

JOHANN CHRISTIAN EDELMANN'S RADICALISM: A SYNTHESIS OF ENLIGHTENMENT AND SPIRITUALITY

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ABSTRACT

In this paper Johann Christian Edelmann's radicalism is studied from two points of view. First, the reasons why he unanimously is labeled as a radical thinker are considered and evaluated: his vehement style and language, his affinity with radical pietism, his turn to rationalism, his Spinozism, his massive internal and external criticism of the Bible and of the Christian faith. Second, the threefold progressive message Edelmann wanted to transmit to us through his dynamic and unstructured works is revealed and discussed: his plea for peace and justice based on a secularization of Jesus' gospel of love, his promotion of a non-dogmatic freethinking which combines freedom of thought and of speech with pluralism and open-mindedness, his defence of a pan(en)theistic, philosophical religiosity by which he extends the scope of religiosity beyond the limits of any established creed.

The extreme rational nature of his external criticism of religion and his humanistic messages prove that Edelmann joined after a long journey the Enlightenment movement. Simultaneously, he remained a *homo religiosus*. His

mature thought is thus a successful synthesis of Enlightenment and – secular – spirituality.

1. Introduction

In November 1749 the then fifty-one-year-old Johann Christian Edelmann begins to compose his *Selbstbiographie*.¹ This undertaking is provoked by the appearance of an anonymous pamphlet *Des berechtigten Johann Christian Edelmanns Leben und Schriften, dessen Geburth und Familiae, welcher in Weissenfels gebohren und in Jena Theologiam studiret, solche aber verlassen; dargegen die Spötterey der Christlichen Religion, der heiligen Schrift und der Geistlichkeit ergriffen* which was published in Frankfurt in 1750 – in fact 1749.² In order to correct this and other unreliable and defamatory biographies Edelmann decides to write his version of the story of his life. The resulting witty autobiography is both a proud self-justification and a severe self-reflection in which Edelmann is disposed to self-criticism and self-mockery.

There is a central thread in the autobiography, which is also suggested by the title of the denounced pamphlet: it describes an intellectual development of a man whose life and thinking are dominated by the theological-philosophical discussion of the time. It

¹ For the abbreviations of the writings of Edelmann see References, Works of Edelmann.

² SB, 2-3.

depicts a laborious journey from Lutheran orthodoxy, over radical spiritualism, to Enlightenment rationalism. The work is indeed uncompleted: in the middle of the description of his move in 1744 to Neuwied, Edelmann breaks off his autobiography. Nevertheless, the work deals partially with the last phase since *Die Göttlichkeit der Vernunft* (written in 1739, published in 1743) and *Moses mit aufgedeckten Angesicht* (1740) who introduce this final phase, have then already been treated of. It is also from that last perspective that Edelmann surveys and interprets his life history. Moreover, Edelmann gives the topic of his intellectual progress a prominent place in most of his writings. Edelmann's educational journey also occurs in the title of many academic studies. For example, *From Orthodoxy to Enlightenment* is the subtitle of Walter Grossmann's monograph (1976) and Annegret Schaper's work on Edelmann is entitled *Ein langer Abschied vom Christentum* (1996).

Concerning the meaning of the latest stage, scholarly interpretations diverge. Is Edelmann's worldview in his final stage that of an adherent of the Enlightenment, or is it still situated in the heterodox spiritualistic tradition? Quite recently, documents were detected that could clarify this question. In the city library of Hamburg, Schaper discovered four texts of lectures for masonic lodges. One of them is dated 21 February 1759, the three others were written about the middle of the eighteenth century.³ Schaper's hypothesis is that these masonic texts, which she

³ Schaper 1996, 218-227.

reproduces in an appendix of her monograph,⁴ “höchswahrscheinlich aus seiner [Edelmann’s] Feder stammen”.⁵

The second document is discovered by Miguel Benítez in the university library of Breslau: the manuscript of a German translation of the anonymous work *De imposturis religionum (De tribus impostoribus)* along with a copious commentary, both finished in 1761. Under the synonym Evander, translator and commentator appear to be Edelmann. A transcription of the manuscript is included in the annotated and amply commented edition by Winfried Schröder of *De imposturis religionem* in the series *Philosophische Clandestina der deutschen Aufklärung*.⁶

The two discoveries seem to lead to opposite results. For Schaper Edelmann’s – as far as I see, conjectural – connections with the freemasonry in Hamburg and Berlin, and the four masonic lectures attributed to him, prove that he has joined the German deistic movement and confirm that he finally became an advocate of a deistic natural religion.⁷ Schröder, on the contrary, judges that the Edelmann of the commentary seems rather to be a “*homo religiosus*”⁸ who has moderated his criticism of religion.

⁴ Schaper 1996, 229-262.

⁵ Schaper 1996, 220.

⁶ Anon. 1999.

⁷ Schaper 1996, 219-220.

⁸ Anon. 1999, 74; Schröder 2010, 261.

Besides its stirring development, Edelmann's thinking has another, unanimously stressed particularity: its radicalism. For opposite reasons, both supporters and opponents consider Edelmann to be a radical thinker. His enemies range him among the notorious and dangerous mockers of religion and faith.⁹ His sympathizers stress and admire his courage and his uncompromising militancy.¹⁰ Scholars like Fritz Mauthner (1922), Paul Hazard (1946), Emanuel Hirsch (1951) and of course Grossmann and Schaper also locate him in the camp of the radicals. And Jonathan Israel, who devotes a section of his standard work *Radical Enlightenment* to Edelmann, characterizes him as "the most notable spokesman of radical thought of the generation following that of Stosch and Lau".¹¹

In the first part of this contribution, I will consider the reasons why Edelmann is labelled a radical. To do this I will discuss five features of his attitude and thought: 1. the frank, often coarse and even insulting, tone of many of his writings, 2. his affinity with radical spiritualism, 3. his later turn to rationalism, 4. his Spinozism, and 5. his drastic criticism of the Christian dogmatism and the Lutheran church (internal criticism) and of the Scriptures (external criticism of the Christian faith).¹²

⁹ Pratje 1755; Trinius 1759, 244-252, 255-279.

¹⁰ Bauer 1927, 88.

¹¹ Israel 2001, 659.

¹² I shall not discuss the political facets of Edelmann's thinking, because politics is not one of his central themes and because what he writes about it is complex,

In the second part of my paper, I will turn to a systematic approach of Edelman's thought and focus on what I consider to be his central progressive message.

