Plato’s early dialogue the *Euthyphro* and Lessing’s final drama *Nathan der Weise* share much in common. Most importantly, each work attempts to define holiness. Socrates’ interlocutor Euthyphro offers a series of definitions. His first is dogmatic and subjective. Euthyphro asserts that holiness is acting as he does: “the holy is what I am now doing” (3d). For Socrates this definition does not capture the essence or form of piety; it is a mere instance. In his second attempt Euthyphro reaches a universal level: holiness is doing what pleases the gods. Socrates responds that the gods are at variance with one another. They quarrel and disagree. Whereas Euthyphro had earlier asserted—sensibly enough—that the holy and unholy are opposed (7b), they become under these conditions interchangeable (8a). Since what is pleasing to some gods is not pleasing to others, the same things will be holy and unholy. For the sake of argument Socrates agrees there may be situations where a particular action is pleasing to all the gods, but he then asks, is what all the gods love an adequate definition of holiness. What is the cause and what the effect when one considers what is holy and what god—loved: “Is what is holy holy because the gods approve it, or do they approve it because it is holy?” (10a). For Socrates the answer is clear: what is holy is holy or virtuous not because the gods approve it, but rather the gods approve it because it is holy. Holiness transcends the potentially relative concept of what is god—loved. Unless the gods are bound to love what is already holy, what they may love at any given moment becomes a matter of happenstance. Euthyphro next attempts to define holiness as that part of justice which has to do with our relations to the gods, not men, in particular with our service to the gods. Socrates underscores this final definition as well. Since service and care are rendered in order to improve the welfare of the object served, what advantages could we possibly offer the gods? Since they are perfect, they do not need our services.

Each of Euthyphro’s definitions corresponds to a significant moment in Lessing’s play. Euthyphro’s first definition parallels the positions of Daja and the Patriarch: these characters make blind, unphilosophical claims for the validity of their own religion. Related to the disagreements of the gods is Lessing’s depiction of the difficulties of defining holiness in a world that has more than one religion. Sittah, meanwhile, criticizes the Christians who follow Christ’s commands not because his commands are good but because Christ is their God. Finally, Nathan’s critique of Recha, as she worships an “angel,” who, as an angel, could not possibly need her service, is structurally analogous to Socrates’ final rebuttal. By focusing on Lessing’s variations of the definitions proposed in Plato’s dialogue, I will try to shed new light on the major themes of the play as well as contribute to a definition of holiness.
Daja blindly asserts the validity of her religion over competing ones. Confident, like Euthyphro, that she knows the truth, Daja is possessed of a missionary zeal. Just as Euthyphro refers to the Greeks' traditional beliefs about the gods (5e–6d), so does Daja fail to propose arguments for the validity of her religion: she cites traditional Christian dogma and narrates the lives of Christian heroes in her attempts to persuade Recha of Christianity's exclusive claim to truth. Nathan continually admonishes Daja for her careless use of words and, therefore, ideas. Certainly more dangerous than Daja, but similar in his confidence and blind faith is the Patriarch. The Patriarch refuses to enter a discourse. He scorns theoretical debate, the weighing of an issue for its own sake. He wants to know whether what the Templar tells him is «ein Faktum oder cine Hypothes» (IV, 2, 133):

Denn ist der vongetragne Fall nur so
Ein Spiel des Wirtes: so verlohnt es sich
Der Mühe nicht, im Emsi ihn durchdenken.
Ich will den Herrn damit auf das Theater
Verwiesen haben, wo dergleichen pro
Et contra sich mit vielen Beyfall könnte
Behandeln lassen. (IV,2,141–47)

Lessing places this self-cancelling commentary into the unknowing mouth of the Patriarch, thus reinforcing the audience's lack of identification with him. The Patriarch demonstrates his un-Socratic spirit when he shows concern not for the essence of justice but solely for its appearance as law. Like Euthyphro, the Patriarch is confident enough in his knowledge of holiness that he is ready and eager to take another's life. He does not consider that his standards may be arbitrary and his application of them even more so. Again like Euthyphro, the Patriarch believes that he is a special messenger of God -- the Patriarch alone knows why the Templar was saved (I,5,581–83) -- and that his ideas on religion (and religious politics) are above criticism. In a telling slip the Patriarch refers to himself as an angel.

The parable of the three rings attempts to solve the problem of quarreling deities and competing religions. As with religion, the ring is passed on from one generation to the next. In order to treat all his children equally, one eventual owner of the ring decides to have two copies made, such that the original ring is no longer distinct -- not even to the owner himself. After the father dies, his three sons quarrel over who has the true ring. The conflicts that arise among the family members tell us that the ring alone, not to mention family bonds, does not suffice for proper

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1 II,2,67–73. I cite Nathan by Act, Scene, and line number according to the Lohmann/Müncker edition (LM). Other quotations are given by volume and page number.

2 While the Patriarch admits of no conversation dealing in conjecture and possibility -- his interest is power, not truth -- it is precisely the realm of possibility to which Nathan appeals when he convinces Recha that the Templar is not an angel. Schröder writes: «Die Sprache tritt nicht als realitätsbezogene Mitteilung, sondern, ganz aus den eigenen verantwortungsfähigen Möglichkeiten lebend, als ein reines Mittel der Verzückung auf» (253).

3 IV,2,103. There is a subtle allusion here to Pastor Goeze. See LM I, 87. The best commentary on the Patriarch comes from Seeba, 99–109.
behavior. Recognizing that the sons battle and that the ring is allegedly magical, the judge tells the plaintiffs that the genuine ring must have been lost. He challenges each one to prove to the others that his own ring is genuine. The brothers should do this by acting justly toward one another. The ring is not the cause of good behavior; instead one can make a case for the validity of one's ring (or religion) through the goodness of one's actions. Just acts are primary, history and religion secondary.

