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Reimarus and the Religious Enlightenment: His Apologetic Project

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Abstract

Intellectual history abounds with writers who were celebrated figures in their own time but who are scarcely remembered today; whereas others emerge from obscurity to become canonical figures in their disciplines. Hermann Samuel Reimarus (1694 – 1768) does not quite fit either model: he was a respected scholar in his own lifetime, and as other contributors to this issue demonstrate, he was certainly not forgotten. But his posthumous reputation, whether as innovator or infidel, has often been narrowly conceived, focused as it was on (literally) fragments of his work.¹ In this article I shall attempt to do three things: 1) contextualise the renewed interest in Reimarus for eighteenth-century intellectual history; 2) foreground the robust natural theology he promoted in his lifetime; and 3) show the continuities between that positive programme, and some of Reimarus's more famous writings attacking Christianity.

1: The Historiographical Context

Renewed interest in Reimarus is especially apparent within the context of a vibrant field of Enlightenment studies: that phase of early modernity when everyone agrees that significant changes were initiated in the intellectual, socio-political, and spiritual life of Europe (and beyond),² but where there is widespread disagreement over exactly what those changes were, when they occurred, and by whom they were enacted.³ One discernible trend in the field is a move away from canonical

¹ The *Fragmente* are contained in vols. 8 and 9 of Wilfried Barner et al (eds.), *Gotthold Ephraim Lessing Werke und Briefe* (12 vols.), Frankfurt am Main: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1989 – 2004.

² In Jonathan Israel's astounding series of works on the Enlightenment he tracks the progress of Enlightenment thought into India, China, Japan and Russia: see especially his *Democratic Enlightenment: Philosophy, Revolution and Human Rights*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011, chaps. 19 – 22.

³ Whereas Israel conceives of the Enlightenment as a primarily intellectual enterprise, variously defused within particular social contexts, cultural historians such as Robert Darnton have emphasised the 'bottom up' nature of historical change and the social processes which generate and transmit ideas: see the landmark article 'The High Enlightenment and the Low-Life Literature of in

writers, with a smattering of fringe figures for colour and context.⁴ Recent scholarship has turned this method on its head: the 'fringe' has taken centre stage.⁵ There are many reasons for this: the law of diminishing returns has certainly been at work, a limiting principle which afflicts all disciplines bound by a canon. But there was also an increasing realisation that the task of illuminating a period of history is not well served when it is understood primarily through the prism of its most illustrious writers, not all of whom were as influential in their own time as they are today. The aim of some scholars working in the new wave of Reimarus studies has been to pluck him from the fringes and relocate him to the centre of eighteenth-century European thought.

The Life and Reputation of Reimarus

Born in the harbour city of Hamburg, Reimarus received a stellar education. He attended the prestigious *Gelehrtschule des Johanneums*,⁶ and then the *Akademische Gymnasium* where he was instructed by Johan Albert Fabricius (1688 – 1736),⁷ one of the greatest classical scholars of his age.⁸ The universities of Jena and Wittenberg provided Reimarus with learning environments to develop his facility in the academic disciplines which would inform his theological enquiries: ancient languages and philosophy.⁹ Reimarus never matched the scholarly achievements of his illustrious teacher, Fabricius, but he was elected professor of Oriental languages at his alma mater (the *Gymnasium*) and produced distinguished work in text criticism.¹⁰

Pre-Revolutionary France', *Past and Present: A journal of Historical Studies*, no. 51, May 1971, pp. 81 – 115. This article was followed by major books which fleshed out his historiographical programme.

⁴ An example of this would be Peter Gay's *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation* (2 vols.)—*The Rise of Modern Paganism*, New York: W. W. Norton, 1966 – 1969.

⁵ From their own very different perspectives, both Darnton and Israel have contributed to this shift.

⁶ See Amut Spalding and Paul Spalding, *The Household Accounts of the Reimarus Family of Hamburg, 1728-1780* (vol. 2 of 2), Leiden: Brill, 2015, p. 1168.

