This volume provides a valuable contribution to our knowledge of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century intellectual life inside and outside Germany.

Prof. Karl S. Guthke, Harvard University

This elegant collection of essays ranges across eighteenth and nineteenth-century thought, covering philosophy, science, literature and religion in the 'Age of Goethe.' A recognized authority in the field, Nisbet grapples with the major voices of the Enlightenment and gives pride of place to the figures of Lessing, Herder, Goethe and Schiller.

The book ranges widely in its compass of thought and intellectual discourse, dealing incisively with themes including the philosophical implications of literature and the relationship between religion, science and politics. The result is an accomplished reflection on German thought, but also on its rebirth, as Nisbet argues for the relevance of these Enlightenment thinkers for the readers of today.

The first half of this collection focuses predominantly on eighteenth-century thought, where names like Lessing, Goethe and Herder, but also Locke and Voltaire, feature. The second has a wider chronological scope, discussing authors such as Winckelmann and Schiller, while branching out from discussions of religion, philosophy and literature to explore the sciences. Issues of biology, early environmentalism, and natural history also form part of this volume. The collection concludes with an examination of changing attitudes towards art in the aftermath of the 'Age of Goethe.'

The essays in this volume are brought together in this collection to present Nisbet's widely-acclaimed perspectives on this fascinating period of German thought. It will be of interest to scholars and students of the intellectual life of Europe during the Enlightenment, while its engaging and lucid style will also appeal to the general reader.
2. On the Rise of Toleration in Europe
Lessing and the German Contribution

If we examine the rise of toleration in Europe, the most prominent documents are easily identified. In Britain, there is John Locke’s *Letter concerning Toleration*; in France, Voltaire’s *Treatise on Toleration*; and in Germany, Lessing’s drama *Nathan the Wise*. The last of these is anomalous: why should a drama acquire such significance for so fundamental a problem in European history? No doubt this is partly because Germany, a disunited country until the second half of the nineteenth century, has traditionally looked to its cultural—and especially literary—achievements to define its national identity, and still habitually consults its classical authors for guidance on present-day problems. But it is also, I think, because Lessing’s play, with its parable of the three indistinguishable rings which represent the rival claims of the three monotheistic religions, exemplifies a distinctively German approach to the problem of toleration. Before I look at a selection of German writers to substantiate this claim, I would like to comment

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briefly on the two works just mentioned by Locke and Voltaire, in order to highlight some crucial differences between Britain, France, and Germany in their pursuit of toleration.

But first, a note on the word ‘toleration’ itself. Although I shall shortly refer to some of the edicts and legislative measures governing the practice of toleration in Europe, I shall be chiefly concerned with the theoretical pronouncements of the writers and thinkers who sought to promote it. The link between the theory and practice of toleration is often indirect, for governments are of course influenced by political, economic, and other factors apart from the opinions of theorists. But although practice often lags behind theory, most of the measures demanded by the theorists did eventually find their way into the statute books of the modern western democracies. It should also be noted that, until fairly recent times, toleration meant primarily religious toleration, whereas today, it more often applies to the toleration of cultural and ethnic differences.

John Locke published the first and most important of his four *Letters concerning Toleration* in 1689. He had written it in response to Louis XIV’s revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685, the edict which, for nearly a century, had granted toleration to the Protestant minority in France. Locke advocates freedom of conscience as a natural right, for which even Jews, Muslims, pagans, and Unitarians are eligible. To that extent, his Letter is liberal and rational in spirit. But in denying toleration to atheists (on the ground that they cannot take credible oaths in a court of law) and to Roman Catholics (on the ground that they owe allegiance to a foreign power), he introduces ad hoc political considerations influenced more by his wish to secure the established Church of England and the Protestant succession to the British throne than by any rational principle. Together with the Act of Toleration of 1689, Locke’s work helped to secure religious peace in Britain by affirming the supremacy of the established church, and at the same time supporting freedom

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6 Ibid., pp. 45–47 and 84–85.
of worship on the part of the Protestant non-conformists. In their characteristically British pragmatism and spirit of compromise, Locke's *Letter* and the act of parliament with which it coincided contrast sharply with their nearest continental equivalents.

In France, appeals for toleration, after the revocation of the Edict of Nantes and the end of toleration for Protestants, have much greater urgency and radicality than Locke's *Letter*, for they were directed both at France's established religion and at the French state itself for encouraging religious persecution. The classic protest is that of Voltaire in his *Treatise on Toleration* of 1763, in which he deploys all his skill in satire and eloquence to denounce the torture and execution of the Protestant Jean Calas, falsely accused of murdering his son to prevent his conversion to Catholicism. Voltaire is fond of citing, as he does here, the example of other countries in which numerous religions and nationalities coexist and work together in harmony, as in the Ottoman empire and the London stock exchange. He does so, however, not because he respects the religions in question, but because he believes that the more of them are allowed to coexist, the more likely they are to neutralise each other and lose the power which a monopolistic religion is able to exercise in France. The logic of his views, and of those of most of his allies in the French Enlightenment, is to require a secular state, tolerant of but indifferent to the diverse religious beliefs and practices of its subjects. Such a requirement was eventually enshrined in Article 10 of the Declaration of the Rights of Man as approved by the French National Assembly in 1789: 'No one shall be disquieted on account of his opinions, including his religious views, provided that their manifestation does not disturb the public order established by law.'