Nathan responds to Saladin's challenge for a justification of Judaism by suggesting that his own religion is in fact identical, yet different. Nathan's position is not as absolute as he claims. Islam is common in the sense that both Judaism and Christianity are common in the sense that both religions base their validity on tradition, but Islam implies that no religion is a basis for absolute religious truth. The one relative argument he does give for following family tradition is based not on the primacy of history or blood but on the simple idea that in the family one sees many just acts. For another family member one does good deeds intuitively. In the family and in religion one learns love; ideally, this love would extend beyond the immediate family of (or religion) and reach mankind as a whole. Lessing's major concern is not one's choice of the correct religion (man's relationship to God) but, as with Socrates, justice (man's relationship to man). In the ring parable the universal definition or form of holiness is nothing other than human virtue. A religion should be embraced not simply because it has been passed on from one's parents but because the religion is conducive to the development of just acts. The principle of justice rather than divine ordinance or religious orthodoxy should guide our actions and determine what is holy.

The specific test for holiness in the ring parable becomes the question, whom do two of you love the most. The sons' subjective responses tell us that the ring (or traditional religion) does not suffice. Moreover, implicit in both the judge's advice and the earlier statement that the ring was always passed along to the most loving son is the idea that with love the ring is superfluous. The Friar insists that wherever a choice is necessary, love is more important than religion (IV,7,635–37). The ring parable limits the claims of each religion (history is not an argument for universal truth), but it solidifies through its stress on human relations the claim of each religion within its own tradition. The ring (or traditional religion) has a role insofar as it helps one to love; but because traditional religion is subpersonal, it can also motivate unjust acts.

4 In his short essay »Über den Beweis des Götes und der Kräfte« Lessing himself argues in a well-known passage that accidental historical truth, i.e., tradition, can never be the basis of necessary truths: »Zufällige Geschichtswahrheiten können der Beweis von notwendigen Veranlassheiten nie werden« (LM 13.5). The truth of any religion, including Christianity, functions independently of its historical foundation.

5 I would use such a position to limit Angers' otherwise persuasive account of the role of family in Nathan.

6 Alluding to the advice of the judge in the ring parable, Bennett suggests that »Nathan's aim is tension and conflict among orthodoxies, not reconciliation« (77–78). He thus discerns the play's final cosmic scale. The judge, however, wills a compromise out for the sake of discord but with the purpose of expanding the realm of just acts, ultimately in the spirit of reconciliation. A harmony of this kind is not to be equated with emptiness. See Fuhrmann, 83–84. Bennett mistakenly assumes that Lessing's stress on striving eliminates the possibility of systematic perfection; this leads him into the kind of error his essay embraces. As soon as one recognizes a distinction between systematic and material perfection (see Hölder), the apparent tension between striving and truth is overcome, as is the absurd notion that truth implies not the sublation of error or the desire to resolve newly discovered errors but the underestimating of one's truth as the service of an arbitrary embrace of cyclical error.

7 See Bölker, 166–167.

In the parable religion is characterized above all by tradition (blood relations or inheritance) and obedience. As characters such as Assad and the Templar develop, they break religious boundaries; others, like Daja and the Patriarch, who blindly adhere to these boundaries are ironized. In the parable the role and obedience alone does not constitute a criterion for goodness. Obedience meanwhile is mocked via several of Nathan's exchanges and the Patriarch's commands to the Friar and Templar. In the name of obedience to God the Patriarch would have the Templar spy on Saladin and eventually murder him. Tradition and blind obedience are the only objects of Socrates' critique in the Euthyphro. Though Euthyphro doesn't view blood as a guide to his actions, traditional definitions of religion remain primary in his mind. In completing his first definition Euthyphro relies on material examples unsupported by argument or reason. While disagreeing with what some men take to be holy, Euthyphro appeals for part of his proof precisely to what men believe and agree on. He cites divine precedents revealed to us through human convention and simultaneously pins himself against other standards of human convention:

Does not mankind believe that Zeus is the most excellent and just among the gods? And these same men admit that Zeus shackled his own father [Cronus] for swallowing his [other] sons unjustly, and that Cronus in turn had gelded his father [Uranus] for like reasons. But now they are enraged at me when I proceed against my father for wrongdoing, and so they contradict themselves in what they say about the gods and what they say of me. (56–56a)

Definitions derived from convention or common opinion will suffer from inconsistencies and contradictions wherever people differ. The very self-contradictions in public opinion that enraged Euthyphro should also warn him from being dependent on, rather than critical of, tradition.

Related to the insight gained via the ring parable, namely that piety is subordinate to goodness, and tradition to truth, is Sittah's critique of the Christians who do the good not because it is good but because Christ tells them that it is good:

Ich Stohis: Christen seyn, nicht Menschen. Denn
Selbst das, was, noch von Ihrem gutter han,
Mit Menschlichkeit den Abverlaufen wird,
Das lieben sie, nicht weil es menschlich ist;
Wels Christus lieb, wels Christus hat gehab. (11,1,81–85)

As in the ring parable so here with the Christians, truth is accepted »auf Treu und Glauben«. Sittah's position corresponds to Socrates' argument that holiness is determined not by what the

8 A variant of this argument for absolute goodness over convention stems from Nathan when he responds to the Templar's reliance on tradition by suggesting: »Nur Tempelherren? sollten bloß? und bloß! Weiβ es die Ordnungsgruppen, in denen Sie leben?« (11,5,484–85).

