


FAMILIES, SIMILARITIES AND MULTI-FAITH FUTURES: RE-IMAGINING ISLAM AND MUSLIMS IN LESSING AND NOVALIS

JAMES HODKINSON 
(UNIVERSITY OF WARWICK)

ABSTRACT

In G. E. Lessing's *Nathan der Weise* (1779) Muslims are represented alongside Jews and Christians. These relationships are framed in terms of shared human morality and the shared biology of family, expressed through physical resemblance, rather than through similarities or differences of faith. Ultimately, it is the biological fact of consanguine family, not religion, which forms the basis of future human relationships. The Early Romantic Novalis, by contrast, sketches a figurative, interfaith family in *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* (1801). This accommodates Christians and Muslims within a universal model of 'aesthetic' human religiosity, which nonetheless allows each faith to maintain distinctive, even mutually conflicting beliefs, and thus envisions a more pluralistic unity. Modelling interfaith relationships around familial similarities offers a tempting alternative to the mutual alienation and 'othering' of critical Orientalism, although this approach can fixate upon normative characteristics and deflect attention from the distinctiveness of differing faiths. Both writers locate their Muslim characters within differing trajectories of historical progress: for Lessing, humanity's future is grounded in a common humanity rooted in shared biology, with Islam rendered incidental or obscure, whereas Novalis envisions a pluralistic, multi-perspectival future, marked by shifting, re-imaginable familial relationships, within which Muslims can retain core aspects of their faith.

In Lessings *Nathan der Weise* (1779) treten Muslime neben Juden und Christen auf. Diese Beziehungen bleiben in gemeinsamer menschlicher Moralität und in der geteilten Biologie der Familienbeziehungen verankert. Dabei stehen physische Ähnlichkeiten, nicht die Glaubensähnlichkeiten bzw. -differenzen im Vordergrund, und die biologische Tatsache der Blutsverwandtschaft, nicht Religion, bildet die Grundlage künftiger, zwischenmenschlicher Beziehungen. Der Frühromantiker Novalis dagegen skizziert eine figurative, panreligiöse Familie in *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* (1801), und schließt Christen und Muslime in einem Universalmodell 'ästhetischer' menschlicher Religiosität ein, lässt aber jeder Religion den Raum, eindeutige, sich gegenseitig ausschließende Glaubenslehren beizubehalten, und entwirft so eine Einigkeit, die auf größerem Pluralismus beruht. Die Darstellung interreligiöser Beziehungen im Kontext von Familienähnlichkeit kann zwar als eine verlockende Alternative zur gegenseitigen Entfremdung und 'othering' des kritischen Orientalismus gesehen werden, kann aber zu Fixierung auf normative Eigenschaften führen und von der Individualität verschiedener Glaubenstraditionen ablenken. Beide Autoren siedeln ihre muslimischen Charaktere in unterschiedlichen Zeitschienen historischen Fortschritts an: Lessing sieht die Zukunft der Menschheit in einer gemeinschaftlichen Menschlichkeit, die auf geteilter Biologie beruht, in der der Islam aber marginal wird; Novalis entwirft eine pluralistische,

multiperspektivische Zukunft, geprägt von sich stets verändernden, neu zu imaginierenden Familienbeziehungen, in der Muslime an den Kernglauben des Islam festhalten können.

O! mir ist es, als glicht ihr einem meiner Brüder, der vor unserem Unglück von uns schied, und nach Persien zu einem berühmten Dichter zog.¹

In chapter four of Novalis's *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* (1801) we witness an encounter between Zulima, the female Muslim prisoner of a band of veteran Crusaders, and the eponymous protagonist Heinrich, who wishes to liberate her from her captors and learn about her culture. As this quotation shows, she perceives some form of resemblance between Heinrich and her own brother. As Heinrich is not related by blood to Zulima and her family, what other sort of 'family' is being alluded to here and what is its significance for how Islam and Muslims are shown in this text? This article seeks to explore these issues more widely in German literature and thought through a reading of two contrasting canonical literary works from the period, G. E. Lessing's *Nathan der Weise* (1779) and Novalis's *Ofterdingen* (1801), which straddle the ostensible divide between late Enlightenment and Early Romantic writing.

The article will not seek the rigid dualisms of theories of critical Orientalism, which expose the externalisation and 'othering' of Islam and Muslims within European cultural traditions. Instead, it will identify and evaluate the ways in which relationships of family, whether biological or figurative, appear to form different contexts for encounters between Muslims and non-Muslims. The model of family implies shared heritage and common traits of various sorts, and, though requiring critical evaluation, it can help to underpin potentially new readings of these texts. In taking this approach, the aim is not to show how images of Islam and Muslims express two static moments in German cultural history, but to reflect critically on how each writer envisions differing trajectories of historical progress – trajectories that imply contrasting ways of modelling culturally mixed societies of the future and different modalities of the relationships between faiths.

BEYOND BINARY ORIENTALISM: FROM OTHERNESS TO FAMILIAL SIMILARITY

The model of the family opens out a set of connected questions about what governs family membership and how shared characteristics and mutual differences are represented, evaluated and balanced against each other.

¹ Novalis, *Schriften: Die Werke Friedrich von Hardenbergs*, ed. Paul Kluckhohn, Richard Samuel, Heinz Ritter, Hans-Joachim Mähl, Gerhard Schulz and Gabriele Rommel, 3rd edn, 6 vols, Stuttgart 1977, here *Schriften*, 1, p. 236. Hereafter references will be given in the form: (*Schriften*, volume number, page number: fragment or entry number).

Postcolonial discussions of images of Islam and Muslims in European culture have traditionally focused on relationships of difference and mutual exclusivity. Edward Said's original proposition in *Orientalism* was that the Muslim was 'the very epitome of an outsider, against which the whole of European civilisation from the Middle Ages on was founded.'² In other words, Europe externalised and 'othered' Islam and Muslims to bolster its own geographical and cultural integrity.

Said's approach to the topos of so-called Orientalism has been critically refined within German Studies.³ More recently, though, the deceptively simple, highly illuminating, yet still problematic paradigm of cultural *similarity*, 'Ähnlichkeit', has emerged in scholarship and can be used, I will suggest, as the basis for new readings of discursive representations of Islam in German culture. The paradigm has been explored most revealingly by Anil Bhatti and Dorothee Kimmich.⁴ Similarity should not, they argue, be misunderstood as a concept that requires the 'Harmonisierung oder Nivillierung von Unterschieden', but one that retains categories such as 'identity' and 'difference', 'proximity' and 'distance', moving beyond exclusive relationships with any one of these, though without breaking with any of them entirely (*Ähnlichkeit*, p. 15). Whilst it emphasises commonality over stark difference, similarity also serves to describe how mutually distinct cultural phenomena can defy stringently binary categories and inhabit rather the figurative space of 'sowohl als auch', of 'both this and that' (*Ähnlichkeit*, p. 9). Kimmich is careful to show, however, how the idea divides scholars because of its apparent evasion of philosophically precise language, its radically 'contingent' nature or wholesale dependence upon context for meaning, and, thus, its ideologically 'slippery' quality. The concept, she shows, can also be linked historically to phenomena such as 'Selbstverlust, Anpassungsdruck und Assimilation' (*Ähnlichkeit*, p. 14), and to the loss of distinctive identities amidst the pressure to assimilate to cultural norms of various sorts.

References to Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Philosophische Untersuchungen* weave in and out of various of the chapters in Bhatti and Kimmich's volume

² Edward Said, *Orientalism*, London 2003, pp. 70–1.

³ Most notably, Andrea Polaschegg developed a multi-axial framework of concepts for examining German cultural products representing the so-called Orient. Texts and artefacts should be located simultaneously on two sliding scales. The first sits between the epistemological categories of relative familiarity ('das Vertraute') and unfamiliarity ('das Fremde'), in other words the 'more' or 'less' well known. The second scale sits between selfhood ('das Selbst') and otherness ('das Andere') and measures how far the Oriental object and the European subject do or do not resemble each other. These intersecting axes allow for less binary and more multi-layered readings and show how cultural products function in discourses both of hermeneutic enquiry and identity formation. See Andrea Polaschegg, *Der andere Orientalismus. Regeln deutsch-morgenländischer Imagination im 19. Jahrhundert*, Berlin and New York 2005, especially pp. 9–59.

