his due measure-and more-according to the play. He has moved the Christians to an acknowledgement of grace. They see themselves as superior to the Old Testament. Through Shylock they develop an idea of humanity. Shylock is the basis of comparison, against which the 'other' is defined, and through which the self becomes apparent. The transcultural conflict, the mixing of value systems, brings to the forefront that which should be preserved.

A comedic *Merchant of Venice* is no longer possible immediately after the Holocaust, least of all in Germany. The law-abiding Christians in the play would appear vapid, particularly after the death of millions, at the hands of the National Socialists, simply because they were Jewish. In 1943 Lothar Müthel staged *The Merchant of Venice* as a racist production,²⁸ only a few years after films such as *Jud Süß* or *The Rothschilds*.²⁹ After the war the staging of the play was impossible-understandably so. In East Germany this was the case until the 1980s. Nevertheless, nearly a decade after the Shoah, Ernst Deutsch, himself Jewish and an emigrant, felt compelled to bring Shylock to the German stage once again. His philo-Semitic interpretation was understood as a «fundamental critique of German-and in a wider sense European or Christian-anti-Semitism» (Bayerdörfer 1997: 264 f.). Thus, after 1945 it became the basis for a new foundational myth. Deutsch had produced previously numerous, acclaimed versions of *Nathan*: 1954-1967 under director Karl-Heinz Stroux.³⁰ And his 1957 performance of Shylock, directed by Stroux as well, offered precisely the image of Jews that was then acceptable in defeated and occupied Germany.³¹

However, the antagonist of the Merchant of Venice had to be distorted, his destructive aspects reinterpreted as being motivated by revenge, devoid of obstinate aggression and avarice. Heinrich Heine had already interpreted Shylock as a tragic hero.³² At the end of the 1960s, Fritz Kortner saw in the figure of Shylock a reaction «to the thousand year old persecution of the Jewish minority, which culminated in the Nazi-Holocaust» (Bayerdörfer 1997: 267). Shylock has to be transformed into a Nathan, or at least that was the rough pattern post-1945, if one wanted to play the role. Alternative ap-

28. See Müthel 1943, cit. in Monschau 2003: 75, cf. also pp. 68-79.

29. Cf. Bayerdörfer 1997: 262. See also Klausnitzer 2002: 153-157.

30. See Dessau 1986: 69, 98 f., 280-288.

31. Cf. Monschau 2003: 181-200, 516-521.

32. Heine 1972: vol. 3, 657. Cf. Schwanitz 1998: 235, and Tabori 1979.

proaches, such as the multiple productions by Peter Zadek or even of George Tabori, both Jews and emigrants, are always and exclusively perceived as provocations.³³ As a general rule, however, the anti-Semitic core of the play results in a philo-Semitic tragedy, which reinforces the foundational myth of a 'zero hour', a new, different, and improved Germany. The typological models reverse themselves in their staging into their opposite. And even Hermann, the prototype of the older, aggressively-bellicose, German foundational myth is still conceivable for stage production, only against Kleist's original intentions.

6. NATHAN THE WISE: THE MAGICAL REALM OF TOLERANCE

What makes *Nathan* so valuable that it can pass as «a contemporary, supranational compensation» (Göbel 1977: 8)? Is Nathan the personified reconciliation between the «usurer Shylock and his victim» Antonio, as Walter Jens has Lessing himself say in his (Jens's) fiction? «To unite the two figures into one...that was my goal...To take the example of Nathan, the redeemed Shylock, to anticipate a world in which the Jew is just as important as a Christian, a woman just as important as a man-the magical realm of tolerance» (Jens 1979: 62). Unlike *The Merchant of Venice*, *Nathan* was banned under National Socialism.³⁴ Then, after 1945, it became part of a programme of spiritual and educational renewal that one felt obliged to perform in post-war theatre and to document through numerous productions.³⁵ Gervinus, in his *History of the Poetic National Literature of the Germans*, named *Nathan* «next to Goethe's *Faust* as the most characteristic and most German book that our modern poetry has created» (Gervinus 1873: vol. 4, 459). Was the idea of tolerance now becoming part of the German foundational narrative?