9 11,1,88. Cf. III,7,481–82.
...the love of God to be kept intact. Lessing's most general argument against the conclusions H. S. Reimarus draws from his philological investigations is unmistakably similar to the position Sittah adopts in its critique of the Christians. Lessing writes at the beginning of his Counter-Chrissian: "Die Religion ist nicht wahr, weil die Evangelisten und Apostel sie lehren: sondern sie lehren sie, weil sie wahr ist." (LM 19, 249) After quoting and defending the above statement in his Anmata, Lessing goes so far as to argue: "Auch das, was Gott lehret, ist nicht wahr, weil es Gott lehret wird; sondern Gott lehret es, weil es wahr ist." (LM 13, 127).

Euthypnus's final definition of piety - doing service to the gods - is actually the first definition that Lessing's play proposes and then undermines. The Templar saves Recha from a fire, but she transforms his deed into an act of divine intervention. She worships him as an angel and thanks God, not the Templar. "Wir wollen wir uns freuen, und Gott, / Gott loben! ... Ich also, / Ich hab' einen Engel / Von Angesicht zu Angesicht gesehen; / Und meinen Engel" (1,2,186-187, 196-98). In viewing her rescue as an act of divine intervention, Recha implies that she herself...
is divinely, irrationally privileged, one of a chosen few. Her pious thanks become an elevation of the self at the expense of others. Like Euthyphro she sees herself as a favorite of the gods. Nathan counters:

Stolz! und nichts als Stolz! Der Topf
Von Eisen will mit einer silbern Zange
Gern aus der Gluth gehoben seyn, um selbst
Ein Topf von Silber sich zu dunkeln. (1,2,293–96)

Recha’s seemingly innocent and unintended pride is not unrelated to the arrogance of those who— with only history as their argument—claim exclusive truth for their own religion. Recha’s sense of divine selection implies not only a false view of her own worth but an incorrect reading of divinity. As does Socrates, Nathan argues that angels and other deities are perfect and do not require our service:

... dem Wesen, das
Dich rette, es sey ein Engel oder
Ein Mensch, dem möchtest ihr, und du besonders,
Gern wieder viele große Dienste thana?
Nicht wahr? – Nun, einem Engel, was für Dienste,
Für große Dienste könnt ihr dem wohl thun? (1,2,302–07)

He continues:

... Er wird
Nicht fäls durch euer Fasten; wird nicht reich
Durch eure Spenden; wird nicht heillicher
Durch eure Entzückchen; wird nicht mächtiger
Durch eure Vertraun. Nicht war [sic]? Allein ein Mensch! (1,2,313–17)

While deities are self-sufficient or ‘vergönnt’ (1,2,323), humans need other humans. Nathan suggests that Recha’s otherworldly orientation serves as a block to ethical behavior. It is useless:

Ihr könnt ihm danken; zu ihm seufzen, beten;
Könnt in Entzückchen über ehr Zerschmelzen;
Könnt an dem Tage seiner Feyer fasten,
Almosen spenden. – Alles nichts. (1,2,308–11)

While Recha turns her vision inward, she views herself as privileged, thanks the gods who do not need her thanks, and ignores the man who does. Otherworldly belief is not only misdirected and useless, it would seem to derive from laziness. It demands far less than the rigors of philosophical reasoning or the efforts of human action:

... Begünstigt du aber,
Wie viel andächtig schwärmen leichter, als
Gut handeln ist? wie gern der schlaffste Mensch
Andächtig schwärmen, um nur, – ist er zu Zeiten
Sich schon der Absicht deutlich nicht bewußt
Um nur gut handeln nicht zu dürfen? (1,2,359–61)

Lessing himself adopts a similar view in «Das Testament Johannis», where he argues that it is easier to accept Christian dogma than to practice Christian love (LM 13,16), a tension structurally reminiscent of the brothers’ dispute in the ring parable.

Nathan’s argument against Recha’s mistaking the Templar for an angel relates to his belief in daily miracles, the idea that miracles are not inexplicable, irregular events but natural and common, though nonetheless miracles. Nathan does not deny that he stands in awe of the events that led to Recha’s miraculous rescue: he calls her rescue, along with Saladin’s preliminary act of freeing the Templar, a miracle (1,2,272–74). But he hastens to take away from Recha the illusion that she alone is privileged. Miracles occur «ständiglich» and not just for Recha but «für dich, und deinesgleichen» (1,2,211). Nathan’s contention with Recha lies not with her view of the events as miracles or her standing in awe of the events but rather with the acknowledged source of each miracle. Daja and Recha find the events unbelievable, miraculous; there they would project their origin into a transcendent realm. Nathan counters, why can’t such acts be explained naturally. He offers imminent reasons for the seemingly unbelievable and asks: «Ey, Daja! Warum wäre denn das so? Unglaublich? Doch wohl nicht – wie’s wohl gescheht – / Un like etwas noch ungläublicher? / Zu glauben?» (1,2,256–59). After providing a list of possible explanations, Nathan concludes mockingly: «Wo steckt hier das Unglaubliche? – / Ey freilich, wisse Daja,
war’s für dich? / Kein Wunder mehr? und deine Wunder nur / Bedürf ... verdienen, will ich sagen, Glauben?» (1,2,266–69). Nathan does not relinquish his awe before the miracle, he simply suggests that natural explanations suffice:

... Warum
Es ganz natürlich, ganz alltäglich klingt,
Wenn dich ein eigentlicher Tempelpriester
Gerettet hätte: soll’s es darum weniger
Ein Wunder seyn? – Der Wunder höchstes ist,
Daß uns die wahren, echten Wunder so
Alltäglich werden können, werden sollen. (1,2,213–19)

Good deeds are miracles; we should stand in awe of them. Indeed not only should we recognize them as miracles but we should—as the passage suggests and as the ring parable emphasizes—work to make such miracles of goodness everyday events17. The idea that humans can direct their own fate—guided by their knowledge of goodness—runs through the play to the unraveling of the comic plot. Not an otherworldly deus ex machina or an angel but a human, Nathan, resolves the riddles that stand before the characters and the audience18. This has symbolic significance as well: the spirit of Nathan, characterized by wisdom and goodness, leads the various characters to a position of harmony.