⁷ Reimarus's relationship with Fabricius was deepened through marriage to his daughter, Johanna Friderike in 1728 (see *ibid*, p. 1168).

⁸ Erik Petersen, *Johann Albert Fabricius: en Humanist i Europa* (2 vols.), Copenhagen: Kongelige Bibliotek, Museum Tusculanums Forlag, 1998.

⁹ See Charles Talbert, editorial Introduction, *Reimarus: Fragments*, Ralph S. Fraser (trans.), London: S.C.M. Press, p. 2

¹⁰ Reimarus's greatest achievement in his lifetime was a monument to his relationship with Fabricius: an edition of works by the Roman historian Lucius Cassius Dio Cocceianus, a project initiated by his late mentor: see *Dio Cassius*, Hamburg, 1737.

Reimarus' sporadic fame (or infamy) since his death has for the most part rested on his authorship of the incendiary materials at the centre of the *Fragmentenstreit* (fragment controversy) orchestrated by G. E. Lessing between 1774 and 1778. More specifically, he has been revered (or reviled) as the author of the final fragment and its seminal contribution the quest for the historical Jesus.¹¹ This dimension of Reimarus's legacy is covered elsewhere in this issue, but it is relevant to emphasise that the fragments were extracted from a vast manuscript which ranged over the topics of revealed and natural religion, with a view to defending the integrity of the latter while decrying the social consequences of zealous commitment to the former. This *Apologie oder Schutzschrift für die vernünftigen Verehrer Gotte* was only published in full in 1972,¹² and we still have neither a critical German edition nor an English translation. Some of the recent re-evaluations of Reimarus have challenged over-estimations of the originality of his reconstruction of Christian origins,¹³ but most have been concerned to highlight other aspects of his work, and in doing so to demonstrate the range of Enlightenment contexts with which he can plausibly be associated with, whether as friend or foe.¹⁴

Religious Enlightenment

'There were many philosophes in the eighteenth century', wrote Peter Gay, in his erudite and beautifully crafted study, 'but there was only one Enlightenment.'¹⁵ Gay's work remains a rich source of knowledge for the period, but the notion of a single, more or less unified intellectual movement of Enlightenment, is almost

¹¹ See Reimarus, *Vom dem Zwecke Jesu und seiner Jünger*, in Barner (ed.), *Lessing Werke* (vol. 9), pp. 277 – 311; in English, Talbert (ed.), 'Concerning the Intention of Jesus and his Teaching', pp. 61 – 153.

¹² See Gerhard Alexander (ed.), *Apologie oder Schutzschrift für die vernünftigen Verehrer Gottes / Hermann Samuel Reimarus* (2 vols.), Hamburg; Frankfurt: Insel, 1972.

¹³ See my own 'The Road to Reimarus: Origins of the Quest for the Historical Jesus', in Keith Whitelam (ed.) *Holy Land as Homeland? Models for Constructing the Historic Landscapes of Jesus*, Sheffield: Phoenix Press, 2011, pp. 19 – 47; and Mauro Pesce, 'Per una ricerca storica su Gesù nei secoli XVI-XVIII: prima di H.S. Reimarus', *Annali di Storia dell'Esegesi*, 28/1, 2011, pp. 433 – 464.

¹⁴ An important work here was Wolfgang Walter's (ed.), *Beiträge zur Reimarus-Renaissance in der Gegenwart*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht Vandenhoeck, 1998'. More significant internationally is Martin Muslow (ed.), *Between Philology and Radical Enlightenment: Hermann Samuel Reimarus (1694-1768)*, Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2011; and Ulrich Groetsch, *Hermann Samuel Reimarus (1694-1768) Classicist, Hebraist, Enlightenment Radical in Disguise*, Leiden, Brill, 2015.

