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Transnationalizing Faith: Re-imagining Islam in German Culture.

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1. Re-imagining East-West Relationships through German Culture.



Fig 1.

In a quiet corner of the *Beethovenplatz* in Weimar, Germany, stands the ‘Hafis-Goethe Denkmal’ – the Hafez-Goethe Monument. Unveiled in 2001, it was the work of two sculptors, Ernst Thevis and Fabian Rabsch, and takes the form of two large chairs made out of stone and set to face each other, as if to imply an encounter or meeting of sorts (see fig. 1). Who or what, though, is involved in this meeting? The monument’s name implies an imaginary encounter between two figures of world literature – the German poet and intellectual Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832) and the fourteenth century Persian poet and scholar Hafez of Shiraz (1325-90), who lived centuries apart and can never in reality have met. In representing this fictitious encounter, though, the monument does not depict the two poets literally. In a city bristling with statues of important literary figures, especially Goethe, the chairs remain empty. In this way the monument arguably also represents a wider series of encounters: Islam, the

Orient, Persia, are shown to meet the occident, Germany and Christianity, in an imaginary space outside of literal history and geography.

What, though, do the chairs have to say in qualitative terms about East-West encounters? The monument might seem to imply that the two cultures are fundamentally separate and different, with each chair representing one of the two. Yet closer attention to the form of the monument and the materials used in its construction imply a less binary reading. Both chairs are situated atop a stone plinth sporting embossed bronze arabesque patterns that connect them physically. And whilst the two 'seats', those surfaces of each chair that face the other, are chiselled smooth and show clear lines of definition, the rear surface of each chair has, by contrast, been left rough, almost untreated in a way that implies some kind of natural state. The chairs' hard edges can be imagined to interlock and thus to re-establish some kind of broken organic whole. In fact, the chairs are identifiably made not only of the same *type* of stone, but the same *piece* of stone.

The plinth also has set into it three plaques, each bearing embossed bronze inscriptions of verses taken from the two poets' works, including two stanzas in German from Goethe and a verse from Hafez in the original Persian script (see figs. 2, 3 and 4). However, the stanzas by Goethe, one taken from his collection of poems that inspired the monument, the *West-östlicher Divan* (1819) the other written around the same time, flank both ends of the plinth, whilst the *ghazal* by Hafez is set between the chairs, such that neither culture and neither poet is associated exclusively with one position or one particular chair. Finally, neither of the quotations simply proclaim the merits of their own culture, but each explores images and ideas of openness, connection and interaction with the other.¹ According to the monument there is, it appears, as much connecting the chairs, the poets and their cultures, as there is dividing them.



(Left to right: figs. 2,3 and 4).

At the most basic level the common materials used to build the chairs imply a fundamental unity of the human species: just as both are of one stone, so humanity is united by a shared biological heritage. The chairs can also refer to more specific cultural historical connections, reinforcing the idea that Christianity and Islam are connected in as many ways as they are distinct. For all of their crucial and significant differences, Christianity and Islam, together with Judaism, form the family of Abrahamic faiths and, as such, share many key tenants of belief and moral codes transmitted through a shared prophetic heritage and embodied in connected scriptural and oral traditions.²

Most significant for this chapter, though, is the fact that the monument also represents a particularly nuanced model of how distinct cultures encounter each other. On the one hand, that model preserves the *distinctiveness* of the cultures involved, recognizing their mutual *differences* at the point of encounter, whilst simultaneously preserving a sense of those characteristics and traditions they have in *common* on the other. This chapter will seek to trace this paradigm, referred to in the following as the *similarity* of cultures. It will show how, in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries, a range of German writers began to represent the relationship between the Islamic and non-Islamic worlds in a relationship we can describe as one of mutual similarity.³ Two key literary works from the period will be considered, firstly the literary work that gave rise to the monument considered above, Goethe's *West-eastern Divan* (*West-östlicher Divan*, 1819), where the goal is to re-invest insights from the discussion of cultural similarity back into the work itself and use it as a tool for close reading, and secondly G.E Lessing's Enlightenment drama of religious tolerance *Nathan the Wise* (*Nathan der Weise*, 1779), which will be subjected to the same scrutiny. Throughout, similarity is recognized as an emerging paradigm in scholarship and as an alternative to more established academic models which have tended to reflect how Western culture has reduced Islam, Judaism and Oriental cultures generally and to its 'other.' The discussion will also explore carefully the limitations of similarity, however, showing how, in the hands of both writers and readers, the concept can become ambivalent and, at times, deeply problematic.

2. From critical binaries to ambivalent similarities

Through the latter half of the twentieth century, 'postcolonial' scholarship sought to illuminate the ethical shortcomings, cultural prejudices and imbalanced power relations of European colonialism, documenting histories of the trauma, oppression, misrepresentation and exclusion of colonised peoples. Within this context the figure of Edward Said played a pivotal and

specific role and his first major work, *Orientalism* (1978), is directly germane to this discussion.⁴ Said discerned practices of exercising soft cultural power within European literature, art and scholarship, which went in tandem with the politics, militarism and economics of chiefly French and British colonialism in North Africa, the Middle East and Asia. These Orientalist practices amounted to the oft-cited ‘othering’ of Oriental peoples and cultures. This meant the reductive representation of all things oriental as the binary opposite of European culture and values: where Europe was presented as active, rational, progressive and civilized, the Orient was passive, childishly irrational and in need of civilization or modernization. Whilst, on occasion, the Orient could be positively inflected according to Said, representing the long-lost origins or longed-for exotic locales, it remained outside of and different to European culture and served to undergird Europe’s sense of its own cultural supremacy and legitimize its ‘civilizing mission’ in Africa and Asia.⁵