Throughout Nathan humanity and reason contrast with the sphere of otherworldly faith and the concrete tenets and prejudices of specific religions. Reason is juxtaposed, first, with

17 Müller, 57.
18 Lessing’s belief in providence is met with an equally strong humanism. Among the interpreters of Lessing’s theology Bolte makes one of the strongest cases for Lessing’s humanism, Witsell, who focuses on inconsistencies and ambiguities in Lessing’s theological writings, summarizes a number of the diverse views.
irrationality and, second, with blind adherence to tradition. Serving mankind is opposed to worshiping the gods and enhancing one’s own subjectivity. Modesty contrasts on both sides with pride. Only with reason can one advance to a universal definition of holiness. Even an intuitive, subrational insight into truth — such as Recha’s vision of the harmony of all three religions — is limited as a subjective vision. Nathan must dissolve Recha’s harmony in order to lead her from «Wahn» to «Wahrheit», from her otherworldliness, irrational orientation to a sense of humanity (11,162). One might contrast the realm of rational truth with the irrational leap of faith and with specific religious traditions according to the following table:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Otherworldliness</th>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>Tradition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>holiness as service to the gods</td>
<td>holiness as service to mankind (holiness = justice)</td>
<td>holiness as the development of one’s own religion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pride: the sense that one’s own self has been divinely privileged</td>
<td>modesty: a willingness to consider the validity of diverse religious traditions</td>
<td>pride: belief in the truth of only one’s own inherited position</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>restricted truth: truth as a singular and momentary vision</td>
<td>universal truth: the recognition and evaluation of competing positions</td>
<td>restricted truth: prejudice vis-à-vis competing truths</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>heteronomy: dependence on the whans of the gods</td>
<td>autonomy: reason as a guide for the acts of men and gods</td>
<td>heteronomy: dependence on the whans of the gods</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In Act I Recha and Daja provide us with examples of behavior associated with otherworldliness. Strict adherence to tradition is exemplified by virtually every character — even Nathan is momentarily bound by the traditional, nonrational view of the family — but most prominently of course by the Patriarch. Most of Nathan’s actions illustrate the middle column of reason, and Nathan is followed in this direction by Recha, the Templar, Saladin, and Sitlah. Recha learns to think critically of competing traditions but nonetheless to recognize their various virtues. The Templar is happy to find in Nathan not a fanatic attached only to his own tradition but an enlightened thinker who respects traditions other than his own. Saladin espouses a principle of tolerance (IV,4,309–10) and finds himself humbled before Nathan’s wisdom (III,7,540–41). Finally, Sitlah prefers goodness to godliness — at least in her critique of the Christians.

One senses in Nathan not only the subordination of religious tradition and otherworldliness to justice and humanity but also an attempt to preserve the value of religious tradition (insofar as rational insights are intuitively passed from one generation to the next) and the sense of awe associated with religious faith. Nathan’s reservations apply only to blind trust in tradition — ancestral tradition can be reliable if it is checked against a universal definition of justice — and to an awe that is falsely directed beyond mankind. As with the Greeks, so for Nathan, eusebeia or awe is not restricted to divine excellence. One can freely stand in awe of human accomplishments, revere the daily miracles.

In every instance — from Recha’s worship of an angel to the parable of the rings — Nathan redifnes holiness as justice. The Greek eusebeia, literally right reverence, is not restricted to what one might otherwise call piety or holiness. It is the knowledge that allows us to venerate what is truly awesome and abhor what is awful. With his identification of holiness and justice, Lessing follows Plato in spirit and letter.

Besides the three common definitions of holiness and the general proximity in each work of holiness and justice, several other Socratic elements support the view that Plato’s Euthyphro may have influenced Lessing’s Nathan or that it is at least useful to study the two works together. One might begin by alluding to similarities in the historical circumstances out of which the two works arose: Socrates’ search for a clear definition of piety is recorded in the context of his awaiting his trial for denying the gods of Athens and corrupting the young by teaching them his impiety. Lessing, too, was defending a definition of holiness that stood in opposition to virtually all contemporary views of religion. Lessing, like Socrates, was accused by his contemporaries of impiety.

Moreover, numerous general Socratic ideas are found in Nathan. As if to express his solidarity with Socrates’ precision with language and his continual questioning, Lessing opens his play by presenting Nathan’s exactitude vis-à-vis Daja’s use of the word «endlich». Throughout the play we see examples of Nathan’s precision with language, for example, his use of «müssen» vis-à-vis Al-Hafi or of «sollen» vis-à-vis the Templar. In addition, we as readers are confronted with questions. The first act, rather than offering the reader a traditional exposition, presents more questions than answers: What is Daja’s secret? Why should «the wise Nathan» present her with gifts in order to keep her silent? By what way of what virtue is Recha Nathan’s daughter? These Leerstellen are clarified in the course of the extended exposition, but the invitation to and impetus toward a questioning reading have already begun. In the ring parable Nathan invites Saladin, and, one might say, the reader, to draw the conclusions. The ring parable seems to present an aпорia, much like the Euthyphro. What is the precise role of tradition vis-à-vis truth? of family vis-à-vis love? The aпорia, in true Socratic fashion, is not a suggestion of the impossibility of truth, but an invitation to the reader to seek the solution him or herself. With answers provided, the reader is not forced to search. Without answers, intellectual inquiry becomes futile, arbitrary, and ridiculous. To avoid these extremes Nathan leaves the parable open; the answer is not given, but suggested. It is not as though the answer disappeared — like the original ring — but that the power of the original ring — again as in Nathan’s parable — can be reached only through the efforts of its wearer. Given the philosophical stance of Socrates or Lessing it would be coun-

