



## Research article

# Toleration and Tolerance as Human Challenges: The Voice of an Eighteenth-Century Dramatist, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, for the Twenty-First Century

Albrecht Classen

University of Arizona, Editor-in-Chief, *Humanities*, MDPI, and Editor-in-Chief, *Mediaevistik*

## Abstract

In light of countless problems, the modern world faces, especially religious fanaticism, violence, and hatred, it is high time to reflect on some of the older literary statements once again that had already voiced critical concerns about the principles of human interaction determined by good communication, love, and tolerance. Maybe surprisingly, when we turn to Lessing's *Nathan der Weise* (1779), we come across a major literary document in which those ideals are formulated convincingly and dramatically. While German scholarship has already discussed this play for a long time, it deserves much wider attention because of its strong advocacy of those ideals, which we are in the highest need as of today.

**Keywords:** Toleration; tolerance; Gotthold Ephraim Lessing; *Nathan der Weise*; Enlightenment; religions; truth; love



Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions

## Introduction

### Human Rights and Tolerance

No one could claim that practicing tolerance or tolerance – here at first conceived of as one phenomenon – would be an easy task or that it would automatically be embraced by a vast majority of people across the globe. Human societies have struggled with this idea already for a long time, and yet it does not look like we have made much progress on that front. Of course, the concept itself has been firmly developed and cemented since the late eighteenth century, and it has been enshrined in most Western and other constitutions along with the notion of fundamental human rights. We could closely associate the rise of Enlightenment with the idea of tolerance,

**Article History:** Received: 19 August 2023. Revised: 30 August 2023. Accepted: 1 September 2023. Published: 4 September 2023.

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**Citation:** Classen, Albrecht. 2023. Toleration and Tolerance as Human Challenges: The Voice of an Eighteenth-Century Dramatist, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, for the Twenty-First Century. *Rupkatha Journal* 15:3. <https://doi.org/10.21659/rupkatha.v15n3.21>

whether we think of Voltaire, Hume, Locke, or Kant, and our efforts to come to terms with tolerance are hence the same as embracing rationality, reason, and intellect as the dominant forces in our decision-making strategies.

While the concept is most welcome in the political parlance and self-concept at least in the Western world, it appears to be very fragile and evanescent in the daily practice of many people until today. And in some countries, toleration and tolerance do not even represent particular values because of religious or ideological reasons. Nevertheless, for this paper, I take it as a premise that both ideals are crucial for the productive and harmonious cohabitation of people and peoples since the opposite has always led to wars, genocides, mass murder, and other major conflicts and crimes (Stearns, 2017).

Ethnic cleansing, persecution of homosexuals, Antisemitism, Islamophobia, anti-Christianism, Anti-Hinduism, etc. continue to be the bane of humanity, all the result of intolerance in many different manifestations. Consequently, in light of the ever-growing violence directed against minorities in the present world, we need the discourse on tolerance and toleration more than ever before, so it seems. This paper wants to contribute to this discourse through a close reading of a most significant if not revolutionary literary text from the late eighteenth century that speaks directly to us today and carries great importance for the current religious and political conditions.

## **Toleration and Tolerance**

Philosophers, theologians, legal experts, literary scholars, and others have already examined the issues involved from many different perspectives. The theoretical reflections are, undoubtedly, of the greatest importance if we want to survive as a human species, yet the practical application always seems to lag in the day-to-day operations and the ordinary situations of everyday life. Only when we investigate the basic conditions that detract from those ideals, and when we examine specific cases of intolerance, for instance, can we hope to install clear notions of what toleration and tolerance mean and why they are fundamentally necessary. This proves to be one of the central tasks of education at many different levels, instilling the ideals of those notions into our young generation, although we continue to face major challenges from many authorities. The subject of toleration and toleration faces opposition and criticism, and it is constantly necessary to revisit it. Literary scholarship is probably best equipped to engage with this issue since the struggle in coming to terms with foreigners, migrants, and others in general terms is deeply anchored in the literary and philosophical discourse already since the Middle Ages and beyond. Fictional narratives facilitate the critical discussion of those issues because they isolate them within a narrative context, which makes it possible to view them more objectively and subsequently self-reflectively.