¹⁵ Gay, *Enlightenment* (vol. 1), p. 3. A critical engagement with the theological oeuvre is Dietrich Klein's *Hermann Samuel Reimarus (1694-1768): Das theologische Werk*, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007.

certainly broken beyond repair. Although there were precedents for the acknowledgement of multiple 'Enlightenments' in early twentieth-century scholarship, the tide turned in an emphatically pluralistic direction in the late twentieth century.¹⁶ And so we have the Enlightenment in different national contexts;¹⁷ we have distinctions between traditions of radical and moderate Enlightenment;¹⁸ and we have seen a surge in historiography on religious Enlightenments:¹⁹ Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish.²⁰ The intellectually secularising narratives of earlier historiography are being corrected by the reinstatement of orthodox religious traditions and their pro-Enlightenment factions. But we should not allow this important corrective to marginalise the genuine theological commitment for those who, for whatever reason, could no longer affirm the traditional articles of faith in their received tradition. Deists, Arians, Socinians, and other dissenters from orthodoxy were not simply heretics who had 'not lived long enough' to become atheists:²¹ they had a spiritual and moral integrity of their own.²²

2. Reimarus as Natural Theologian

¹⁶ For a distillation of the trends see Margaret Jacob and Lynn Hunt, 'Enlightenment Studies,' in Alan Charles Kors (ed), *Encyclopaedia of the Enlightenment* (vol. 1 of 4), Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 418 - 430.

¹⁷ See Mikulas Teich and Roy Porter (eds.), *The Enlightenment in National Context*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981,

¹⁸ Israel makes sustained use of this distinction, especially in (see n.2), but especially in *Enlightenment*

Contested: Philosophy, Modernity and the Emancipated on Man, 1670 - 1752, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006.

¹⁹ The religious origins of the Enlightenment was a thesis explored by Hugh Trevor Roper long before it was fashionable in 'Religion, the Reformation and Social Change', *Historical Studies IV: Papers read before the Fifth Irish Conference of Historians*, G.A. Hayes-McCoy (ed.), London: Bowes & Bowes, 1963, pp. 18 – 44.

²⁰ Perhaps the most important recent study is David Jan Sorkin, *The Religious Enlightenment: Protestants, Jews, and Catholics from London to Vienna*, Princeton, New Jersey; Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2008.

²¹ This thought is typically attributed (without citation) to Denis Diderot, for example in Walter Isaacson, *Benjamin Franklin: An American Life*, New York: Simon & Shuster, 2003, p. 85. I have found no reliable contemporary source, but the quip may have morphed out of a conversational exchange reported by Diderot between David Hume and d'Holbach at one of the latter's legendary social gatherings: see Letter to Sophie Volland, 06 October 1765, in George Roth and Jean Varloot (eds.), *Diderot, Correspondence* (vol. 5 of 16), Paris, 1959, pp. 134 – 135.

²² Pocock has criticised stadial versions of the decent (or assent) from these positions to thoroughgoing atheism in 'Enthusiasm: The Anti-Self of Enlightenment', *Huntington Library, Quarterly* vol. 60, No. 1/2, 1997, pp. 7 – 28.

Earlier scholarship tended to account for Reimarus's religious odysseys from orthodox Lutheran to deistic rationalist by way of an epistemology inherited from Christian Wolff (1679 – 1754) and the biblical scholarship of the so called 'English deists'.²³ This philosophical and theological context remains an important component in any account of how Reimarus came to author one of the most profane works of biblical criticism in the modern era.²⁴ But more recent scholarship has insisted on the importance of another creature of eighteenth-century intellectual culture: the polymathic historian combining primary source scholarship with the study of realia to illuminate the past. Of course there is no necessary connection, no inevitability, about the passage from antiquarianism to hostility to revealed religion. But unlike his mentor Fabricius, it does seem that the more Reimarus sought to lay bare the facts of the ancient Near East, the less he felt able to affirm the historicity of foundational biblical narratives.²⁵ But whatever served as the principle agent of change in his religious perspective, his theological priorities were already clear when he published *Die Vornehmsten Wahrheiten der Natürlichen Religion* (1754),²⁶ and it is here in that we really begin to see the emergence of Reimarus as both a polemical and constructive theologian.

