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# Kant, Mendelssohn, and the Question of Enlightenment

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## THE QUESTION OF ENLIGHTENMENT: KANT, MENDELSSOHN, AND THE *MITTWOCHSGESELLSCHAFT*

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*The Question and Its Context.* Faced with the need to provide a quick characterization of the Enlightenment, few scholars have been able to resist invoking the opening of Kant's essay from 1784, "Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?":

*Enlightenment is man's emergence from his self-incurred immaturity. Immaturity is man's inability to use one's own understanding without the guidance of another. This immaturity is self-incurred if its cause is not lack of understanding, but lack of resolution and courage to use it without the guidance of another. The motto of enlightenment is therefore: Sapere aude! "Have courage to use your own understanding!"*<sup>1</sup>

Historians searching for a felicitous way of capturing the spirit of the age have cited it, philosophers hoping to incite a renewed devotion to the ideal of enlightenment have appealed to it, and present-day social critics—apparently in need of a bit of historical legitimacy—have sometimes wrapped themselves in its mantle.<sup>2</sup> Stylistically one of Kant's more spirited offerings, it has been the victim of its own success. An essay more often alluded to than analyzed, it may be well on its way to joining that unhappy company of texts which are frequently cited but rarely read.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, at least one historian has questioned whether the essay is even worth reading: Franco Venturi has argued that the understanding of the European Enlightenment "from Kant to Cassirer and beyond"

<sup>1</sup> Kant, "Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung?," *Kants gesammelte Schriften. Akademie-Ausgabe* (Berlin, 1904 ff.), hereafter "AA," VIII, 35, tr. H. B. Nisbet in *Kant's Political Writings*, ed. H. Reiss (Cambridge, 1970), 54.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Gay appeals to Kant's definition on the opening page of the "Overture" to *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation* (New York, 1966-69), I, 3; Robert Anchor, *The Enlightenment Tradition* (Berkeley, 1967), holds off until page 7. Karl Popper finds in the essay a ringing proclamation of the principle of "emancipation through knowledge," a theme which he sees as the chief *leitmotif* of Kant's own life; see "Kant's Critique and Cosmology," *Conjectures and Refutations* (New York, 1962), 175-77. Michel Foucault saw in it the origins of a "critical ontology of ourselves," a project which Foucault saw himself as carrying on; see "What is Enlightenment?," *The Foucault Reader* (New York, 1984), 49-50.

<sup>3</sup> As early as 1921, Gisbert Beyerhaus noted the "step-motherly" treatment the essay has typically received; see "Kants 'Program' der Aufklärung aus dem Jahre 1784," in Zwi Batscha (ed.), *Materialien zu Kants Rechtsphilosophie* (Frankfurt, 1976), 151. Two recent exceptions to the general neglect are Onora O'Neill, "The Public Use of Reason," *Political Theory*, 14 (1986), 523-51, and John Christian Laursen, "The Subversive Kant: The Vocabulary of 'Public' and 'Publicity,'" *ibid.*, 14 (1986), 584-603.

has been dominated by a “philosophical interpretation of the German *Aufklärung*” which blinds historians to the political dimension of the Enlightenment.<sup>4</sup>

This much is clear. The endless invocation of Kant’s definition has dulled our sense of its peculiarity and its novelty. Viewed from an eighteenth-century perspective, Kant’s essay is notable for at least two reasons. First, like the similarly titled essay of his contemporary Moses Mendelssohn,<sup>5</sup> Kant’s response to the question “What is Enlightenment?” recast what had been an issue of political policy into the language of philosophical reflection. Second, it redefined the philosophical principles at stake in the question of enlightenment in terms of a rather different understanding of the relationship between morality, politics, and history from that which dominated earlier contributions, including Mendelssohn’s.<sup>6</sup> Venturi’s brief against Kant is partly valid: Kant’s discussion of enlightenment may indeed have led subsequent commentators away from questions of power and politics. But perhaps this is only because those who have invoked Kant’s definition have rarely explored the debate which his essay joined.