In this essay, I do not intend to explore heretofore ignored or forgotten texts addressing toleration or tolerance in specific terms, a task that I have already tackled in a book on that topic (Classen, 2018; see also my edition from 2020). I also do not aim for innovative theoretical concepts; both operations would be tantamount to carrying the proverbial coals to Newcastle. However, our task as Humanities scholars also consists of returning to the most valuable

documents we have in that regard and reviewing once again the concepts behind those terms as to their applicability in our modern times. After all, we do not want to reinvent the proverbial wheel, and should not neglect the precious insights already developed a long time ago, particularly when they prove to be relevant for us as well. Intellectually, we just cannot allow ourselves to rest on our laurels in this ongoing struggle and assume that the basic groundwork has already been achieved.

Education is not a time-limited endeavor. Each generation needs to return to its foundations and regain a solid footing in the critical values that make and shape our society. At the risk of sounding repetitive and conservative, here I will examine once again a major literary source from the late eighteenth century in which the critical issues have already been formulated most distinctly, addressing them in a universal manner that makes them most relevant for us today as well (cf. also Classen, 2021).

But let us first gain a clear understanding of the terms to be used here. Briefly put, I distinguish between toleration and tolerance in the following way: The former constitutes a concept according to which the majority allows the minority to exist within the same system, but still disregards it as inferior and wrong in its belief and value system. For example, medieval Christianity tolerated Jews in their midst but rejected them as blind and ignorant in their belief. The latter, tolerance, is determined by an attitude according to which the minority is respected as an equal partner who deserves full credit and might even hold better insights than their faith, system, or ideology. The tolerant person would be the first to acknowledge that his/her belief system might be faulty and could be improved, even though the other system might not be the best either. Tolerance assumes a sense of human frailty, humbleness, and mutual respect because no faith or idea could claim to be superior or better than all others as long as there is no scientific evidence for the opposite, something which in religious terms will never happen (see, for instance, Oberdiek, 2001; Zagorin, 2003; McKinnon, 2006; for a concise summary, see Fiala, n.d.).

Writers and philosophers such as Mirabeau (1789), Kant (1784), and Goethe (1809) had already noted the great need to move beyond just toleration and to embrace the idea of tolerance because it would amount to a form of arrogance and even insult. The *Bill of Rights* of the US State of Virginia from 1776 and the American Constitution, written in 1787, ratified in 1788, and in operation since 1789, but then also the tolerance edict by the Austrian Emperor Joseph II from 1781, and the *Déclaration des droits de l'homme et du citoyen* from 1794 all formulated already the principle ideas, and those documents were accompanied by literary and philosophical reflections by John Locke, Pierre Bayle, Voltaire, Rousseau, Leibniz, Kant, Thomas Hobbes, Montesquieu, Samuel Pufendorf, and Christian Thomasius on the same topics (Schmidinger, 2002, 16–17). However, practicing tolerance truly represents a highly developed sense of humanism, open-mindedness, and respect for other cultures, ideas, and values. Only in one case would a truly tolerant person turn away from tolerance, and that is in the confrontation with a truly intolerant person (Lacorne, 2019; see the tolerance paradox as formulated by Karl Popper in his book, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, first published in 1945; cf. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paradox\\_of\\_tolerance](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paradox_of_tolerance); last accessed on Aug. 29, 2023). Tolerance represents an ideal that developed over centuries, and we continue to grapple with it as the heirs

of a long-term philosophical, religious, political, ethical, and moral struggle pertaining to the relationship of the self with the social environment (see the contributions to Scotton and Zucchi, ed. 2016).