2. Edelman's radicalism

2.1 Edelman's vehement style and language.

From his first publications, namely the fifteen issues of his *Unschuldige Wahrheiten* (especially from the sixth to the fifteenth) on, Edelman treats the targets of his criticism in a harsh and disrespectful way. The representatives of the Lutheran church are depicted as liars, power-mad persons and hypocrites. The priests are regularly called "Pfaffen" and about the Holy Communion, one of the sacraments Edelman rejects, he writes that the clergymen "Christum mit Haut und Haar zu fressen und zu verschlingen [gäben]"¹³. In the three "Anblicke" of *Moses mit Aufgedeckten Angesicht* the language is just as polemical and rough.

contradictory and is in need of thorough scholarship. The Marxist interpretation of Edelman's political significance by Wolfgang Heise (1954), which has been reiterated by Eva Scheweleit (1989), is no longer satisfactory.

¹³ *UW*, XIII, 28.

The theologians and the priests are called “gelehrte Ochsen-Köpffen unsrer Zeit”¹⁴, “Liebe Schwartz-Röcken”¹⁵ and “unverschämte Huren-Knechte”¹⁶. Edelmann designates the Wolffian philosophers as “unsere heutige Zärtlinge” (Moses III, 103) or “Winckel-Professores”¹⁷, and Voltaire as “Teller-Lecker”¹⁸. Towards temporary allies in the spiritualistic-pietistic movement from whom he dissociates himself or with whom he broke up, Edelmann’s attitude is equally hard and injurious. In the writing *Bereitete Schläge auf der Narren Rücken* Johann Friedrich Rock (1687-1749), the leader of the sect of the Inspired, is named “Maul-Affen”¹⁹ and in the pamphlet *Christus und Belial* Edelmann unmasks count Ludwig von Zinzendorf (1700-1760), the charismatic head of the Herrnhuter, as a false prophet and calls him a “Wind-Beutel”²⁰ and “Affter-Heyland”²¹. He also sharply reproaches his former sponsor, publisher and friend, Andreas Gross his alleged cowardice. Gross and his circle of separatist spiritualists had compelled Edelmann to remove coarse passages concerning the Holy Communion from the

¹⁴ Mo, I, 61.

¹⁵ Mo, I, 64.

¹⁶ Mo, I, 67.

¹⁷ Mo, III, 105.

¹⁸ Mo, III, 149.

¹⁹ B, 28.

²⁰ CB, 55.

²¹ CB, 45, 56.

eleventh and the twelfth part of the *Unschuldige Wahrheiten* because they feared these would harm their case. In an ample justification at the beginning of the thirteenth part, published by another editor, Edelmann ruthlessly denounces their half-heartedness and their lack of courage.²²

A lack of education is not the explanation of this polemical and aggressive style. Edelmann was born in a middle class family– his father was a musician and tutor to the pages in service of the count of Sachsen-Weissenfels – and he received, in spite of the precarious financial situation of his parents, a profoundly schoolish and academic education. This means that he was familiar with professional and learned speech and writing. Edelmann’s option for the described style has thus nothing to do with ignorance of a more appropriate method. The reasons are rather a. the nature of his writings, his aim and the public he addressed, and b. the controversial nature of the religious-theological literature at the time.

a. Edelmann, who is an inquisitive and ambitious pupil and student, wants to escape the extreme poverty his parents landed in through the mismanagement of the dissipated duke Christian of Saksen-Weissenfels. He studied theology at the university of Jena in the hope to find a theological profession that would fulfill this ardent wish. However, the career Edelmann is aiming at, has a particular nature: it is committed to the orthodox Lutheran faith. At first, this causes no problem: Edelmann

²² UW, XIII, 5-224.

is a believer and he is prepared to continue the Lutheran tradition of his family and to become a pastor. But as time goes by, (suppressed) doubts arise concerning the Lutheran creed and the infallibility of the Bible. This rising scepticism renders Edelmänn's search for a ministry upon his return to Germany after his six-year stay in Austria as a tutor not only unsuccessful due to an external cause – the scarcity of the position²³ – but also to an inner one. Mentally, Edelmänn is in the position of the clergyman Kant is talking about in his essay *Was ist Aufklärung*, who finds that what he has to preach and to teach in his catechism is no longer in accordance with his personal conviction.²⁴ During this twofold crisis – the struggling with his religious convictions and the uncertainty concerning his living – Edelmänn gets acquainted with the spiritualistic-pietistic movement through encounters with religious dissenters and foremost through intensive reading of works belonging to that rich and complex religious movement. The immersion in the spiritualistic range reveals him his real vocation, the vocation to become a critical religious writer.²⁵ So, his works (especially his early ones) join the tradition of the edifying and reformatory literary genre. This implies that they have a specific nature which differs from the nature of academic treatises and writings of secular philosophers. They also aim at and reach a specific public. As he explains in the thirteenth

²³ Schaper 1996, 68, 118-121.

²⁴ Kant 1968, 38.

²⁵ SB, 157-158.

part of the *Unschuldige Wahrheiten* he addresses “sonderlich einfältigen, (dann den Gelehrten zu gefallen schreibe ich nicht)”.²⁶ His actual readers are not unlettered, but they are no scholars, theologians or learned philosophers. They are in majority representatives of the middle class. Among them we find many independent artisans, merchants and academic trained representatives of practical professions (physicians and jurists). Like Edelmann, these people are religious seekers and with them he enters in conversation. That is one of the reasons why he uses the dialogical form in many of his writings, a method which objective is to achieve a gradual emancipation of his readers from blind faith. Further, Edelmann publishes his correspondence with his sympathizers or answers their questions in a special work. I refer here to the *Sendschreiben* from which some are published (*Die Begierde Nach der Vernünfftigen Lautern Milch*, 1744 and *Send-Schreiben an seine Freunde den Vorzug eines Freygeistes vor einem armen Sünder zeigend*, 1749), while others circulate as manuscripts (e.g. *Drittes Sendschreiben an seine Freunde, Darinnen Er seine Gedancken von der Unsterblichkeit der Seelen eröffnet*, 1749-1754). The tone of these writings addressed to like-minded persons and friends is mild and benevolent. In his *Unschuldige Wahrheiten* and his *Streitschriften* his opponents are of course vehemently attacked and refuted in the first place. Nevertheless he also tries to convince them and even here he pretends (ironically?)