19 Versenyi, 1–9.

20 Besides the Euthyphro see, for example, Protagoras, 331b; Gorgias, 507a–b; Theaetetus, 176b–c; and Laws, 663b–d.

21 For an overview of Lessing’s disagreements with orthodoxy, eclecticism, pietism, and deism see Ölmüller, 43–68.

22 Cf. Versenyi’s illuminating comments on critics who embroil themselves in contradictions by reading the aпорia in the Euthyphro as final, 13–16.
that knowledge is virtue. Though Nathan is called the wise, Daja states: «Vor allen aber / Hät’s [sein Volk] ihn den Guten nennen müssen» (1.6, 782–43). In a sketch for the play's final scene Lessing has Saladin state: «Du sollst nicht mehr Nathan der Weise, du sollst nicht mehr Nathan der Kluge – du sollst Nathan der Gute haben» (LM 22/1, 113). For Socrates, as for Nathan – here specifically where he agrees with Al-Hafi's reasoning, to know the good is to be compelled to do the good: «Warum [sic] man ihn recht bittet, / Und er für gut erkennen: das muß ein Derwisch» (1.3, 386–87). Lessing himself by the way embraces such rational necessity when he writes: «Ich danke dem Schöpfer, daß ich muß; das Beste muß» (LM 12, 298).

Recha and Al-Hafi are not Nathan's only interlocutors. Two prominent goals of the Socratic elenchus are confession of ignorance and knowledge of self. Saladin's unwillingness to assume the role of judge fits the first of these two, while Recha's and the Templar's eventual recognition of their familial ties symbolizes not only knowledge of their relationship to the world but also knowledge of themselves. Nathan, like Socrates, leads his partners to such positions of recognition.

Family relations are central to Nathan. In the parable religion is handed down through the family, and reverence toward one's father is very much an element of piety. More significantly, the comic plot revolves around mistaken family relationships. Finally, even figures removed from family life such as the Patriarch (or arch-father) and the Friar (or brother) are defined through the rhetoric of family relations. Family plays a prominent role in the Euthyphro as well. Euthyphro is on his way to court to try his father for murder. Socrates expresses shock at this news, challenging Euthyphro that he must have quite a secure definition of bosion if he is to risk the impiety of charging his father with a crime. In Lessing's work a father is tried as well – at least symbolically – namely the false original father or Patriarch26. From the Gorgias – and from veiled suggestions in the Euthyphro itself – we know that for Socrates family members or blood relations are indeed subject to justice.27 Despite offering a model example of filial piety, Lessing does satirize the impostor father; moreover, Nathan's parable demonstrates that family members do not always act justly toward one another. Though family members will in most cases naturally show love to other family members, subjectivity and arrogance can interfere. When intuitive family goodness breaks down, reason must take over. As with Plato, family may inspire, but is nonetheless subservient to, goodness. Nathan's own development as a hero consists in his overcoming a false emphasis on ancestry and mere blood relations, and with this an overcoming of his dishonesty, however well-intended, vis-à-vis Recha and the Templars28. Here, as in the ring parable, reason and love supersede nature and family.

When Nathan recounts his personal suffering to the Friar, the reader automatically registers an allusion to Job's unwarranted anguish. But rather than awakening from this suffering to the fear of God and a recognition of his omniscience and transcendent power, Nathan turns to the

23 I agree with Göbel, 188, and Schlüter, 73, who adopt a position opposed to Denetta, 146–47, and argue that the "vulgale Münze" represents not tradition but truth. The "nuev Münze" introduces a split between essence and appearance, as in the break between knowledge and right opinion.
24 Socrates in contrast did not change for his services; he lived in poverty. See, for example, Euthyphro, 3d, and Apology, 23b–c, and 31b–c. Claiming ignorance, Socrates had his listeners earn their wisdom with the use of their own intellects.
26 To cite a few sources: Charmides, 164d–176b; Laches, 194d–195d; Gorgias, 460b–c; Protagoras, 352b–c; Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, 1165b23–27.
28 See Gorgias, 482c–d, and Euthyphro, 4a–b, 9a–b.
29 See Schweitzer.
God of reason\textsuperscript{30}. Socratic wisdom looms larger than the Biblical tradition. Moreover, in fulfillment of the ideas inherent in the ring parable, Nathan fuses his thoughts not on history, tradition, or even the claims of his own subjectivity, but on the question how might he act more justly. Rather than bowing to an arbitrary God of power, Nathan bows to a god-father who is himself a bedfellon to reason. Nathan's will is not subservient to God's; it is identical with his\textsuperscript{31}. In transforming his hatred into love, Nathan adheres to the central Socratic insight that it is better to suffer than to commit injustice\textsuperscript{32}. Like Socrates in the prayer he publicly offers in a Platonic dialogue, Nathan prays for wisdom and self-improvement\textsuperscript{33}. In viewing the strength of Nathan's wisdom vs. evil, one is even reminded of Lessing's ironic statement on Socrates' trial and death: «Alein was vermag die Boshit gegen einen Weisen?» (LM 14, 156).