I shall return later to Lessing's drama and its parable of the three rings, but I must point out in advance that, although it is based on an Italian model—namely the story of the three rings in Boccaccio's *Decameron*—Lessing changes the latter in fundamental respects. In particular, although Boccaccio's story leaves it in doubt which of the three rings—or the religions they represent—is the true one, it does not question the basic assumption that only one of them can be exclusively

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true. But in Lessing’s case, the claims of all three remain indefinitely open: all three religions have the option of demonstrating, if not their exclusive truth, then at least their relative moral worth, by the conduct of their adherents. In short, Lessing’s parable has an inbuilt pluralism which, as I shall attempt to show, is characteristic of a distinctive German tradition. Unlike British pragmatism and French secularism, this pluralistic tradition holds that, since we have no means of knowing whether or not one of the rival religions has an exclusive claim to truth, they should all be tolerated and respected.\footnote{On the meaning of the term ‘pluralism’ as used in this essay, see Michael Salewski, ‘Europa, der tolerante Kontinent?’, in Religiöser Pluralismus und Toleranz in Europa, ed. by Christian Augustin, Johannes Wienand and Christiane Winkler (Wiesbaden: Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2006), pp. 12–27 and passim.}

So far as I can determine, this pluralistic tradition first emerges in Germany in the late Middle Ages, with Nicholas of Cusa, who took his name from his birthplace of Kues on the River Moselle. He taught at the university of Cologne, and became a Cardinal and diplomat in the service of Rome. In this capacity, he travelled to Constantinople in 1437 and arranged for the Byzantine emperor John VIII Palaeologus to attend a conference in Florence, at which a union of the Greek Orthodox and Roman Catholic confessions was provisionally agreed. Inspired by this ecumenical initiative, Cusa went on to claim that, despite all differences in religious rites and doctrines, religion is ultimately one, for all contradictions are resolved in God, whose divine truth is inaccessible to finite mortals.\footnote{Nicholas of Cusa on Learned Ignorance [De docta ignorantia, 1440], ed. by Jasper Hopkins (Minneapolis: Arthur J. Banning Press, 1981). See also the article ‘Toleranz’ in Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe, ed. by Otto Brunner, Werner Conze and Reinhart Koselleck, 8 vols (Stuttgart: Klett, 1972–97), V, 445–605 (pp. 459–61).} On receiving the news in 1453 that Constantinople had fallen to the Turks, he at once proceeded to write On Religious Peace (De pace fidei), which incorporates a dialogue between seventeen representatives of different faiths, all of which embody partial manifestations of divinity.\footnote{Nicholas of Cusa on Interreligious Harmony [De pace fidei, 1453], edited and translated by James E. Biechler and H. Lawrence Bond (Lewiston, Queenston and Lampeter: Edwin Mellen, 1990).} Cusa was probably the first Christian thinker to call for inter-religious harmony and to teach what later became known as ‘perspectivism’: that is, the doctrine that each religion offers a distinct and partial perspective on the one ineffable truth.\footnote{Ibid., p. xxv; also Nicholas of Cusa on Learned Ignorance pp. 28–29 and 182.}
2. On the Rise of Toleration in Europe

The problem of religious differences became acute in Germany with the coming of the Reformation some sixty years later. Christianity now faced new, internal divisions, with Catholicism, Lutheranism, and subsequently Calvinism all claiming exclusive truth for their doctrines. Their conflict had serious political consequences as the hundreds of German rulers and their states divided their allegiance between the rival confessions. When successive attempts in the 1540s failed to heal the breach between Catholicism and Lutheranism, war broke out and agreement was not reached until the Peace of Augsburg of 1555, which bound the subjects of German states to adopt the confession of their ruler. This was the same disastrous principle of *cuius regio, eius religio* which ended the Thirty Years War nearly a century later, aggravating rather than terminating religious controversy by making the religious faith of millions of people dependent on the whim of their particular head of state.