The Apologetic Project

While showing no interest in defending the concrete truth claims of Christianity, and declaring that 'a wise man will neither expect nor desire Providence to work miracles on his behalf',²⁷ he positions himself against a rising tide of materialism,²⁸

²³Strictly speaking, these writers were neither all English nor deists, in the sense of 'denying *all* forms of revelation and biblical authority'. This classic definition of deism goes (at least) as far back as Samuel Johnson's *A Dictionary of the English Language*, vol. 1 of 2 London, 1755) sv..

²⁴ See Israel, 'The Philosophical Context of Hermann Samael Reimarus' Radical Biblical Scholarship', in *Philology and Radical Enlightenment*, p. 183 – 200.

²⁵ See Muslow, 'From Antiquarianism to Bible Criticism?', in *Philology and Radical Enlightenment*, pp. 1-39.

²⁶ It is interesting to note a) the number of German editions this ran to (seven by 1798), and the relative speed of its translation into English: *The Principal Truths of Natural Religion Defended and Illustrated, in Nine Dissertations, Wherein the Objections of Lucretius, Buffon, Maupertuis, Rousseau, La Mettrie, and Other Ancient and Modern Followers of Epicurus are Considered, and Their Doctrines Refuted*, R. Wynne (trans.), London: B. Law, 1766 (all references hereafter are to this edition).

²⁷ Ibid, p. 403.

²⁸ This was especially associated with the Parisian circle of intellectuals who gathered around d'Holbach, other prominent members included Diderot, although perhaps the most militant was Jacques-André Naigeon: for a classic study see Alan Charles Kors, *D'Holbach's Coterie: An Enlightenment in Paris*, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1976.

which he combats in ancient and modern forms.²⁹ As such Reimarus stands in opposition to the metaphysical worldview that Jonathan Israel has identified as a key marker of the most radical wing of the Enlightenment.³⁰ In a work composed of nine complementary and accumulative dissertations, Reimarus defends what he takes to be ‘the foundation of all Religion’, namely ‘A FIRM persuasion of the existence of a God.’³¹ The culturally insular nature of this generalisation is typical of his (and much subsequent) natural theology, but the terms of his enquiry are perfectly transparent.

The first dissertation places Reimarus within the classical theistic tradition, developing out of Jewish, Christian and Islamic engagement with Platonic and Aristotelian thought: producing a posteriori demonstrations of a first cause of creation. Perhaps operating in accordance with the popular early-modern intuition than ‘truth is more ancient than error’,³² Plato and Aristotle are both cited as authorities,³³ working as they did prior to the ‘dangerous’ Epicurus. The philosopher-theologians of the medieval period are absent from the discussions. Nevertheless, when one reads Reimarus’s arguments against the logical tenability of an actual infinity (and need for a first temporal cause), the arguments of John Philoponus (c. 490 – 570 CE) Al-Kindi (c. 801 – 873) and AL Ghazali (1058 – 1111) are obvious forerunners;³⁴ elsewhere, when he leaves open the theoretical possibility of an eternal universe, it is the first (sustaining) cause of St. Thomas Aquinas (1225 – 1274) with which his arguments most resonate.³⁵ The immediate sources of philosophical appeal are, not surprisingly, modern Protestant philosophers: Wolff and Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1746 – 1716),³⁶ although the influence of Aquinas on those fountainheads of eighteenth-century philosophy is well attested.³⁷ While the age of Enlightenment was undoubtedly a period of bold scepticism, it was also an age of extraordinary confidence in the power of human reason to demonstrate the

²⁹ See n. 28.

³⁰ Israel traces the origins of this tradition to Spinoza: see Jonathan I Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity, 1650 – 1750*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.

³¹ Reimarus, *Natural Religion*, p. 1.

³² Matthew Hale formulated this principle in *The Primitive Organisation of Mankind Considered and Examined According to the Light of Nature*, London: W. Shrobsbury, 1677, p. 168.