⁴ See Anil Bhatti and Dorothee Kimmich, *Ähnlichkeit. Ein kulturtheoretisches Paradigma*, Konstanz 2015. Further references appear in the text in the form: (*Ähnlichkeit*, page number).

and it was in exploring ‘similarity’ that Wittgenstein came to family.⁵ In his exemplary discussion of ‘games’ of various sorts, Wittgenstein famously moved away from a notion of family in which family membership is governed by a single trait common to all, which we can call *monothetic*, towards one in which no single shared trait governs, in which multiple shared characteristics occur simultaneously, often in shifting constellations, and which we can call *polythetic*. He defines this form of familial similarity thus:

Ich kann diese Ähnlichkeiten nicht besser charakterisieren, als durch das Wort ‘Familienähnlichkeit’; denn so übergreifen und kreuzen sich die verschiedenen Ähnlichkeiten, die zwischen den Gliedern einer Familie bestehen [...] (*Philosophische Untersuchungen*, no. 66, p. 36).

The unifying concept of the family is ‘das lückenlose Übergreifen dieser Farsen’, the continued weaving of multiple ‘threads’ or characteristics, rather than a single, connective and hegemonic trait (*Philosophische Untersuchungen*, no. 67, pp. 36–7). Wittgenstein thus offers a plural, heterogenous and decentred model of similarity, though one which is unified in its plurality.⁶ In these specifically familial contexts, then, the concept of similarity retains its ambiguity as it can both emphasise and yet also downplay the importance of distinct and diverse characteristics.

There is not just a conceptual, but also an historical, text-immanent reason for approaching our chosen texts in these terms. Not only do both Lessing and Novalis use ‘families’ as the locus for re-imagining relationships between different faiths but they also make explicit use of the adjective ‘ähnlich’ or the noun ‘Ähnlichkeit’, or paraphrase the concept in some way.⁷ The art of applying this concept of similarity to our readings will, if we recall Bhatti, Kimmich and their contributors, involve asking what kind of families are shown and how their mutual similarities are treated, and will also involve maintaining a critical eye for how similarity can function to the detriment of cultural distinctiveness.

HISTORICAL TRAJECTORIES INTO MODERNITY: PLURAL FUTURES?

Much philosophical, political, historiographical and literary writing of the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries is marked by a diverging

⁵ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophische Untersuchungen. Philosophical Investigations*, tr. G. E. M. Anscombe, P. M. S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte, 4th revd edn, Hoboken, NJ 2009. Hereafter, all references will be given in the form: (*Philosophische Untersuchungen*, section number, page number).

⁶ See, for example, Rüdiger Görner’s treatment of Wittgenstein in Bhatti and Kimmich, *Ähnlichkeit* (note 4), pp. 209–10.

⁷ I have already made a critical reading of Lessing’s *Nathan* in terms of similarity theory. See James Hodkinson, ‘Transnationalizing Faith. Re-imagining Islam in German Culture’, in *Transnational German Studies*, ed. Rebecca Braun and Benedict Schofield, Liverpool 2020, pp. 193–212.

set of understandings of the key drivers and teleologies of human history. Humanity is conceived variously as a single unified whole, or as a series of distinct, even disconnected cultures, or as some synthesis of these viewpoints. Many writers and thinkers of the later German Enlightenment and the Early Romantic period shared an interest in conceiving and defining a single human community and its future destiny, though they also sought to explore the position and role that individual cultures and religions could play within models of a shared future. Decades of postcolonial theory prompt us to question these paradigms critically: do universal, so-called ‘cosmopolitan’ visions of humanity extinguish cultural diversity in the name of a collective model, fashioning the universal around limiting cultural norms?⁸ Conversely, do attempts to recognise and respect cultural diversity lead to essentialism and exoticisation? For our discussion, we might ask particularly if Western, European and specifically German writing of this period promulgates models of ‘universal’ human progress which tend to be monocultural, as they are dictated to by European traditions such as Enlightenment reason or Christian doctrine? Or, alternatively, do our chosen texts succeed in imagining and representing more pluralistic models of human history, in which all cultures are seen to retain their integrity, and simultaneously figure within and shape the whole of humanity? A brief glance at two contrasting examples from the period, both dealing with human progress across history, one from the work of Immanuel Kant and the other from that of Johann Gottfried Herder, can give context to our discussion of Lessing and Novalis here.

In his essay ‘Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung?’ (1784), Kant’s now almost commonplace definition of Enlightenment offers a version of progress as humanity’s long, tortuous journey out of self-imposed immaturity or ineptitude: ‘Aufklärung ist der Ausgang des Menschen aus seiner selbstverschuldeten Unmündigkeit.’⁹ Who, though, are the human subjects that drive this progress and what drives them to do so? Progress within a society is achieved, in Kant’s vision, when the human subject engages in free, uninhibited and reasoned thought and applies this thinking critically to the various spheres of human activity. Kant acknowledges that a public cannot spontaneously and collectively enlighten itself and requires a degree of intellectual leadership by individual free-thinkers, ‘Selbstdenkende’ (‘Was ist Aufklärung?’, p. 170). His illustrative examples of such individuals include an officer in the military who instils discipline within the ranks, follows orders at the point of issue, but does not obey them unthinkingly and might submit reasoned

⁸ One example of this is to be found in Bhabha’s critical exploration of ‘vernacular’ forms of Enlightenment cosmopolitanism: Homi K. Bhabha, ‘Unsatisfied: Notes on Vernacular Cosmopolitanism’, in *Postcolonial Discourses: An Anthology*, ed. Gregory Castle, Oxford and Malden, MA 2001, pp. 38–52.

⁹ See *Immanuel Kants Werke*, ed. Artur Buchenau and Ernst Cassirer, 11 vols, Hildesheim 1973, here IV, pp. 169–76. Hereafter cited in the form: (‘Was ist Aufklärung?’, page numbers).

objections to his superiors, or a pastor who represents the orthodoxy of the church that has elected him, though remains free to publish critically on theological matters. Whilst Kant sees each such individual as a functioning member of a worldwide society of scholars – ‘Glied eines ganzen, gemeinen Wesens, ja sogar der Weltbürgergesellschaft,’ (‘Was ist Aufklärung?’, p. 171) – his community of the Enlightened seems, tellingly, to comprise exclusively modern, educated European men in largely bourgeois professions, dedicated to Enlightenment ideals. In Kant, then, humanity’s collective future seems to offer particular privilege to members of a certain, exclusive group, whilst failing to take into account the potential contributions made by those falling outside that group.¹⁰

In Herder’s writings we find a very different model of collective human history and future progress. Herder is known today as a writer well versed in European discourses of Enlightenment reason, though one who is at pains to demonstrate the value of cultural forms generated within non-European cultural frameworks. John Noyes carefully reconstructs Herder’s dissatisfied work with reason in its Enlightenment forms throughout his essayistic work of the 1760s and 1770s.¹¹ By the time Herder came to write his voluminous *Ideen zur Philosophie einer Weltgeschichte* (1784–91), a long, complex text that dances between philosophy, aesthetics, anthropology and historiography, he was working with a radically decentred and plural notion of humanity, in which our species remained biologically unified yet was shaped through differing environmental factors into starkly contrasting cultural groupings across history.¹²

Ultimately, for Noyes, there is an ‘antinomy of universal reason’ at the heart of Herder’s work, which insists on the universality of reason across all human cultures but rejects a universal (culturally specific) model of reason. In other words, ‘reason only exists in the plural and the plurality of reason will be cognised in countless different ways’ for Herder (*Aesthetics against Imperialism*, p. 301), a position that allows all cultures, in theory, to engage in deeply significant cultural endeavour without having to emulate the mind-centred, bookish cultural forms of the European Enlightenment. Noyes acknowledges that Herder’s position is fraught with contradictions. Indeed, it appears to be a contradiction in itself to attempt to marshal the heterogeneity of human cultural history within a set of narrowly

¹⁰ Kant ultimately characterises the Enlightenment not as an enlightened age, but as an age moving towards enlightenment. The embodiment of this process is, he feels, the historical figure Frederick the Great (1712–86). See ‘Was ist Aufklärung?’, p. 174.

¹¹ See John Noyes, *Herder: Aesthetics against Imperialism*, Toronto, Buffalo and London 2015.

¹² Johann Gottfried Herder, *Werke in zehn Bänden*, ed. Martin Bollacher et al., Frankfurt a. M. 1985–2000, see especially VI: *Ideen zur Philosophie einer Geschichte der Menschheit*. On the idea of a decentred, pluralistic humanity in Herder’s work, see also Anne Löchte, *Johann Gottfried Herder: Kulturtheorie und Humanitätsidee der ‘Ideen’, ‘Humanitätsbriefe’ und ‘Adrastea’*, Würzburg 2005; and Sonia Sikka, *Herder on Humanity and Cultural Difference: Enlightened Relativism*, Cambridge 2011.

European cultural discourses, which cannot by definition articulate those histories in their fullness.¹³ Nonetheless, Herder's work contains an anti-imperialist programme, as it marks a sustained attempt to think critically about the normative side effects and distortions that can occur when framing the history of one culture within the universalising traditions of another. It is this thinking that underpins his attempt to write a decentred, pluralistic, though conceptually unified history of humanity (*Aesthetics against Imperialism*, pp. 300–11).