My goal here is to restore Kant’s essay to its original context: as one response to a question which was addressed by a number of other writers and debated in a number of other forums. I shall begin by examining the immediate provocation for Kant’s essay, a question posed to the readers of the *Berlinische Monatsschrift*. After a brief sketch of the relationship of the *Berlinische Monatsschrift* to the *Mittwochsgesellschaft*, a secret society of “Friends of Enlightenment,” I shall discuss the extensive debate within the society sparked by a lecture by J. K. W. Möhsen, a prominent Berlin physician, on the question, “What is to be done towards the Enlightenment of Fellow Citizens?” My conclusion will examine the extent to which Kant’s and Mendelssohn’s essays—despite their more philosophical approach to the problem of enlightenment—still remain aware of the political dilemmas addressed by the *Mittwochsgesellschaft*.

*The “Berlinische Monatsschrift.”* Mendelssohn’s essay appeared in the September 1784 issue of the *Berlinische Monatsschrift*; Kant’s appeared in the December issue. Both were ostensibly responding to a question which had been posed in the journal the previous December by

<sup>4</sup> Franco Venturi, *Utopia and Reform in the Enlightenment* (Cambridge, 1971), 1-17.

<sup>5</sup> Mendelssohn, “Über die Frage: was heisst aufklären?” A. Altmann et al (eds.), *Gesammelte Schriften Jubiläumsausgabe* (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt, 1971ff.), VI/1, 115-19.

<sup>6</sup> For a comparison of their respective standpoints, see Frieder Löttsch, “Moses Mendelssohn und Immanuel Kant im Gespräch über die Aufklärung,” *Wolfenbuttel Studien zur Aufklärung*, 4 (1977), 163-86.

Johann Friedrich Zöllner, a pastor, theologian, and educational reformer with close ties to the group associated with the journal. Published between 1783 and 1796, the *Berlinische Monatsschrift* was one of the main organs of the *Aufklärung*. Edited by Johann Erich Biester, the librarian of the royal library in Berlin, and Friedrich Gedike, a Prussian educational reformer and Gymnasium director, its regular contributors included both Kant (who published fifteen articles in it) and Mendelssohn (who contributed eight essays) as well as such other prominent figures in the *Aufklärung* as Christian Garve, Justus Möser, Friedrich Nicolai, and Wilhelm von Humboldt.<sup>7</sup>

Zöllner posed the question “What is Enlightenment?” almost as an afterthought in a rejoinder to yet another article in the journal: an essay, written by Biester but published anonymously, on the question of whether it was necessary for clergy to preside at wedding ceremonies. Biester had argued that the presence of the clergy led the “unenlightened citizen” to feel that the marriage contract was unique in that it was made with God himself, while other contracts “are only made with men, and are therefore less meaningful.” Because of this tendency to underestimate the importance of contracts which did not require clerical participation, Biester concluded that a purely civil wedding ceremony would be appropriate not only for the “enlightened citizen,” who “can do without all of the ceremonies” but also for the unenlightened citizen, who would thus learn that all laws and contracts are to be equally respected.<sup>8</sup>

Biester’s argument is misunderstood if it is seen simply as a demand for the removal of religious interference from public life. His analysis of the problem of clerical participation in marriage ceremonies is only the prelude to a much more ambitious and—to the twentieth-century reader—much more peculiar proposal: the creation of ceremonies which could provide religious support for *all* civil responsibilities, including marriage. “How excellent,” Biester enthused, “if faith and civil duty were more integrated, if all laws had the sacredness of religious prescription.”<sup>9</sup>

Oh when comes the time, that the concern for the religion of a state is no longer the private monopoly of a few who often lead the state into disorder, but rather becomes itself again the business of the state. . . . Then we will have once again

<sup>7</sup> After 1792 the journal moved from Berlin to Jena to escape the tightening of Prussian censorship laws after the death of Frederick II. See Norbert Hinkse’s introduction to his collection of essays published in it, *Was ist Aufklärung? Beiträge aus der Berlinischen Monatsschrift* (Darmstadt, 1977), xx-xxiii. Ursula Schulz, *Die Berlinische Monatsschrift (1783-1796) Eine Bibliographie. Bremer Beiträge zur freien Volksbildung*, XI (n.d.) contains a complete list of articles appearing in the journal and attempts to identify the authors of the many articles which were published anonymously or with only initials to indicate authorship.

<sup>8</sup> *Berlinische Monatsschrift*, 2 (1783), 268 (Hinske, 95).