³³ On Plato see Reimarus, *Natural Religion*, pp. 23, 50 -51, 198 – 199; on Aristotle, see 172, 198.

³⁴ One of the best accounts of this philosophical-theological tradition is William Lane Craig’s *The Kalām Cosmological Argument*, London: MacMillan, 1979.

³⁵ Arguments found in their simplest form in the *Summa Theologica*, pt. 1, q. 1. art. 2.

³⁶ On Wolff see Reimarus, *Natural Religion*, pp. 11, 389; on Leibniz, 12, 194, 373.

³⁷ See Fergus Kerr, *After Aquinas: Versions of Thomism*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2002, pp. 53 – 56.

existence of God and to know something of the divine nature.³⁸ Reimarus certainly shared that confidence in 1754, and all the evidence suggests he maintained it to the end.³⁹

Reimarus takes terrestrial life as his first concrete point of departure. The focus of his critique is the thesis of an anonymous French atheist that the human race is eternal.⁴⁰ Reimarus argues for the finitude of humanity on both philosophical grounds (alluded to above) and historical, referring to ancient writers chronicling human civilisation.⁴¹ We would not regard the latter as a reliable way of demonstrating a thesis of human origins today, of course: this is precisely the line of argument that some young-earth-creationists use, albeit they are only really interested in the authority of one source: Genesis. Reimarus seems to have thought the details of the various authorities less important than the *consensus* that the human race has a finite existence, and since no finite being can be the cause itself, we must look elsewhere for an explanation. Reimarus's second and third dissertations aim to show why no such explanation can be found in nature, for 'the material world is in itself void of life, and consequently incapable of perfection; from whence it follows, that it is not self-existent, eternal, and necessary, and must have derived its existence from another Being',⁴² who alone is self-existence, eternal and necessary: God.

Writing before evolutionary theories had a viable mechanism (i.e. natural selection), Reimarus's view that the natural world could not generate a dynamic process of life was by no means unusual. What is unusual is the extent to which Reimarus engages with finer details of animal physiology and behaviour, and the appreciation he shows for the lower animals in the created order.⁴³ He is especially impressed by the social life of bees: 'The Bee, by an unconscious instinct, discharges its duty to its own advantage and the common good of the hive, much more

³⁸ The overture to this triumphant age of theological rationalism is played in the third and fifth of Rene Descartes's *Meditationes de prima philosophia* [1641]: see John Cottingham (ed. and trans.), *Descartes, Meditations on First Philosophy with Selections from the Objections and Replies* (2nd edn.), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017.

³⁹ His *Apologie* was a defence of that very form of theological commitment.

⁴⁰ This is the point of departure for Reimarus's first dissertation from p. 18.

⁴¹ See Reimarus, *Natural Religion*, pp 18- 50.

⁴² Reimarus, *Natural Religion*, p. 88.

⁴³ See especially dissertations five (pp. 206 – 275) and six (315 – 353) of *Natural Religion*.

effectually and diligently than we do with our bloated virtue.’⁴⁴ Although we now appreciate the fecundity of nature, seemingly unassisted by any external process, we still lack an agreed scientific account of the origin of life itself.⁴⁵ Such an observation is often treated today as offering no more than the basis from which to construct a ‘god of the gaps’ argument, but Reimarus is not simply concerned to plug explanatory gaps in the natural sciences. He is concerned with something in nature that scientists and philosophers have been trying (with various degrees of success) to resist since the seventeenth century: teleology.⁴⁶ Seemingly banished for good by Darwinism, teleology has returned to haunt discussions of the natural world, the status of human consciousness, intentionality, normativity, and other properties we seem unable to banish from our picture of reality and human value.⁴⁷ This return of teleology cuts across religious divides.⁴⁸ What Reimarus shares with today’s theistic defenders of teleology in the natural world nature is the view that, metaphysically, this feature of nature requires a transcendent cause. But what is at stake in this beyond the correct solution to some philosophical problem? If Reimarus had no answer to this question, then it would be hard to make the case that his stance has any religious significance. He thinks it all matters a great deal, however.

