

Moses Mendelssohn, Reply to Johann Caspar Lavater (1769)

Abstract

Moses Mendelssohn (1729–1786) achieved fame and distinction as the father of the Jewish *Haskalah* or Enlightenment, which entailed reconciling the Jewish religion with the broad universalist principles of the European Enlightenment. Mendelssohn pioneered Jewish engagement in non-Jewish intellectual life in Germany, embracing the philosophical project begun by Leibniz and developed thereafter by Christian Wolff. Mendelssohn remained faithful to Orthodox Judaism but challenged Jewish traditionalism by translating the Pentateuch into German and by generally advocating the adoption of the High German language and other forms of acculturation into German society. After the Swiss clergyman Johann Caspar Lavater (1741–1801) challenged him to convert to Christianity, he penned the following reply, which silenced Lavater and earned Mendelssohn much respect among Enlightenment intellectuals. Noteworthy are Mendelssohn's very pointed formulation of the disadvantages faced by Jews in Christian society and his measured praise for the degree of toleration enjoyed by the small Jewish community in Frederick II's Prussia.

Source

Open Letter to Deacon Lavater of Zurich from Moses Mendelssohn

Worthy Friend of Humanity!

You have deemed it fitting to dedicate your translation of Mr. Bonnet's *Inquiry into the Evidence for Christianity*^[1] to me, and in your dedication you have appealed to me most solemnly and before the eyes of the public: "to refute this work, insofar as I find its essential arguments in support of Christianity to be incorrect, but insofar as I find them correct, to do what wisdom, love of truth, and honesty call upon me to do – what Socrates would have done, had he read this work and found it irrefutable [...]," that is, abandon the religion of my fathers and profess the one defended by Mr. Bonnet. For surely, even if I were so base as to counterbalance wisdom with the love of truth and honesty, in this case I would certainly place all three on the same side of the scale.

I am fully convinced that your actions flow from pure motives and can attribute to you none but the most loving and humane of intentions. I would be unworthy of the respect of any honorable man should I not reply with a thankful heart to your affectionate dedication. I cannot deny, however, that this step on your part has disturbed me extraordinarily. I could scarcely have expected, from a Lavater, such a public challenge.

Since you will still remember the confidential discussion which I had the pleasure of having with you and your estimable friends in my drawing room, you cannot have forgotten how frequently I tried to steer the conversation away from religion and toward more innocuous subjects, and how strenuously you and your friends had to press me before I dared express my attitude about something so dear to the heart. Unless I am mistaken, assurances had been given beforehand that the words spoken there would never be made public. – Yet I would rather be wrong than blame you for breaking this promise. – But if I so carefully tried to avoid making a declaration in my own drawing room among a small number of worthy men, of whose good will I had reason to be assured, it ought to be all the easier to understand how very averse I would be to making such a declaration public. That the voice challenging me to make it is not a

contemptible one is a further cause of embarrassment to me. What, then, has moved you – against my inclination, which is known to you – to draw me out of the crowd and lead me to a public arena that I very much wished never to enter? And even if you ascribed my reluctance to mere timidity or diffidence, does not such weakness merit forbearance and leniency from any loving heart?

My reluctance to enter into religious controversies has never been the result of fear or weakness, however. I may say that I did not start examining my religion only yesterday. Indeed, early on, I recognized it as a duty to examine my opinions and acts, and if, since my youth, I have dedicated my leisure hours to worldly wisdom and the humanities, it was solely with the intention of preparing myself for this necessary [self-] examination. I could have had no other motives for this. In my situation I could not expect the slightest temporal advantage from such studies. I knew well that I could not prosper in worldly affairs in this way. And as for pleasure? – Oh, my worthy friend of humanity! The status assigned to my coreligionists in civil society is so remote from any free exercise of the intellect that one surely does not increase one's contentment by learning the truth about the rights of mankind. – I will refrain from further elaboration on this point. He who knows the conditions in which we exist, and who has a human heart, will feel more than I can say.

If, after so many years of research, my decision had not been wholly in favor of my own religion, then it would have been necessary to for me acknowledge this through a public act [i.e., conversion to Christianity]. I cannot comprehend what could bind me to so strict a religion, and one so generally despised, if I were not convinced in my heart of its truth. Whatever the result of my inquiries, as soon as I found the religion of my fathers to be untrue, I had to abandon it. If I had been inwardly attracted to another [religion], it would have been despicably base, in defiance of this inner conviction, not to acknowledge this truth. And what could have tempted me to such baseness? I have already averred that, in this case, wisdom, love of truth, and honesty would lead me in one and the same direction.