Not surprisingly, these conflicts inspired many attempts in Germany to eliminate or minimise religious differences. The reformer Martin Bucer, for example, worked tirelessly to unite the warring parties, and the Catholic theologians Georg Witzel and Georg Cassander, with the encouragement of the Habsburg emperors Ferdinand I and Maximilian II, sought to establish common ground between the warring confessions. Several German humanists, including Philipp Melanchthon and Johannes Reuchlin, strove to heal the breach with Rome (and in Reuchlin’s case, to secure equal rights for the Jews). The independent theologian Sebastian Franck went further still, declaring—uniquely in the first half of the sixteenth century—‘I have my brothers among the Turks, Papists, Jews and all peoples’; Franck also called for universal tolerance, to include even heretics of every description.

In due course, various German rulers began to adopt more tolerant measures, with Brandenburg-Prussia (whose Hohenzollern rulers were not otherwise renowned for their liberal sympathies) leading

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14 Ibid., p. 97.
the way. In 1611, the Elector Johann Sigismund granted freedom of worship to the Catholics of East Prussia who had until recently been citizens of Poland; and when he himself converted from Lutheran to Calvinist observance two years later, he refrained from requiring his country to convert along with him. His grandson, the ‘Great Elector’ Friedrich Wilhelm, recognised all three major confessions in his realm and also tolerated Baptists, Socinians, and Jews. Like their more famous successor Frederick the Great, these rulers were motivated as much by political and commercial considerations as by their own religious convictions (or lack of them); in order to keep the peace in Prussia’s widely dispersed territories and to increase its population by immigration and territorial expansion, it made sense to keep religious restrictions to a minimum. Similarly, more than one confession was tolerated, at least on a de facto basis, in several imperial cities such as Augsburg, Biberach, and Kaufbeuren, no doubt for commercial reasons. These practical examples, plus the fact that, after the Peace of Westphalia of 1648, three Christian confessions were allowed to coexist within the Holy Roman Empire, could only encourage the advocates of religious pluralism and toleration to continue their efforts.

I am, of course, aware that pluralistic attitudes and ecumenical initiatives were not confined to the German territories in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Towards the end of the sixteenth century, for example, the French philosopher Jean Bodin, in his clandestine treatise *Colloquium Heptaplomeres*, constructed an open-ended dialogue between seven representatives of diverse religions and Christian confessions, in which it remains unclear which of them, if any, is the true one. In the 1640s in England, the independent theologians Henry Robinson and John Goodwin argued that no one can possess the whole of truth, so that error is always possible and divergent opinions should be tolerated.

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And in 1670, the French Huguenot Isaac d’Huisseau published a work entitled *The Reunion of Christianity*, in which he sought common ground between the confessions in a few basic principles conducive to moral rectitude.\(^{22}\) With the coming of the Enlightenment, the cause of religious tolerance was widely supported in France, for example in the two main works of Montesquieu.\(^{23}\) But the point I wish to make is that, in countries other than Germany, there is not the same long and continuous tradition of religious pluralism and attempts to reconcile the warring religions; this pluralism was, after all, a response to the political as well as religious diversity of the Holy Roman Empire with its multitude of virtually independent states. The strength of this tradition becomes especially clear in the eighteenth century, above all through the work of Leibniz and his enormous influence on German thought.

Leibniz has the distinction of putting both religious and cultural pluralism on a metaphysical foundation. Already in his *Discourse on Metaphysics* of 1686, he declares:\(^{24}\)

> Every substance is like a complete world and like a mirror of God, or indeed of the whole universe, which each expresses in its own way, much as one and the same town is represented differently according to the different positions from which it is viewed. Thus the universe is in a sense multiplied as many times as there are substances, and the glory of God is likewise multiplied by as many different representations as there are of his works.

In other words, all simple substances—or what Leibniz would later describe as ‘monads’—view the universe from different perspectives; and in his subsequent works, he repeatedly uses this optical image to denote the uniqueness and relativity of all human insights.\(^{25}\) In keeping with this perspectivism, Leibniz discerns some truth and value in all religious confessions, maintaining that ‘it is possible to be saved in every religion, provided that one truly loves God above all things’ [Leibniz’s

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22 *La Réunion du Christianisme, ou la manière de rejoindre tous les chrétiens sous une seule confession de foi* (Saumur: René Pearn, 1670); see also Ruffini, *Religious Liberty*, pp. 116–17.

23 *Lettres persanes* (1721) and *De l’Esprit des lois* (1748); see also Guggisberg, *Religiöse Toleranz*, pp. 237 and 241.


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and on another occasion, ‘I have found that most sects are right in a good part of what they affirm, but not so much in what they deny’. These convictions underlie his protracted but ultimately unsuccessful negotiations, supported by both Protestant and Catholic German rulers, to reunite the Christian confessions.