Said’s model has limited application for German culture. Although the only two German writers he examines in any depth, Goethe and the Romantic polymath Friedrich Schlegel (1772-1829), both wrote in the period before a united German nation, Empire and colonialism, Said does not explore the possibility that their work and German culture generally might reflect different modalities of engagement with the Orient in the period.⁶ Alternative approaches have been forthcoming, however.⁷ Todd Kontje, for instance, does not lose sight of the fact that German writers produced literary Orientals that were effectively ‘imaginaries’ facilitating reflection on nascent German nationhood, but builds a strong case for reading some German writing as an attempt to resist the ‘ideological straightjacketing’ of earlier binary models and explores less antagonistic models of German-Oriental encounter.⁸ Andrea Polaschegg sought to disentangle what she saw as two separate drives at the heart of the orientalising process – the drive to ‘know’ the orient as an object of hermeneutic endeavour, and the drive to co-opt the Oriental to function within processes of European identity

formation.⁹ These analogous though distinct drives require different conceptual terms, with the former, the drive to know, operating in terms of Oriental culture's relative familiarity ('das Vertraute') and unfamiliarity ('das Fremde') to the European subject, and the latter operating in terms of a sliding scale between 'selfhood' ('das Selbst') and the other ('das Andere') and marked by instances of 'Grenzziehung' – acts of demarcation by which the European cultural agent associates and disassociates itself from the Oriental. With this multiaxial framework Polaschegg began to produce multi-layered, less binary, and less 'either-or' readings of key German writing on the Orient.¹⁰

The simple, illuminating, flexible and yet not unproblematic paradigm of cultural *similarity* can be seen as an intervention in this conceptual debate. Similarity has been explored most revealingly by Germanists Anil Bhatti and Dorothea Kimmich. According to Bhatti, similarity should not be misunderstood as the 'Harmonieierung oder Nivellierung von Unterschieden' – a 'harmonisation' or 'levelling out of differences' – but as a category that retains cultural concepts such as 'identity' and 'difference,' 'proximity' and 'distance', and moves beyond them without breaking with them entirely.¹¹ It can serve to describe mutually distinct cultural phenomena in terms of how they defy stringently binary categories and rather inhabit the figurative space of 'sowohl als auch' or 'both this and that' (9). Yet similarity remains an ambivalent concept. Kimmich shows how the idea continues to divide scholars due to its 'fuzzy' qualities, that is, for its apparent evasion of philosophically precise language, its radically 'contingent' nature or wholesale dependence upon context for meaning, and, thus, for its ideologically 'slippery' quality. This latter becomes evident in its apparent applicability to experiences and phenomena such as the loss of individual identity and the pressure to 'fit in' and to assimilate, rather than integrate, so often viewed as negative in cultural theory.¹²

So, whilst the term appears an apt concept for discussing our chosen texts, with many of them referring explicitly to the adjective 'ähnlich' or the noun 'Ähnlichkeit' in their

representations of German-Oriental encounters, we must proceed with caution. If our chosen texts by Lessing Goethe appear to contain strategies for critically rethinking black-and-white models of Occident and Orient, Christianity, Islam and indeed Judaism, then we must also ask critically how similarity functions within those strategies – be it as an explicitly framed concept or as a subtler tendency, and as a progressive notion or as a problematic pull towards cultural homogeneity.

3. Experiments in Similarity in Goethe's *Divan*

Goethe poured much of the knowledge he had amassed on Oriental language and culture into the poems of his *Divan*.¹³ The *Divan* is no mere pastiche of Persian verse, however. Rather, Goethe seems to wish to suspend the idea that the collection belongs exclusively to either of the worlds it touches – Medieval Persia and nineteenth-century Germany.¹⁴ Many formal aspects of the collection bear testimony to this. The term ‘divan’ is a Germanic rendering of the Persian ‘*divân*’, referring traditionally to a collection of a poet’s shorter verses. Goethe’s *Divan* is such a collection, arranged into twelve books, separated by thematic foci and matters of style. The first edition of the collection came with a frontispiece in which the left leaf bore a message both in Arabic script introducing Goethe and his collection to an Oriental audience, whilst the second page displays the author’s name and publishing details typical of any book in German. The poems are, of course written in Goethe’s native German. They are accompanied, too, by a series of ‘Notes and Essays’ [‘Noten und Abhandlungen’, 1819] designed to provide

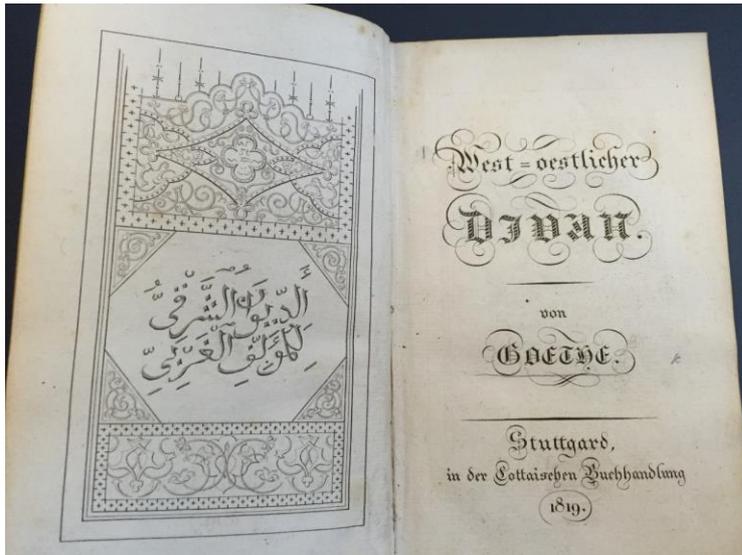


Fig 5. Frontispiece of first edition of the Divan (Stuttgart, 1819)

historical facts and explanations on Persian and Arabic culture and Islam generally to a largely uninformed, nineteenth-century German-speaking readership. Despite its obvious status as a great work of German literature, then, as a published artefact, the various editions of the Divan appeal to a position between two cultures and in some sense to reflect elements of both.