Were I indifferent toward both religions, and scornful or contemptuous of all revelation, then I would have known very well what wisdom advises when conscience remains silent. What would have stopped me? Fear of my coreligionists? Their worldly power is far too slight to make me fearful of them. Obstinacy? Sloth? Attachment to habitual beliefs? I have dedicated the better part of my life to inquiry. Surely, men will grant me credit for being reflective enough not to sacrifice the fruits of my inquiries to such weaknesses.

Therefore, as you see, had I lacked a sincere belief in my own religion, the result of my inquiries would have made itself visible in a public act. But because [those inquiries] strengthened me in my fathers' [religion], I was able to continue quietly on my way without having to account for my convictions to the world. I will not deny that I have perceived in my religion human additions and abuses which, unfortunately, do too much to dim its luster. What friend of truth can boast that his religion is free from all damaging human embellishments? All of us who seek Truth recognize the lethal breath of hypocrisy and superstition and wish we could expunge it without doing harm to the true and the good. For my part, I am as convinced of the essentials of my religion – and unshakably so – as you and Mr. Bonnet could be of yours. And I hereby swear before the God of Truth, your and my creator and preserver, He whom you invoked in your letter to me, that I shall remain steadfast in my principles so long as my whole soul does not alter its nature. The distance from your religion which I acknowledged to you and your friends has not diminished in the meantime. And my respect for the moral character of its founder? You ought not have remained silent about the qualification that I expressly added and must now once again concede. At some point in his life a man must put an end to certain inquiries in order to move on. I may say that in the matter of religion I did this some years ago. I read, compared, contemplated, and took a stance.

And for my part, Judaism could have been toppled to the ground in every polemical textbook, and triumphantly introduced in every school exercise, without my ever having to engage in a dispute about it. Any expert or semi-expert in rabbinic matters might, on the basis of outmoded texts that no reasonable

Jew reads anymore, or even knows about, arrive at the most absurd concept of Judaism for himself and his audience, and still I would not object in the slightest. I would like to be able to refute the contemptuous opinion people have of the Jew by virtuous behavior, not by polemics. My religion, my philosophy, and my place in civil society give me serious grounds to avoid all religious controversies and take up in public writings only those truths that are equally important for all religions.

According to the principles of my religion, I should not attempt to convert anyone not born under our law.^[2] Some would like to attribute the origin of this spirit of conversion to the Jewish religion, but it is [actually] diametrically opposed to it. All our rabbis are in agreement in teaching that the written and oral laws that make up our revealed religion are binding only on our nation. Upon us, Moses bestowed the law, the inheritance of the tribes of Jacob. All the other nations of the earth, we believe, are commanded by God to observe the law of nature and the religion of the patriarchs. Those who live according to the laws of this religion of nature and reason are called “virtuous men of other nations,” the children of eternal blessedness.

Our rabbis are so far removed from all desire to convert others that they even enjoin us to offer serious counter-arguments to dissuade anyone who presents himself [for conversion] on his own accord. We are supposed to give him pause because the step, though voluntary, entails a very arduous burden. In his current [unconverted] state he need only observe the Noahide laws^[3] to achieve eternal bliss, but as soon as he accepts the religion of the Israelites, he would voluntarily submit to all the strict laws of the faith and have to obey them or expect the punishments that the lawgiver proscribed for their violation. Finally, we are to inform him honestly about the misery, oppression, and contempt in which the nation currently lives, in order to dissuade him from taking a hasty step that he might later regret.

The religion of my fathers, therefore, does not wish to be disseminated. We send no missions to the Indies, East or West, or to Greenland to preach our religion to those distant peoples. The latter, in particular, according to descriptions of them, observe the law of nature better – alas! – than we do and are therefore, according to our religious teachings, an enviable people. He who has not been born under our law may not live according to our law. We alone hold ourselves bound to observe these laws, and this cannot give our fellow men cause for anger. Do our opinions seem illogical? There is no need to provoke a dispute about them. We act according to our conviction, and others are free to doubt the validity of these laws, which we willingly concede do not apply to them. Whether it is appropriate, amiable, or humane of them to so greatly scorn our laws and customs – we leave that to their own consciences to determine. Inasmuch as we do not want to convert others to our opinion, dispute serves no purpose.