Fundamental human concerns have always stayed with us, either virtues or vices and although the various poets and thinkers throughout time have offered their own take on them, the central issues have never gone away, probably because every generation has to learn its own lessons and to deal with its own failures and weaknesses. For instance, the list of the Seven Deadly Sins, as identified already by Christian thinkers in the fourth and fifth centuries, first by Evagrius Ponticus (d. ca. 399) and then by John Cassian (d. ca. 435; especially in his *De institutis coenobiorum* [with eight vices]), can easily be transferred to our own times since most people certainly suffer from some or all of those sins. Similarly, the Seven Virtues or Cardinals (prudence, justice, temperance, fortitude, faith, hope, and charity), as described first by St. Ambrose and subsequently St. Augustine, can be recognized as ideals we all could profit from (Bejczy, 2011; cf. also [the useful overview, online at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Seven\\_virtues#CITEREFBejczy2011](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Seven_virtues#CITEREFBejczy2011)). Those insights about human nature, though first formulated in late antiquity, prove to be of timeless value and deserve to be studied closely also today (Schumacher, 2005; Newhauser and Ridyard, ed. 2012).

## **Tolerance and Literature:**

### **The Future of the Humanities**

Literature carries many functions, whether aesthetic pleasure or moral instruction, whether providing excitement or emotional support. Because of its fictional nature, at least in most cases, literature constitutes a narrative medium that serves as a most effective lens for human introspection. Hence, turning to the issues of toleration and tolerance once again, we can easily understand that the literary forum can serve exceedingly well as a training ground for human communication and interaction, for ideals, values, and virtues. Drawing from narratives where those issues find vivid expression, facilitates significantly the critical examination of the concepts that concern us here. After all, it is very difficult to understand thoroughly the meaning of both terms, toleration and tolerance without much background and context. Moreover, theoretical comprehension does not necessarily lead to a practical application, so the daily struggle continues all over the world, especially because religion continues to be of supreme importance in many different countries.

Finally, the discussion of those two ethical strategies easily touches on personal, emotional conditions. Thus, a literary reflection, which draws from an older text, would serve the purpose exceedingly well to examine the challenges more objectively either alone or in a group setting. In short, anyone interested in teaching toleration and tolerance would be well advised to draw from a literary document because it presents relevant cases more objectively; i.e., it allows a more rational examination since the situation presented would not necessarily be the same as the own, and then yet prove to be parallel and meaningful.

## Gotthold Ephraim Lessing

Here, the intention is to examine, once again, what the famous Enlightenment author, playwright, theater critic, librarian, and philologist Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729–1781) had to say about the relationships among the various religions. The focus will rest on the certainly very well-known play, *Nathan der Weise* (1779; Nathan the Wise; first performed in Berlin in 1783) (Göpfert, ed., 1971; for an online version, see <https://www.projekt-gutenberg.org/lessing/nathan/chap002.html>; for an English translation, online, see William Taylor, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/3820/3820-h/3820-h.htm>). Already in that famous play, a significant product of Enlightenment, the crucial questions regarding the relationship between the three world religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam were addressed and examined in narrative terms. As we have observed already for a long time, Lessing was deeply committed to the ideals of tolerance and thought of different ways to illustrate the practical approach to finding solutions for the religious conflicts of his time.

Although German literary research has already dealt with Lessing at large and this work quite intensively, and although there are certainly plenty of philosophical investigations of the concepts of 'toleration' and 'tolerance' available, neither the play nor the discussion of the issues have lost any relevance if not urgency. *Nathan der Weise* is standard reading material in most German-language upper-level schools leading to college, and it is one of those plays that are constantly performed on stages all over Europe and elsewhere. It is easily one of the most recognizable dramatic pieces in the history of German literature. It exists not only in countless editions but also in many translations into the various world languages.

The entire play is predicated on the notion that all people are somehow connected, and often form parts of a global family, and this also across religious boundaries. The protagonist is a Jew whose daughter Recha would have almost perished in flames when the house was burning. A devout and proud Knight Templar saves her, however, although she is a Jewish woman. This young man, a prisoner of war, just had been saved from execution by the Sultan Saladin because the latter had recognized in the Templar's face his dead brother's facial features. While all the other prisoners were killed, this one survives and can save Recha subsequently. Soon enough, Nathan's daughter falls in love with the Templar, and the latter returns her feelings although he is tortured over their presumed religious differences.