Whether in matters of history, historiography, or more generally, neither Lessing nor Novalis can be reduced to simple disciples of either Kant or Herder. The contrast between Kant and Herder as shown here, though, serves to illustrate a field of tension within which texts such as *Nathan* and *Ofterdingen* were written and also reminds us of the exclusive and inclusive tendencies to be found within all well-intentioned writing about apparently universal models of identity, history and progress.

FAITH AND THE FACT OF FAMILY. LESSING AND THE OBSCURATION OF ISLAM?

Lessing's writing on religion is as diverse in form and outlook as his work is generally.¹⁴ His engagement with his own Christianity oscillated between direct challenges to Lutheran Orthodoxy, which brought infamy and the threat of censorship, and shaped his decision to push for reform through his literary and theatrical practice rather than through public debate.¹⁵ Through his friendship and intellectual exchange with Moses Mendelssohn, his play *Die Juden*, and, at times, his own activism, he also

¹³ It falls to Ian Almond to give a sustained treatment of Herder's complex writing on Islam, which seems to damn and praise Islamic culture and history in equal measure. Almond's full and nuanced account stops short, though, of reading Herder's contradictory writing as an attempt both to comment upon Islam and to expose the inadequacies of doing so from within Western discursive traditions. Instead, Almond sees in Herder a series of positions which, when judged in terms of contemporary postcolonial thinking, appear confused at best. See Ian Almond, *History of Islam in German Thought from Leibniz to Nietzsche*, New York and Abingdon 2010, pp. 53–65.

¹⁴ On the disciplinary and intellectual diversity of Lessing's work, see *Lessing and the German Enlightenment*, ed. Ritchie Robertson, Oxford 2013, especially the Preface (pp. ix–xv) and H. B. Nisbet's account of Lessing's achievements (pp. 1–14). Further references are given in the form: (*Lessing and the German Enlightenment*, page numbers).

¹⁵ Lessing intervened directly in Christian debates on the nature of divine revelation, publishing posthumously in his *Fragmente eines Ungenannten* (1774–8) excerpts from the work of Hermann Samuel Reimarus which had proposed provocatively unorthodox ideas on the matter. See William Boehart, *Politik und Religion. Studien zum Fragmentenstreit (Reimarus, Goethe, Lessing)*, Schwarzenbek 1988. Following the controversy, Lessing famously declared his intention to advocate for religious reform from his former 'pulpit' of the theatre and in so doing gestured forward to the work he would produce in *Nathan*. See Arno Schilson, '...auf meiner alten Kanzel, dem Theater.' *Über Religion und Theater bei Gotthold Ephraim Lessing*, Göttingen 1997.

remained a staunch supporter of Jewish emancipation throughout his career.¹⁶

Lessing is less well known for his knowledge of and writing about Islam, however. Karl-Josef Kuschel has offered a painstakingly thorough reconstruction of the many treatments of Islam, both tangential and more substantial, which punctuate Lessing's work from his juvenilia through to works such as *Nathan*.¹⁷ Lessing is not presented as an Orientalist, indeed, Kuschel shows him to depend on other, notably European experts for knowledge, recommended reading and discussion.¹⁸ Nonetheless, Lessing's exposure to writing on Islam furnished him with a significant body of knowledge, as well as certain politically and theologically progressive attitudes towards Islam and Muslims. During the 1750s, for instance, the young Lessing translated a series of key works by Voltaire. This included 'Von dem Korane und dem Mahomed' which contained Voltaire's well-informed, though often negatively prejudiced reading of the Prophet's life, and 'Geschichte der Kreuzzüge', which gave a more favourable account of the role of the (historical) Sultan Saladin during the period and supplied Lessing with a particular reading of Islam's 'positive' contribution to history which he would reinvest in *Nathan* decades later (*Vom Streit zum Wettstreit der Religionen*, pp. 84–90). However, in reading *Nathan*, critics such as Ritchie Robertson have noted that representations of non-Christian faiths appear to be emptied of detailed references to doctrine and belief and that they serve, at least in part, as templates against which to model a better Christianity.¹⁹ So, is the substance of Islam obscured by Lessing's interest in *other* faiths in this way, or by the content and nature of the Enlightenment debates on interreligious relations and human progress in which he engages? Closer scrutiny of this seems justified.

¹⁶ For an accessible survey and critical re-reading of Lessing's engagement with German-Jewish culture, see Jonathan M. Hess, 'Lessing and German-Jewish culture: a reappraisal', in Robertson, *Lessing and the German Enlightenment* (note 14), pp. 179–204.

¹⁷ Karl-Josef Kuschel, *Vom Streit zum Wettstreit der Religionen. Lessing und die Herausforderung des Islam*, Düsseldorf 1998. Hereafter referred to in the form: (*Vom Streit zum Wettstreit der Religionen*, page numbers).

¹⁸ See, for example, Kuschel's account of the influence of the orientalist Johann Jacob Reiske (1716–74) on Lessing's understanding of Islam: *Vom Streit zum Wettstreit der Religionen* (note 17), pp. 105–10. Lessing's thinking on Islam came to resemble that of Reiske, who believed that the rise of Islam must in some way reflect the divine will of God and that the faith could thus not be dismissed as 'bloße[n] Aberglauben', see *ibid.*, p. 108.

¹⁹ Ritchie Robertson, "Dies hohe Lied der Duldung". The Ambiguities of Toleration in Lessing's "Die Juden" and "Nathan der Weise", *Modern Language Review*, 93/1 (1998), 105–20. See also Nicholas Boyle's assertion, cited by Robertson, that representatives of the three faiths in Lessing effectively conspire in a fourth, secret religion of 'agnostic humanism', rather than representing their own traditions. Doctrine, for Boyle, is reduced by Lessing to a morally instructive fiction, rather than an expression of religious truth; Nicholas Boyle, *Goethe: The Poet and the Age, I: The Poetry of Desire*, Oxford 1991, p. 33.

Die Erziehung des Menschengeschlechtes (1777) is arguably Lessing's most sustained intervention in religious debate.²⁰ The essay tracks progress in the human understanding and practice of religion along an historical axis, charting the emergence and refinement of the monotheistic Abrahamic faiths through to the Enlightenment period, and begins to postulate on their future development. Here, history is meant to educate, and humanity learns and evolves through an ongoing process of divine revelations, each of which is appropriate to its spiritual and cultural development at any one point in history. Lessing discerns three 'ages' or 'epochs': firstly, an age of 'natural' religion, in which a kind of pre-Abrahamic religiosity is given to mankind; secondly, an age of 'positive' religion (Judaism and Christianity), in which prophets and Messiahs are revealed, the Old and New Testaments are written, and a series of competing narratives on the nature of God, divine prophecy and the pathway to eternal salvation are mapped out; thirdly, an age of 'reasoned religion', in which the faculty of reason blossoms and humanity engages critically with the experience of divine revelation to advance its understanding of religion further still.

In this final speculative section, Lessing explores the combined power of reason and faith to produce ever more refined notions, 'neuere und bessere Begriffe' of God (*Erziehung*, p. 95). The process of refinement consists in jettisoning the dogmas of earlier 'unfortunate' ('mißlich') iterations of the Christian faith through an appeal to the intellectual and spiritual resources of that same tradition (*Erziehung*, p. 95). Numerous critics have highlighted what they see as the problematic aspects of Lessing's *Erziehung*.²¹ The issue of greatest significance here, though, is the fact that a text seemingly exploring universal human progress in the understanding and practice of religion nominates a self-improving, Enlightened form of Christianity as the sole means to and locus for that progress.²² Within Lessing's thinking, Judaism can be respected as humanity's 'co-educator' throughout history, albeit one that is surpassed, ultimately, by Christianity. Islam, however, which sees itself as a legitimate revelation of a 'Final Testament' following on from, correcting and completing the Jewish and Christian narratives, threatens to disrupt the underlying teleology of Lessing's account. It is perhaps for this reason that his text fails to mention Islam and Muslims.

²⁰ Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Werke und Briefe in zwölf Bänden*, ed. Arno Schilson and Axel Schmidt, Frankfurt a. M 2001, here X, pp. 74–99. Hereafter cited in the form (*Erziehung*, page numbers).

²¹ See, for example, Ingrid Belke, 'Religion und Toleranz aus der Sicht Moses Mendelssohns und Gotthold Ephraim Lessings', in Norbert Hinske (ed.), *Ich handle mit Vernunft. Moses Mendelssohn und die europäische Aufklärung*, Hamburg 1981, pp. 139–51. Belke insists Lessing is more concerned with a critique of contemporary orthodoxy than with a genuine attempt to envision the future of religion.