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 269 (Hinske, 99).

state, citizen, patriots; undefiled would be the debased names. . . . Let politics and religion, law and catechism be one!<sup>10</sup>

Biester was concerned not with removing religion from civil society but rather with fostering a "civic religion" which, going beyond the religious neutrality and indifferentism that marked the reign of Frederick the Great, would introduce religious ritual into public life.<sup>11</sup>

In the response which occasioned Kant's and Mendelssohn's essays, Zöllner argued that Biester's proposals were exceedingly ill-advised. A time when the first principles of morality had been weakened, when religion itself had been attacked, and when "under the name of enlightenment the hearts and minds of men are bewildered" was not a time to toy with the institution of marriage, that most basic pillar of public order.<sup>12</sup> The family stood in grave need of support, especially that support which the traditional religious denominations provided. Almost as an aside, in the course of his recitation of the dangers of an enlightenment run amok, Zöllner inserted a footnote which read: "What is enlightenment? This question, which is almost as important as what is truth, should indeed be answered before one begins enlightening! And still I have never found it answered!"<sup>13</sup> This, then, was the question Kant presumed both he and Mendelssohn were answering. But behind both Zöllner's question and Mendelssohn's answer were a series of discussions of which Kant was apparently unaware.

*The Mittwochsgesellschaft.* The *Berlinische Monatsschrift* functioned as the public organ of the *Mittwochsgesellschaft* ("Wednesday Society"), a secret society of "Friends of the Enlightenment" founded in 1783 and consisting of between twelve and twenty-four individuals who met on a regular basis to discuss the prospects and the consequences of enlightenment.<sup>14</sup> In addition to Biester, Gedike, Zöllner, and Mendelssohn, its membership included such important figures in Berlin intellectual life as the writer Friedrich Nicolai and the philosopher Johann Jacob Engel.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 271-72 (Hinske, 101-2).

<sup>11</sup> For a brief discussion of Frederick's policy towards religion, see Gerhard Ritter, *Frederick the Great: A Historical Profile*, tr. Peter Paret (Berkeley, 1968), 16, 167-68.

<sup>12</sup> *Berlinische Monatsschrift*, 2 (1783), 516 (Hinske, 115).

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> For discussions of the *Mittwochsgesellschaft* and its membership see Ludwig Keller, "Die Berliner Mittwochsgesellschaft," *Monatshefte der Comenius-Gesellschaft*, V,3-4 (1896), 70-73, 88-91; Heinrich Meisner, "Die Freunde der Aufklärung. Geschichte der Berliner Mittwochsgesellschaft," *Festschrift zur 50jährigen Doktorjubelfeier Karl Weinholds* (Strasburg, 1896), 43-54; Hinske, *Was ist Aufklärung?*, xxiv-xxxi, and Alexander Altmann, *Moses Mendelssohn: A Biographical Study* (University, Alabama, 1973), 654-55.

<sup>15</sup> See Horst Möller, *Aufklärung in Preussen: Der Verleger, Publizist und Geschichtsschreiber Friedrich Nicolai* (Berlin, 1974), and, briefly, Henri Brunschwig, *Enlightenment and Romanticism in Eighteenth-Century Prussia*, tr. F. Jelinek (Chicago, 1974), 87-89.

A number of prominent officials within the Prussian bureaucracy were also members. The jurists Karl Gottlieb Svarez and Ernst Ferdinand Klein (both members of Frederick the Great's Department of Justice) were active participants, as were Christian Wilhelm Dohm (royal archivist and well-known advocate of reforms in the treatment of Jews<sup>16</sup>) and the privy finance counsellors Karl August von Struensee and Johann Heinrich Wloemer.<sup>17</sup> The *Mittwochsgesellschaft* also counted among its members the clergymen Johann Joachim Spalding, Johann Samuel Di-terich, and Wilhelm Abraham Teller, all of whom were prominent spokesmen for an enlightened approach to theology which stressed that, because the central tenets of Christian belief could be supported by rational arguments, there could be no contradiction between faith and reason.<sup>18</sup> Finally, the membership included two physicians with ties to both the intellectual and political worlds: Johann Karl Wilhelm Möhsen (who was Frederick's own doctor and an historian of the sciences) and Christian Gottlieb Selle (a privy counsellor whose interests spanned the fields of chemistry, physics, and philosophy).