The Euthyphro is as much a drama as Nathan is a dialogue. Not designating his work as either a tragedy or a comedy, Lessing chose as his subtitle «Ein dramatisches Gedicht.» In truth Nathan contains both comic and tragic elements, very much like Plato's Euthyphro and very much in the spirit of Socrates' veiled statement at the end of the Symposium concerning the ultimate unity of the two genres. Nathan is obviously comic in its appeal to the intellect and its happy end, as critics from Schiller to Hofmannsthal have noted\textsuperscript{34}. Additional comic elements surface whenever Nathan plays with the shallowness of his protagonists' opinions or their use of language. Moreover, characters such as Daja and the Patriarch are, like Euthyphro, alazons such as one finds in Old Comedy: they are paradigmatic examples of the shortcomings of tradition even as they view themselves as special and separate. Daja sees herself as a missionary; the Patriarch sees himself as an angel of God. They are certain of their positions, like the brothers who are sure they possess the true ring, but their knowledge is pretentious, their self-confidence warranted; they are impostors. To use a Socratic formulation: «They think themselves superior in virtue, when they are not»\textsuperscript{35}. The brothers who battle with one another before the court in an attempt to prove their claims to the one ring represent, of course, the warring religions. Their claims to exclusivity might be viewed not only as comic posturing but as examples of hamartia or tragic weakness. Peripeteia is at work here as well. The actions of the brothers, like those of the warring nations, recall back on themselves. Insofar as the brothers refuse to love one another, the rings work backwards, an indication, first, of self-love, and second, of the self-cancellation of their own claims to owning the true ring (or religion). The brothers are in need of anagnorisis, recognition of the original power of the ring, but this insight is blocked by their self-righteousness and confining claims. The absurdity of their positions is revealed to Saladin and to the reflective reader, bringing with it catharsis or a purification of right ideas and a therapy of right conduct\textsuperscript{36}. While hamartia, peripeteia, anagnorisis, and catharsis are tragic concepts, they make their way into Lessing's drama not primarily as part of the action but, more importantly, as elements of the path to truth. Not surprisingly these same tragic elements belong to the Socratic method: an interrogation of views, specifically those of the impostor, leads to the interlocutor's confusion and the recognition of inner contradiction; the self-cancellation of the interlocutor's position eventually gives way to an awareness (on the part of the interlocutor or reader) of the need for purification or to purification itself\textsuperscript{37}.

III

The fact that Lessing shares much in spirit with Socrates has not escaped previous interpreters of Lessing. Helmut Thielicke, in a phrase later applied by Klaus Heydemann to Nathan, calls Lessing a «Socrates redivivus.» Peter Heller opens his reading of Nathan by calling Lessing a «spiritual kinman of Socrates»\textsuperscript{38}. This association of Lessing with Socrates is not pure chance. Lessing had a thorough knowledge of Greek literature and philosophy. His knowledge of Aristotle is apparent even to the novice student of Lessing, but Lessing had also read widely in Plato, a philosoper who was undergoing a renaissance toward the end of the eighteenth century\textsuperscript{39}. Plato plays a role in many of Lessing’s writings – from Lessing's praise of the Socratic method in his Briefe, die neueste Literatur betreffend (11. Brief) to the obvious connection, first noted by Friedrich Schlegel, between the Socratic dialogues and Ernst und Falk\textsuperscript{40}. In his writings Lessing mentions the following dialogues of Plato: the Apology, Phaedo, Menexenus, Gorgias, Protagoras, Symposium, Republic, and Laws\textsuperscript{41}. Though Lessing never cites the Euthyphro by name, this dialogue would certainly have been of interest, first and foremost, for its discussion of holiness, and second, as part of the tetralogy of the last days of Lessing. Lessing would probably have read the tetralogy given his interest in Socrates' trial and death\textsuperscript{42}. Moreover, Lessing did read the Apology and the Phaedo, which together with the Euthyphro

\textsuperscript{37} Verena, 19.

\textsuperscript{38} Thielicke, 17. Heydemann, 101. Heller, 3. Though Thielicke writes of Lessing's theology and Heydemann and Heller of Nathan, none of the critics mentions the obvious parallels to the Euthyphro. The only references to the Euthyphro date back to the beginning of this century. See the short pedagogical studies by Kohl and Schneider. These, however, cannot be said to overlap with my investigation in any significant way.

\textsuperscript{39} See Wundt. On the popularity of Socrates in the eighteenth century see Bühr.

\textsuperscript{40} Schlegel, 195.

\textsuperscript{41} LM 15. 436 – Anmerkungen über alte Schriftsteller.

\textsuperscript{42} LM 8, 168. 177 = Briefe, die neueste Literatur betreffend, nos. 63 and 64.

\textsuperscript{43} LM 8, 310–11 = Sophokles.

\textsuperscript{44} LM 11, 486 = Lehm. von den ewigen Streifen, and elsewhere.

\textsuperscript{45} LM 8, 314 = Sophokles.

\textsuperscript{46} LM 15, 134 = Collectanea

\textsuperscript{47} LM 10, 181 = Hamburgische Dramaturgie, no. 99, and elsewhere.

\textsuperscript{48} LM 10, 170 = Hamburgische Dramaturgie, no. 91.

\textsuperscript{49} See his Gedenken über die Herrnw. (LM 16: 55–61, 160–61) and the section of his Briefe, die neueste Literatur betreffend. Note also his discussion of Diderot's Der Tod des Sokrates in Das Theater des Herrn Diderot, which can be found in volume 11 of the Petersen/Ohhausen edition. See esp. 258–60, 325–29.
and Crité constitute the tetralogy, as Lessing himself well knew. Since part of the tetralogy had been read, it is not too bold to assume that Lessing might have read the entire work. That the Euthyphro would never have passed through Lessing's hands is highly unlikely also given the fact that Lessing was a remarkable reader and made extensive use of literary and philosophical sources. That the influence of the Euthyphro on Nathan can be argued for with only circumstantial evidence does not of course diminish the value of a parallel analysis of the structures and arguments of the two works.