Despite these 'German evaluations', the sources of the play remain European as with *The Merchant of Venice*. Direct links between Lessing's text and Boccaccio can be established, as well as with the collection of stories entitled *Gesta Romanorum*.³⁶ In the *Decameron* the figure of the wise man with the

33. Cf. Bayerdörfer 1997: 272-278.

34. Cf. Fischer 2000: 124-129, 136.

35. See Dessau 1986 29-69, here pp. 30 f. Cf. Monschau 2003: 88, 96, 98 f., 103.

36. Early 14th century. See Düffel 1979: 73 f.

same name is introduced (10.3), as well as the Parable of the Ring (1.3).³⁷ Boccaccio portrays the Jew as a miserly moneylender, in this case called Melchisedech, to whom Saladin,³⁸ the sultan of Babylon, goes to request a loan. Subterfuge puts the Jew at a disadvantage, and lends emphasis to the request: he wants to learn from the wise man, which among the three religions-Christianity, Judaism, or Islam-is the true faith. The wise man recognises the trap and replies with the well-known parable of the three rings. A father bequeaths a ring to his favourite son. However, at a certain point he must choose between three of his sons, which proves problematic. He has two duplicate rings made and gives all three as gifts. Thus, the sons cannot tell which one is in possession of the real ring. The Jew concludes: «and so I say to you, my lord, the same applies to the three laws given by God the Father to the three peoples, and about which you have questioned me. Each religion believes it has its inheritance, its true laws and true commandments, to which they vow to adhere. The question of who really has the true inheritance remains, much like the rings, undecided» (Boccaccio 1981: 36).

Large parts of the parable form the basis of Lessing's adaptation, but he expands them considerably. The ring has «the hidden power to make one pleasing before God and man» (Lessing 1996: III.7, v. 399 f). The brothers' dispute over the true ring becomes a matter for the court. The judge recalls more precisely the regulation (added by Lessing) and decides thusly: if everyone thinks of his own interests, and does not love the other two, and all three are obviously deceived deceivers and not one of the rings is genuine, because that one presumably got lost. «In order to conceal this loss the father to replace it made three versions in the place of one» (Lessing 1996: III.7, v. 509-512). The claim to truth by each religion is thus itself a fiction. Lessing's parable argues that the three systems of belief are constructions that lack enduring substance, and must prove again and again their validity. They must solicit the positive judgement that is to legitimate them.

The figure of Nathan no longer promises to derive the self from the antithesis of the other, but from the cognitive faculties of general reason. Such an approach is intended to be enlightened and pragmatic in the best sense.³⁹ But this drama of ideas only draws further the boundaries of exclusion.⁴⁰ For

37. Boccaccio 1981: 35-37 and 562-567.

38. Cf. Birus 1978: 134-139. See also Düffel 1979: 78-87.

39. Cf. Kant 1975: 55-62.

40. See Kuschel 2004: 19. Cf. pp. 96-124.

Europe, the associated religions of revelation-Judaism and Islam-are no longer primarily 'the other' but those which lack reference to the foundational biblical text of the Old Testament.⁴¹ These include great religious communities such as Hinduism, Shintoism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism and all forms of paganism.⁴² Muslims are incorporated through the Jew, who already embodies the principle of Enlightenment. Europe reconstructs itself in the spirit of monotheism, with reference to the same God of creation and no longer to the claims of supremacy of Christianity. And it universalizes the claim, to act throughout the world, because it proceeds only from ostensibly indisputable maxims to those of better arguments.