²⁶ *UW*, XII, 29.

that he hopes to emancipate them too, although he is aware of the fact that the possibility of success is very slight.

For Edelmann, his authorship is a mission. His writings document his personal search for truth and he considers it as his task to communicate to his fellow men his new religious insights and to free them from the oppression first of the Lutheran church, later also from the threatening oppression of the new so called spiritual leaders and finally from any faith based on the authority of the Bible.

b. The second explanation of Edelmann's vehemence is that an offensive style is prevailing in both the interreligious and the religion-critical debate. Edelmann frequently refers to polemical passages in the Scriptures and he draws the attention to the fact that the early Luther speaks plainly when he criticizes the papacy or the Catholic church.²⁷ Edelmann considers himself to be a reformer who continues the critical project of Luther or even more of Jesus Christ and his apostles. He stresses that Jesus and the early Christians also ruthlessly attacked the heathen superstition.²⁸ By this he justifies his own radical attitude and he derives from it the right to scorn the in his eyes declined Lutheran clergy.

Besides, it is well-known that the tone of the pamphlets of the defenders of orthodoxy, is mainly defamatory. Finally, it is evident that the language the freethinkers use in their criticism of religion or rather

²⁷ *UW*, VIII, 634.

²⁸ *UW*, XIII, 209-224.

of what they call superstition and enthusiasm, is not always sophisticated. Edelmann's writing is thus situated in a global polemical climate. Stimulated by his ardent and combative temperament that is averse of shallowness, he is carried away by it. The abuses he detects arouse his indignation and provoke his anger. In his view, controversy is a mark of courage. Moreover, writing polemically is according to him the most efficient means to realize his destructive and his emancipatory objectives. He is convinced that Philipp Jakob Spener (1635-1705), Johann Wilhelm Petersen (1649-1727) and August Hermann Francke (1663-1727) did not attain their goals by their moderate criticism of the orthodox church and the gentle way they advocated their reforms and he judges that it was necessary to paint harshly the abomination of the Communion, as he did, so that his readers would be disgusted and distance from it.²⁹

However, there is in Edelmann's writings a slow evolution in the direction of a more polished tone. As we saw, Edelmann was already internally attacked by his separatist brothers and we know how he reacted to that. Later, some of Edelmann's friends, among which one of his most important protectors, the Berlin merchant Pinell, also pointed out to him that improper phrases marred his *Moses*. Edelmann first neither accepted Pinell's well-intended reprimand, but in his autobiography he admits that Pinell was right.³⁰ He now equally

²⁹ *UW*, VIII, 653-654, XIII, 29-30.

³⁰ *SB*, 357.

understands Gross' caution and recognizes that he wronged his separatist friends.³¹ In another previous passage of his autobiography, he writes "Seit der Ausgabe meines Glaubensbekenntnißes, wird man einen andern Geist an mir erblicken", although he ironically adds "und ob ich schon weiß, daß er den Liebhabern verjährter Vorurtheile eben so wenig, und vielleicht noch weniger, als der erste anstehen werde, so werden sie doch, wieder willen auch gestehen müssen, daß er sanfter, als der ihre sei"³². He ascribes his former lack of clemency towards the clergy to the arrogance of his Lutheran education. He writes "dass ich besser gethan haben würde, wenn ich gleich anfangs sanfter und leutseeliger geschrieben hätte"³³, but confesses that he formerly was not able to be more charitable because he was too outraged by the deceit of which he had so long been the victim. He nevertheless concludes drastically: "Es mißfällt mir diese damalige Gestalt an mir so sehr, daß ich wünschte, daß keine von meinen ersten Schriften mehr in der Welt seyn möchten. Was aber geschehen ist, daß ist geschehen, und wird nicht mehr geschehen"³⁴. Finally, Edelmann distances himself likewise from his former impetuosity in his *Schuldigstes Dancksagungsschreiben an Herrn Probst Süßmilch vor Dessen, Ihm unbewust erzeugte Dienste*, his subtle and all but servile answer to Probst Johann Peter

³¹ SB, 231.

³² SB, 202.

³³ SB, 204.

³⁴ SB, 203.

Süssmilchs pamphlet, *Die Unvernunft und Bosheit des berühmten Edelman*.³⁵ Edelmann thus firmly renounces his harsh style and tone, but as to the content he does not take back anything from his criticism of religion. At the most he admits that some of his positions and insights were incomplete and improvable.

2.2 Affinity with radical spiritualism.

As I already indicated, it is not through philosophy that Edelmann was stimulated to become a radical writer but through his acquaintance with the spiritualistic-pietistic movement in German Lutheranism. Edelmann gets for the first time in touch with pietism thanks to Johann Franz Buddeus (1667-1729), his admired professor at the university of Jena who sympathizes with the pietistic religiosity. Edelmann is equally attracted by it which becomes manifest in increased virtuousness and a great religious seriousness but doesn't yet result in criticism of the Lutheran church and faith. During the period he spends in Vienna as a tutor in the house of the merchant Mühl, Edelmann gets acquainted with the melancholy, self-tormenting and pessimistic pietism of the version of Halle. In spite of his awakened sympathy for the pietistic movement, Edelmann experiences an intuitive aversion for this oppressive side of pietism. Many years later, he expresses again his

³⁵ SD, 278-282, 286.

aversion for the gloominess and the hypocrisy of the adherents of Francke, which he ascribes to their pessimistic view of man.³⁶

The third encounter with pietism causes a revolution in Edelmann's life and attitude. From 1731 to 1739 Edelmann familiarizes himself in different ways with the spiritualistic-pietistic movement: by the intensive reading of mystical-spiritualistic works (among which those of Johann Arndt, Jacob Böhme, Joachim Betke, Philipp Jacob Spener and Gottfried Arnold); by personal encounters with representatives of the movement (adherents of Antoinette Bourignon and Madame Guyon, Mennonites, Gichtelians); by his reception into the network of Gross and his participation to the translation of the 'mystical' Berleburger Bible; and by his acquaintance with the community of the Herrnhuter and of the Inspired.