²² For another critical assessment of the model of human progress in Lessing's *Erziehung*, see David Hill, 'Enlightenment as a historical process: *Ernst und Falk* and *Die Erziehung des Menschengeschlechtes*', in Robertson, *Lessing and the German Enlightenment* (note 14), pp. 227–44.

Here, the theologian Daniel Cyranka sounds two notes of caution. Firstly, the *Erziehung* represents Lessing's particular reaction to specific eighteenth-century theological debates within the Judeo-Christian tradition, not a monolithic statement on the history and future of all religion.²³ Secondly, Cyranka notes the 1780 edition of the *Erziehung*, which is accompanied by a foreword in which Lessing explicitly calls his readership to see 'in allen positiven Religionen' tendencies and the potential to reveal aspects of humanity's shared spiritual future.²⁴ Cyranka's warnings carry merit, yet Lessing's retrospectively inclusive mention of 'all religions' is slender and non-specific at best, and reminds us that, as critical readers, we should remain wary of how his visions of 'collective' human progress exclude Islam and Muslims to varying degrees and in more and less subtle ways.

Written in the years following the first publication of the *Erziehung*, Lessing's *Nathan* is a very different text. Intended as an Enlightenment re-imagining of the religious context of the Crusades, the play is arguably more about people of faith and their sectarian, political and individual conflicts, than it is about the specifics of faith *qua* doctrine, theological debate and exegesis.²⁵ It is well known as a critique of religious and cultural intolerance and how these can be overcome through the rediscovery of shared human values and interpersonal connections.²⁶ Yet *Nathan* is not without reference to and reflection on the specifics of religious belief and doctrine, however subtle that might be. Various of the characters *do* speak on key aspects of their religion, discussing these within the context of interfaith conflict, offering critiques of the status quo in interfaith relations and presenting some vision of how faith-based relationships might evolve in the future.

Do we, though, find specifically Muslim voices and beliefs represented within the play? Barry Murnane's recent essay surveys radical re-imaginings of the *Nathan* story by female playwrights and directors working on the contemporary stage, some of which seek to open out the Muslim perspectives thought to be lacking from Lessing's original work.²⁷

²³ See Daniel Cyranka, 'Natürlich – positiv – vernünftig: Der Religionsbegriff in Lessing's *Erziehungsschrift*', in Ulrich Kronauer and Wilhelm Kühlmann (eds), *Aufklärung: Stationen – Konflikte – Prozesse: Festgabe für Jörn Garber zum 65. Geburtstag*, Eutin 2007, pp. 39–61.

²⁴ Lessing, *Erziehung* (note 20), p. 74. See, too, Cyranka's contention that Lessing sees faiths other than Christianity driving human progress in the understanding and practice of religion: Cyranka, 'Natürlich – positiv – vernünftig' (note 23), pp. 56–60.

²⁵ Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Werke und Briefe in zwölf Bänden*, ed. Arno Schilson and Axel Schmidt, Frankfurt a. M. 2001, here IX, pp. 483–627. Hereafter cited in the form (*Nathan*, act, scene, page numbers).

²⁶ On toleration in Lessing's work, see also Adam Sutcliffe, 'Lessing and toleration', in Robertson, *Lessing and the German Enlightenment* (note 14), pp. 205–26.

²⁷ Barry Murnane, "'Toleranz – du nervst mich so". Reinventing Lessing's *Nathan der Weise* for the Contemporary Stage', *German Quarterly*, 93/4 (2020), 447–65. Murnane not only highlights how artists today are responding to arguably outdated notions of tolerance, reworking aspects of

Nonetheless, the original *Nathan* does contain a range of Muslim characters of arguably differing origins and outlooks, many of whom touch upon aspects of their religious belief and practice. The most prominent of these is Sultan Saladin. Although he has spared the Christian Templar's life after retaking the city of Jerusalem, he begins the play, as T. J. Reed reminds us, having also executed nineteen other Crusaders.²⁸ In fact, the even-handed Nathan is surprised at Saladin's act of mercy, which he feels to be uncharacteristic.²⁹ Saladin presents himself as a steadfast Muslim ruler defined by a limited series of needs: 'Ein Kleid, Ein Schwert, Ein Pferd – Und Einen Gott! / Was brauch' ich mehr?' (*Nathan*, II. 2, p. 522). We might share Kuschel's view of this image as a positive representation of a Muslim exhibiting 'Selbstgenügsamkeit in Gottergebenheit', in that he embraces material asceticism and affirms his devotion to the Islamic doctrine of *Tawhīd*, which emphasises both the worship of one God and the oneness or indivisibility of God. Conversely, we might see this as an image of a Muslim ruler bent on spreading his religion and its laws through military expansion – by sword and by horse – which would be more at home in Said's history of stock Orientalist stereotypes.³⁰ Either way, the initial image of Saladin is that of a man devoted, perhaps unyieldingly, to a series of exclusively Islamic beliefs and the culture, politics and statecraft arising from them.

In a telling exchange in the second act between Saladin and his sister Sittah, however, Saladin's own judgement of other faiths is shown to be quite nuanced. Here Saladin questions his sister's outright dismissal of Christian warmongering by distinguishing between the behaviour of Christians generally and the militancy of the Knights Templar in particular: the knights, who had proven aggressive and resistant to his attempts to treaty with them, were guilty of their failings as Templars, he says, not as Christians (*Nathan*, II. 1, pp. 516–17). Later, in debate with Nathan, Saladin at first insists that all faiths ought to be easily distinguishable from each other, citing cultural markers such as diet and clothing: 'Ich dächte die Religionen [...] doch wohl zu unterscheiden wären. Bis auf Kleidung, bis auf Speis' und Trank' (*Nathan*, III. 7, p. 557), though his views again begin to change following Nathan's account of the iconic parable of the rings.

Lessing's play to speak to contemporary issues of gender, sexuality and identity in a neo-liberal, globalised world but, as in the case of Emre Koyuncuoğlu's *Nathan Schweigt*, transforming the play to compensate for the arguable lack of focus on Muslim and female voices in Lessing's original work, and by default in much scholarship. See also Kuschel, *Vom Streit zum Wettstreit der Religionen* (note 17), as a work that is resolutely dedicated to Lessing's historical engagement with Islam – albeit in defence of Lessing's Enlightenment tolerance.

²⁸ T. J. Reed, *Light in Germany. Scenes from an Unknown Enlightenment*, Chicago and London 2015, pp. 74–6.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ See Kuschel's comments on Saladin: *Vom Streit zum Wettstreit der Religionen* (note 17), pp. 252–4. See, too, Said on how European literary images of Saladin are, along with representations of the prophet Mohammed, 'boxed in' to a narrow set of functions serving Western discursive needs; Said, *Orientalism* (note 2), pp. 69–70.

In the parable, discord erupts amongst three sons, each of whom believes a ring gifted to him by their late father to be the 'true' ring, all of which signifies the mutual disputes between the three Abrahamic faiths regarding their sole access to religious truth and salvation. The judge called in to mediate in the dispute proposes the three sons should effectively enter a form of wager ('Wette'), whereby each is to prove the truth of his own beliefs to the others (*Nathan*, III. 7, p. 559). The underlying aim of the wager, though, is not for each son to prove the other rings or beliefs to be fake, but rather to live up to his own ring's ideals as best he can and so to heighten devotion to his own faith, whilst also aspiring to the 'innigste[r] Ergebenheit in Gott' that all faiths share (*Nathan*, III. 7, p. 559). Devotion to the specifics of one's own faith, teaches the parable, will also lead to an experience of unity with God and moral improvement for followers of all faiths. Nathan's narrative can be read as a finely balanced attempt to place value *simultaneously* on the notional specifics of belief and practice within each of the three religions *and* on their shared understanding of God-consciousness and broader ethical goals. Ultimately, however, the parable defers its final vision for humanity's religious destiny to a future, wiser judge, whether temporal or divine, who will replace the current judge and reveal humanity's true path to God. Arguably, the narrative compels the adherents of each of the three religions to go in peace without grappling with mutual differences of belief and remains vague about the role of all three faiths within their notional, shared future.³¹

Yet it is not so much nuanced interfaith debate, or even religion *per se* that occupies Saladin's thoughts after hearing the parable, as his own nascent thoughts on family. Von Stauffen's resemblance to Saladin's brother is mentioned repeatedly throughout the play, with the Christian character Daja commenting '[...] dass Saladin den Tempelherrn // Begnadigt, weil er seiner Brüder einem, // Den er besonders lieb gehabt, so ähnlich sehe' (*Nathan*, I. 2, p. 493). Following the parable, Saladin feels the burning need to introduce Sittah to von Stauffen, his brother's 'Ebenbild', in person so that she might see the resemblance for herself (*Nathan*, I. 2, p. 493). What truly shifts the ground for Saladin and his relationship to non-Muslims, then, is neither Nathan's teaching, nor the values of his own faith, nor religion in any sense. Rather it is the play's final revelation that Recha and Curd are twin siblings, offspring of their father Assad, Saladin's (Muslim) brother and a European Christian mother, though raised separately and in different faiths. Repeatedly, explicit reference is made to 'similarity', which refers here to physical resemblances that stem from biological, familial relationships.