This group of civil servants, clergymen, and men of letters gathered twice a month during the winter months and once a month during the summer.<sup>19</sup> At its meetings, which began at half-past six in the evening and ended with a dinner which began at around eight, two members would make presentations either in the form of a lecture or a brief statement of points for discussion. The statutes of membership excluded presentations on specialized issues in theology, jurisprudence, medicine, mathematics, or philology—where only a few members might have professional expertise—but allowed for discussions of these and other subjects insofar as they could be related to the more general concerns of “the enlightenment and the welfare of mankind.”<sup>20</sup> After the presentation, the rest of the membership would respond one by one, according to the order in which they were seated, with members permitted to speak

<sup>16</sup> On Dohm and his contact with Mendelssohn during the composition of Dohm's treatise on the need for a reform of the civil status of Jews, see Altmann, 449-74, and Brunschwig, 266-73.

<sup>17</sup> Struensee is remembered today chiefly for his widely-quoted claim to the French *chargés d'affaires* in 1799 that, “The salutary revolution which you have made from below will come gradually in Prussia from above.” See Hans Rosenberg, *Bureaucracy, Aristocracy, and Autocracy: The Prussian Experience 1660-1815* (Boston, 1966), 161.

<sup>18</sup> See Joseph Schollmeier, *Johann Joachim Spalding: Ein Beitrag zur Theologie der Aufklärung* (Gütersloher, 1967). For the significance of clergymen within the Berlin *Aufklärung*, see Brunschwig, 23-26.

<sup>19</sup> Biester set out some of the rules governing the meetings of the *Mittwochsgesellschaft* in a letter, written in the Spring of 1783, inviting Mendelssohn to become an “honorary member” of the society (regular participation in the society was impossible because of Mendelssohn's infirmities during his last years); see Mendelssohn, *Gesammelte Schriften*, XIII, 96-97; also Meisner, 48-50, and Altmann, 654.

<sup>20</sup> Meisner, 49.

a second time only after each of their colleagues had a chance to comment on the lecture. Notes taken on these discussions were subsequently circulated among the membership, along with the original lecture, and members were encouraged to attach additional written comments (termed *Vota*). Members were sworn to respect the opinions of their colleagues—no matter how nonsensical they might appear—and were forbidden to divulge what had been discussed to those outside the society or, indeed, even to disclose the existence of the society to those who were not members.<sup>21</sup>

The *Mittwochsgesellschaft* thus offered a setting where, in Mendelssohn's words, "the enlightened part of the nation can put forward opinions among its own ranks in friendship and mutual trust. . . ." <sup>22</sup> Like the other secret societies and "reading clubs" which proliferated throughout Germany at the end of the eighteenth century, the *Mittwochsgesellschaft* allowed men from differing walks of life to discuss matters of common concern in a setting which was free from the constraints and hierarchy of conventional society.<sup>23</sup> The strict secrecy to which the members were pledged both allowed for the discussion of such politically sensitive issues as the proper direction of legal reform or the legitimacy of press censorship and enabled members to try out new ideas in a sympathetic setting before submitting them to scrutiny of others. Indeed, it was only because discussions were carried on under what J. K. W. Möhsen called "the seal of secrecy" that the writers, clergymen, and civil servants who came together in the *Mittwochsgesellschaft* were free to fulfill what Möhsen regarded as their most important vocation: "the duty of good-minded patriots."<sup>24</sup>

On December 17, 1783—the month in which Zöllner's request for a definition of enlightenment appeared in the *Berlinische Monatsschrift*—Möhsen read a paper on the question "What is to be done towards the Enlightenment of Fellow Citizens?"<sup>25</sup> His lecture prompted comments from many of the members, and discussion continued through the next April, with Zöllner and Selle contributing lectures on the same question

<sup>21</sup> For a discussion of published references to the society during the forty years after its founding, see Meisner, 43-45.

<sup>22</sup> Mendelssohn, "Über die Freiheit seine Meinung zu sagen" *Gesammelte Schriften*, VI/1, 123-24.

<sup>23</sup> For the role of reading clubs and secret societies in the Aufklärung see the brief discussions in Brunschwig, 38-40, and Möller, 232-38 and the more wide-ranging discussions in Horst Möller, *Vernunft und Kritik: Deutsche Aufklärung im 17. und 18. Jahrhundert* (Frankfurt, 1986), 213-31; Jürgen Habermas, *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit* (Neuwied, 1962); and Reinhart Koselleck, *Critique and Crisis* (Cambridge, Mass., 1988). On the particular case of the *Mittwochsgesellschaft* see Keller, 91-94.