For Andrea Polaschegg the collection reflects two different strategic approaches to the Orient on Goethe's part. On the one hand Goethe addresses and informs his readers so that they might understand his many Oriental allusions. In the 'Notes' Goethe positions himself as a European subject who wishes to mediate the Orient as the object of scholarly knowledge. Secondly, though, the lyrical voice of the poems is seen to undertake a fictional journey directly 'into' the Orient. Here, though, the fictional Orient is no naive fairy-tale alternative to the Occident. This journey is both temporal and spatial, and its destination is a fictional Oriental 'Zeit-Raum', a constructed time-place in which the specifics of cultural and linguistic difference are left behind. The Orient, in this form, can be experienced directly and as a realm of connection and continuity. For Polaschegg, these two strategies coexist and allow Goethe to communicate to his audience aspects of the Orient as known 'other', but also mark his attempt to move beyond the limitations of hermeneutic knowledge. The collection thus treats the Orient

in terms of its cultural distinctiveness, though simultaneously explores it from 'within'. This Orient is, of course, a constructed imaginary, through one which is self-consciously experimental and fictional and, as such, seeks to sidestep the drive to control through knowledge and thus to overcome a relationship based solely on known differences.¹⁵

In the collection's opening verse entitled 'Hegira', for instance, the lyrical voice reflects on its own experiences, exhorting itself to undertake a flight to the East:

North and South and West
Thrones are shattered, empires shaking;
Flee, now, to the purer East
On patriarchal air to feast:
Amidst the loving, drinking singing
Youth from Khiser's well is springing.¹⁶

Depicted here are not the serene chairs of the monument in Weimar, but the shattered thrones and shuddering kingdoms involved in the Napoleonic Wars (1809-1815) which preceded the writing of the collection. Goethe's 'flight' then refers both to his drive to flee the literal destruction, conflict and intellectual poverty of modern Europe and his figurative desire to seek the stability and wisdom he saw as represented by the historical Orient.¹⁷ The lyrical voice longs to breathe the air of the 'purer East' and seeks rejuvenation for itself at fountain of Al-Khidr's (Khiser) – a figure in the Koran associated with the perennial life of nature. This imagery smacks, one might think, of a fantasy of returning to human origins in the cradle of the Orient – and thus of the exoticized form of Orientalism constantly criticised by Edward Said. Things, though, are arguably more complex.

By giving his poem its title, Goethe likens his own flight to the East to that of the Prophet Mohammed, who undertook his hegira to Medina in 622 AD. On one level, this naming of the poem begins a pattern within the *Divan* by which Goethe 'participates' in an apparently historical Islamic world. Goethe's poems do not, though, express the simple desire to inhabit the past. The poem alludes both to the Islamic past and to Germany's present: just as the prophetic hegira was both a flight and the beginning of a new historical period for Mohammed

and his followers, so the hegira of the *Divan*, too, marks both a flight and a new beginning – one that seeks to renew Germany and Europe through its fictional experience of the Orient. This fictional version of the Orient is thus so overtly trans-historical and multi-temporal, encompassing episodes from the Prophet’s life, reimagined explicitly as the experiences of a nineteenth-century German, imagined meetings with Koranic figures and glimpses at the fourteenth century Persia of Hafez, that no stable sense of place or time is established. The product is rather a self-reflexive fiction of Orient, one that announces its own fictional status and serves as an experimental literary space for exploring more fluid Occidental-Oriental relationships.¹⁸

Elsewhere in the *Divan*, the lyrical voice exploits the new possibilities offered by this fictional Orient. The lyrical voice’s own relationship with the figure of Hafez is cast and recast. In the first poem of ‘The Book of Hafez’ [‘Hafis Nameh’], the lyrical voice, presented as a German poet, begins a fictional dialogue with Hafez, calling upon him to explain the relevance of his epithet by which he is known (Hafez referring to one who has memorized the Koran). Having configured himself, albeit rhetorically, as a stranger ignorant of the life of Hafez, the ‘Dichter’ pulls closer to his Persian counterpart, addressing him directly:

For if we share another’s mind
We shall be the other’s equal
You I’ll mirror to perfection
I who am myself endowed
With our scared book’s reflection
Like as on that holy shroud
Our Lord’s image was impressed:
Quickening secret in my breast
Conquering sceptic, foe, or thief,
Radiant vision of belief.¹⁹

The fictional poet’s desire to resemble Hafez perfectly here does not, though, express a drive to self-negation. The poet-persona wishes rather to become the equivalent of Hafez within his own tradition, carrying with him the spiritual imprint of the Bible in the manner that the Shroud

of Turin was said to carry the likeness of Christ's face. In the section entitled 'Unbegrenzt' ['Unlimited'] within the 'Book of Hafez,' the relationship morphs again, and two poets are no longer mere companions or even kindred spirits. The poet imagines his own fate as so intertwined with that of Hafez that the pair are effectively twins, locked in benign fraternal competition:

And let the world entirely sink
Hafez, with you or else with none
I will compete! Let joy and pain
Be ours, as twins in common!²⁰

The fluidity of the fictional relationship between Hafez and the lyrical voice is mirrored in the voice's relationship to Islam generally. In the 'Book of Maxims' ['Hikmet Nameh'], the lyrical voice criticizes those who adhere only to their own beliefs:

Stupid, that each his own special opinion
Praises as though his case be odd!
If Islam means submissive to God
We all live and die in Islam's dominion.²¹

The grounds for such criticism are that, according to this stanza, we all live and die within Islam. This deliberately hyperbolic statement plays off the fact that the name 'Islam' is derived from the Arabic verb to submit, where submission refers to the surrender of the self to God's will. Arguably many religions, and certainly the Abrahamic faiths, have this in common, so the poetic voice does not call upon readers literally to become Muslims, but implies that they might think of their own faith in terms of the doctrinal elements it shares with Islam, drawing itself and an implied readership into an idealistic notion of cross-faith identity.