³¹ See Robertson's critique of the parable, which he feels promotes a common human morality whilst reducing the 'historical and traditional basis of religion to a mere fairy story'; Robertson, 'Dies hohe Lied der Duldung?' (note 19), p. 118.

There is a scholarly tradition of examining Lessing's use of 'family' in *Nathan* in various social, psychological and cultural contexts.³² For the purposes of our discussion, though, Lessing's model of family appears monothetic in nature, as it focuses on the single trait of (presumably facial) similarity as an expression of shared familial heritage in the strictly biological sense. It does not serve to explore the other layers of cultural similarity, of both differences and commonalities, that might exist between two characters who are Jewish and Christian and who share a Muslim parent, or the implications this has for religious belief and practice and for the experience of communal belonging. Nor does it treat the adoptive, 'patchwork' family that Nathan, as a Jew, had built in order to raise Recha and the various debates this might spark on interfaith families.³³ If Lessing is attempting to derive wider symbolic capital from his representation of family and familial similarity, perhaps seeking to model a wider, inclusive human family by means of the conventionally consanguine family, then his attempt is quite flawed. His appeal to the trope of shared genetic heritage not only looks away from the religious and cultural dimensions of communal human relationships but also effectively divides and excludes in more insidious ways.

Lessing also treats more marginal Muslim characters. In Sittah, we see an informative representation of a Muslim woman. She has to listen in on many of her brother's dealings from an antechamber and can only offer advice to him on these matters in private. Yet offer advice she does, for Sittah does not conform to established Orientalist tropes of women as seldom-heard Harem dwellers. Highly perceptive, diplomatic and a keen and able chess player, she advises her brother on how to rescue his dwindling finances. She also debates with him on the shortcomings of their Christian others. Berating her brother for his apparently wilful ignorance of their flaws, she criticises Christians for deferring unquestioningly to Jesus, following his word and example solely 'Weils Christus lehrt; weils Christus hat getan' (*Nathan*, II. 1, p. 517). In one sense, she offers a

³² See Karin A. Wurst, *Familiale Liebe ist die 'Wahre Gewalt'. Die Repräsentation der Familie in G. E. Lessings dramatischem Werk*, Amsterdam 1988; Helmut Schneider, 'Geburt und Adoption bei Lessing und Kleist', *Kleist-Jahrbuch* 2002, 21–41; Eva Lezzi, 'Liebe ist meine Religion!' *Eros und Ehe zwischen Juden und Christen in der Literatur des 19. Jahrhunderts*, Göttingen 2013.

³³ Commentators of all disciplinary affiliations have pointed to the fact that, in a play which ostensibly validates the wisdom and humanity of a Jew, Nathan is problematically excluded from the interfaith family revealed at the play's end. See Adam Sutcliffe, 'Lessing and Toleration', in Robertson, *Lessing and the German Enlightenment* (note 14), pp. 205–25 (p. 219). See also Jonathan M. Hess, 'Lessing and German-Jewish culture: a reappraisal', for an alternative approach in which the 'obscuration' of Judaism is less a function of an 'empty universalism' in Lessing's work and more an attempt to 'give Jews the right to define Judaism on their own' beyond the realm of public debate; Robertson, *Lessing and the German Enlightenment* (note 14), pp. 187–90. For a more popular perspective, see Neil Rogachevsky, "'Nathan the Wise': An Ambiguous Plea for Religious Toleration", *Mosaic Magazine*, <https://mosaicmagazine.com/observation/history-ideas/2016/06/nathan-the-wise-an-ambiguous-plea-for-religious-toleration/> (accessed 9 August 2022).

classic Muslim critique of a perceived distortion within Christian thinking on the historical figure of Jesus, whereby Jesus is not merely the virtuous human and Prophet of Islam but is deified as the son of God. This, by implication, opens the faith to Muslim charges of polytheism, which jar heavily with the Islamic doctrine of *Tawhīd*. Yet her alternative view of Jesus is not really that of Issa bin Maryam, of Jesus, son of Mary, who is a God-chosen prophet of Islam, but appeals solely to the humanity of Jesus. Christians are criticised by Sittah for their blindness to how humane ('menschlich') Jesus was, and for the explicitly humanistic value of his deeds and teachings: Christians are fortunate, she continues, that Jesus also happened to be 'so ein guter Mensch' (*Nathan*, II. 1, p. 517). In Islam, Jesus is mortal and human, although he is an exceptional human, belongs to the Abrahamic prophetic succession and plays a central role in shaping humanity's spirituality and ultimate destiny. In Sittah's words, however, that exceptional quality is lost and her use of 'Mensch' reads more as an expression of secular Enlightenment humanism, than as an expression of her own religious belief.

The figure of Al-Hafi is a Muslim dervish who works as a *de facto* treasurer and intermediary for Saladin. At times played on stage as a bedraggled Bedouin wanderer, he has come to be seen as a positive representative of the Islamic tradition of Sufism and the more liberal attitudes towards non-Muslims associated with it. In his exchange with Nathan, he exhorts his Jewish friend to accompany him to live in a community on the river Ganges, which includes a group of what he calls 'meinen Ghebern' (*Nathan*, II. 9, p. 540). This refers to a community of Zoroastrians, known in English as 'Ghebers' or 'Parsees', who fled to India during the seventh and eighth centuries to escape from religious persecution by Muslims.³⁴ Rather than conflating Muslims and Ghebers, the possessive 'meinen' seems likely to refer here to the camaraderie and shared communal attitudes Al-Hafi has already established with this community.³⁵

Yet that communal vision is not without its problems. As he leaves the play at the end of the second act, tired of court politics, financial dealings and religious conflict, Al-Hafi aims both to live amongst precisely those whom his own faith had historically persecuted. Yet, in waxing lyrical about his chosen future home, he says 'Am Ganges, Am Ganges nur gibt's Menschen' (*Nathan*, II. 9, p. 540). So, is this Ganges idyll one that truly tolerates diversity and difference, a cosmopolitan community in which all live as fellow humans without surrendering their heritage? In the event, the brief passage is neither an attempt to explore the doctrinal basis by

³⁴ For an historical perspective on the Parsees, see Rustom Paymaster, *Early History of the Parsees in India from Their Landing in Sanjan to 1700 A.D.*, Bombay 1954.

³⁵ Given Lessing's knowledge of Islam, it seems unlikely that for him 'Islam was not distinct from Zoroastrianism or Hinduism'; see Robertson, 'Dies hohe Liede der Duldung' (note 19), p. 115. This is not, however, to free Lessing from criticism for subsuming faith traditions into more generalised models of human morality and community.

which a Muslim might cohabit with the other People of the Book, nor is it an attempt to evoke the possibility of Islamic societies as benevolent host cultures for a plurality of other faiths. Again, the emphasis seems to be on a community of humans who do not coexist peacefully because of similarities of belief or shared ethics derived from differing doctrines, but who resemble each other only in that they belong to a homogeneous human community – one which functions harmoniously only *because* it looks away from religious and cultural differences.

Written close together in time, though in two very different contexts, Lessing's *Erziehung* and *Nathan* represent different modes of engagement with religion: the former is a validation of the revealed religions and of their capacity to enter into dialogue with reason, the latter a human-centred, even humanistic drama critiquing religious intolerance. Yet both works have certain things in common: both present, to a greater or lesser extent, a vision in which all humanity, and by implication every culture and faith, is at least notionally represented within humanity's collective future. Both Lessing's works, in different ways, also bear witness to a subtle or less subtle obscuration of key tenets of Islamic belief and the specifically Islamic contribution that Muslims might make to that future; the essay does so by ignoring the role of Islam wholesale, the play and its parable by evoking aspects of Islamic belief, only to obscure the presence of Islam and Muslims within a wider set of moral ideals that lean towards secular humanism. It is less the object of this discussion to seek in Lessing's texts any form of what today might be termed ideological 'Islamophobia'. Of key importance is rather that, in seeking to imagine culturally inclusive, universal human communities of the future, he notionally includes Muslims whilst tacitly obscuring and ultimately excluding those specifics of Islamic doctrine and culture that might question the primacy of his own beliefs.