Creation and Providence

Reimarus’s deism is characterised by an unabashed providentialism:

‘God’s omnipotent influence in the world did not absolutely cease with the

⁴⁴ Reimarus, *Natural Religion*, pp. 433–434.

⁴⁵ There are candidate theories, of course: John Sutherland and Matthew Powner won the Origin of Life Challenge in 2012 for progress in the field evidenced in their ‘Chemoslective multicomponent on-pot assembly of purine precursors in water’, *Journal of the American Chemical Society*, 02 November 2010, 132 (46), pp 16677–16688.

⁴⁶ Descartes sought to banish teleology from physics: see the fourth of his *Meditationes*.

⁴⁷ In the philosophy of science see Nancy Cartwright, ‘Aristotelian Natures and the Modern Experimental Method’, *Causation, and Other Frustrations: Essays in the Philosophy of Science*, John Earman (ed.), Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992; in metaphysics, see David S. Oderberg, *Real Essentialism* (London: Routledge, 2007); in ethics see William J FitzPatrick, *Teleology and the Norms of Nature*, London: Routledge, New York: 2000. The most talked about recent critique of Darwinian orthodoxy is Thomas Nagel’s *Mind and Cosmos: Why the Materialist Neo-Darwinist Conception of Nature is Almost Certainly False*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.

⁴⁸ Nagel is an avowed atheist and argues for a naturalised Aristotelian account.

creation, but, equally, with his knowledge and will, extends to the whole duration of the world, fulfilling his design concerning the welfare of animate Beings; and this is what we term a Divine Prominence...⁴⁹

And he defends this against a battery of objections, first and foremost the problem of evil. Acknowledging his debts to Leibniz,⁵⁰ he forges a defence against the claims of natural evil by insisting that in so far as creatures of flesh and blood are to exist at all, then it is in their nature to be perishable and subject to pain: it could not have been otherwise.⁵¹ His argument for the formative significance of suffering has echoes of Irenaeus's 'soul making' theodicy, recovered and defended by John Hick (1922 – 2013).⁵² Reimarus acknowledges that the distribution of flourishing and suffering among creatures are far from equal,⁵³ but, like Hick, he insists that the sceptical argument only holds if we assume that corporeal existence is exhaustive of our being. Reimarus rejects this assumption. He defends a substantial distinction between mind and body in his penultimate dissertation, using a version of the Cartesian argument from logical conceivability.⁵⁴ But the immateriality of the soul has been a consistent theme in the early arguments, leaning for support on our moral intuitions and legal precedents concerning the nature of personal identity, which includes a discussion of the status of conjoined twins.⁵⁵ Reimarus is rather more inclined than his younger contemporary Immanuel Kant (1724 - 1804) was towards talk of divine reward and punishment for a life of virtue,⁵⁶ but, underpinning this rather mechanistic argument, is the penetrating doubt articulated by Kant in his *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft* (1788) that on a thoroughly naturalistic worldview, the disconnect between the demands of the moral life and human happiness is so stark as to threaten the rationality of the whole enterprise.⁵⁷ So stark, in fact, it is only *sub specie aeternitatis* and on the presumption of a providential God that the moral life can be rationally integrated with our natural human aspirations.⁵⁸ Unlike Kant in his critical period,⁵⁹ however, Reimarus was

⁴⁹ Reimarus, *Natural Religion*, pp. 366 – 367.

⁵⁰ Ibid, p. 373.

⁵¹ See Ibid, p. 373 – 376.

⁵² See John Hick, *Evil and the Love of God*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1966.

⁵³ Reimarus, *Natural Religion*, pp. 410 – 412.

⁵⁴ Ibid, pp. 416 – 419.

⁵⁵ Ibid, pp. 288 – 289.

⁵⁶ See Ibid, p. 439.