<sup>24</sup> J. K. W. Möhsen, "Was ist zu thun zur Aufklärung der Mitbürger?" reprinted in Keller, 75.

<sup>25</sup> For the text of the lecture, see Keller, 73-77.

in January.<sup>26</sup> Mendelssohn wrote a short *Votum* regarding Möhsen's lecture on December 26, 1783, and the next May composed a longer response (which formed the basis of his subsequent article in the *Berlinische Monatsschrift*) in response to the lectures by Zöllner and Selle.<sup>27</sup> Thus the footnote which caught Kant's eye in Zöllner's article was but the earliest public manifestation of a much more wide-ranging discussion which unfolded in secrecy inside the *Mittwochsgesellschaft*.

*The Prospects for Enlightenment: Möhsen's Lecture.* While Zöllner consigned the question "What is Enlightenment?" to a footnote, it served as Möhsen's point of departure. He began by reminding his colleagues that, "Our intent is to enlighten ourselves and our fellow citizens" and went on to observe that while the enlightenment of Berlin had been difficult, these difficulties had been overcome, and with luck "a spark, fanned here, might in time spread a light over all of Germany. . . ." But, he cautioned, if this goal is to be achieved, a number of problems must be addressed, first among them the question of determining more precisely "What is Enlightenment?"<sup>28</sup>

Möhsen did not offer a definition of enlightenment. He instead called for a study of prejudice and superstition, suggesting that an understanding of their origins would further the enlightenment's goal of rooting out the most serious deficiencies in public reasoning and promoting those truths which are necessary for the public's well-being. Möhsen, however, had few illusions about how easily the obstacles to enlightenment could be surmounted. Indeed, what impressed him most about superstition and prejudice was their tenacity. He had begun by hailing the triumph of enlightenment in Berlin, but he rather quickly came around to suggesting that one of the most crucial tasks facing the *Mittwochsgesellschaft* was to determine why enlightenment had *not* been embraced by the public. The question "What is enlightenment?" gave way to the more troubling question of "why enlightenment has not progressed very far with our public, despite more than forty years of freedom to think, to speak, and also to publish. . . ."<sup>29</sup>

The "forty years" of which Möhsen speaks refers to the reign of Frederick the Great, the Prussian monarch who has come to epitomize

<sup>26</sup> Norbert Hinske, "Mendelssohns Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung? oder Über die Aktualität Mendelssohns," Norbert Hinske (ed.), *Ich handle mit Vernunft. . . : Moses Mendelssohn und die europäische Aufklärung* (Hamburg, 1981), 87-88.

<sup>27</sup> Altmann, 656, and Hinske, "Mendelssohns Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung," 88.

<sup>28</sup> Keller, 74.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

the curious political genre of "enlightened absolutism."<sup>30</sup> For the many members of the *Mittwochsgesellschaft* who worked within Frederick's bureaucracy, enlightenment was not merely an abstract ideal to be discussed on Wednesday evenings. It was a practical question, involving day-to-day policy issues in the areas of law, religion, and public education.<sup>31</sup> In responding to these concerns, Frederick's Department of Justice had long played a prominent role. As a result of reforms undertaken in the late 1740s by Samuel von Cocceji, Frederick's Chancellor of Justice, the department had become one of the more active and progressive parts of the Prussian bureaucracy.<sup>32</sup> Charged with the task of centralizing and rationalizing a system where courts typically served the interests of local nobility, Cocceji began a thorough reorganization of the department, introducing rigorous standards of recruitment, training, and promotion. As a consequence, the department held out the prospect of rapid advancement to intelligent, university-trained members of the middle class, who, decades later, would gather in groups like the *Mittwochsgesellschaft*.<sup>33</sup>

The influence of this professionalization of the Prussian bureaucracy loomed large within the *Mittwochsgesellschaft*. Nobles who had inherited their titles—as opposed to recently ennobled members of the bureaucracy—were prohibited from membership, and officials of the Justice Department were well represented in its ranks. Svarez and Klein had been brought to Berlin by Cocceji's successor, Johann Heinrich Kasimir von Carmer, to work on the revision of the Prussian civil code which culminated in the *Allgemeines Landrecht* of 1794.<sup>34</sup> Their presentations to the group developed some of the broader implications raised by their work, including such questions as the nature of legislation, the proper ends of the state, and the limits of freedom of speech and freedom of

<sup>30</sup> For a recent overview of the now voluminous literature on the subject, see Charles Ingrao, "The Problem of 'Enlightened Absolutism' and the German States," *Journal of Modern History*, 58, suppl. (1986), S161-S180; also *Der Aufgeklärte Absolutismus*, ed. Karl Otmar Freiherr von Aretin (Cologne, 1974).