Elsewhere in the collection, the poetic voice speaks as if from a Muslim perspective. In a well-known poem that was never published in the *Divan* but belongs to its paralipomena, "Sweetest Child, a pearly row" ["Süßes Kind, die Perlenreihen,"] (Mommsen, *Poets of Arabia*, pp. 136-140. Also: G, *FA*, 3.I, 508–10) the lyrical voice pronounces on the common origins of Abrahamic faiths, describing how the succession of Abrahamic prophets, including Moses and

Jesus, had been united in their experience of one true God (Mommsen, *Poets of Arabia*, p. 136. Also: G, *FA*, 3.I, 509). In doing so, however, the poet effectively echoes the Prophet Mohammed's vision of Islam as the restoration of a pure monotheistic faith destined to supersede Judaism and Christianity. Furthermore, when addressing Suleika, an adored female subject in many *Divan* poems, the poetic voice shows hostility to the "Zeichen" ['sign'] of the crucifix she wears, echoing the Islamic dislike of the symbol and the underlying disavowal of Christ as the son of God. However, the voice relents, saying it will, for the love of Suleika, take on the 'Renegatenbürde', the burdensome role of infidelity to his own faith by accepting her wearing of the cross (Mommsen, *Poets of Arabia*, p. 138. Also: G, *FA*, 3.I, 509-10).²² The 'Notes' also contain successive references to and instruction on the Islamic project of restoring 'true' monotheism to the world.²³ On such occasions Goethe-as-commentator writes from a more conventionally German locus to address and inform a German readership about the doctrine of a faith different to their own.

The *Divan* thus examines Islam from changing perspectives. As a German author-commentator Goethe informs his readership about Islam in his 'Notes', though he also has his lyrical voice speak poetically, through parable and allegory, on Islamic doctrine. That poetic voice also participates in a construction of the Orient that both stands for the historical Orient in itself, though one which also functions as an idealized nexus facilitating cross-cultural, perspectival shifting, and allows the poet to inhabit, at times, an imaginary Muslim persona. Within that imaginary the poetic voice explores aspects of belief shared by people of all the Abrahamic faiths, doing so through reference to more conservative Islamic beliefs. From the imagined Muslim perspective, though, the poetic voice begins to adopt more accepting attitudes towards Christianity and, thus, towards religious diversity. It is in this constellation of perspectives that Goethe's poems explore forms of cultural similarity, both by communicating 'known' cultural differences between the Islamic Orient and the West and,

simultaneously, by shifting to an imaginary locus from which traditions and doctrines can be re-examined, their mutual differences in turn relativized, dissolved and re-established.

The *Divan* has been criticised on a number of fronts. For one thing, Goethe derived much of his information on oriental culture from questionable translations of texts and ‘loaded’ colonial sources.²⁴ In his great work of cultural mediation, Goethe chose not to collaborate with a living Muslim poet and imagined instead a dialogue with a long-dead poet. Whilst that choice is not itself inherently problematic, the space and influence allotted to the imagined other poet in the collection remain significant: where Goethe freely imagines himself as a Muslim persona Hafez is given only one stanza to introduce himself. This relatively marginal position might be read both as a failure to consider at least notionally the role of the other’s voice into representations of cultural alterity, though, equally, as a strategy of avoiding the ventriloquistic pastiche of another poet’s voice. Arguably, though, the collection’s value for this chapter lies less in its questionable attempt at realizing an authentic, cross-cultural polyphony. More significant is the fact that, from a nineteenth-century German perspective, the poems employ different modes of writing that both acknowledge the relative differences of Islamic culture and represent the possibility of experiencing that culture in a way that is not fixated upon those differences – and, at times, even overcomes them.

4. Faith and Familial Similarity in Lessing’s *Nathan the Wise*

G.E. Lessing engaged in religious debates in published essays, private correspondence and literary texts throughout his career, and the comparative theologian Karl-Josef Kuschel has provided a detailed analytical reconstruction.²⁵ Lessing published on key religious debates within German-speaking Christendom from the 1750s, often striking out against what he saw as the inflexible dogma of orthodox Lutheran theology.²⁶ He was also well-informed on matters of Islam, having cultivated intellectual friendships with leading Orientalists, reading widely in

French and English translations of the Koran and writing, again, in defence of the Prophet Mohammed and his followers, countering views of Islam as irrational, praising its ‘logical’ stance on the topic of miracles, arguing for its compatibility with a model of universal morality, and envisioning the possibility of salvation for Muslims in an afterlife.²⁷ And, of course, he wrote against Antisemitism in various forms throughout his life, whether in the early play *The Jews* [*Die Juden*, 1749], which uses the comic tale of a foiled plot and the uncovering of underhand disguises to critique how Christians utilize Jewish stereotypes for their own ends, or in *Nathan*, which had much to do with his interest in the cause of eighteenth-century Jewish emancipation and his support and admiration for his own friend German-Jewish philosopher Moses Mendelssohn (1729-86), upon whom the figure of Nathan is often thought to be modelled.