⁵⁷ See Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Practical Reason*, Mary Gregor (ed. & trans.), Andrews Reath, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997, pt. I, bk. 1, chap. 2.

much more confident of the power of speculative reason to mount a compelling case for the existence of such a God. Throughout *Natürlichen Religion* there is a sense in which Reimarus conceived this rationalist theological commitment as assuaging existential fears: cultivating gratitude for our rites of passage, enhancing the celebration of our greatest endeavours and the enjoyment of our simplest pleasures; and all the while cultivating dignified resignation at our profound losses.⁶⁰

Natürlichen Religion in the Public Sphere

Reimarus's Hamburg played host to some of the most 'bitter' disputes over how to accommodate diverse Christian communities.⁶¹ Although he was not a noted controversialist, Reimarus was more publically engaged than one would assume from the picture generated in histories of biblical studies. He was a founding member of the Patriotic Society of Hamburg (1765),⁶² committed to promoting independent learning and a culture of civic virtue. One of the overarching themes of Reimarus's *Apologie* was an appeal for religious toleration to be extended beyond Jewish and minority Christian groups to include followers of *Natürlichen Religion*. In the first of the fragments, *Von Duldung der Deisten*, Reimarus lists the religious types he thought were already looked upon with greater sympathy—'Ketzer, Fanatiker, Juden, Türken'⁶³—as a way of highlighting the alleged injustice of the minority on behalf of whom he was writing. If there is a place for 'heretics, fanatics, Jews, and Turks (Muslims), why not the rational worshippers of God?

In his *Natürlichen Religion* Reimarus had considered the moral and political implications of atheism for society, with particular reference to the amoral pleasure

⁵⁸ See Reimarus, *Natural Religion*, pp. 472 – 475.

⁵⁹ This was the position Kant developed in his *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (1781): see Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (eds. & trans.), *Critique of Pure Reason* (1st and 2nd edns.), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 117, 500, 684 – 690.

⁶⁰ The eschatological perspective on the totality of human experience is central to the final dissertation of *Natural Religion*: 'Of the immortality of the Soul, and the advantages of Religion' (p.414).

⁶¹ Israel, *Democratic*, p. 136. In the mid-1680s, approximately nine hundred Huguenots arrived in Hamburg, which added to existing tensions between the majority Lutheran population and the Jewish minority.

⁶² See Groetsch, *Reimarus*, p. 166. He was also associated with the first Society, established in 1724, which brought together men from across the arts, science and industry, encouraging mutually supportive citizenship.

⁶³ Reimarus, *Von Duldung der Deisten*, in Barner (ed.), *Lessing Werke* (vol. 8), pp. 115 – 134: 117.

principle of Julien Offray de La Mettrie (1709 – 1751).⁶⁴ To combat this feared degeneracy, in *Duldung der Deisten* Reimarus suggests a minimalist theology with an ancient heritage. He argues that in so far as someone holds to some basic religious imperatives—love of God, love of humanity, concern with personal salvation—then their theology is consistent with the essential message of Jesus, and, as such, they can properly be regarded as religious fellow travellers with the dominant Christian community.⁶⁵ Reimarus was not just arguing for toleration on the grounds that a person's conscience is beyond the rightful legislative reach of government, but that a religion is to be tolerated in so far as it shares a basic theological core.⁶⁶ Reimarus appeals to studies of ancient Jewish law by the English jurist John Selden (1584 – 1654) and the Jewish philosopher Moses Maimonides (1135 – 1204),⁶⁷ insisting on the conformity of the 'unbeschnittenen [uncircumcised] Noah',⁶⁸ with the principles of '*vernünftigen* Religion und des Naturgesetzes'.⁶⁹ These supposedly 'natural laws' are significant to Reimarus's argument because they are said to have been sufficient for the 'Proselytorum Dominicilii' and their peaceful co-existence with the Jewish people:⁷⁰ the basic religious conformity which enabled non-Jews to be accepted as pious members of the host community. The parallels are clear enough: Reimarus and the *vernünftigen Verehrer Gottes* are the *Proselytorum Dominicilii* of eighteenth-century Europe. But his reference points extend beyond rationalists from his own context. Uriel Acosta (1585 - 1640) especially interested him.⁷¹

Acosta was from a Catholic Portuguese family with Jewish ancestry. His study of scripture seems to have led him away from Catholicism to reconnect with the religion of his forefathers, and the adoption of an independent minded Jewish rationalism. On moving to Amsterdam he openly embraced his Jewish faith for the first time, only to find the form of Judaism practised there as stifling as the Catholicism of his youth. Acosta's unrealistic expectations that the Jewish

⁶⁴ Reimarus, *Natural Religion*, p. 446.