Leibniz’s perspectivism is not entirely original: it is foreshadowed to some extent by Nicholas of Cusa. But Leibniz is original in the way in which he extends it beyond religious differences to different civilisations, notably those of Europe and the Far East, as expressions of the universe from different perspectives. Before the end of the seventeenth century, he made personal contact in Italy with several members of the Jesuit mission to China and corresponded regularly with them in subsequent years. In 1697, he published a series of documents which he had obtained through these exchanges, with the aim of showing that European culture had as much to gain from China as China had from Europe, declaring in his editorial preface: ‘they [the Chinese] surpass us [...] in practical philosophy, that is, in the precepts of ethics and politics adapted to the present life and use of mortals’; he also added ‘we need missionaries from the Chinese who might teach us the use and practice of natural religion, just as we have sent them teachers of revealed theology’. Leibniz particularly admired the enlightened emperor Kang Xi, a contemporary of Louis XIV, who, unlike the French monarch, promulgated an edict of toleration in which Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam were granted equal rights.

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27 Leibniz to Nicolas Rémond, 10 January 1714, cited in Antognazza, *Leibniz*, p. 500.


were eventually expelled by Kang Xi’s son, it was because of their own intolerance: they disagreed among themselves on doctrinal principles and refused, on the Vatican’s insistence, to accommodate Christian liturgy to Chinese rites and terminology.33

Leibniz’s cultural perspectivism thus accorded equal status to Chinese and European culture: Chinese ethics was superior to European ethics; European science was superior to Chinese science; and while Chinese natural religion was superior to that of Europe, the revealed Christianity of Europe was superior to Chinese religion, which had no transcendental revelation. But while Leibniz’s cultural perspectivism confined itself to differences between contemporary cultures, it had nothing to say on historical differences, and so did nothing to counteract the increasingly prevalent view that the modern age was in many ways superior to the earlier phases of history. This omission was made good in 1752 by Johann Martin Chladenius (or Chladni), who argued in a work on the theory of history (Allgemeine Geschichtswissenschaft) that our perception of history is relative to the position or point of view (Sehpunkt or Standpunkt) that we occupy within it.34 With this insight, Leibniz’s metaphysical, religious, and cultural perspectivism was complemented in Germany by a new historical perspectivism.

Another example of religious pluralism, more radical than that of Leibniz, is that of Gottfried Arnold, author of a monumental history of the Christian church with particular reference to heretics (Unparteiische Kirchen- und Ketzerhistorie, 1699–1700). Arnold’s closest affinity as a thinker is to Sebastian Franck, by whose radical individualism he seems to have been influenced.35 His rebellion against orthodox Lutheranism—he was himself a Lutheran pastor—becomes an attack on

33 Perkins, Leibniz and China, p. 199.
church authority in general. He teaches a kind of theological anarchism, in which Christ himself figures as the first persecuted heretic.\textsuperscript{36} It follows from these premises that religious truth is not to be found in any one place or society, but disseminated among many nations and communities. The lesson which runs throughout Arnold’s work is that the only acceptable attitude on the part of religious authority is to allow complete liberty of conscience and to practise universal toleration. Arnold’s vast compilation had considerable influence in its time, and was read and respected by Herder, Lessing, and Goethe among others.

Some fifty years after Leibniz’s death, there was a sudden revival of interest in his philosophy with the posthumous publication of his \textit{New Essays on Human Understanding} in 1765\textsuperscript{37} and the six-volume edition of his works by Louis Dutens in 1768;\textsuperscript{38} Herder and Lessing both studied him intensively during the following years. In his notes on Leibniz, Herder twice refers to Leibniz’s metaphor of optical perspectives and seeks to develop it further. On the first occasion, in the draft of a letter probably written in 1768 and only recently published, he applies the optical metaphor to history in order to highlight the necessary incompleteness of each individual’s historical vision, saying:\textsuperscript{39}

\begin{quote}
Every human eye has always had its own angle of vision: each projects the object before it in its own way; and at all events, just as little as a complete body can appear as it really is on a flat surface, so perhaps, despite all the abundance of circumstantial memoirs, is it in an ideal sense impossible to construct a complete history of even a single thing or event.
\end{quote}

And on the second occasion, Herder points to the inadequacy of Leibniz’s optical metaphor of the individual monad or soul as a ‘mirror’ of the universe, arguing that the perceiving subject must add a subjective element of its own in the process of perception:\textsuperscript{40}

\begin{quote}
So if our soul is a living mirror of the universe, it must not reflect this universe out of itself so that it is not in itself but outside itself with no
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{36} See Guggisberg, \textit{Religiöse Toleranz}, pp. 226–27.
\textsuperscript{37} In \textit{Oeuvres philosophiques latines et françaises de feu M. de Leibnitz}, ed. by Rudolf Erich Raspe (Amsterdam and Leipzig: Schreuder, 1765).
\textsuperscript{38} Leibniz, \textit{Opera omnia, nunc primum collecta}, ed. by Louis Dutens, 6 vols (Geneva: De Tournes, 1768).
\textsuperscript{39} Johann Gottfried Herder, \textit{Ausgewählte Werke in Einzelausgaben. Schriften zur Literatur}, 2 vols (Berlin and Weimar, Aufbau Verlag, 1985–90), II/1, 685.
\textsuperscript{40} Johann Gottfried Herder, \textit{Sämtliche Werke}, ed. by Bernhard Suphan, 33 vols (Berlin: Weidmann, 1877–1913), XXXII, 226.
communicability between the two [...]. On the contrary, there must be in each soul an internal basis for the presence of that part of the universe which it surveys, and which should not be sought in some third being as the basis of both [as in Leibniz’s theory of pre-established harmony—HBN].