<sup>31</sup> The practical dimension of the question has been rightly stressed by H. B. Nisbet, "'Was ist Aufklärung?': The Concept of Enlightenment in Eighteenth-Century Germany," *Journal of European Studies*, 12 (1982), 84-87.

<sup>32</sup> For a discussion of Cocceji and his reforms see Herman Weill, *Frederick the Great and Samuel von Cocceji* (Madison, 1961); Rosenberg, 123-34; and Hubert C. Johnson, *Frederick the Great and His Officials* (New Haven, 1975), 259-63.

<sup>33</sup> Johnson provides an analysis of the social composition of the bureaucracy in the appendices to *Frederick the Great and his Officials*, 288-91; on the class composition of reading societies see Möller, *Aufklärung in Preussen*, 232-38.

<sup>34</sup> On the nature of von Carmer's efforts see Johnson, 259-63, who stresses that the commitment to rationalizing the administration of law did not preclude the conservation of traditional social hierarchies. On von Carmer's relation to Klein and Svarez, see Keller, 72.

the press.<sup>35</sup> The theologians Spalding, Diterich, and Teller were also connected to the Justice Department, albeit in a somewhat more round-about way. During the 1740s Cocceji gained control over the so-called "Spiritual Department," a moribund branch of the bureaucracy charged with the supervision of all ecclesiastical and higher educational institutions, and began a reorganization of the consistories of the Protestant confessions. These administrative bodies were composed of clergy and laymen (typically lawyers) and were assigned the responsibility of acting as mediators between the central bureaucracy and individual parishes. Beginning with the Lutheran Superior Consistory—on which Spalding, Diterich, and Teller served—Cocceji gave the consistories a wide range of powers including that of deciding what announcements were to be made from the pulpit, who would be appointed to fill openings in specific parishes, and even what education clergymen would receive in the universities.<sup>36</sup> The interest of clergymen like Spalding, Diterich, and Teller in pedagogical reforms was shared by Gedike, Engel, and Karl Franz von Irwing, the director of the Joachimsthaler Gymnasium. Finally, the Privy Finance Counsellors von Struensee and Wloemer served in a branch of the bureaucracy which, like the Justice Department, was dominated by members of the middle class.<sup>37</sup>

Thus when Möhsen reflected on the prospects for the enlightenment of the Prussian citizenry, he was examining an aspect of Prussian policy which had enjoyed the blessings of the monarch, the support of important branches of the bureaucracy, and the labors of educated members of the middle class, including the members of the *Mittwochsgesellschaft*. But the balance sheet he drew was hardly encouraging. Despite a forty-year effort at reforming the legal, ecclesiastical, and educational institutions

<sup>35</sup> For Klein and Svarez's role in the *Mittwochsgesellschaft* see Meisner, 52; according to Schulz (156), the article "In wiefern müssen Gesetze kurz sein?" *Berlinische Monatsschrift*, 12 (1788), 99-112 had its origins as a lecture by Svarez before the *Mittwochsgesellschaft* on June 6, 1788; Klein later claimed credit for the anonymous article "Über Denk- und Druck-freiheit. An Fürsten, Minister, und Schriftsteller," *Berlinische Monatsschrift*, 3 (1784), 312-30 (see Hinske, 517). Klein's dialogue with the French National Assembly, *Freiheit und Eigenthum* (Berlin und Stettin, 1790), also derives from discussions within the *Mittwochsgesellschaft*; for an analysis, see Günter Birtsch, "Freiheit und Eigenthum," ed., R. Vierhaus, *Eigenthum und Verfassung* (Göttingen, 1972), 179-92. Finally, the *Berlinische Monatsschrift* published a series of anonymous—and to date uncredited—articles on the new Prussian constitution: "Über die neue Preussische Justizverfassung," *Berlinische Monatsschrift*, 3 (1784), 243-49, 330-35, 521-30, and 4 (1784), 56-63.