Lessing’s writing on religion bears the hallmark of the Enlightenment tradition of *tolerance*, and the term, together with its negative inverse, *intolerance*, is strewn throughout his writing.²⁸ Although viewed as progressive value in Enlightenment thinkers, concepts and practices of tolerance are, though, fraught with numerous tensions, including the critical objection that they can be skewed to favour normative values, or more specifically, that members of one community can be seen to tolerate only their own acceptable version of another. Lessing scholars have become critical in their assessment of Lessing’s tolerance in this sense. Ritchie Robertson describes what he believes to be a flawed or ‘false’ idea of tolerance in Lessing’s writing, by which members of faiths overcome their mutual prejudices, but do so on the basis of a notion of shared humanity that fails to recognize or respect the importance of religious difference.²⁹

The ideal of a universal humanity stretching beyond apparent markers of cultural difference also awakens associations of the intellectual tradition of *cosmopolitanism*. In the Enlightenment period, cosmopolitanism often referred to a core set of ideals, explored by

thinkers and writers in different contexts and disciplines, which sought to conceive of humanity as a substantially unified community, and to which ethnic, linguistic and cultural differences were internal.³⁰ Lessing's work is often seen to exemplify cosmopolitan thinking, in that it appeals to such a unified notion of humanity as an alternative ethical framework within which to conceive of or regulate cross-community relations between humans, especially at times of apparently irreconcilable conflict, clashing world views and exclusive identity politics. This is true, not least of Lessing's treatment of interfaith relations in *Nathan the Wise*. However, many famously Enlightenment cosmopolitan thinkers and writers have been exposed by postcolonial critics as undercutting their own aspirations. The philosopher Immanuel Kant is one such example: whilst his essay "Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose" (1784) began mapping out the possibility of universal world history that looked beyond individualistic nation states, his anthropological writing promulgated racist and hierarchical thinking by presenting European peoples as more capable of reasoned thought than others, and thus as better fulfilling criteria qualifying membership of a nascent world community.³¹ As with the ideal of tolerance, then, cosmopolitan thinking contains pitfalls for scholars seeking to reconstruct histories of progressive thinking on matters of race and culture.

At the heart of the critical objections to both of these Enlightenment traditions lies a dissatisfaction with how cultural difference is de-valued within ostensibly progressive models of intercultural relationships. If tolerance is only to be extended by one culture to another when the latter culture sufficiently shares beliefs of the former, or, indeed, if one culture insists on defining the standards by which other communities may be included in a model of universal humanity, then cultural differences serve to reinforce hierarchies, or are rejected entirely, and a more problematically normative notion of similarity comes into play. Considering key moments from *Nathan*, then, this chapter will next examine the treatment of religious groupings, the erosion of their mutual prejudices in favour of forms of tolerance, and evaluate

critically Lessing's apparently cosmopolitan vision of a culturally inclusive world community. In so doing it will consider in what ways thinking on cultural similarity, however problematic, can be found within the play.

Nathan is set in Jerusalem during the Third Crusade (1189-92), which saw a failed attempt by European Christian monarchs and their armies to retake the city of Jerusalem following its capture in 1187 by the Muslim forces of Sultan Saladin – known historically as Saladin the Wise (1137-93). In his play, however, Lessing transfers this epithet to the eponymous central character, a Jewish merchant named Nathan. Nathan's 'wisdom' arguably expresses itself in his ability to recognize and assert the value of tolerance and universal humanity. He schools the incumbent Muslim ruler Saladin in ideals of religious tolerance through his telling of the iconic 'parable of the Ring,' has taken in a Christian orphan girl, Recha, and raised her as his own daughter, and maintains an open and tolerant attitude to the Christian community – especially to one particular Knight Templar, Curd von Stauffen, who had been spared by Saladin following the defeat of the Crusaders and who saves Recha from Nathan's burning house despite his own initially anti-Semitic views. In a play set in one of the most contested cities on Earth, and at one of the most fraught and violent periods in Christian-Islamic history, Nathan serves as a peacemaker, a mediator and a preacher of human values speaking out against sectarian hatred.

Such hatred, flowing from mutual intolerance and bigotry, abounds in the play. On hearing the 'anonymized' story of a Jew who had adopted a Christian girl and raised her in his own faith, the Patriarch, the head of the Christian community in Jerusalem, calls for the Jew to be burned alive in line with Papal decrees on apostasy.³² In speaking, the Patriarch is offering advice to the Templar von Stauffen, who is struggling to come to terms with his discovery that Recha is a not Nathan's biological daughter but is an adoptee of Christian heritage. Informed of the news by Recha's Christian companion, Daja, his reaction is also negative, referring to

her Jewish upbringing as a perversion ('Verlenken') of innately Christian spiritual inclinations that would have otherwise followed 'an altogether different path' ['Ganz andere Wege'] (Clennell and Philip, p. 94. Also: L, IX, 571). As the action unfolds, though, the Templar appears capable of freeing himself from bigotry and intolerance, confessing to Nathan that he should never have sought advice from the bigoted, villainous Patriarch (Clennell and Philip, p. 127. Also: L, IX, 610). Indeed, it is only the revelation of Recha as his sister that prevents a full-blown romance from developing between the two, and he ends the play reconciled with Saladin, his uncle, and Nathan.

Although the Muslim ruler Saladdin has spared the Templeherr's life, he begins the play as an ambivalent figure, having, as Jim Reed reminds us, executed all of von Stauffen's brothers in arms.³³ Yet Saladin's own thinking also evolves beyond binary categories: when Sittah, his sister, condemns Christians for following Christ out of partisan devotion rather than for the ethical content of his teaching, he acknowledges her point, but distinguishes between Christians generally and the militancy of the Knights Templar, with whom he had sought a truce and attempted a treaty (Clennell and Philip *Nathan the Wise*, pp 47-49. Also: L, IX, 516–18). Rather than ask to borrow from Nathan the money that he needs in the third act, he asks for truth about which of the three Abrahamic faiths is the better. Upon being presented with Nathan's ring parable, he insists that all faiths ought to be distinguishable from each other, citing cultural markers such as diet and clothing: 'I should have thought// That each of the religions which I named to you // Were easy to distinguish. Even by // Their clothing; even down to food and drink,' though is forced to follow the conclusion Nathan draws from his own parable, wishing his sister had been privy to this lesson.³⁴