As it turns out, however, she was only raised by Nathan, after the latter had lost his wife and seven sons in a fire set by a crazed mob of Christians committing a pogrom. Amazingly enough, she had been a Christian girl, but Nathan did not care, understanding fully that this infant desperately needed a parent and that he himself had to take care of another human being to heal his wounds. The Templar finally learns of those facts and begins to probe with the Jerusalem patriarch what that would imply for Nathan's standing as Recha's father, considering their respective religions. Eventually, the Templar, identified only at the end as Conrad, asks for Recha's hand, which Nathan, out of deep reflection, refuses because he has a strong hunch that a marriage would not be possible for family reasons. Finally, a friar delivers a book written by the sultan's brother, Assad, who had handed it over to that man as his military companion before his death in the crusading war. Nathan can read the text and then reveals to everyone that Recha and the

Templar are siblings, that their father was the sultan's brother, had married a German lady, had moved to her homeland, but then had returned to the Holy Land, where he perished in military operations. Since Nathan and Saladin's brother had been friends, irrespective of their different religions, the surviving infant had been brought to Nathan. Her brother, now being the Templar, had stayed behind in Germany and had arrived only recently to fight against the Muslims. He was captured and yet saved by the sultan. Out of these complicated relationships, it thus emerges that the presumed Jewish girl and the proud German Christian are actually siblings and hence cannot marry. The Sultan is deeply moved and welcomes his long-lost blood relatives, and Nathan emerges as the wisest person of them all, as his epithet already indicates because he had overcome all religious hatred a long time ago already and practiced a form of tolerance. Not surprisingly, Saladin finally embraces the two young people as his blood relatives and strikes a friendship with Nathan.

### **Lessing's Parable of Tolerance**

The most famous part in the entire play proves to be a parable early in the text that Nathan relates to the Sultan upon his request to voice his opinion, and this in absolute terms, that is, what the true world religion would be, Judaism, Christianity, or Islam. Saladin's purpose behind this request is to put Nathan into an awkward situation and thus to extort a large amount of money from him as a loan. The wise man realizes, however, that this could only be a trap for him, so he resorts to a counterstrategy, and instead of providing a direct answer, he tells a story, a parable, which ultimately defuses all tensions and provides a most astonishing turn of events and thoughts.

Subsequently, I intend to examine this parable closely, to trace the development of the argument, and to highlight Lessing's thoughts hidden behind the metaphors and comments. This analysis aims at offering a more or less practical guide for how to teach this text, how to employ it in virtually any teaching situation, and thus how to spread the ideals formulated by the playwright as critically important for the universal betterment of human interaction within societies strongly determined by religious preferences. The premise for this approach can only be that toleration and especially tolerance are accepted as major values and that we can learn about them particularly well through literary analysis.

Unquestionably, Lessing, as a representative of the late Enlightenment, was determined by a strong sense of optimism regarding people's ability and willingness to learn lessons from the past conveyed through a literary model. Nevertheless, he drew from the genre of the parable to explain the religious and political message, obviously because its complexity and profound challenge to all people requires a certain level of self-realization during the reading or listening process (see, e.g., Brettschneider, 1971/1980. Schirren, 2015). In the present, the Humanities are certainly informed by the ideals of tolerance, for instance, and it is one of the central tasks of this academic field to foster the fundamental values of human life through the study of narratives such as Lessing's *Nathan der Weise*. The central task of the Humanities pertains to communication, ethics, morality, identity, and culture, mostly perceived through literary text and other media. By the same token, the study of tolerance as formulated in fictional narratives constitutes a most critical task in all of education.

It would seem to be a self-evident realization that literature matters critically for society, but that is unfortunately not always the case, especially in the current political climate in the United States, Europe, and other parts of the world. Hence, the entire discussion offered here addresses not only the topic of tolerance and its importance for us today but also the relevance of literature for the current discourse on the fundamental values determining our society. *Nathan der Weise* proves to be an outstanding illustration of the central significance of literature for our increasingly mechanistic world determined by AI because its major task is focused on the human conditions, concerns, values, and ideals.