<sup>36</sup> On the function of the consistories, see Brunschwig, 23; on Cocceji's reorganization, see Johnson, 126-28, and Weill, 85.

<sup>37</sup> Finance Councillors were a part of the "General Directory," the oldest and, until Ludwig von Hagen introduced reforms in the 1760s which paralleled the efforts of von Cocceji in the 1740s, the least professionalized branch of the bureaucracy. But as early as 1754, only two of the eighteen privy finance councillors were nobles. See Johnson, 218-23, 231-32, 288.

of the nation, the ideals of enlightenment had not been embraced by the population. Superstition and prejudice still reigned even within the allegedly enlightened city of Berlin.

*Removing the Obstacles to Enlightenment.* In defining enlightenment by counterposing it to prejudice and superstition, Möhsen was only following a well-established convention within the Berlin *Aufklärung*. When Biester and Gedike launched the *Berlinische Monatsschrift* with the hope that the journal's collaborators would share a "love for the dissemination of useful enlightenment and for the banishment of pernicious error," it was clear that they felt that the chief utility of enlightenment was its ability to banish error.<sup>38</sup> Truth drives out falsehood, just as light drives away darkness: the imagery was simple and incessantly invoked.<sup>39</sup>

The "errors" which received most attention in the *Berlinische Monatsschrift* were those which flourished in popular religion and public customs. They were typically denoted by the epithets "superstition" (*Aberglaube*) and "fanaticism" (*Schwärmerei*). For Biester, one of the more effective ways of "robbing superstition of at least some of its adherents" was to expose popular beliefs to the light of "publicity." For example, in the August 1783 issue of the journal Biester published a brief report recounting how, in response to a rumor that Berlin would be destroyed on July 11, a considerable number of individuals had fled the city. Bringing such absurd behavior before the eyes of the public might make it less likely that similar rumors would be believed in the future.<sup>40</sup> Likewise, the printing of a report by the state physician Johann Theodor Pyl on the activities of the "Moon Doctor of Berlin"—a practitioner of "astral medicine" who in 1780-81 built a sizable practice by treating patients with "moonshine and prayer"—could serve to alert the public that "no less than religion does medicine have its fanatics."<sup>41</sup> By the end of 1784 short anecdotes recounting cases of religious fanaticism, charlatanry, and quackery were a regular feature of the journal.<sup>42</sup>

More subtle responses to the public's gullibility were also available. The lead article in the first issue of the journal was an essay by Kant's

<sup>38</sup> Editors' foreword, *Berlinische Monatsschrift*, 1 (1783), vii-viii (Hinske, 3).

<sup>39</sup> For one particularly tedious invocation of the metaphors, see Christoph Martin Wieland's "Sechs Fragen zur Aufklärung," Ehrhard Bahr (ed.), *Was ist Aufklärung? Thesen und Definitionen* (Stuttgart, 1974), 23-28.

<sup>40</sup> Biester, "Der gefürchtete elfte Julius in Berlin," *Berlinische Monatsschrift*, 2 (1783), 143-50.

<sup>41</sup> Biester, "Der Mond doktor in Berlin," *Berlinische Monatsschrift*, 1 (1783), 353-56; for a discussion of the spread of medical quackery which includes a brief account of the Moon Doctor's activities see Brunschwig, 190-204.

<sup>42</sup> See the "Anekdoten" columns in the issues of November and December 1784 (*Berlinische Monatsschrift*, 4, 428-46 and 536-55); the column continued in future issues on an irregular basis, sometimes written by Biester, other times by unidentified correspondents.

future critic Johann August Eberhard, a professor of philosophy at Halle and a friend of Mendelssohn, which examined the origin of the belief that the ghostly figure of a woman dressed in flowing white clothing often appears in a household when a male family member is about to die. After tracing the history of the legend and subjecting the tale to a rigorous philological and historical scrutiny, Eberhard argued that the superstition ultimately rested on a misunderstanding of a harmless figure of speech. In the middle ages princesses and queens mourned the deaths of spouses by dressing in white, and a common way of asking if the king had died was to question whether a "white woman" had appeared in the royal household. Over time, the appearance of the "white woman" was transformed from a customary consequence of the death of royalty into an omen of the death of the male head of the household.<sup>43</sup>