Nathan's parable is well known. It tells of a father with three sons, all equally beloved to him. As his life progresses the father struggles to decide which of his sons should inherit his most precious item – a ring that rendered the wearer more beloved of God. His solution is to

have two replicas made and to share the three rings out. Over time, the identity of the true ring is lost and after the father's death, arguments surface as to which ring is the original. Ultimately a judge is called in to arbitrate and suggests that the 'tyranny of the one ring' ['Tyrannei des Einen Rings'] should be forgotten (Clennell and Philip, p. 84. Also: L, IX, 559). Of course, the three rings represent the three Abrahamic faiths, and each son, the judge proposes, should believe in the truth of his own 'ring', effectively entering a form of wager ('Wette'), whereby he prove the truth of his beliefs to the others (Clennell and Philip, p. 84. Also: L, IX, 559). The aim of the wager, though, is not for each son to prove the other rings to be fake, but rather to heighten devotion to his own faith, attaining 'deepest of devotion to God,' '[innigste[r] Ergebenheit in Gott' (Clennell and Philip, p. 84. Also: L, IX, 559). Devotion to the specifics of one's own faith, teaches the parable, will *also* lead to a *common* experience of unity with God and moral improvement for all. In scholarship, the parable has been read in many ways – as the classic Enlightenment proverb calling for tolerance, and more recently as an allegory of diasporic traditions in which migrant Jewish communities assimilated into local cultures and, at times, necessarily 'hid' their Jewishness.³⁵ Here, though, it can be also seen as an attempt to place value simultaneously on the specific beliefs and practises of different religions and on the broader ethical goals they appear to share – an approach which frames the three faiths according to our concept of similarity.

Nathan is not the play's only cross-cultural mediator. The figure of Al-Hafi is a Muslim dervish who works as a *de facto* treasurer and intermediary for Saladin. Traditionally played on stage as a comical, bedraggled wanderer, he has come to be seen to as a positive representative of Sufism and the more liberal attitudes towards non-Muslims associated with that form of Islam.³⁶ In his exchange with Nathan, he refers to a community on the river Ganges where he has lived amongst the 'Ghebern' (Clennell and Philip, p.68. Also: L, IX, 540), a community of Zoroastrians, also known as 'Ghebers' or 'Parsees', who fled to India from

religious persecution by Muslims.³⁷ As he leaves the play at the end of the second act, tired of court politics, financial dealings and religious conflict, Al-Hafi invites Nathan to join him on his journey, to live amongst the Ghebers free of material needs, saying ‘On the Ganges, on // The Ganges only there are human Beings’ [‘Am Ganges, Am Ganges nur gibt’s Menschen’] (Clennell and Philip, p. 68. Also: L, IX, 540). Nathan chose not to accompany Al-Hafi, and yet the Ganges community seems to retain the status of a distant idyll. Yet is that idyll one that truly tolerates diversity and difference, or one that reflects the aporia at the heart of Enlightenment tolerance by only tolerating humans who adhere to certain norms – here, those who abandon religious affiliations? Does this hazily cosmopolitan community envision a form of human coexistence in which individual cultural heritage is preserved, or one which functions harmoniously only because it overwrites religious and cultural distinctiveness with a culturally flattened and secularized vision of community?

The two moments described here, the parable that advances a doctrine of toleration and seeks to balance precariously universal ethics against the specifics of faith doctrine, and Al Hafi’s cosmopolitan India in which people are defined more by their humanity than their specific cultural affiliations, thus carry with them tensions inherent within the wider Enlightenment, and which arguably run through the play as a whole. For all its culturally sensitive ideals, the play seems to veer towards a future peace that flattens out cultural differences and even moves beyond faith *per se*. This tension emerges again in the play’s famous denouement: the revelation that Recha and Curd are actually twin siblings, offspring of their father Assad, Saladin’s (Muslim) brother, and a European Christian mother, though raised separately. Von Stauffen’s resemblance to Saladin’s brother is mentioned repeatedly throughout, with Daja commenting ‘that Saladin has pardoned // Him because he looks so like one of // His brothers, one whom her loved dearly’ (Clennell and Philip, p 27).³⁸ Explicit references to ‘similarity’ in the original German text refer here to the literal physical

resemblances that often go hand in hand with biological, familial relationships. In seeking to represent a new symbolic human family, Lessing appeals to literal blood ties. Just as the Ganges community downplayed cultural differences, so this new family gestures beyond religious convictions. Notably, though, whilst Nathan is doubtless involved the mutual embraces, the ‘allseitige[...] Umarmungen,’ (Clenell and Philip, p.142. Also: L, IX, 627), on which the final curtain falls, and which includes characters of all faith backgrounds, the newly re-established consanguine family, as critics have pointed out, excludes the Jew.

This point in the play can also be seen as the conclusion of a far broader tendency in which none of the major religions are presented, as Robertson and others have noted, in any great detail – certainly in theological terms.³⁹ In a similar vein Nicholas Boyle has noted that the characters end up embracing a form of ‘agnostic humanism,’ dedicated to shared ethical values, but ambivalent if not indifferent about key tenets of religious belief and observance.⁴⁰ The play’s main characters, then, become less representative of their respective faiths as they come to resemble each other in their shared humanistic ideals. *Nathan*, rightly holds a place as a well-intentioned literary masterpiece of the later Enlightenment. Yet its idealistic pull towards universal humanity is also a pull away from cultural and religious specificity, and the appeal to genealogical connections arguably threatens the inclusivity and thus the cultural diversity and of this model of the wider human family. The drift towards this kind of similarity in the play reminds us that certain groups and traditions can be seen as not similar enough, and thus to belong less.