The three radical spiritualists, Gottfried Arnold (1666-1714), Joachim Betke (1601-1666) and Johann Konrad Dippel (1673-1734) make a deep impression on Edelmann and they play a decisive role in his own radicalization. The reading of Arnolds *Unpartheyische Kirchen- und Ketzerhistorie, von Anfang des Neuen Testaments biss auf das Jahr 1688* in the winter of 1731/32 occasions a spiritual awakening in Edelmann's life. From Arnold Edelmann learns that Christian truth is not found in the official church but rather among the supposed heretics who aim to restore the original, pure Christianity. Not the orthodox persecutors but those who are persecuted appear to be the true Christians. The

³⁶ BM, 358-360.

church history is the history of a decline: the plain faith of the early Christians was gradually substituted by an extinct, exteriorized, rigid and oppressive doctrine. The *Kirchen- und Ketzergeschichte* becomes the main source of Edelmann's *Unschuldige Wahrheiten* and has also an influence on his transition to rationalism.³⁷

Edelmann further welcomes the church critical approach of Betke's *Antichristentum*. Edelmann quotes extensively from Betke's attacks on the Lutheran clergy, which the latter holds responsible for the decline of Christianity.³⁸ Edelmann gets acquainted with the writings of Dippel when five parts of the *Unschuldige Wahrheiten* are already completed.³⁹ He feels a very strong affinity with this combative theologian, physician and alchemist,⁴⁰ who is famous due to his fearless charges against the abuses in the Lutheran church and to his devastating criticism of Lutheran articles of faith, among which the doctrine of Reconciliation. Edelmann's endorsement of Dippel's criticism of orthodox religion accelerates his dissociation from the Lutheran orthodoxy and sharpens his own criticism. Edelmann thus becomes the last link in a process of radicalisation within the German spiritualism.

Alongside the continuation of its criticism of the orthodox church and religion, Edelmann's contacts with pietism and radical spiritualism

³⁷ Schaper 1996, 152.

³⁸ *UW*, III, 176, 271-305.

³⁹ *UW*, VI, 423-427.

⁴⁰ *UW*, VIII, 675.

have some additional consequences. In the first place, he assimilates the spiritualistic-pietistic view that faith is an inner, personal experience and he also approves the requirement that the Christian message of love should be put into practice. Secondly, he is influenced by the mystical tendency of radical spiritualism and he begins to thoroughly study its intellectual basis, namely the complex mystical-hermetic-gnostic-neo-platonic-esoteric tradition.⁴¹ Thirdly, he absorbs the dualistic worldview and anthropology that is characteristic for the movement. This results in a series of questions and problems with which Edelmann will struggle during the rest of his life: the notion of the Divine; the relation between the Creator and his Creation (the visible world and humanity); the origin of evil; the attitude towards sensuality, the body, sexuality; ethics and moral consciousness; immortality of the soul.

2.3 Turn to rationalism.

In contrast to his vast knowledge of the spiritualistic literature, Edelmann's knowledge in the field of philosophy is very small at the start of his career as a writer. In the index at the end of the eleventh issue of the *Unschuldige Wahrheiten* names of non-Christian

⁴¹ For more information concerning this cultural tradition see Stockinger (2004) and Neugebauer-Wölke (1999) and (2011).

philosophical authors are seldom and when philosophers such as Plato or Seneca are discussed in the text, it is always very summarily and exclusively on the basis of second-hand information. This remark holds for the last three parts, although more names of philosophers appear in the index in the fifteenth issue that covers them. From the publication of *Die Göttlichkeit der Vernunft* and *Moses* on, this situation changes: from now on Edelmann also includes ideas and arguments of philosophers, deists and other freethinking authors in his reasoning. What could be the reason for this turn?

Die Göttlichkeit der Vernunft is the result of Edelmann's new understanding of the value of reason that arose from his conflict with the community of the Inspired and their leader Rock. One of the characteristics of this sect was its belief in ecstatic prophetism and its – in separatist circles not unusual – rejection of reason in religious life. One could say that Edelmann experienced among the 'Inspired' in a personal and extremely dramatic way the famous tension between irrational faith and reason.⁴² The argument that permits Edelmann to distance himself from the according to him intolerable and tormenting condemnation and oppression of reason, is the sudden inspiration – which of course has many sources – that the initial verse of the gospel of John "Theos ein ho Logos" is to be translated and understood as "God is Reason". To clarify his identification of God with reason, Edelmann uses spiritualistic-religious expressions: reason is the voice of the living

⁴² SB, 273-275.

God in us and Christ who speaks to us internally. But in spite of this religious terminology, it is clear that by the logos he means the *lumen naturale* and also moral conscience.⁴³ Reason and common sense, Edelmann argues, are suppressed by the Christian sects and confessions because they fear their critical potential. They condemn those who value reason as heretics, rationalists, freethinkers and libertines.⁴⁴ These thinkers, who “durch einen vernünftigen Gottesdienst immer näher zu Gott einzudringen suchen” are Edelmann’s new allies.⁴⁵

Edelmann finds arguments in support of his logos-interpretation in the works of the Church Fathers Justin and Clement of Alexandria,⁴⁶ who record striking similarities between true Christianity and aspects of Pythagorism, Platonism and Stoicism. Their religion is a reasonable religion. Edelmann becomes receptive for this idea of a reasonable, natural religion, so characteristic for the deists of the seventeenth and eighteenth century. The *Anhang to Die Göttlichkeit der Vernunft* in which he defends John Locke’s *Reasonableness of Christianity* against the attacks of John Edwards, a British opponent of Locke, reflects that mood.

But whereas the Church Fathers of the second century wanted to promote the Christian doctrine by harmonizing it with the ancient Greek philosophy, Edelmann’s undertaking goes in the opposite

⁴³ GV, 14-15, 198.

⁴⁴ GV, 4, 11.

⁴⁵ GV, 10.

⁴⁶ GV, 25-26, 92-107.

direction: through philosophy and its rationalism he gradually moves away from Christianity. Under the influence of philosophy he indeed switches from an internal, reformatory criticism of Christianity to an external one. *Moses* is the work in which this passage has taken place: The divine inspiration of the Scriptures is now contested which is the starting point of Edelmann's definitive dismissal of the Christian faith.

In *Moses* a large number of enlightened and freethinking philosophers and authors appear: Balthasar Bekker, Adriaan Koerbagh, Antonius van Dale, Hermann von der Hardt, Mattias Knutzen, Friedrich Stosch, Benedictus Spinoza, Anthony Collins and Matthew Tindal. Edelmann integrates their criticism of religion and decides to continue their emancipatory mission. He will surpass many of them in radicalism.