Like the individual subject itself, what that subject perceives in history—for example, a particular nation or age—will likewise be unique, or as Herder puts it, ‘the genius of human and natural history lives in and with each nation as if the latter were the only one on earth’, or again, ‘each nation has its centre of happiness within itself, just as every sphere has its own centre of gravity.’

Thus Herder’s well known cultural relativism or pluralism has its roots in Leibniz’s metaphysics, and he endows each nation or society with a dynamic, organic quality akin to that of Leibniz’s monads, each of which has its own sufficient reason within it. As already noted, Herder develops these ideas further. For example, since each nation has its own inherent value, he deplores colonialism with its destruction of indigenous cultures, and the activities of European missionaries in suppressing non-Christian systems of belief. He is, of course, also influenced by Rousseau and other contemporary opponents of Eurocentrism; but Leibniz’s cultural perspectivism and the metaphysical pluralism which underpinned it certainly pointed him in the same direction.

A word now about Lessing. I have yet to discuss his play Nathan the Wise, but at this point, it should be noted that he was well acquainted with the theory of perspective, both in its literal sense as a branch of optics and in its metaphorical application to denote limited degrees of insight in metaphysics, epistemology, religion, and other areas. Thus, in the ongoing debate in Germany as to whether or not the ancients fully understood the laws of perspective in visual art, he correctly argued that linear perspective was a Renaissance discovery and refuted those who thought otherwise. He also applied the metaphors of perspective

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41 Ibid., XVIII, 249.
42 Ibid., V, 509; see also V, 455.
44 Herder, Sämtliche Werke, V, 550; also IV, 472, XVIII, 221–24, and 249.
to dramatic theory, declaring that the dramatist must project himself
into the points of view of the characters he creates, and at the same time
unify these limited viewpoints in a comprehensive view of the action
which the reader or spectator is allowed to share.47 Besides, he knew at
least some of the works of Nicholas of Cusa, and there is evidence that
he prevailed upon one of his learned associates to translate Cusa’s On
Religious Peace, with its interreligious dialogue, from Latin into German;
the manuscript of this translation unfortunately disappeared after
Lessing’s death.48 More significantly, his admiration for Leibniz and his
major indebtedness to Leibniz’s thought are amply documented. In the
present context, the main point to note is that, in one of two essays on
Leibniz which Lessing published in 1773 after intensive study of his
works, he speaks approvingly of Leibniz’s ability to discern an element
of truth, though never the whole truth, in the most divergent opinions—
that is, his perspectivism. In Lessing’s own words:49

In his quest for truth, Leibniz never took any notice of accepted opinions;
but in the firm belief that no opinion can be accepted unless it is in a
certain respect, or in a certain sense true, he was often so accommodating
as to turn the opinion over and over until he was able to bring that certain
respect to light, and to make that certain sense comprehensible. [...] He
willingly set his own system aside, and tried to lead each individual
along the path to truth on which he found him.

The main difference between Lessing’s perspectivism and that of Leibniz
is that Lessing’s version incorporates a higher degree of scepticism with
regard to obtaining certainty on the truths we believe we possess, not
least those of religion. Lessing inherited this scepticism from Leibniz’s
adversary Pierre Bayle, one of the writers he most admired in his early
years and one of the most important progenitors of toleration. Bayle’s

47 Lessing, Sämtliche Schriften, IX, 185 and 371; also Seeba, ‘Der wahre Standort’, pp.
200–03.
48 See Markus Schmitz, ‘Die eine Religion in der Mannigfaltigkeit der Riten.
Zur Erkenntnistheorie von Cusanus’ De pace fidei sowie Lessings Nathan als
Ausgangspunkt einer Konzeption des friedlichen Miteinanders verschiedener
Religionen’, in Lessings Grenzen, ed. by Ulrike Zeuch (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz,
2005), pp. 181–95; also Konrad Arnold Schmid to Lessing, 8 and 18 December 1779,
in Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, Werke und Briefe, ed. by Wilfried Barner and other
49 Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, Philosophical and Theological Writings, ed. by H. B. Nisbet
(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); also in Lessing, Sämtliche Schriften,
XI, 470.
scepticism had the effect, in Lessing’s case, of reinforcing Leibniz’s perspectivism by further stressing that all truth is relative, so that no religion can claim exclusive access to it. I have examined these questions in greater detail elsewhere, and I shall simply add here that, once we realise that Lessing’s perspectival theory of truth underlies his view of the three monotheistic religions—and of the three rings which represent their rival claims in *Nathan the Wise*—some common misunderstandings of that play and its relation to religious toleration can be avoided.