5. *Conclusion*

It was arguably through his work on Goethe’s *Divan* that Anil Bhatti’s interest in the concept of similarity grew.⁴¹ By constructing shifting relationships between the West and the Islamic Orient, by both communicating with Western readers on Islamic culture and also ‘inhabiting’

that culture poetically, and by constructing fluid relationships between Islam and other revealed religions and finding commonalities between all whilst preserving a sense of the distinctiveness of each, Goethe's collection exemplifies a particular model of culturally sensitive similarity. Bhatti's reading of Goethe offers an optimistic vision here – one that might serve to depolarize traditional notions of Occident and Orient, Islam and the West, to illuminate these tendencies in the texts of the past and also provides us with a new critical paradigm as scholars in the present. As we have seen from the discussion of Lessing in this chapter, however, different models of similarity, be they explicit references in literary texts or descriptors we apply as scholars, can be more or less sophisticated, can contribute to excluding tendencies and can end up denying cultural difference and promoting normative and hierarchical thinking. This critical insight perhaps informs the final goal of this chapter – namely to remind us as readers of the insight, perhaps obvious though often forgotten, that the conclusions we reach are not simply the results of the conceptual tools we use, but also of how we use them.

Essential Reading

- Bhatti, Anil and Dorothee Kimmich (eds.), *Ähnlichkeit: ein kulturtheoretisches Paradigma* (Konstanz: University of Konstanz Press, 2015), 340 pp.
- Hodkinson, James and Morrison, Jeffery, (eds.), *Encounters with Islam in German Literature and Culture*, (Rochester & NY: Camden House, 2009), 271 pp.
- Polaschegg, Andrea, *Der andere Orientalismus. Regeln deutsch-morgenländischer Imagination im 19. Jahrhundert* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2004), 613 pp.
- Robertso, Ritchie, "'Dies hohe Lied der Duldung'? The Ambiguities of Toleration in Lessing's *Die Juden* and *Nathan der Weise*' *The Modern Language Review*, 93.1 (1998), pp. 105–120.
- Said, Edward, *Orientalism*, 3rd ed. (London & New York: Penguin, 2003), 396 pp.

Notes

¹ The ghazal (fig. 4), no. 413 from the *Divan* of Hafez, asserts that it was not through force that the ruler's throne was built, though (by implication) through love, and yearns to see what 'magic' experiences will unfold from gazing into the eyes of a friend. One of the stanzas from Goethe reads: 'Wer sich selbst und andere kennt, // Wird auch hier erkennen: // Orient und Okzident // Sind nicht mehr zu trennen.' It contains categories common to discussion of Orientalism, 'Orient' and 'Occident', 'self' and 'other', yet speaks of connections between these pairings that cannot be severed.

² Much contemporary interfaith dialogue stresses the commonalities between the faiths, though in theology scepticism about grouping the religions together can be found: Adam Dodds, 'The Abrahamic Faiths? Continuity and Discontinuity in Christian and Islamic Doctrine', *Evangelical Quarterly*. 81. 3 (2009), pp. 230–253.

³ Anil Bhatti and Dorothee Kimmich (eds.), *Ähnlichkeit: ein kulturtheoretisches Paradigma* (Konstanz: University of Konstanz Press, 2015).

⁴ Edward Said, *Orientalism*, 3rd edn. (London & NY: Penguin, 2003).

⁵ See Said, *Orientalism*, pp. 1–28.

⁶ See Said's brief treatment of Goethe's *Divan*, *Orientalism*, pp.167-68.

⁷ Responses to Said did not really emerge in German until the mid 1990's with Nina Berman, *Orientalismus, Kolonialismus und Moderne: Zum Bild des Orients in der deutschsprachigen Kultur um 1900* (Stuttgart: Verlag für Wissenschaft und Forschung, 1996). The early twenty-first century saw a growth in interest, including such works as: Debra Prager, *Orienting the Self: The German Literary Encounter with the Eastern Other* (Rochester & NY: Camden House, 2014) and Suzanne Marchand, *German Orientalism in the Age of Empire: Religion, Race and Scholarship* (Cambridge: CUP, 2009).

⁸ Todd Kontje, *German Orientalisms* (Ann Arbor: UMP, 2004), pp. 1–14 (9).

⁹ Andrea Polaschegg, *Der andere Orientalismus. Regeln deutsch-morgenländischer Imagination im 19. Jahrhundert* (Berlin: de Gruyter 2004).

¹⁰ Polaschegg, *Der andere Orientalismus*, pp. 39–59.

¹¹ Bhatti and Kimmich, *Ähnlichkeit*, p. 15.

¹² Bhatti and Kimmich, *Ähnlichkeit*, pp. 10–14.

¹³ Katharine Mommsen, *Goethe and the Poets of Arabia*, trans. Michael M. Metzger (Rochester & NY: Camden House, 2014).

¹⁴ Goethe describes this as a state of 'hovering between two worlds' ('zwischen zwei Welten schwebend) in a letter to Zelter, May 1820. Cited in Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *West-östlicher Divan. Studienausgabe*, ed. by Michael Knaupp (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1999), p. 622. On this see also: Anil Bhatti, "...zwischen zwei Welten schwebend ...". Zu Goethes Fremdheitsexperiment im *West-östlichen Divan*': http://www.goethezeitportal.de/fileadmin/PDF/kk/df/postkoloniale-studien/bhatti_divan.pdf .

¹⁵ Polaschegg, *Der andere Orientalismus*, pp. 293–97.

¹⁶ See: J. Whaley (trans), *Goethe's West-Eastern Divan/ West-östlicher Divan, rendered into English by J. Whaley* (London: Oswald Wolff, 1974). Cf. the original: "Nord und West und Süd zersplittern, // Throne bersten, Reiche zittern, // Flüchte du, im reinen Osten // Patriarchenluft zu kosten, // Unter Lieben, Trinken, Singen, // Soll dich Chisers Quell verjüngen" in: Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *Sämtliche Werke, Briefe, Tagebücher und Gespräche*, ed. by Hendrik Birus (Frankfurt am Main, 1987 ff), here: (G, FA, 3.1, 12).

¹⁷ Mommsen, *Goethe and the Poets of Arabia*, p. 33.