If there dwelt among my contemporaries a Confucius or a Solon, I could, according to the principles of my religion, love and admire the great man without entertaining the ridiculous notion of wishing to convert a Confucius or a Solon. Convert him to what? Since he does not belong to the tribes of Jacob, the laws of my religion are not binding upon him; and on the teachings we would soon come to an understanding. Do I believe that he could achieve a blessed state? Oh! I could scarcely think that he who leads men to virtue in this life can be damned in the next, and I need not fear that any venerable college will trouble me because of this opinion, as the Sorbonne did the honest Marmontel.^[4]

I have the good fortune to have as friends many excellent men who are not of my religion. We love and respect one another even though we assume and expect that we have quite different opinions in matters of religion. I enjoy the pleasure of their company which improves and delights me. Never has my heart secretly said to me: “What a shame about their beautiful souls!” Only he who believes that blessedness cannot be found outside his own church must often feel such sighs rising in his bosom.

Certainly, it is a natural obligation for all mortals to spread knowledge and virtue among their fellow men and at the same time to extirpate prejudices and errors among them when possible. In this regard, some believe it is the responsibility of such mortals to publicly contest the religious beliefs they find erroneous.

But not all prejudices are equally harmful, and therefore all the prejudices which we think we perceive among our fellow men ought not to be treated in the same way. A few of them are directly contrary to the happiness of the human race. Their influence on the morals of mankind is obviously corrupting and there is no reason to expect even an unintended benefit from them. These must be immediately attacked by every friend of mankind. Doubtless, it is best to attack them directly; every hesitation resulting from circumlocutions is irresponsible. Of this sort are all the errors and prejudices of people that disturb their own peace of mind and that of their fellow man and that serve to nip in the bud every seed of truth and goodness among men. On the one side, fanaticism, misanthropy, and the spirit of persecution, on the other, frivolity, hedonism, and licentious thinking.

Occasionally, the opinions of my fellow man, which I consider to be in error, are too far removed from the practical world, too much a matter of higher theoretical principles, to be considered directly harmful. Yet, precisely because of their universality, they constitute, among the people who adhere to them, the basis of moral and social systems and for this reason have become extremely important to this part of the human race. Contesting such doctrines publicly, because they seem prejudicial to us, is like digging up a building's foundation to see if it is safe and secure without first supporting the structure. He who cares more for the welfare of man than for his own fame will refrain from expressing his opinion about such prejudices, and will take the utmost care not to overturn the suspect principle of morality before his fellow men are ready to accept a true one in its place.

Thus, I can believe that I recognize national prejudices and religious errors among my fellow citizens and still feel obliged to remain silent, as long as these errors do no direct harm to either natural religion or natural law and instead are unintentionally connected to the advancement of the good. True, the morality of our acts scarcely deserves that name when it is based on error, and the advancement of the good is always far better and more securely served by the truth, when it is known, than by prejudice. Yet, until it is known, and until it has become national, and can affect the great masses as mightily as deeply rooted prejudice, the latter must be held almost sacred by every friend of virtue.

Such reticence is all the more called for when the nation we believe fosters such errors has otherwise distinguished itself through wisdom and virtue and includes a number of great men who deserve to be called benefactors of the human race. Such a noble part of humanity must be treated with respect, even when it exhibits human failings. Who would dare to disregard the qualities of so sublime a nation and attack where he believes he has espied a weakness?

These are the grounds, provided by my religion and my philosophy, for carefully avoiding religious controversies. Consider also the circumstances that govern my ordinary relations with my fellow men and you will find me completely justified. I belong to an oppressed people that must rely on the good will of the dominant nation and beseech its protection and succor, which does not always receive it and never without certain restrictions. Liberties that are allowed to every son of man, my coreligionists renounce gladly, if only they are tolerated and protected. They must reckon it as no small kindness if a nation accepts them under endurable conditions, for many states deny them even the right to reside. Do not the laws of your native city forbid your circumcised friend even to visit you in Zurich? How grateful my coreligionists would be to the dominant nation that includes them in the universal love of mankind and allows them unhindered to pray to the Almighty according to the ways of their fathers! They enjoy a most respectable degree of freedom in the state where I dwell. Should they, then, not be reluctant to contest the religion of the dominant majority, that is, to fall upon their protectors on the side that must be the most sensitive for virtuous men?