There is a philosopher, who could have become an additional source of inspiration for Edelmann, but who he is on the contrary attacking in *Moses*: the famous German rationalist Christian Wolff (1679-1754). The target of his criticism of Wolff's philosophy is twofold: its worldliness and its ensuing lack of freedom/independence and its defence of the Leibnizean idea of the best of possible worlds.⁴⁷

According to Edelmann, Wolff's philosophy is too much directed towards earthly happiness and social success which make it dependant. Whereas true philosophy is rebellious and combative, Wolff's philosophy is subordinate. Edelmann rejects the idea of the best of

⁴⁷ *Mo*, III, 139-141, 112-138.

possible worlds chiefly because this view presupposes that God is an architect who created a world which is external to him and that he moreover had the choice between many possible worlds. Edelmann conversely argues that God and his creation are closely linked, that the world is as old as God and that God could not make a choice before producing the actualized world. These pantheistic considerations ripened under the combined influence of the Christian theosophy and of the philosophy of Spinoza.

2.4 Edemann's Spinozism.

Benedictus Spinoza (1632-1677) is for many reasons a radical philosopher, from which the two main are his naturalistic, pantheistic conception of God and his critical reinterpretation of the Bible. Edelmann adheres to both facets of Spinoza's thought. In *Moses* he utters his agreement with many of Spinoza's pantheistic propositions of the *Ethica more geometrico demonstrata*⁴⁸ and in his *Selbstbiographie* he describes the enormous impact on him of the *Tractatus theologico-politicus*.⁴⁹ Edelmann reads the text eagerly and consults many other works concerning the status of the Bible. The results of this intensive

⁴⁸ *Mo*, II, 120-121, 149.

⁴⁹ *SB*, 350-351.

study find a first expression in *Moses* in which Edelmann comes to the conclusion that the Bible is based on totally unreliable grounds.

From now on, Edelmann is closely associated with Spinoza and often labelled as an outspoken representative of his philosophy. In the meanwhile, Edelmann's Spinozism has been the subject of intensive scholarly investigation and the conviction that he would have been a genuine Spinozist has been abandoned. Especially since the publication of Edelmann's collected works by Grossmann and Grossmann's profound analysis of his understanding of Spinoza's idea of God,⁵⁰ the meaning of Edelmann's pantheism has been revised. The most important conclusion of this revision is that Edelmann in *Moses* interprets Spinoza's pantheistic idea of God and the subsequent new relation between God and his creation, from a neo-platonistic, hermetic, esoteric, mystical point of view. Because of this approach, Edelmann's pantheism still has a too dualistic orientation. Edelmann considers matter to be a necessary emanation of God, and in this sense he is a materialist, but his relation towards matter and body remains ambiguous. This becomes manifest in the fact that he identifies matter with the shadow of God and that his view of man is definitely dualistic. Concerning Edelmann's reception of Spinoza's criticism of the Bible, Rüdiger Otto's realistic assessment of this issue has also shown how selective and unscientific it is.⁵¹

⁵⁰ Grossmann 1976, 127-136.

⁵¹ Otto 1996.

It is clear that there is a gap between Spinoza's scholarly criticism of religion and that of Edelmann and also between Spinoza's monistic, naturalistic and anti-teleological concept of God, the world and men and the one Edelmann tries to express in *Moses*. However, the indispensable revision of the meaning of Edelmann's Spinozism, does not imply that his defence of Spinoza and his discussion with aspects of his thought, do no longer deserve our attention. On the contrary.

First, to express publicly one's agreement with the pantheistic worldview of a thinker who was considered as an atheist and as a threat by orthodox theologians and clergymen and who was equally rejected by moderate deistic philosophers among which Hermann Samuel Reimarus,⁵² is undoubtedly a mark of courage. Once more, Edelmann observes that a persecuted person comes closer to truth than the persecutors who belong to the establishment and he overtly sides him. To agree with Spinoza, Edelmann knows and experiences, implies that one is accused of atheism. Edelmann parries the imputation of atheism by pointing out that the pantheistic notion of the Divine is much more elevated than the anthropomorphic, Lutheran view of God,⁵³ and he absolves himself and Spinoza resolutely from the charge of atheism.⁵⁴

Second, it is obvious that Edelmann was deeply moved by the sentence of the *Ethica* "I believe that God is the immanent, not the

⁵² Reimarus 1985, 188-191.

⁵³ *EH*, 39-40; *EEH*, 64-65.

⁵⁴ *Mo*, II, 120; *GV*, 360-361.

transitive cause of all things” (Part 1, Proposition 18). This sentence stimulated him to read and study Spinoza’s works. Both in *Moses* and in different later writings, Edelmann discusses the pantheistic view of God and the world and integrates it in his own thought. And in his commentary to his translation of *De imposturis religionum* he still refers to Spinoza as the one who together with Seneca gives the “würdigste Beschreibung von Gott”.⁵⁵ But in contrast with Spinoza, Edelmann does not start his reflection from a scientific point of view, such a view is alien to him. And the systematic, geometrical method of the rational Spinoza differs completely from his rhapsodic argumentation. Moreover, Edelmann only picks a few themes out of Spinoza’s intricate system and so neglects many important lines of reasoning. However, it is equally obvious that Edelmann’s discussion with Spinoza’s pantheism provokes a dynamic that results in a further articulation and refinement of his idea of God. In this new view of God every form of anthropomorphism has disappeared and this non-personal Creator has an intimate relation with its creation. The idea of alliance between God and his creatures, will be used by Edelmann to free himself and his fellow men from an overstrained ascetic morality and will help him to develop a more positive attitude towards the body.

Third, Spinoza’s works play a decisive role in Edelmann’s further intellectual progress. In contrast to the unbelieving philosopher Spinoza, Edelmann is at the moment when he discovers the *Tractatus*, a

⁵⁵ Anon. 1999, 157.

dissident believer who only recently made the passage to reason. The reading of the *Tractatus* gives him the final impulse to unmask Moses, i.e. to develop his criticism of the Bible and of the Judeo-Christian religion.