¹⁸ See also: Hamid Tafazoli, 'Heterotopie als Entwurf poetischer Raumgestaltung', in: Hamid Tafazoli and Richard T. Gray, (eds.), *External Space – Co-Space – Internal Space. Heterotopia in Culture and Society* (Bielefeld: Aisthesis: 2012), pp. 35–59.

¹⁹ Translation from Whaley, *West-Eastern Divan*, pp. 28-31. Also see the original: “Denn wenn wir wie andre meinen, // Werden wir den andern gleichen. // Und so gleich ich dir vollkommen, // Der ich unsrer heil'gen Bücher // Herrlich Bild an mich genommen, // Wie auf jenes Tuch der Tücher // Sich des Herren Bildnis drückte // Mich in stiller Brust erquickte, // Trotz Verneinung, Hindrung, Raubens, // Mit dem heitern Bild des Glaubens” (G, FA, 3.1, 28).

²⁰ Translation from Whaley, *West-Eastern Divan*, pp. 34-35. For the original see: “Und mag die ganze Welt versinken, // Hafis mit dir, mit dir allein // Will ich wetteifern! Lust und Pein // Sei uns, den Zwillingen, gemein!” (G, FA, 3.1, 32)

²¹ Translation from Whaley, *West-Eastern Divan*, pp. 102-103. Cf the original: “Närrisch, daß jeder in seinem Falle / Seine besondere Meinung preist! // Wenn *Islam* Gott ergeben heißt, // In *Islam* leben und sterben wir alle.” (G, FA, 3.1, 65).

²² There is an entire chapter on Goethe's dissent from Islam in: Mommsen, *Goethe and the Poets of Arabia*, pp. 174–234.

²³ See (G, FA, Vol, 236). See also: Mommsen, *Goethe and the Poets of Arabia*, pp. 129–132 (131).

²⁴ See: Yomb May, ‘Goethe, Islam, and the Orient: The Impetus for and Mode of Cultural Encounter in the West-östlicher Divan’ in: James Hodgkinson and Jeffery Morrison (eds.), *Encounters with Islam in German Literature and Culture*, (Rochester & NY: Camden House, 2009), pp. 89–107.

²⁵ Karl-Josef Kuschel, *Vom Streit zum Wettstreit der Religionen. Lessing und die Herausforderung des Islam* (Düsseldorf: Patmos Verlag, 1998).

²⁶ Kuschel, *Vom Streit zum Wettstreit der Religionen*, pp. 124–56.

²⁷ Kuschel, *Vom Streit zum Wettstreit der Religionen*, pp. 84–101, 105–124 and 156–165.

²⁸ See: Peter Freimark, Franklin Kopitzsch, Helga Slessnarev (eds.), *Lessing und die Toleranz. Sonderband zum Lessing Yearbook* (Detroit: WSUP; Munich: text + kritik, 1986); also Ritchie Robertson, “‘Dies hohe Lied der Duldung’? The Ambiguities of Toleration in Lessing's *Die Juden* and *Nathan der Weise*’ *The Modern Language Review*, 93.1 (1998), pp. 105–120 (106 and 109); also Adam Sutcliffe, ‘Lessing and toleration’ in: Ritchie Robertson, *Lessing and the German Enlightenment* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2013), pp. 205–225.

²⁹ Robertson, “‘Dies hohe Lied der Duldung,’” p.118.

³⁰ Robert Fine, *Cosmopolitanism*, (London & NY: Routledge, 2007), esp. x.

³¹ On Kant's racism see: Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze, ‘The Color of Reason: The Idea of Race in Kant's Anthropology’, in: Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze (ed.), *Postcolonial African Philosophy. A Critical Reader*.

(Cambridge MA/Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), pp.103-132. For a wider post-colonial critique of cosmopolitanism see: Homi K. Bhabha, 'Unsatisfied: Notes on Vernacular Cosmopolitanism', in Gregory Castle (ed.), *Postcolonial Discourses: An Anthology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), pp. 39–52, (esp. p. 41).

³² All translations are from: Stephanie Clennell and Robert Philip (trans.), *Nathan the Wise by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing. Translated from the German Nathan der Weise* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1994), here: p. 82. See also the original in: Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Werke und Briefe. Gesamte Werkausgabe*. 12 vols. in 14. Ed. by Wilfried Barner, Klaus Bohnen and others (Frankfurt a.M: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1987 ff), here: (L, V, 578).

³³ T.J Reed, *Light in Germany. Scenes from an Unknown Enlightenment* (Chicago & London: UCP, 2015), pp. 74–76.

³⁴ See: Clennell and Philip (trans), *Nathan the Wise*, p. 82. Cf. the original: 'Ich dächte die Religionen [...] doch wohl zu unterscheiden wären. Bis auf Kleidung, bis auf Speis' und Trank'" (L, IX, 557).

³⁵ See: Jonathan M. Hess, *Lessing and German-Jewish culture: a reappraisal* in: Robertson, *Lessing and the German Enlightenment*, pp. 179–204 (187).

³⁶ See: Kuschel, *Vom Streit zum Wetstreit der Religionen*, pp. 231–39.

³⁷ The threat is perhaps less that Lessing conflates Ghebers and Sufi Muslims, as in Robertson, *Dies hohe Lied der Duldung*, p. 115, and more that the play appeals to an idealized humanity at the cost of representing faith traditions.

³⁸ See the original German: '[...] dass Saladin den Tempelherrn, Begnadigt, weil er seinem Brüder einem, Den er besonders lieb gehabt, so ähnlich sehe' (L, IX, 493). The sentiment is echoed almost verbatim by Saladin (L, IX, 561).

³⁹ Robertson, "Dies hohe Lied der Duldung," p. 115.

⁴⁰ Nicholas Boyle, *Goethe. The Poet and the Age. Vol 1: The Poetry of Desire* (Oxford: OUP, 1991), p.33.

⁴¹ Cf. Bhatti, ' "...zwischen zwei Welten schwebend ..."'.