RE-IMAGINED FAMILIES AND SHIFTING SIMILARITIES. ISLAM AND PLURALITY IN NOVALIS

Over the last half century Novalis has, for the most part, shaken off associations of morbidity and dreamy idealism. He is seen now less in terms of the myth that was built around him and read more as the poet and polymath, Friedrich von Hardenberg (1772–1801), whose poetic practice grew from his own precociously modern, theoretical *oeuvre*.³⁶ Beginning his mature work in 1796 with a critical engagement with philosophy, specifically with Johann Gottlieb Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre*, Novalis developed a set of theoretical positions which conceived 'meaning'

³⁶ The reconstruction of Hardenberg's work in all its complexity and the evolving critical reception of it is still best seen in Herbert Uerlings, *Friedrich von Hardenberg, genannt Novalis. Werk und Forschung*, Stuttgart 1991. The historical legacy of *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* can be followed in Dennis Mahoney, *The Critical Fortunes of a Romantic Novel: Novalis's 'Heinrich von Ofterdingen'*, Columbia, SC 1994.

and 'identity' as things absent in their transcendental essence and which must be built by us, by way of compensation, as semiotic constructions within the sign systems of language. 'Poësie' is Novalis's term for an interdisciplinary practice encompassing and connecting literary fiction, scientific, political and religious writing, and one which flows from his key philosophical reflections. Ironically, Novalis's poetics acknowledge the necessity for articulating truth and meaning within language, though simultaneously thrive in demonstrating the relativity and mutability of both. 'Poësie' is marked by self-reflexive, experimental play with meaning and identity. It seeks to pursue a restless practice of changing a world we can only know through representation, by introducing into that world the representation of new possibilities. Poetic writing, for Novalis, is effectively a matter of re-imagining and re-writing the necessary fiction of being.³⁷

Such practice might appear highly esoteric in formulation and also subject-centred in execution. Yet in his notebooks of 1798 Novalis jotted down the arresting formula: 'Statt Nicht-Ich – Du' (*Schriften*, III, pp. 429–30), which transformed the weighty and apparently immutable philosophical dualism to be found in Fichte's philosophy in the pairing of 'Ich' and 'Nicht-Ich'. Here, Novalis suggests re-thinking the relationship between the self and the world at a deep ontological and ethical level: our 'world' is neither detached from us, nor is it inhabited by wholly discrete 'others'. Rather the world is itself another subject, a collective 'you' rather than a 'not-I,' populated by other, individuated selves, each of whom is a subject in his or her own right. The fellow subjects we encounter in life should not, therefore, be thought of solely in terms of their relative differences but also in terms of their relative similarity to us.³⁸ If we read Novalis in terms of his own thinking here, then we can justifiably seek fascinatingly non-binary representations of intercultural encounters in his literary fiction.

³⁷ The theoretical basis for Novalis's poetics can be found in his 'Fichte-Studien': *Schriften*, II, pp. 29–284. This is a topic on which several generations of scholars have written. For an evolutionary history of changing understandings of Novalis's philosophical groundwork, see Uerlings, *Friedrich von Hardenberg, genannt Novalis* (note 36), pp. 105–232. See also William A. O'Brien, *Novalis. Signs of Revolution*, London and Durham 1996, for a lucid and highly scholarly account of how Novalis developed a politically and socially engaged writing practice, which saw the world as an interlocking series of fictional representations that could be changed in revolutionary fashion by disseminating new fictional possibilities created in poetry.

³⁸ Critics have interpreted this fascinating formulation in a variety of ways, seeing in it the basis for a misogynistic narcissism, as in Regula Fankhauser, *Des Dichters Sophia. Weiblichkeitsentwürfe im Werk von Novalis*, Cologne, Weimar and Vienna 1997; or reading it as a prefiguration of models of mediated intersubjectivity to be found in contemporary psychoanalysis, as in Gail Newman, *Locating the Romantic Subject: Novalis with Winnicott*, Detroit 1997; or using it as the basis for an ethically grounded recognition of 'other' subjects and their communicative agency and rights, as in James Hodkinson, *Women and Writing in the Works of Novalis. Transformation beyond Measure?* London and Durham 2006, especially pp. 134–67. Hereafter referred to in the form (*Transformation beyond Measure*, page numbers).

What, though, did Novalis have to say about religion generally, and Islam specifically? As a natural extension of his poetics, Novalis's theory of religion is not found within an extended treatise on the subject, but in one of the fragments in his *Blüthenstaub* collection (1797–8). True religiosity, he contends, requires above all a mediator ('ein Mittelglied') to connect humanity to the divine. Humanity is wholly free, 'durchaus frey', in its choice of mediator, though it may not confuse the mediator with God as the mediated: such confusion he critiques as idolatry (*Schriften*, II, pp. 440–2: 73). This is a potentially broad and inclusive approach to religion and, in certain aspects, actually resonates with Islamic teaching, not least in an apparently shared prohibition of idolatry.³⁹ Conversely, though, it is entirely against Islamic principles in its permissive attitude towards religion in all its forms.⁴⁰ Perhaps, though, the question as to whether Novalis's universal theory of religion is directly compatible with Islamic theology is less important than the fact that it allows Novalis to envision a more pluralistic model of a future, multi-faith world in which both Muslims and the specifics of Islamic belief have a place.

Novalis wrote very little about Islam as a theme in itself. He did, though, think about the relationship between Christian Europe and the Muslim world. This tendency can be found in more oblique form in his address *Die Christenheit oder Europa* (1799), which has had radically differing political outlooks ascribed to it in scholarship.⁴¹ The text surveys the religious schisms and political upheavals that have driven progress throughout the history of Christian Europe (mainly the Reformation and the French Revolution), though also left its nations divided from each other and fractured internally. Yet Novalis evokes the power of religion, or rather of Romantic religiosity, as a balm to heal the wounds inflicted by history. Rather than presenting a reactionary manifesto calling for a *literal* return to a pre-revolutionary, pre-schismatic Christian Europe, however, the text calls upon readers to attend to history in its written, recorded form and to seek there '[...] Zeichen der Zeit', signs of the times that can be 'read' and interpreted in relation to the present.⁴² The implied Romantic reader

³⁹ The Islamic prohibition of idolatry can be found in the fifth and twenty-first surahs of the Qur'ān, specifically: 5:87–92 and 21:51–4, among others.

⁴⁰ The Islamic rejection of polytheism, or *shirk*, refers not only to the conscious worship of multiple gods but also to the more insidious ways in which aspects of the material world can become the fetishised object of false or misguided devotion. The basis for this belief in the Qur'ān can be found in 'Sūrat an-Nisā', specifically in 4:48 and 4:116, among others.

⁴¹ Novalis's *Europa* address has been read as a proto-fascist manifesto for a European super-state with Christian Germany at its centre, as well as a proto-leftist, anti-authoritarian tract. See Hermann Kurzke, *Romantik und Konservatismus. Das 'politische' Werk Friedrich von Hardenbergs (Novalis) im Horizont seiner Wirkungsgeschichte*, Munich 1983. See also James Hodkinson, 'Romantic Cosmopolitanism? On the Tensions and Topicalities of an Intellectual and Literary Tradition', *LIMBUS: Australisches Jahrbuch für germanistische Literatur- und Kulturwissenschaft / Australian Yearbook of German Literary and Cultural Studies*, 5 (2012), 69–90, for a reappraisal of the text as a work of Romantic cosmopolitanism with culturally inclusive, pluralistic credentials.

⁴² The particular 'sign' Novalis refers to here is the Reformation (*Schriften*, III, p. 515).

is not urged to turn back the clock of history, but to seek analogies in the past that can be transferred to the present to transform it for the better: 'An die Geschichte verweise ich Euch, forscht in ihrem belehrenden Zusammenhang, und lernt den Zauberstab der Analogie gebrauchen' (*Schriften*, III, p. 518).

The text spends much time focusing on European problems. Christianity's power to heal the divisions riving modern Europe, together with Germany's leading role in promoting this through cultural means, are both themes treated at length and in depth: 'Deutschland geht einen langsamen aber sichern Gang vor den übrigen europäischen Ländern voraus' (*Schriften*, III, p. 519). Yet Novalis also writes about the creative, restorative power of religion more broadly – the 'Zeugungselement der Religion' (*Schriften*, III, p. 523). Indeed, a 'Freude an aller Religion' (*Schriften*, III, p. 523), a joy in *all* religion, can serve as the basis for wider future reconciliations, such as those that might occur between Europe and the non-European world. Other parts of the globe are, Novalis contends, waiting for Europe to heal internally and re-establish such relations: 'Die andern Welttheile warten auf Europas Versöhnung und Auferstehung, um sich anzuschließen und Mitbürger des Himmelreichs zu werden' (*Schriften*, III, p. 524). A vision of members of all faiths as fellow citizens of a shared spiritual kingdom, whether celestial or temporal, is intended here to serve as an ideal that might steer the flow of human history back towards some form of global unity.⁴³ The question remains, though, as to how pluralistic and inclusive of distinct belief systems this spiritual kingdom is for Novalis, and what position and in what form Islam and Muslims come to reside there. It is a question he does not resolve explicitly in *Europa*, though it is one he picks up again in *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*.