IV

What consequences does this connection have beyond the recognition of a possible influence? By reading Lessing in the light of Plato we have certainly become more attentive to the proximity of holiness and justice. Holiness or piety is not the specific virtue of carrying out acts that please the gods, nor does it consist in adherence to ancestral tradition; holiness is virtue or goodness as such. The ring parable teaches us the Socratic lesson that the just man is by definition pious. If the gods are, as Plato and Lessing believe, necessarily good, we can rest assured — whatever attributes specific traditions may assign to the gods — that good acts will be pleasing to them. Recha cites Nathans' position: "Das Erbe und das Wissen über Gott / So ganz und gar nicht abhängt," (III, 24f.). Plato's Euthyphro passes over into a discussion of holiness and justice; so, too, Nathan's ring parable turns our attention away from theology and toward ethics. What is god-centered and divine gives way to humanistic considerations. Euthyphro fails to define holiness as a relationship to ancestral tradition or to the gods. Nathan avoids as much. For Nathan, like Socrates, holiness is human, not divine, therapy. The first scenes of Nathan with Nathans' discussion of miracles, awe, and angels — sometimes considered unwieldy and superfluous — are shown to be intrinsically connected to the play's attempt to redefine the holy as what is venerable and good in human relations.

51. On Lessing's voracious reading habits see Heller, 5-6. Lessing's use of sources is documented — if in the most bizarre and often trivial way — in Albrecht, who says he handles initial references — never got as far as Nathans in his attempt to show that the "Diss. von Lessing in der... der..., Diebstahl" (Bd. 1, 76).
52. If we are to find unconvincing the claim that Lessing probably read the Euthyphro, one would want to know how Socrates and Lessing could have arrived at such similar positions. Here I refer the reader to Huiritz's insightful analysis of cyclical structures in the history of philosophy. Socrates and Lessing occupy similar positions in the two cycles that culminate in Plato and Hegel.
53. By reading theaporia at the conclusion of Plato's dialogue as genuine, one might place a disclaimer on the above statement. None of Euthyphro's definitions sufficiently explains man's relationship to the gods. The Euthyphro could thus be said to anticipate an Aristotelian structure that becomes self-evident in the Hellenistic era: the separation of religion from ethics and the transference of the para thesis doctrine to physics. One might, however, read the aporia in a different manner: because the gods are subordinate to holiness, i.e., to justice, ethics subsumes religion. Verstâb's analysis moves in this direction.
54. See Demetz, 164 and 164. Note by the way that the discussion of miracles in Nathan does not focus on the obscure theological-historical debate (see Uber den Begriff des Geistes und der Kraft) regarding actual miracles vis-à-vis reports of miracles in establishing faith.

55. See, for example, Angress.
56. In the spirit of the Socratic dialogues and in tune with the conclusion of Nathans' view of love and reason as interrelated, cf. Pritz, 276.
58. See Vanne, 134-50.
59. On similarities between Nathans and the judge see Atkins, 264.
60. Hegel writes insightfully: "Das Verhältnis von Kindern zu Eltern nämlich baute auf der Einheit im Natürlichen, das Bündnis des Ehelebenes und der Ehefrau dagegen mißl.; als durch die Hass und das häßliche Wesen, die noch nicht aus bloßer natürlicher Liebe, aus Blasen- und Naturverwandtschaft herkommn., sondern aus bewußter Neigung entspringt, und dadurch der freien Selbstzweck des selbstbewußten Willens angehört. ... Der Begriff und das Wesen von der Substanzlücke des ehrlichen Lebens ist etwas Spätere und Tieferes als der natürliche Zusammenhang von Selbst- und Anden und macht den Schritt des Staats als der Realisierung des freien, vernünftigen Willens aus" (345-59). In Nathans the passage from consciousness to natural bonds via the relationship of Recha and the Templar is a deepening of the
choosing to move beyond tradition by creating his own family (III, 8, 627-36). Nathan's adoption of Recha functions at a level of consciousness equal to his earlier marriage. Recha herself is neither compelled nor deceived into thinking of Nathan as her father; nature and the appearance of blood eventually give way to freedom and consciousness. Though Nathan shows us that emotions can act as catalysis for good deeds and for moments of insight, reason still has priority.65

Nathan's struggle toward reason in his relationship with Recha is a form of holiness, a *therapeia* aimed not at divine but at human improvement. And it is holy, too, in the sense of being a kind of *hypéreptikê*, the subservience of one part of the self to another, the subordination of the subrational and arbitrary to rationality and thus at one and the same time mastery of self and service to the self. Nathan's *therapeia* and *hypéreptikê* are very much in line with Socrates' implicit humanization of the concept of holiness proposed by Euthyphro. Rather than denying the subrational or arguing for a split, Lessing's reason operates with regard for the demands of our desires, inclinations, and emotions, without denying them or giving way to them. The ring parable does not deny the value of religion or tradition but solidifies it in its harmony with justice. Nathan's natural inclination to be a father finds genuine fulfillment in his rational fatherhood. Lessing does not underscore the dualism of natural and rational motivation. He does not sever the two parts of man; rather, he subordinates one to the other and in this way harmonizes them.

V

Beyond the detailed analysis and the questions of influence and consequence lies the final topic of the differences between the *Euthyphro* and *Nathan der Weise*. These can be broken down into three areas: those relating to differences between philosophy and literature; those that hinge on Lessing's integration of contemporary concerns; and those that underlie Lessing's change in the sequence of definitions originally presented by Euthyphro.