Following these principles, I was ever determined to avoid with utmost care all religious controversies, unless an extraordinary cause necessitated the altering of my resolution. Private challenges from honorable men I have been bold enough to pass over in silence, and the importunings of petty minds, who felt entitled to attack me publicly because of my religion, I felt entitled to scorn in turn. But the

solemn entreaty of a Lavater necessitates that I make my attitudes known publicly, so that none may understand a prolonged silence as contempt or confession.

I have read Bonnet's book, which you translated, with care. Whether I have been convinced is, after what I have declared here, surely no longer in question. However, I must confess, that even as a defense of the Christian religion it does not seem to me to have the value that you ascribe to it. I know Mr. Bonnet from other of his works as an excellent writer, but I have read many another defense of the same religion – I will not say by Englishmen but by our German countrymen – that seem far more thorough and philosophical than Bonnet's work which you recommend to effect my conversion. If I am not mistaken, most of this writer's philosophical premises sprang from German soil, and even [his] *Essai de Psychologie*, which Mr. Bonnet follows so faithfully, is indebted to German savants for almost everything. When it comes to philosophical principles, the German seldom need borrow from his neighbors.

Still, in my view, Bonnet's general introductory observations constitute the most well-founded part of this work. But his application and use of these observations in the defense of his religion struck me as so inadmissible, so arbitrary, that I almost failed to recognize Bonnet. I am not pleased that my judgment differs so much from yours. It seems to me that Mr. Bonnet's inner conviction and his praiseworthy zeal for his religion were supposed to lend a weight to his evidence that another person cannot find in it. Most of his conclusions seem to me to proceed so little from what comes before them that I dare to think I could defend any religion whatsoever with the same arguments. Perhaps the author himself is not to be blamed for this. He can have written only for such readers who, like him, are convinced, and who read only to be strengthened in their faith. When author and reader are already in agreement about the conclusion, they can quickly negotiate the grounds for it. But I must say I am surprised that you, Sir, think this work sufficient to convert someone who, according to his principles, must take an opposite position. You cannot possibly have put yourself in the position of a person who does not bring his convictions with him but is supposed rather to seek to form them from this book. But if you have, indeed, done this and still believe, as you have given me to understand, that Socrates himself would have to find Mr. Bonnet's arguments irrefutable, then one of us is certainly a remarkable example of the power that prejudices and education can exert over even those who seek the Truth with upright hearts.

I have now indicated the reasons why I so sincerely wish never to argue about matters of religion; but I have also made known that I believe myself well able to counter Bonnet's work. If pressured, I must set aside my concerns and decide to make public my thoughts and counter-observations about Mr. Bonnet's work and the matter he defends. However, I hope you will free me from this unpleasant step and rather let me return to my natural peaceful situation. Were you to put yourself in my place and see the circumstances from my point of view rather than your own, you would grant the justice of my inclination. I would not willingly be tempted to overstep the limits that I have imposed upon myself with all due deliberation.

I am, with the utmost respect,

Your sincere admirer

Moses Mendelssohn

Berlin,

December 12, 1769

NOTES

[1] The Swiss cleric Johann Caspar Lavater (1741–1801) translated *Palingénésie philosophique* (1769), a work by his compatriot Charles Bonnet (1720–1793), from French into German. His

challenge to Mendelssohn, “the German Socrates,” came in a specially printed dedication – trans.
[2] Jewish proselytism may have once been vigorously supported by a strong missionary consciousness, especially in the third century C.E., but had all but disappeared by Mendelssohn’s day. After Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire in the fourth century C.E., severe penalties were attached to conversion to Judaism – trans.

[3] The “Seven Laws of Noah,” binding on all mankind and providing a non-Judaic path to the next life, included prohibitions against murder, idolatry, theft, sexual license, blasphemy, and the eating of still-living animals. The seventh law provided for the establishment of just laws to enforce the previous six – trans.

[4] Composer, dramatist, and *Encyclopedist* Jean-François Marmontel (1723–1799) fell afoul of the archbishop of Paris as well as the faculty of theology of the Sorbonne by advocating religious toleration of Protestants in one of his books – trans.

Source: Moses Mendelssohn, *Gesammelte Schriften, Jubiläumsausgabe*, ed. I. Elbogen, J. Guttmann and E. Mittwoch. Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1930, pp. 7–17.

Translation: Richard Levy

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