This work by Novalis has been read as an Early Romantic 'Bildungsroman' which seems to explore a linear pattern of male subjective development, seeking to achieve this through numerous (Romantic) retreats into subjectivity and narcissism.⁴⁴ It has also, though, been read as a different form of narrative, which begins with the various awakenings experienced by a single, male subject, but then depicts his gradual introduction into a series of inherently socialising and de-centralising encounters which expose him to the views and experiences of diverse characters and cultivate in him a receptive, non-oppositional relationship with the world.⁴⁵ The novel's opening dream sequence, the iconic dream of the blue flower,

⁴³ See Pauline Kleingeld, 'Romantic Cosmopolitanism: Novalis's "Christianity or Europe"', *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 46/2 (2008), 269–84.

⁴⁴ Having been deeply inspired by the archetypal 'Bildungsroman' of the age, *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* (1795–6), Novalis came to criticise Goethe's work for what he saw as its privileging of economic over aesthetic concerns. His positing of an alternative, poetically mediated set of relationships and ideals for his protagonist already marks something of a break with the emerging genre. See Uerlings, *Friedrich von Hardenberg, genannt Novalis* (note 36), pp. 444–59.

⁴⁵ See Hodkinson, *Transformation beyond Measure?* (note 38), pp. 24–56 and 168–243.

for instance, has been seen as a template for ongoing introspection and self-gratification, though also precisely as an interruption of narcissistic dream narratives: Heinrich is woken by the mother's voice at a moment of incomplete communion with the flower (*Schriften*, I, p. 197). This, too, can be seen to shape the journey that is to follow. Heinrich, an apparently prototypical Romantic subject, seeks throughout to relive and complete this interrupted communion, developing a receptive relationship to the world of other subjects, listening to their voices and stories and allowing them to co-determine the process of his development.⁴⁶

Heinrich's journey becomes, in part, an allegory for exploring and reinventing relationships with a sequence of 'others' who are distinct from, though never entirely unfamiliar to or disconnected from the self. This exploration includes instances in which the young German poet re-imagines his relationship, and arguably that of his own faith and culture, to Islam and to Muslims. Like Lessing, Novalis places the action of his unfinished novel within a re-imagined medieval period, set once again against the backdrop of the Crusades. In the novel's fourth chapter (*Schriften*, I, pp. 229–39), Heinrich lodges in a castle and meets with a company of veteran Knights Templar. Returning from a crusade, they bring with them two spoils of war: boastful songs of victory, which present the Muslim forces occupying Jerusalem as 'wilde Heyden' (*Schriften*, I, p. 231) defiling Christ's grave by occupying the city, and a female captive slave named Zulima. Zulima is first revealed through her song, which recalls her lost homeland in exotic form, with its myrtle trees and 'krystallne Quellen' (*Schriften*, I, p. 234). Unsurprisingly, she has been read as a token Oriental, an exoticised female, or a colonised subaltern.⁴⁷

During this encounter, though, the stark binaries of occident and orient begin to blur and do so at Zulima's behest. She criticises her Christian captors for having triggered what she calls a 'fürchterlichen, unnützen Krieg' (*Schriften*, I, p. 237) with the Muslim world, which 'auf immer das Morgenland von Europa getrennt hat' and most significantly appears futile, given that Muslims also recognised Christ as 'einen göttlichen Propheten' (*Schriften*, I, p. 237). This statement is pivotal. Once more, this is not the Jesus Christ of Christian teaching, though neither is it Jesus the good human, judged against European Enlightenment paradigms. Zulima refers to an overtly Islamic Jesus, who is a chosen prophet of God, but not the son of God, and who is mentioned and venerated often in the Qur'ān, yet is not *al-masih*, the Messiah. Here, Zulima posits an ideal relationship in which distinct religions can come to coexist. She imagines a situation in which

⁴⁶ See Alice Kuzniar, 'Hearing women's voices in "Heinrich von Ofterdingen"', *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*, 107/5 (1992), 1196–1208. See also Hodkinson, *Transformation beyond Measure?* (note 38), pp. 134–67.

⁴⁷ See Kamakshi Murti's entry on Zulima as an 'Exotin', *The Feminist Encyclopaedia of German Literature*, ed. Friederike Eigler and Susanne Kord, Westport, CT 1997, pp. 133–5.

objects of belief and veneration common to both traditions can, at one and the same time, be subject to dispute and serve as the basis for agreements or overlaps in belief and practice. This ideal, then, calls upon differing religious communities to move beyond a starkly binary relationship, to retain their beliefs and yet, at the same time, relinquish sole proprietorship over them. Giving an example, Zulima emphasises that, had the tragedy of Crusades not occurred, the Muslim rulers of Jerusalem would have extended access and hospitality to Christian pilgrims visiting Christ's grave in the city. In so doing, she imagines a future form of shared habitation that functions not because it disregards religious differences but is made possible precisely by its recognition of them. Her vision is founded upon the similarities exhibited by both faiths and neither conflates the beliefs of either, nor fails to grapple with their mutual distinctiveness (*Schriften*, I, p. 237).

We do not receive much more insight into the details, diversity or nuances of Islamic doctrine here. However, this apparent 'vagueness' in Novalis is not the result of doctrinal specifics being supplanted by humanistic ideals. Perhaps tellingly, in his *Logologische Fragmente* Novalis writes in support of vagueness by way of an explicit, quintessentially Romantic critique of Lessing's Enlightenment aesthetics and the form of cognition or truth disclosure he felt they implied: 'Lessing sah zu scharf und verlor darüber das Gefühl des undeutlichen Ganzen, die magische Anschauung der Gegenstände zusammen in mannichfacher Verdunklung' (*Schriften*, II, p. 537: 53). Lessing's clarity of vision, runs the argument, effectively blinded him to the infinite complexities that existed beyond empirical truths yielded up by reasoned thought – complexities that appear only as an 'unclear' or 'indeterminate' whole.⁴⁸ Here, the 'whole' of the topic at hand arguably applies to the many and varied aspects of both faiths about which Novalis remains vague, which are implied but not mentioned, and which effectively become a negotiating (and negotiable) space within which more overt differences of belief can prevail, or new similarities of belief explored. This, significantly, is presented to us through a form of sermon, given by a Muslim woman.

The issue of family arises here again at this point, however. Zulima likens Heinrich to her brother:

Euer Gesicht dünkt mir bekannt, laßt mich besinnen [...] euer Anblick erweckt in mir eine sonderbare Erinnerung aus frohen Zeiten. O! mir ist es, als glicht ihr einem meiner Brüder, der vor unserem Unglück von uns schied, und nach Persien zu einem berühmten Dichter zog. (*Schriften*, I, p. 236)

⁴⁸ Novalis feels that Lessing's writing fails to gesture symbolically to the infinite possibilities existing beyond rational propositions made in thought and language. On this he writes further: 'Lessings Prosa fehlt oft an hieroglyphischen Zusatz' (*Schriften*, II, p. 537: 52).

Dennis Mahoney has already explored the various ways in which Novalis poeticises the idea of family resemblance he took from reading Lessing's play.⁴⁹ Novalis re-imagines the idea of familial resemblance in the episode with Zulima. Called forth from memory, it appears to her *as if* Heinrich resembled one of her brothers: 'als glicht ihr einem meiner Brüder' (*Schriften*, I, p. 236). Novalis's treatment of resemblance does not present itself as an immutable fact, grounded solely in physical biology and simply awaiting discovery and disclosure. Although Zulima begins by describing an inkling of facial resemblance, her observation is also indeterminate or 'fuzzy'. It is contingent upon her own view of Heinrich in a single moment, expressed carefully in the subjunctive mood and, in effect, an act of 'reading' or 'association' by which she imagines or constructs some form of interpersonal similarity. She also explores the differing contexts in which the two young men might be thought to exhibit similar traits. Although they are not related by blood, the two become imaginary brothers of a sort, united through a different, if not wholly articulated, set of shared characteristics and equivalent, if not wholly identical, experiences. Having left the Holy Land for Persia, presumably to study under a great Persian poet, Zulima's brother forms a kind of Oriental counterpart to Heinrich, who is by way of analogy *en route* to his mentor in Augsburg. Perhaps it is in their shared characteristics as poets that the two resemble each other in Zulima's eyes, or perhaps other characteristics play a role. The text remains unresolved in this matter. Either way, the familial ties Zulima presents here are not only polythetic, in that they appear to be grounded on diverse and shifting shared characteristics, but they also reflect a different kind of modernity, in which identity and human relationships are fluid, self-reflexive and, at least in part, things of our own imagining.