2.5 Radical internal and external criticism of Christianity.

In his *Unschuldige Wahrheiten* Edelmann reproduces and spreads in his typical long-winded way the different aspects of the radical spiritualistic criticism of religion. The criteria for this reformative criticism are the idealized early Christianity, the spiritual, internally experienced and ethical Christian faith, and love, the essence of this faith. The main lines of this criticism are:

a. The idea of one sanctifying sect or confession is rejected because of the unchristian exclusion of the greatest part of humanity it entails and of the bitter interreligious conflicts which result from it. In contrast to it, the indifferentist and universalist thesis is defended that there are true Christians not only in every Christian confession or sect, but also in any non-Christian religion and in heathen philosophy.

b. The clergymen of the institutionalized Lutheran church are severely attacked. They are accused of materialism, corruption and neglect of their spiritual and existential mission. They are considered to

be clerks without divine vocation who exclusively defend the doctrine of their own party.

c. The rigid dogmas and the externalized sacraments of the Lutheran church are disputed. The church is accused of eroding basic truths such as the New Birth and of introducing unchristian dogmas. The Justification is criticized because the belief in the idea of the satisfaction by Jesus Christ implies moral laxity and is based on the absurd conception of a vindictive God who reconciles himself with the fallen humanity by the death of his innocent Son. Other dogmas like original sin, the Last Judgment, the traditional conception of heaven and hell and eternal damnation are dismissed because of their inhumanity. The Lutheran sacraments of Baptism and Communion are said to pervert the original meaning of these Acts. Their content is distorted and they are abusively considered as necessary external signs of faith, which again leads to intolerable exclusion. The orthodox dogmas and sacraments only serve the interests of the church and its clergy.

By this massive criticism, the authority of the Lutheran church is undermined and an important part of the Christian doctrine dismantled. As we already saw, Edelmann is not satisfied with that result. With Christian criterions the internal criticism unmasked the orthodox dogmas and sacraments as the work of men. Using the standards of reason Edelmann now does the same with the Bible. The Scriptures – and especially the Old Testament – are equally examined and finally exposed as the effect of human deceit.

The external criticism breaks through in the three “Anblicke” of Moses, is continued in the *Glaubens-Bekentniß*, *Das Evangelium St.*

Harenbergs, Die erste Epistel St. Harenbergs, it culminates in the further “Anblicke” of *Moses*, which were definitively elaborated between 1753 and 1755, and is repeated in a slightly more moderate form in the commentary of 1761. The chief points of this criticism are:

a. On the basis of text-critical and historical arguments and of arguments concerning content, the infallibility and the direct divine inspiration of the Old Testament are denied: the original texts are not preserved; the text contains chronological incongruities; it bears striking resemblances with other, older religious texts; the conduct of many biblical figures is immoral; the Pentateuch cannot be written by Moses; and its authorship is attributed to Ezra instead.

b. The origin of the Bible and of the superstition that is built on it, is explained by the thesis of “the deceit of the priests”. The first deceit goes back to Moses who invented a direct contact with God to delude the credulous people and to install a theocracy. Ezra is the second impostor. Equally for political reasons – the manipulation of the Jewish people – he 1200 years later invented the biblical mosaic story that does not agree with the historical events. Out of self-interest the deceit is continued by the later priests and supported by political leaders.

c. The Christian religion is likewise affected by critical objections: the original text of the New Testament is not preserved; the Gospels are written down many years after Jesus' death; Christianity is founded on the false basis of the Old Testament; and the Christian religion is an invention of Paul. Paul is thus the third impostor.

d. Large superstitious systems – the Jewish and the Christian religion – are brought about by the deceiving priests. Since these superstitions

are imposed from childhood, it is extremely difficult to free oneself from it.

e. The mosaic story of the Creation *ex nihilo* is abandoned in favour of the idea of the eternity of the world and followed by the defence of a panentheistic notion of God.

As a result of this external criticism the authority of the Bible is destructed and Christian religion definitely demolished. The idea of Jesus as the Messiah, the godhood of Jesus Christ and the Holy Trinity are now also denied. Consequently, Edelmann is able to further deliver himself and his readers from a religion based on guilt, repentance and fear. Thanks to its divine origin the world can be considered as intrinsic good and the view of a human being capable of natural cognitive and ethical capacities can fully break through.

3. Edelmann's threefold message

Edelmann is not a great, innovating philosopher like Descartes, Spinoza or Kant. He is neither a German "Popular Philosoph" (popular philosopher) but a religious-philosophical eclectic thinker. Edelmann would have accepted this characterisation. In many places he indeed explicitly advocates his own eclectic method against the rigid method of the systematists.⁵⁶ According to him, thinking systems are fictive

⁵⁶ *Mo*, II, 88-89; *BM*, 198-199; *SF*, 101; *DSF*, 63-74; and, *SB*, 393-394.

constructs which press limited views upon reality. The eclectic searcher, on the contrary, is flexible and able to grasp or come closer to the complex truth.

Edelmann's eclecticism does not mean that he is just a compiler. He transforms and sometimes radicalizes the thoughts of others, combines them and incorporates them in his own moving body of thought. Most of all, there is a coherence in his dynamic, unstructured, contradictory and often repetitive writings. To demonstrate this, I will consider three recurrent topics: 1. love and charity; 2. freethinking; 3. religiosity or spirituality. My purpose is to reveal by their discussion the 'progressive' – a more gentle synonym of the term 'radical' – message Edelmann wanted to transmit us through his numerous works.

3.1 Love and charity.

To introduce the first issue, I will highlight the result of Edelmann's internal and external criticism of religion: the total destruction of the Christian faith. In spite of this devastating result, something is left of Christianity thanks to the distinction Edelmann makes between the teaching of Jesus Christ and the Christian teaching.⁵⁷ The second is eliminated, the first persists. According to Edelmann, Jesus did not write down nor formulate a doctrine, but exemplified his message

⁵⁷ *GB*, 251; *BM*, 94-95.

through his life and actions. The very core of his thus revealed message is that he “die allgemeine Liebe unter den Menschen wieder herzustellen suchte”,⁵⁸ or, as he puts it in his confession of faith, that he wished to nurture among men mutual love and charity, and to eliminate all cruelty and inhumanity.⁵⁹ In accordance with the anti-trinitarian Socinians and Spinoza, Edelmann holds that Jesus is not the Son of God but a true human being who more than any other was endowed by God with extraordinary gifts and virtues.⁶⁰ Above all, he is the messenger of the gospel of love, which entails the natural obligations of benevolence, altruism, the pursue of peace and the advancement of social justice.

The imitation of Jesus Christ remains Edelmann’s ideal, but this ideal has lost the self-denying character it had during his spiritualistic phase. Indeed, Edelmann now recognizes that Jesus wanted us to be happy not only in the future, but also in this life.⁶¹ And the true earthly happiness consists of “den Vernunftgemäßen und ungestörten Genuß der mannichfaltigen Güte des Schöpfers in seinen Wercken”⁶². And he

⁵⁸ *BM*, 95.