The mighty ruler Saladin is in desperate need of money, and only the Jew Nathan might be wealthy enough to offer him such a huge loan to keep his war efforts going. However, as he is told explicitly by his financier, the Dervish Al-Hafi, Nathan's friend from the past, Nathan would be most reticent to make his money available. Hence, the sultan resorts to a deceptive question that no one could answer in the first place, requiring this rich Jew to tell which would be the only true religion. Nathan immediately realizes the danger involved in this question and quickly resorts to a counterstrategy. Instead of offering his honest opinion, he tells him a story about a father and his son, and about an heirloom ring that the father always hands over to his most beloved son as a sign that he would be the designated heir and lead the family into the future. While this custom works well for many generations, one day, there is a father who has three sons whom he all loves equally. Not knowing what to do else, he asks a goldsmith to create two exact copies, and before the father dies, he hands over one of the three rings as a sign of his love for each one of them. When the sons then realize this complication, they go to court to ask the judge for a decision as to who holds the true ring and hence the authority to be the next *pater familias*. However, not even the judge can settle the case because no one can distinguish between the individual rings. The sultan gets impatient at this point, asking for the real answer to his question, but then has to face the realization that these three rings represent the three world religions.

As Nathan explains, neither the rings nor the religions can be distinguished, and that would be the ultimate answer to the sultan's question, which leaves the latter deeply frustrated since he assumes that there are clear differences among the three both in content and form. Nathan, however, identifies faith as a matter the individual acquires through their own family history, following the parent's religion. Since people trust their older family members most, this would explain why most people simply embrace the religion that is practiced among their families or social network. As Nathan concludes: "How can I less believe in my forefathers / Than thou in thine. How can I ask of thee / To own that thy forefathers falsified / In order to yield mine the praise of truth." Nathan does not resort to a religious argument; instead, he points out that faith is normally the result of one's family history because individuals trust their parents the most and so follow their path in terms of religion. This proves to be a pragmatic solution, and thus it convinces Saladin more than an elaborate theological argument.

However, Nathan then complicates his parable, raising the issue of why the father had ordered from the goldsmith those two fake rings, whether he had been determined by selfish or loving reasons. In Lessing's major source for this parable, Boccaccio's third story told on the first day in his *Decameron* (ca. 1350; see also the 73rd story in the *Novellino* from the late thirteenth

century), the judge simply refuses to decide who might have the true ring and refers to the future when another judge might have arrived (God) who would be much superior to him. Lessing adds the intriguing twist that his judge suddenly remembers that the true ring holds the unique property that the one who wears it would be loved by all people and by God. Questioning the sons who among them would have acquired that character, it turns out that they all dislike and distrust each other. Hence, the judge assumes that the father had probably lost the original ring and had three copies made even though under that circumstance the goldsmith could not have created those replicas. The wise man then suggests that each one of the three sons should believe that he holds the true ring because the father had no longer wanted to "tolerate the one ring's tyranny." To the father's credit, then, he had loved each son equally, so it would be unfair to blame the father for his love due to which he broke with the old tradition.

The sons would thus face the challenge to accept their own ring as the father's true and honest gift, but they would now be tasked "to vie with both his brothers in displaying / the virtue of his ring; assist its might / with gentleness, benevolence, forbearance, / with inward resignation to the godhead, / and if the virtues of the ring continue / to show themselves among your children's children." In other words, the ring's properties would only appear if the bearer would contribute to this phenomenon through his actions. The true judge would then show up in a thousand times a thousand years and acknowledge the true ring, i.e., God would then decide which the true religion would be and which would have proven itself not through power, might, or influence, but through love.

Ultimately, hence, Nathan is teaching Saladin and us a most valuable lesson regarding religion the truth of which cannot be proven by laws, force, or a legal judgment. Instead, as the parable indicates, God's chosen one would be determined by the fact of who would love that person, or religion most. All three religions are thus given equal opportunities and ought to compete against each other but not based on their respective Scripture, or a judgment call. The true religion then would neither be Judaism, Islam, or Christianity. Instead, it would manifest itself through the degree of love which it would engender.

The sultan feels deeply humiliated having even asked that question, being embarrassed that he might have assumed to be this judge when he, as a Muslim, was nothing but one of the three sons still being filled with arrogance, hatred, and jealousy of the other religions. In a way, Nathan removes the traditional notion of religion as an institution and replaces it with an ethical concept based on love. Not surprisingly, Saladin falls to Nathan's feet, asking him for his forgiveness, and begging him to be his friend, both being bonded by love.