However, upon closer examination, the equality postulated by the play is not achieved on any level. Numerous figures illustrate the point, for example, the patriarch of Jerusalem, who wants to burn Nathan at the funeral pyre⁴³ because he has taken a Christian as a foster-daughter.⁴⁴ Additionally, the Knight Templar denounces (half-unintentionally) the wise man,⁴⁵ and moreover speaks ill of Recha, who he had saved from the flames of her father's house, because she was only a Jew.⁴⁶ His astonishment is thus considerable when he realizes that he has fallen in love with a young Jewish girl.⁴⁷ Even greater is the relief that she is a Christian. However, the joy is clouded immediately by his aversion to Nathan, who had allowed himself «to falsify the voice of nature» (Lessing 1996: III.10, v. 843 f.) and raise the Christian as a Jew:⁴⁸ «This tolerant chatterer is unmasked! This Jewish wolf in philosophical sheep's clothing! But I shall set the dogs upon him to rough him up» (Lessing 1996: IV.4, v. 401-404). Saladin, Sultan of Egypt, who reconquered Jerusalem in 1187 from the crusaders, which subsequently triggered the Third Crusade, is portrayed by Lessing first and foremost as a typological despot who executed nineteen of the twenty imprisoned Knights Templar, and who kept alive the protagonist simply because of his uncanny resemblance to his (the Sultan's) missing brother Assad.⁴⁹ Particularly arbitrary is the manner in which

41. Lutherisches Kirchenamt 2001: 154-163.

42. Cf. Eliade / Couliano 1991, *passim*.

43. Cf. Overath / Kermani / Schindel 2004: 21-31, here p. 28.

44. Lessing 1996: IV.2, v. 159, 168 f.

45. *Ibid.* IV.2, v. 116-223.

46. *Ibid.* I.6, v. 778 f.; II.5, v. 424-433.

47. Lessing 1996: III.2, v. 118-123; III.8, v. 610-615; III.10, v. 762.

48. But see also Fick 2000: 405.

49. Lessing 1996: I.5, v. 576-591, v. 699-701.

the patriarch behaves as a practitioner of power politics, as well his depiction as a dogmatic fanatic-the negative image of Christians.⁵⁰

Against this arrogance and ostensibly stronger power Nathan has only his money and the strength of his convictions-the former a well-known stereotype, and the latter the only weapon of the underdog.⁵¹ Thus the play confirms a typological expectation, which was substantiated by figures of the time, such as Moses Mendelssohn.⁵² Nathan is a foretaste of Habermas, and the concerns of a utopian discourse, free from power structures.⁵³ The Patriarch, the Knight Templar, Sittah (the Sultan's sister), and also Saladin himself demonstrates how the discourse depends on power relations.⁵⁴ Naturally Lessing allows the Enlightenment to prevail. The dénouement is in some respects improbable, and perhaps even grotesque. As it turns out, Recha and the Knight Templar are siblings (Lessing 1996: V.8, v. 599 f.). Both are the children of Assad from a relationship with Conrad von Stauffen's sister. In addition, they are the niece and nephew of Saladin as well. The separation of the lovers due to the 'incest taboo' is left unexplored. The notion of victim is scarcely mentioned. Instead they fall into each other's arms as if they had wanted only to be siblings and had never considered marriage.⁵⁵

However, the fact that reconciliation only takes place within family circles is particularly problematic for the idea of religious tolerance. As if elective affinities do not suffice, in order to overstep the boundaries of cultures, the protagonists seek refuge in the convenient idyll of familial relations.⁵⁶ In this unification the *dramatis personae* abrogate the claim to universality, which at first brought them together. The circle completes itself, rather than opening out into the world. The figures have each other-the others are irrelevant. This self-sufficient nucleus reveals an Enlightenment ideal that is, in the French expression, *la diffusion des lumières* (a spreading of the light). It radiates outwards from a centre, but still attempts to illuminate the last darkness.

After the war the reinterpretation of anti-Semitic caricatures by a well-intentioned philo-Semitism above all provided a negative foundational myth for the subjugated nation of perpetrators-a specifically German foundational

50. Ibid. IV.2, v. 153-199.

51. Ibid. II.2, v. 260-280.

52. Cf. Will 1999: 151.

53. Without mentioning Habermas, but in his sense see Hildebrandt 1982: 28 f., 141.

54. See König 1976: 136 f.

55. Cf. Vischer 1857: 1429 f.

56. Cf. Kuschel 2004: 9-13, 203, 227.

myth, one which forbade both a positive self-image and the promotion of a successful identification with German nationality or Germanness.

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