⁵⁹ *GB*, 255-256.

⁶⁰ *GB*, 93, 101.

⁶¹ *GB*, 252, 256.

⁶² *GB*, 252.

specifies that lasting happiness is only guaranteed when the pleasure is moderated by reason and combined with virtuousness and solidarity.⁶³ Since Edelmann destroyed the Christian teaching by his radical criticism, his distinction makes it possible for him to save the teaching of Jesus. Separated from the Christian economy of salvation, the gospel of love becomes a secular message of intersubjective and political peace and of social justice. For the mature Edelmann the Christian religion cannot be reconciled with reason, but the spirit of Christianity is in perfect accordance with it. The humanism of the teaching of Jesus and the secular humanism appear to have the same finality.

3.2 Free-thinking and pluralism.

The second central part of Jesus' teaching is "dass er dem Aberglauben und der falschen Religion seiner Lands-Leute die Larve abzohe".⁶⁴ Jesus did not intend to introduce a new religion,⁶⁵ his aim was rather to emancipate his contemporaries from the spiritual dominance of the clergy and from the Jewish superstition.⁶⁶ This undertaking points to a free-thinking attitude.

⁶³ GB, 253-255.

⁶⁴ BM, 95.

⁶⁵ GB, 147.

⁶⁶ GB, 213, 220.

As early as in the first part of the *Unschuldige Wahrheiten*, Edelmann supports “das Freigeisterische Wesen”, the true freedom of thinking sanctioned by Jesus Christ⁶⁷ by virtue of which “wir nicht der Menschen Knechte werden, noch eines jeden tyrannischer Meinung uns unterwerffen sollen I Cor. 7, 23”⁶⁸. Edelmann deduces from it the justification of his own reformatory religious criticism.

Next, he gradually builds a bridge between this Christian freethinking and the rational freethinking of the Enlightenment. This bridging is achieved in his confession of faith, where he approvingly quotes his translation of Anthony Collins definition of freethinking “daß sie ein Recht *involviret*, (gebe,) seine Vernunft in allen Stücken zu gebrauchen, damit man in allen Fällen eine *proposition* (Satz) gegen die andre richtig halten könne”⁶⁹, asserting simultaneously “daß der Herr Jesus der Freyheit zu denken gar nachdrücklich das Wort geredet”⁷⁰. Freethinking is definitely Edelmann’s leitmotiv. I will explain this in three steps.

a. Edelmann argues that truth is evolving. From the perspective of God, truth is one and immovable, but it is only gradually unveiled by him to the human beings. According to Edelmann, the emergence of truth is realized through the voice of God in each of us, voice of God

⁶⁷ *UW*, I, 13-14.

⁶⁸ *UW*, I, 14.

⁶⁹ *GB*, 171.

⁷⁰ *GB*, 170.

that he identifies with reason and with moral conscience. Since truth is emerging through the human subjects, Edelmann moves the focus from God to the human, historical level: truth develops throughout the entire history of mankind. This enables Edelmann to assert that truth - partially - emerges as well in the writings of the ancient Greek philosophers, as in the Bible, the Koran or any other religious or philosophical text.

b. Since truth evolves, it is not possible to catch it in a definitive system. Dogmatic rigidity is unacceptable. For the individual truth-seeker this means that he never may pretend to have the monopoly of wisdom. Absolute wisdom is a purpose that will never be reached. The freethinker who is aware of this, will never try or want to become an authority. He will know that his insights are partial and not definitive. Consequently, he will never impose his knowledge to others because he respects their freedom and understands that truth is something one has to accept freely.

c. Hence the task of the freethinker is the following: to learn to think free and to incite his/her fellow men to do so equally, to criticise and unmask superstition and deceit, to formulate and to communicate his/her new insights, to be open-minded, and to be prepared to reconsider and to correct his/her convictions.

Edelmann's plea for freedom of thinking and of speech is thus completed by a plea for pluralism, openness, curiosity, dialogue and self-criticism.

3.3 Religiosity.

In her analysis of his Lutheran stage, Annegret Schaper suggests that Edelmann basically was out of touch with the Christian religiosity.⁷¹ Since the question what the Christian religion precisely means is the very subject of discussion, I am not inclined to call Edelmann unchristian, but I am in agreement with Schapers' other judgment that the Lutheran piety was alien to him.⁷² In Edelmann's autobiography – the only source concerning this period – I indeed find evidence of his initial adherence to the Lutheran doctrine, of his wish to promote it himself as a pastor and to defend it against believers of other confessions, but no signs of a warm, existential belief.

The first manifestation of a lively religiosity has nothing to do with the Lutheran orthodoxy. On his way back to Germany after his stay in Austria, Edelmann is overwhelmed by the beauty of the landscape and he experiences a deep emotion and a kind of mystical unification with nature. He indicates that the previous reading of Bartold Brockes *Irdisches Vergnügen in Gott* opened his mind for the experience that he links with a direct experience of God.⁷³ To work one's way to God by the contemplation of the beauty of the created world is what Edelmann learns from Brockes and in a letter he thanks him for that: "was du so

⁷¹ Schaper 1996, 32-33, 67, 75-76.

⁷² Schaper 1996, 75-76.

⁷³ SB, 62-63.

oft gesagt: Mann soll durchs Geschöpf, den Weg zum Schöpfer bahnen"⁷⁴. This optimistic attitude towards nature matches with Edelman's fundamental cheerful character.

Edelman's sensitivity for a lively and mystical religiosity is further activated by his affiliation with the spiritualistic-pietistic practice. He adopts the idea that the living God is speaking in each of us and aspires to the mystical communion with God. He interprets the inspiration to write 'innocent truths' as a divine calling and is persuaded that his slow intellectual progress is directed by a higher power. The Christian faith he stands for at that moment is delivered from the pessimistic ballast of the orthodox Lutheran doctrine. In *The Varieties of Religious Experience* William James gives a description of an optimistic version of Christianity which bears a great resemblance to it⁷⁵:

The advance of liberalism, so-called, in Christianity, during the past fifty years, may fairly be called a victory of healthy-mindedness within the church over the morbidity with which the old hell-fire theology was more harmoniously related. We have now hale congregations whose preachers, far from magnifying our consciousness of sin, seem devoted rather to making little of it. They ignore, or even deny, eternal

⁷⁴ SB, 114.