In the second half of the eighteenth century, a subtle change took place in the discourse of toleration, and Lessing is among the first to exhibit it. What changes is the use and significance of the word ‘toleration’ (German *Toleranz*) itself, as well as the adjective ‘tolerant’, which begins to go out of fashion and even to take on negative associations. For example, the word *Toleranz* occurs only twice in all of Lessing’s works, in both cases with reference to past ages (the Reformation and the medieval period); and on both occasions, Lessing’s aim is not to recommend toleration as a positive value for the present, but to deplore its absence as a minimum requirement in past ages—that is, to condemn intolerance. Similarly, Herder speaks with heavy sarcasm in 1774 of the ‘universal international benevolence [Völkerliebe] full of tolerant subjugation, extortion, and enlightenment’ which characterises the present age; and Kant, in 1784, praises Frederick the Great for declining to accept ‘the presumptuous title of tolerant’. What has happened here is that the concept of toleration, in its then accepted sense of ‘sufferance’ or ‘putting up with’, was seen to imply an act of indulgence by a condescending authority which might at any time withdraw the concession in question. At a time when at least some western governments (the USA in 1776 and 1787 and France in 1789) began to frame legislation guaranteeing basic freedoms to their subjects, the relevant declarations speak not of universal toleration, but of universal and inalienable rights. This terminology is

54 Thus, in the era of the French Revolution, Mirabeau rejects the concept of toleration in favour of an unrestricted right to religious freedom (Guggisberg, *Religiöse Toleranz*, p. 289), as does Tom Paine (*Toleration in Enlightenment Europe*, ed. Grell and Porter, pp. 16, 46, and 115).
derived from the ancient tradition of natural law, revived and codified in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries by such writers as the Dutch theorist Hugo Grotius and the Germans Samuel von Pufendorf and Christian Thomasius (the last of whom recommended toleration of all religions). This revival of natural law also marks a step in the direction of secularisation, inasmuch as natural rights extend not just to religion, but to all forms of belief, so long as their observance does not disturb the public peace; and unlike the pluralistic and perspectivist attitudes already mentioned, natural law makes no judgement as to the truth or value of the religious and cultural attitudes to which the right of free expression is granted. The same is true of Kant’s theory of freedom: it makes no mention of religion other than as a possible support for morality, and it defines the right to freedom of conscience in purely secular terms as an inherent aspect of individual moral autonomy.

As for the word ‘toleration’, it has in present-day usage acquired a more positive meaning (often denoted in English by the variant noun ‘tolerance’) to denote respectful recognition of the legitimate beliefs of others which we ourselves do not happen to share.

But where does this leave the German tradition of pluralism and perspectivism as the recognition of religious, cultural, and historical differences? This tradition lives on in various guises, one of which is nineteenth-century historicism, the historical method pioneered by Herder whereby each historical age and culture is seen as a unique and valuable whole, reconstructed by the historian in an act of empathetic understanding. This is what Leopold von Ranke had in mind when he famously declared of the historical process: ‘Every epoch has a direct relationship to God, and its value consists not in what it gives rise to, but in its existence itself.’

Closely related to this is another development in German thought, more far-reaching and longer-lived than nineteenth-century historicism, namely hermeneutics. Hermeneutics is a quintessentially German

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55 See Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe, V, 503; also Ruffini, Religious Liberty, pp. 218 and 223–27.
56 Kant, Gesammelte Schriften, VI, 237.
discipline, associated with such names as Friedrich Schleiermacher, Wilhelm Dilthey, Martin Heidegger, and Hans-Georg Gadamer. From its theological beginnings as a guide to interpreting scriptural texts and discovering their supposedly true meaning, it was gradually secularised in the eighteenth century to become a means of discovering the multiple meanings of literary and other texts (Chladenius, already referred to above, was one of those involved).\textsuperscript{59} For Schleiermacher and others, the meaning of the Bible becomes progressively enlarged as knowledge of its historical context and the psychology of its writers increases.\textsuperscript{60} For Dilthey, such divinatory psychology becomes the basic means of comprehension for the humanities in general.\textsuperscript{61} In the hermeneutic enterprise, feeling and imagination play an important part, and for Gadamer, their conclusions are always subject to enlargement and modification. Hermeneutics no longer claims to discover any ‘objective’ meaning, but rather the individuality of the text and its author as the interpreter’s ‘horizon’ merges with that of the writer under scrutiny.\textsuperscript{62} There is no universal viewpoint, only individual perspectives; and since we can never exclude our own preconceptions—or even know how far these are involved in our interpretation—our conclusions must always be provisional.\textsuperscript{63} Thus, hermeneutic understanding is an ongoing, open-ended process, in which new experience modifies or negates previous expectations; and as we learn to perceive the historicity of the text or writer studied, we simultaneously become aware of our own historicity.\textsuperscript{64} Gadamer’s aim and achievement is to distinguish clearly between the objective knowledge provided by science, which is purged of human

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\textsuperscript{63} Gadamer, \textit{Wahrheit und Methode}, pp. 374–75.