Although Nathan is clearly a drama of ideas, it includes an element of action lacking in Plato's dialogue. The focus of Nathan is not ideas as such but the relationship of ideas, specifically of definitions of holiness, to the ways in which humans interact. Analogous to this distinction is Socrates' rigorous demand for an enlightened definition of holiness vis-à-vis Lessing's natural and a demonstration of Lessing's respect for it; Nathan's passage meanwhile from seemingly natural fatherhood to a conscious and freely chosen fatherhood (along with Recha's act of choosing Nathan as her father) displays the power of rationality and freedom in a form independent of marriage. This respect for the natural together with the desire to extend consciousness and freedom to other spheres should be seen in the context of the play's final portrait, in which family ties are symbolically extended into the social sphere. Family will pass over into the state either with the disruption of the family (the judge decides the dispute among the brothers) or with the elevation of the family (the mutual embraces at the end of Nathan could be said to symbolize the passage from irrational bonds to rational agreements). Family bonds are constituted by natural love; the unity of the state on the other hand is formed through rational laws that are known. Only through freedom and consciousness are familial, traditional, national, and religious boundaries superseded (aufgehoben). Nathan, with its account of the passage from nature to reason, points toward such a synthesis.

61 See Whitney.

62 It is in this context that I would like to assert agreement with Angress. See also Scott-Pflorenzentz.

benevolent acknowledgment that those who follow right opinion are also good. The Friar is not greatly ironized. Tradition, where it does not stand in conflict with reason and love, is quickly upheld. Although Lessing recognizes in his theoretical essays the supremacy of reason and the absolute nature of goodness, he tends in Nathan to finitize reason and ethics and move toward a humanism void of any metaphysical background. The stress in Nathan on humanity and autonomy represents an advance over the heteronomous positions the play undercuts, but to establish the correct criteria for autonomy, one still needs a *priori* principles. It is not possible to found morals only on model human relations, one needs an idea of human relations, i.e., a philosophical structure. Lessing's embrace of humanism not only serves as an impetus to a specific dramatic action and a counterforce to otherworldliness, it can also undermine the need for philosophical structure. Plato, who exhibits in his works, including the *Euthyphro*, a fine feeling for Socratic humanism, takes the stress on good actions a step further and reflects on the grounds of goodness and the metaphysical structures of intersubjectivity. Both the *Euthyphro* and Nathan adopt circular structures. The circularity of *Euthyphro* upholds the need for continued reflection. The movement in Nathan takes us from Recha's vision of unity to its reality; this reality within the fiction is of course itself an aesthetic projection. The final scene invites the reader to make this utopia a reality beyond the fictive world.63 On a more literal level the play's first lines introduce the themes of separation and reunion; the play then ends with the silence and symbolism of physical embrace. In sum, Lessing's work is more aesthetic and less philosophical than the *Euthyphro* in the following threefold sense: it represents ideas through action; it is less rigorous in its demands for conceptual clarity, argumentation, and first principles; and it offers a symbolic illustration of the good society.

Related to Lessing's focus on human behavior is his concern with tolerance, an issue of singular importance in eighteenth-century Germany.64 While there is much at stake for Socrates personally in his trial, from the inadequately self-conscious perspective of the Athenians very little is at stake. This of course is the irony of the *Euthyphro* and the *Apology*. From the perspective of Socrates (and Plato) it is not Socrates who is on trial but the Athenians and their religious and moral tradition. Lessing and his contemporaries were aware of religious tension and conflict within a single city or state in a way that the Athenians were not. The *Euthyphro* discusses conflicting deities within one tradition; Nathan focuses on conflicting traditions as a whole. Supplementing Lessing's awareness of direct religious conflict and the resulting stress in his writings on tolerance is his enlightenment vision of harmony. The final scene presents us with a unity beyond religious and national boundaries. The only disquieting element is the background knowledge that the religious wars are resuming (V, 2, 71–73). Socrates' conflict is more tragic. Though the *Euthyphro* does not portray Socrates' tragedy, it points toward the irreconcilable conflict between the traditional, conflict-ridden, and self-canceling religion of Athens and Socrates' strict moral consciousness. While Lessing's play is directly optimistic, Socrates' tragedy is optimistic only when one recognizes that though the good man does not survive, he continues to do the good - even when he knows that he will suffer for it. It is an optimism deeply

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63 See Fütter, 251.
64 See Fuler, 262–63.
65 See Scholz, esp. 11–23.
shaded by tragedy. Even Nathan's Job experience is not tragic in this way: not only does Nathan survive but his suffering can hardly be seen as the necessary consequence of his virtue.

Finally, Euthyphro's last definition of holiness as service to the gods is the first definition introduced in Nathan. By privileging Nathan's critique of a concept of holiness that would have us direct our ministry beyond the present, Lessing emphasizes—even more than Socrates—the importance of humanity vis-à-vis transcendence. Plato tells us that the gods are perfect and do not need our service. Lessing stresses that man is imperfect and does need our service. In the parable, too, Nathan stresses human relations. The brothers, not the gods, stand in conflict, and the solution to their quarrel has little to do with accepted notions of piety. The focus on humanity also applies to the play as a whole. Where Socrates speaks of conflicting deities, Lessing portrays armies that fight one another in the name of tradition. Socrates arrives at conclusions similar to Nathan's but by way of a discussion of the gods; Lessing's play and the questions it raises have less to do with religion as such than with humanity, and in this spirit the play has justly been considered the prologue to German Klassik.

VI

My essay has tried to shed new light on Nathan and the questions it raises by way of a comparison with Plato's Euthyphro. The play's didactic elements, the role of familial relations, the association of education with dialogue, the relationship between what is god-loved and what holy, the apparent tension between tradition and reason, the synthesis of comic and tragic structures, and above all the suggestion that an inquiry into the nature of divinity becomes a study of (human) virtue, all take on new dimensions in the context of the comparison with Plato. Plato's and Lessing's views on holiness or right reverence, on what is awesome and venerable, wholesome and prerequisite for the excellent life, share much in common. The common essence allowed us to explicate the nature of holiness, in particular its relation to justice; the distinctions allowed us to show how Lessing reformulated Plato's definitions to create his own unique literary work.

Works Cited

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66 See Fichtbogen, 168.