⁷⁵ I discovered this parallel thanks to Wim Van Moer's study of atheistic religiosity (Van Moer 2012). I am convinced that James' overall view of the religious experience could be an appropriate key to understand and explain the diverse stages of Edelman's religiosity.

punishment, and insist on the dignity rather than on the depravity of man. They look at the continual preoccupation of the old-fashioned Christian with the salvation of the soul as something sickly and reprehensible rather than admirable; and a sanguine and “muscular” attitude, which to our forefathers would have seemed purely heathen, has become in their eyes an ideal element of Christian character.⁷⁶

Yet, the spiritualistic-pietistic culture Edelman than participates in, has a tendency which thwarts such a conciliatory and human view of Christianity: the tendency to make a sharp distinction between (bad) matter and (noble) spirit, to identify ‘the flesh’ with evil, to promote asceticism and condemn sensuous pleasure and worldly life. Edelman assimilates this tendency too, which makes that his religiosity in this period is still tormented and ambiguous. Edelman’s ensuing insight into the identity of God and reason, and his mental break-through thanks to his discovery of Spinoza’s metaphysics and criticism of religion, finally initiate his passage to a cheerful and ethical pantheistic religiosity. This philosophical religiosity is both rational and emotional. Because it is no longer linked to any creed, I call it a secular spirituality. Edelman proves by his example that unbelief and rationalism are compatible with this kind of religiosity.

⁷⁶ James 1952, p. 89.

4. Conclusion

A first feature of Edelmann's thought is that both its destructive and its constructive part have a religious-Christian origin. Edelmann's criticism of religion indeed originates from the critical arsenal of radical spiritualism which already destroys a large part of the – not only Lutheran – Christian doctrine. Under the influence of diverse rational influences, this criticism later develops in Edelmann's drastic dismissal of the entire Christian faith. As I showed, the constructive part of Edelmann's thought is equally an elaboration of religious issues. The three progressive messages – the plea for peace and social justice; the promotion of a non-dogmatic freethinking which combines freedom of thought and speech with pluralism and open-mindedness; the extension of the scope of religiosity beyond the limits of any established creed – are transformations of Christian-religious themes. So, a continuity is established between Christianity and Enlightenment. The in the first stage merely reformatory criticism ends, to be sure, in the entire denial of the Christian faith and therefore one could say that the passage results in a break. But through his constructive messages, Edelmann joins the non-superstitious core of Christianity with secular humanism. He achieves this connection by transforming the teaching of Jesus into his secular enlightened message.

A second feature of Edelmann is that he reached another public with his works than the traditional authors of the Enlightenment. This means that emancipatory and enlightened ideas were spread among other sections of the population than those to which the Enlightenment

philosophers and publicists penetrated with their writings. Edelmann's readers from *Moses* on are indeed still religious dissenters, but only those among them who are prepared to continue, together with Edelmann himself, the radical emancipatory process.

Finally, I want to return to the question I raised in the introduction: did Edelmann in his last phase effectively become a representative of the Enlightenment, or did he remain a *homo religiosus*? On the basis of my investigation in this paper my conclusion is that he was both. The extreme rational nature of his external criticism and his humanistic progressive messages prove that he joined the Enlightenment movement. Simultaneously, he may be called a religious man because he succeeds to combine this Enlightenment position with a pantheistic, philosophical religiosity. Edelmann's mature thought is thus a successful synthesis of rationalism and spirituality.

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B: *Bereitete Schläge auf der Narren Rücken*, 1738, in *Streitschriften*, SSE vol. XI.

- CB: *Christus und Belial*, in: *Streitschriften*, SSE vol. XI.
- DSF: *Drittes Sendschreiben an seine Freunde, Darinnen Er seine Gedancken von der Unsterblichkeit der Seelen eröfnet*, 1749-1754, in: *Sendschreiben*, SSE vol. X.
- EEH: *Die erste Epistel St. Harenbergs an Johann Christian Edelmann, Ihrem vornehmsten Inhalt nach von demselben beantwortet, Und Vernünfftigen Lesern zu freymüthiger Prüfung vorgelegt Von dem Verfasser*, 1747, in: *Streitschriften*, SSE vol. XI.
- EH: *Das Evangelium St. Harenbergs*, 1748, in: *Streitschriften*, SSE vol. XI.
- BM: *Die Begierde Nach der Vernünfftigen Lautern Milch*, 1744, in: *Sendschreiben*, SSE vol. X.
- GB: *Abgenöthigtes Jedoch Andern nicht wieder aufgenöthigtes Glaubens-Bekentniß*, 1746, SSE vol. IX.
- GV: *Die Göttlichkeit der Vernunfft*, 1742, SSE vol. VIII.
- Mo, I-III: *Moses mit Aufgedeckten Angesichte. Erster, zweyter und dritter Anblick*, 1740, SSE vol. VII,1.
- Mo, V-VIII, XXVIII: *Moses mit Aufgedeckten Angesichte. Fünfter, sechster, siebenter, achter und achtundzwanzigster Anblick*, SSE vol. VII, 2.
- SB: *Selbstbiographie*, 1749-1752, SSE vol. XII.
- SD: *Schuldigstes Danksagungs-Schreiben an den Herrn Probst Süßmilch vor Dessen, Ihm unbewußt erzeugte Dienste*, 1747, in: *Streitschriften*, SSE vol. XI.
- SF: *Send-Schreiben an seine Freunde den Vorzug eines Freygeistes vor einem armen Sünder zeigend*, 1749, in *Sendschreiben*, SSE vol. X.
- UW, I-IV: *Unschuldige Wahrheiten*, 1.-4. Unterredung, 1735, SSE vol. I.
- UW, V-VII: *Unschuldige Wahrheiten*, 5.-7. Unterredung, 1735, SSE vol. II.
- UW, VIII-X: *Unschuldige Wahrheiten*, 8.-10. Unterredung, 1735-1736, SSE vol. III.
- UW, XI-XII: *Unschuldige Wahrheiten*, 11.-12. Unterredung, 1736, SSE vol. IV.
- UW, XIII-XIV: *Unschuldige Wahrheiten*, 13.-14. Unterredung, 1738, SSE vol.V.

UW, XV: *Unschuldige Wahrheiten*, 15. Unterredung, 1743, SSE vol. VI.

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