\textsuperscript{64} Ibid., pp. 338–40.
values and purposes, and the bilateral understanding of human phenomena furnished by hermeneutics and by every discipline based on hermeneutic principles. In short, modern hermeneutics is another product of the pluralistic, perspectivist tradition from which it first emerged in eighteenth-century Germany.

But while hermeneutic understanding may well be conducive to toleration (in the modern sense of respectful recognition of the Other), the link with toleration is no longer a necessary one as it had been in the religious and cultural pluralism of, for example, Leibniz, Lessing, and Herder. Several factors subsequently intervened to render this link more tenuous. Herder’s stress on the uniqueness of national cultures was already capable of two constructions: on the one hand, it could help to foster pluralism and international tolerance, as Herder certainly intended; but on the other, it could encourage nationalism, not always of a tolerant variety. The famous chapter on Slavonic culture in Herder’s *Ideas on the Philosophy of History* became a sacred text of pan-Slavism, and his praise of folk culture in his anthology *On German Character and Art* became grist to the mill of German nationalism in the following centuries. At the same time, internal conflicts and differences which had provided a stimulus to pluralistic attitudes in Germany since the Reformation were diminished by other developments, such as the reduction of inter-confessional strife in 1817 with the unification of the two main Protestant churches in Prussia (soon followed by other German territories), the recognition of religious freedom in the constitution of Bismarck’s Reich (already foreshadowed in the Prussian legal code of 1794), and the unification of Germany itself in 1871.

Other major developments in nineteenth-century thought undermined pluralism more directly. For instance, both Hegel and Marx saw history as a uni-directional process leading towards uniform political (and by implication cultural) arrangements. More significantly, perspectivism reappears as a central concept in Nietzsche’s thought, and it is with Nietzsche that it is now most closely linked. But it no longer has the meaning it had held for its earlier adherents. In both philosophy and theology, perspectivism had hitherto required a

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balance to be struck between its positive and negative aspects, between subjectivity and objectivity, between confidence that every perspective affords some degree of truth or value and scepticism as to whether any perspective offers an adequate degree of certainty. With Nietzsche—and with his postmodernist followers—the balance shifts decisively towards the negative, towards subjectivity, towards uncertainty. Like others before him, Nietzsche argues that all our knowledge is perspectival and therefore relative.\(^{67}\) He also concedes that we can increase our knowledge by acquainting ourselves with as many different perspectives as possible.\(^{68}\) But since the number of possible perspectives is infinite, our knowledge can never be complete, and we have no way of deciding which, if any, of our judgements concerning truth or value are objectively valid. Indeed, our failure to recognise this fact is a source of weakness, or as Nietzsche puts it, it is ‘an expression of the sickness of humanity as opposed to the animals’.\(^{69}\) Our respect for truth, he maintains, is the result of an illusion, and the world has no underlying meaning [\textit{Sinn}], but countless possible meanings.\(^{70}\) The most valuable meanings are those we create for ourselves and affirm with all our strength—or rather, with our \textit{will}, as the later Nietzsche never tires of repeating. However inconsistent these arguments—like those of all radical relativists—may be (for example, it is plain that Nietzsche has his own set of values which he considers superior to those of others), it is certain at least that his variety of perspectivism did nothing to further the cause of toleration in Germany. In fact, he has no use whatsoever for toleration, which he sees simply as a cloak for indifference or lack of conviction in one’s own ideals.\(^{71}\)

The catastrophes caused by nationalistic militarism and anti-Semitism in the twentieth century require no discussion here; it is enough to say that, after 1945, the need for religious, ethnic, and cultural toleration in Germany became more obvious than ever before. This need has been further intensified in recent decades by the presence of several millions of Muslims in the Federal Republic. These factors have generated a widespread preoccupation with toleration, witnessed by ongoing public


\(^{69}\) Ibid., III, 441 (\textit{Aus dem Nachlass der achtziger Jahre}).

\(^{70}\) Ibid., III, 424 and 903 (\textit{Aus dem Nachlass der achtziger Jahre}).

\(^{71}\) Ibid., I, 246: II, 610, 619, and 1165; III, 516 and 888, etc.
debates and a huge volume of publications on the subject, and it is widely acknowledged that the need for pluralistic attitudes—not only in Germany, but also in other western countries—is currently acute.