⁶⁵ See Reimarus, *Duldung der Deisten*, pp. 116.

⁶⁶ See *ibid*, pp. 116 – 118.

⁶⁷ See *ibid*, p.125.

⁶⁸ *Ibid*, p. 125.

⁶⁹ *Ibid*, p. 125.

⁷⁰ *Ibid*, p. 125.

⁷¹ For an account of his tragic fate, see Popkin, 'Costa, Uriel Da', in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, (9 vol. of 16 in first edn), Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, 1972, p. 987.

community in Amsterdam ought to be in agreement with his distinctive religious outlook were so comprehensively frustrated that he penned strongly worded attacks on the strictures of Rabbinic Judaism and was excommunicated, twice.⁷² As a religious nomad, he was unable to make a life for himself outside the Jewish community: he was 'verfolgt' (hounded), writes Reimarus, by all as a man of 'keine Religion' (no religion).⁷³ When he returned, beleaguered, to the synagogue, he recanted, but he was subjected to a 'schändliche' (shameful) ordeal by the congregation, physically 'gegeißelt' (lashed), and his 'nackend' (naked) body 'mit Füßen getreten' (trampled underfoot).⁷⁴

By providing a visceral snapshot of the sorry story of Acosta,⁷⁵ Reimarus captures the violent frenzy of insular religious fanaticism. But his real target was not the Jewish community in Amsterdam, but the 'christliche Obrigkeit' (Christian authorities) who permitted such cruel intolerance.⁷⁶ So convinced were the leaders of revealed religions that 'vernünftige Religion' was the 'allgemeine Feindin' (common enemy),⁷⁷ that a state's governing authorities would permit leaders of revealed religions to mete out their own punishments to dissenting members.

Conclusion

Reimarus was undoubtedly one of the most learned and comprehensive critics of eighteenth century Protestant orthodoxy. But throughout his writings he was thoroughly possessed by ideas common to Christianity, Judaism and Islam: that the world was created and sustained by a good God, who exercises provincial care over that creation, with the promise of salvation for the righteous faithful. Much of his polemic against the religious culture of his time was driven by his despair at fellow believers to behave in a manner which suggested they took their ideals seriously.

⁷² The key writings are *Propostas contra a tradição* (1616) and *Exame das tradições farisaicas* (1623); for a recent English version of the latter, see H. P. Solomon and I. S. D. Sassoon (trans.), *Uriel Da Costa:*

Examination of Pharisaic Traditions, Leiden: E J Brill, 1993.

⁷³ See Reimarus, *Duldung der Deisten*, p. 23.

⁷⁴ *Ibid*, p. 123.

⁷⁵ This story did not have a happy ending. After his ordeal at the synagogue, Da Acosta turned a gun on himself, dying a slow, excruciating death. His last notable act of the intellect was his autobiography

Exemplar Humanae Vitae (1640).

⁷⁶ Reimarus, *Duldung der Deisten*, p. 23.

⁷⁷ *Ibid*, p. 124.

But with all the Abrahamic faiths, it has so often been at the level of revelatory detail that divisive passions have been aroused. And given the combination of forensic analysis and stinging polemic levelled at the details of the Christian revelation in the *Apologie*, it can be no surprise that Reimarus's positive programme has been ignored. But in an age of continued religious strife, the emphasis Reimarus placed on the commonalities between religious traditions, as a civic if not theological priority, remains salutary.