The remainder of the play develops as I have already outlined, in a way explicating the central concerns of the parable, which thus serves as a blueprint for the idea of tolerance as advocated by Lessing. We can talk here about tolerance, and not toleration because the three religions are invited to strive for the same goals of forbearance, patience, gentleness, and submission under God. The ideal religion would come forth by itself due to the highest standards of ethical ideals. This would place each religion in an equal position, determined by mutual respect, if not love for each other. No currently living individual would have the insight as to the 'truth' of his/her religion and would thus be required to demonstrate true love to be recognized



by others.

The parable indicates that the last father, like all other fathers and certainly identifiable with God, had loved his three sons equally. The various religions thus are the result of God's own doing who wanted the sons to strive for love as the highest ideal in human existence. Religion thus appears as a manifestation of that sentiment, and it would work only if true tolerance were at work. Toleration would not be sufficient at all since then there still would be only one ring, and not three. For that father, as the judge insinuates, the absolute rule of one ring was tantamount to tyranny, whereas the presence of three would force the sons to compete against each other to demonstrate publicly that they were in possession of the true ring. However, the final judgment would have to wait until far in the future, whereas, in the presence, the relationship between the three sons ought to be determined by love, that is, a form of mutual respect, hence tolerance.

## Conclusion

As much as Lessing's play *Nathan der Weise* might appear to be rather idyllic, if not sentimental, especially the parable sends a powerful message that rings throughout the world if listened to by the world leaders of the three religions (and others). Religion is here identified as a practice, and not as an absolute truth. All claims to hold that truth would suddenly sound hollow just as the sons' respective claim to hold the true ring. Only when the ring's true properties manifest themselves in the bearer's character and performance would the truth come forward.

Little wonder that Lessing's play has achieved world fame, but its challenge still has not been met; on the contrary, so it seems, with religious fervor on the rise all over the world. It is high time that *Nathan* becomes standard reading material in schools all over the world and that hence all religious people understand the true value of love which would be the only criteria to confirm the validity of their claims as to the truth of their religion. In particular, it would be intriguing to learn how this play would be received in other cultures where Buddhism, Hinduism, or Shintoism dominate. After all, Lessing aimed for a global statement about religion at large determined not by rituals, scriptures, conventions, traditions, and rules, but by love, virtues, and ethical ideals. Here we come across a monumental literary document from the late eighteenth century advocating tolerance and not just toleration.

Lessing specialists have already recognized this critically important message and have identified *Nathan* as one of the milestones in the history of German literature, shortly before the periods of Romanticism and Classicism with Goethe and Schiller as the most prominent representatives. In terms of teaching tolerance today, however, Lessing's play proves to be most effective, addressing us all across the globe and admonishing us to abstain from fanatic religions and to embrace the idea of love as the ultimate purpose of our existence and hence also our faith (cf. also the contributions to Freimark, ed., 1986). As much as the playwright relied on basic pedagogical concepts, allowing the events slowly to evolve in front of our eyes, Nathan in his parable does the same, making the sultan a learner of the highest caliber. Particularly because of the epistemological challenges of this narrative genre, both Saladin and we as the readers/listeners are urged to comprehend the intricacies of the symbolism of the three rings and to accept the messages contained in this account as our own.

Undoubtedly, the play is determined by a considerable degree of optimism, if not naiveté as to the possibility of overcoming religious fanaticism, which is also represented here with the figure of the Jerusalem Patriarch who badly abuses his authority and power and wants to instrumentalize the Knight Templar for his purposes. Nevertheless, as a play, *Nathan der Weise* continues to appeal to readers and listeners all over the world at least on the stage. However, the symbolism of the three rings, already developed by Boccaccio in his *Decameron* (ca. 1350), deeply resonates with us and facilitates a profound discourse across the many religious divides that exist today almost as much as in the past, if not even more.

### Declaration of Conflicts of Interests

The author declared no potential conflict of interest.

### Funding Disclosure

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency.

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