To return to Lessing: to what extent is his drama Nathan the Wise relevant to the present situation? Given that this drama emerged, as I have shown, from a long tradition of pluralism as a means to religious toleration, it obviously retains its relevance to all inter-religious conflicts. And although inter-religious strife is less of a problem in the present age of secularism and civil rights than inter-cultural friction, the play’s depiction of (albeit fleeting) harmony between representatives of Christian, Jewish, and Muslim communities also lends support to multiculturalism as a present-day alternative to social unrest. The suspense of judgement in Nathan’s parable regarding the truth claims of the three monotheistic religions—the judge in the parable suggests that a conclusive answer may be found, if at all, some million years hence—is also in keeping with the postmodernist conviction that no concept can have an ultimate, unequivocal meaning. The judge’s recommendation that the moral conduct of the three quarrelling sons, rather than their religious beliefs, should be the deciding factor between their claims is in keeping both with Kant’s moral philosophy and with the conclusions of Rainer Forst, the author of the fullest German study of toleration in recent times.

And in Germany in particular, Lessing’s play has a remarkable way of gaining new relevance as events or comments in the play invite comparison with topical equivalents. This applies not only to Germany’s current relations with its Muslim minority, but also to the bigoted Christian patriarch’s repeated comment on the adoption of a Christian child by a Jew: ‘The Jew must be burnt!’ ['Der Jude wird verbrannt!'].

72 For a full bibliography of works on toleration, mainly but not exclusively in German, from 1945 to 1995, see Kulturthema Toleranz, ed. Wierlacher (see note 2 above), pp. 635–70; works published since 1995 can be found in the annual bibliography Cannstatter Bibliographie zur Toleranz- und Intoleranzforschung, which is available online.


75 Lessing, Sämtliche Schriften, III, 117.
What, then, are we to make of those critics—some, but by no means all of them Jewish—who dismiss or attack the play as irrelevant, unhelpful, or even pernicious? Some of their objections—for example, the claim that Lessing’s intention is to persuade the Jews to abandon their faith and become assimilated to gentile society—are demonstrably out of keeping with Lessing’s views, as I have shown elsewhere. But other criticisms are less easy to refute. As a set text in German schools, the play can all too readily become trivialised by over-familiarity, and its message of toleration may be undermined when repeated by less than tolerant teachers. Others find the play’s utopian ending unconvincing, when three of the main characters discover that they are all members of one family. More seriously, the noted German writer W. G. Sebald describes the early post-war performances of the play in Germany as ‘perfidious tactlessness’ in view of the horrendous crimes committed by that country so shortly before. Seen in this context, the lessons of the play may well seem grossly inadequate, or indeed arouse justified suspicions that some of the play’s admirers may be using it as an aid to self-exculpation or complacency in relation to events for which they were at least to some extent responsible. Such feelings are certainly present in the Hungarian-Jewish dramatist George Tabori’s parody Nathan’s Death (1991), in which Sultan Saladin flatly refuses to listen to Nathan’s parable and Nathan, having retrieved the charred bodies of his children from his burnt-out house, ends up by reciting his parable with no one to hear it and dies alone as a demented, Lear-like figure. Among the most


77 See, for example, Navid Kermani’s contribution in Angelika Overath, Navid Kermani and Robert Schindel, Toleranz. Drei Lesarten zu Lessings Märchen vom Ring (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2003), pp. 33–45 (pp. 36–37).


extreme among all the play’s critics is the German-Jewish writer Henryk M. Broder, who, in a work entitled *Critique of Pure Tolerance* (*Kritik der reinen Toleranz*), denounces the play in the course of his wider offensive against tolerance in general and tolerance of Islam in particular.\(^81\)

In the light of these differences of opinion, it is no wonder that any performance of *Nathan the Wise*, at least in Germany, is bound to be problematic. If it is performed straight (which it rarely is), it may come across as hackneyed, utopian, and unconvincing—or even, in this age of disillusion, as an involuntary satire on the ideals it is meant to represent; and if it is performed against the grain, it may lose sight altogether of the ideals which inspired it.

Where does this leave us? If we ask whether or not *Nathan the Wise* still has value as an appeal for religious and cultural tolerance, there is no easy answer. But if, in keeping with Gadamer’s hermeneutics, we enlarge our horizon to accommodate that of other perspectives and relate the work to the rich and long-lived German tradition of pluralism, it may be possible to conclude that—no less than Locke’s *Letter* in Britain and Voltaire’s *Treatise on Toleration* in France—Lessing’s play still merits its position in Germany as the most significant, though controversial, document on toleration in the German language.

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\(^{81}\) Schönert (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1997), pp. 283 and 318, for a detailed analysis of Tabori’s text.