This form of familial similarity is in keeping with Novalis's own explicitly formulated definitions of 'Ähnlichkeit', which can be found in his fragments and notebooks. There, similarity is the product of a creative act that lies at the heart of the poetic process, 'Der Witz ist schöpferisch – er *macht* Ähnlichkeiten' (*Schriften*, III, p. 410). This also underpins Novalis's poeticised theory and practice of natural science, in which he juxtaposes different forms of organic and inorganic matter in processes of experimental classification.⁵⁰ Indeed, in his unpublished *Logologische*

⁴⁹ See Dennis Mahoney, "Stages of Enlightenment": Lessing's *Nathan der Weise* and Novalis's *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*, *Seminar: A Journal of Germanic Studies*, 23/3 (1987), 200–15. Referred to hereafter in the form ("Stages of Enlightenment", page numbers). Mahoney makes a convincing reading of Novalis's poetic treatment of familial relations as a metaphor for the 'brotherhood of man' (p. 208), an idea Novalis inherited from Lessing though sought to transform into a poetic process in *Ofterdingen*. Mahoney also notes that Novalis read *Nathan* in 1800 and that he playfully bandied around metaphors of the shared 'familial' heritage of religions in his letters to more orthodox Christian friends.

⁵⁰ Novalis was influenced by his teacher A. G. Werner (1749–1817) at the Freiberg Academy of Mining. Werner developed a system of classifying organic and inorganic materials according to

Fragmente, which contain wide-ranging reflections on the use of poetic language in different disciplinary contexts, he even reflects explicitly on family resemblances:

Alle Ideen sind verwandt. Das *Air de Famille* nennt man Analogie. Durch Vergleichung mehrerer Kinder würde man die Eltern Individuen deviniren können. Jede Familie entsteht aus 2 Principien, die Eins sind – durch ihre und wider ihre Natur zugleich. Jede Familie ist eine Anlage zu einer unendlichen individuellen Menschheit. (*Schriften*, II, p. 540: 72)

Family resemblance, referred to here in French, is a kind of ‘analogy’, a relational form which compares groups and individuals and retains their mutual distinctiveness, rather than conflating them or subsuming them into a homogeneous collective. Families are, writes Novalis, governed by two opposing yet united ‘principles’. One is a strictly unifying principle, which asserts shared traits and expresses in one sense the ‘nature’ of family as belonging together, whereas the other asserts the mutual differences which ensure individuality through at least partial dissociation from the familial group. Although Novalis reflects explicitly here on how the parentage of childhood could be ‘divined’ through the comparison of several children, these connections are not reduced to any one characteristic or any single form of relationship, physical or otherwise, and are not immutable, empirical facts. Whether he refers to the genetic diversity within biological families, or to a more figurative form of family governed by different forms of social and cultural connection, it is the heterogeneity of this model of family, its unity in plurality, that serves as an ‘Anlage’, a seed or cell, for a model of humanity comprising an infinite number of individuals. All of this is possible, of course, within the realm of poetic writing practice, in which Novalis flits between different models of family. Indeed, the entire spiral of reflection on family in this fragment begins with a typically Romantic-poetic assertion that all ideas are ultimately related in some way.

It is in this Romantic-poetic vein that Zulima imagines her familial connection with Heinrich. The similarities governing their bond reach beyond black-and-white dualisms of biology, ethnicity and faith, yet resist collapsing into an entirely homogeneous notion of humanity in the process. Heinrich and Zulima’s brother, like Christianity and Islam generally, share certain traits, but are also distinguished by key differences. Crucially, though, the act of perceiving, interpreting and attaching

perceived similarities in their external characteristics, as opposed to using reductivist practices that explained phenomena by penetrating into their underlying structures. Novalis developed his own experimental poetics based on arranging phenomena into ‘Reihen’ in his notes for a Romantic encyclopaedia, *Das Allgemeine Broullion* (1798), for instance. On this, see Uerlings, *Friedrich von Hardenberg, genannt Novalis* (note 36), pp. 185–9.

meaning to these similarities and differences, and, in turn, the project of working out what these complex patterns imply for future relationships between cultures and faith communities, is presented as open-ended and ongoing. It involves both the conscious re-imagining of the existing status quo and the creation of new forms of relating.

Yet the representation of Zulima and her relationships still has its problems. If she stands for Islam, then we see little further elaboration on Islamic doctrine. Also, whilst she sings her song in a notionally 'gebrochner deutscher Aussprache' (*Schriften*, I, p. 234), the perfectly formed conditional clauses and particular philosophical terms she uses in dialogue with Heinrich resemble quite closely Novalis's own theoretical discourse. In a male-authored text, her voice will always be the imagined construct of the author and there is a particular danger here that Novalis reduces her to a mere mouthpiece. Indeed, the novel might be seen generally to fail to ascribe to her even a notional sense of agency, as a speaker, as a woman and as a Muslim. As we have seen, within Novalis's model of religion, observance becomes deeply idiosyncratic, a matter of personal conviction, choice and, frankly, a matter of aesthetics. So, as a Muslim, Zulima might be seen to sit problematically within or proselytise on behalf of an overtly un-Islamic religious relativism. In the event, however, Novalis does not have Zulima simply reiterate his aestheticised religion. Instead, as we have seen, she presents a deeply significant, culturally plural Jesus and does so in a way which resonates both with Novalis's theory of religion and her own Islamic beliefs.

Of course, the novel's journey resumes, and Zulima is left behind as the German poet continues on his way. Yet, in leaving her, Heinrich wishes in some way to become 'ihr Retter' in the future (*Schriften*, I, p. 238), a task that appears not only to involve her rescue from captivity, but the restoration of the lost unity between Europe and the Muslim world for which she longs and which Novalis had hinted at in *Europa*.⁵¹ In the notes for completion of the novel Novalis left behind on his death, he envisaged a strange series of episodes taking place beyond temporal, spatial and cultural boundaries, in which figures from the novel's different narrative frameworks would mingle and commune in an idealised space (*Schriften*, I, pp. 335–70, esp. pp. 340–8). In this purely poetic realm, which Novalis called the 'geistige Gegenwart', Zulima can return. Hers is one of many voices present, engaging in playful games of identity reinvention with Heinrich and the other figures. Her identity blurs with that of Heinrich's beloved Mathilde and the figure of Cyane, who replaces Mathilde in Heinrich's affections after her death. Together, these three women become part of an idealised 'Dreyeiniges Mädchen' (*Schriften*, I, p. 342). Perhaps it is not Zulima's idealisation that is problematic here, as Heinrich, too,

⁵¹ On the novel's template for future progress towards a restored unity between all cultures, see again Mahoney, "Stages of Enlightenment" (note 49), esp. pp. 208–13.

is idealised and shown to die, to return from death, and to morph into new forms. Of greater concern for our discussion is the fact that, in this idealised and ostensibly inclusive realm of poetic play, Zulima's presence as a Muslim remains vague – or perhaps, here, more uncertain. Ultimately, then, it seems that even Novalis's religious pluralism shows its limitations.

CONCLUSION

The allegory of familial relationships, together with the connections and similarities it implies, has an instant appeal. It seems to cut across the deep historical fissures apparent between faiths and communities and to offer powerful, appealing alternatives to the older postcolonial models of 'self' and 'other', 'Occident' and 'Orient', which do as much to entrench those divides, as they do to critique them. Yet, by making Muslims 'familial', both the texts considered here provoke new critical debate about how and to what extent Muslims and non-Muslims are alike, raise critical questions on the nature of inclusivity, and highlight the pitfalls and opportunities arising when imagining new ways in which faiths can coexist. Do these texts induct Muslims into humanistic families of various sorts and Islam into a pantheon of world cultures, only to obscure the specifics of Islamic belief and problematise a pluralistic, multi-faith human future? Or do they find ways of brokering or uncovering new relationships which connect faiths and cultures, whilst preserving specificity and allowing room for differing perspectives and even for disagreement? In fact, neither of these two texts is reducible to either of these two poles.

Nathan, a much-beloved work of world literary importance, often marshalled against the forces of intolerance and racism, seems to build a future that erodes and obscures in the way suggested. *Ofterdingen*, often seen as an esoteric, uncomfortably narcissistic work of German Romanticism, certainly retains some of the exoticism of conventional Orientalism, yet models a more nuanced, perhaps more inclusive form of unity within plurality. When considering the historical reception of these two works, this might seem something of a reversal, or at least a shift in fortunes. Nonetheless, the ongoing value of both texts stems in part from the fact that, as a pairing, they co-articulate an ongoing challenge. It is the challenge of defining the basis for the shared co-existence of differing faiths within culturally complex societies – a challenge that is as much part of our own modernity, as it was of theirs.