Articles like Eberhard's were perhaps the journal's finest achievement. In subsequent issues readers could find meticulously documented studies on everything from the twisted reasoning which reigned at witch trials to the influence of the Roman Saturnalia on Christmas customs.<sup>44</sup> The motivation for this relentless display of erudition was a deeply felt hope that the insights achieved through an often dazzling combination of historical research, philological criticism, and philosophical analysis would have practical consequences. Eberhard perhaps expressed the intent best when he began his study by stating, "Of all the means of opposing superstition, none appears surer to me than research into the origins of legends and fables. . . ." Many individuals, he explained, lack the "philosophical spirit, or critical sharp-mindedness, or historical knowledge" to reject superstition completely. But it is possible to free individuals from the spell of particular superstitions by carefully demonstrating their origins and subsequent spread.<sup>45</sup> By uncovering the true meaning of the fable of the white woman, Eberhard sought "to free the heart of the faithful Christian from an unchristian fear."<sup>46</sup>

In a postscript Gedike praised Eberhard for neither simply denouncing superstition nor merely appealing to common sense. Superstition, Gedike observed, can repulse such attacks rather easily. Eberhard, however, had embraced the far more effective strategy of tracing the often obscure history of the fable back to its birthplace to reveal "the paltry and miserable cradle of the alleged giant, which only blind credulity and deaf

<sup>43</sup> Eberhard, "Über den Ursprung der Fabel von der weissen Frau," *Berlinische Monatsschrift*, 1 (1783), 3-22 (Hinske, 5-24).

<sup>44</sup> G. C. Voigt, "Etwas über die Hexenprozesse in Deutschland," *Berlinische Monatsschrift*, 3 (1784), 297-311 (Hinske, 50-64) and Gedike, "Über den Ursprung der Weihnachtsgeschenke," *Berlinische Monatsschrift*, 3 (1784), 73-87 (Hinske, 80-94).

<sup>45</sup> Eberhard, 3 (Hinske 5).

<sup>46</sup> Eberhard, 4 (Hinske 6).

naïveté made a giant."<sup>47</sup> The tyranny of superstition is ended not by ridicule but rather by interpretation. The point of enlightenment was not to make fun of the stupidity of a public which remained under the sway of the superstitions of popular religion; its goal instead was to free the public from those fears which robbed them of that happiness which was the goal of all human association.<sup>48</sup>

But the very vigor with which Biester, Gedike, and their colleagues entered the fray against superstition and fanaticism suggested that the giant had not yet been turned into an infant. And many times the authors of the articles which sought to banish superstition marvelled at how remarkable it was that such things could still be believed in Berlin.<sup>49</sup> This, of course, was Möhsen's point: after forty years of official support for religious toleration, enlightened approaches to theology, and freedom of expression, why was there still so much prejudice, superstition, and fanaticism to combat?

Möhsen argued that superstition continued to exist because enlightenment had not gone far enough. In order to enlighten others, the friends of enlightenment needed to enlighten themselves about the causes of superstition and fanaticism. Armed with this knowledge they could destroy the errors in the public's understanding at their very roots, presumably using the weapons which the *Berlinische Monatsschrift* was only now bringing into play. But while Möhsen betrayed few doubts as to the appropriateness of the strategy which the *Berlinische Monatsschrift* had embraced, he suggested in closing that there was one other actor in the struggle against superstition and fanaticism whose role needed to be reexamined: the Prussian state.

The time had come, Möhsen announced, to reconsider the relationship between enlightenment and the state. Indeed, he noted, such a review had already begun, and conveniently enough, it had the blessings of the monarch. In 1778 the Berlin Academy announced an essay competition on the question "Is it useful to deceive the people?."<sup>50</sup> The question had been urged on the Academy by Frederick himself, who had been discussing the issue in his correspondence with D'Alembert and who, before assuming the throne, had given an unequivocal answer to the question

<sup>47</sup> Gedike, "Nachtrag zu der Legende von der weissen Frau," *Berlinische Monatsschrift*, 1 (1783), 24 (Hinske, 26).

<sup>48</sup> Zöllner, "Etwas von Vorurteilen und Aberglauben," *Berlinische Monatsschrift*, 1 (1783), 468-75.

<sup>49</sup> Gedike, "Nachtrag. . .," 42 (Hinske, 44); Biester, "Der gefürchtete elfte Julius. . .," 149.

<sup>50</sup> For the historical background to the question, see Werner Krauss, "Eine politische Preisfrage im Jahre 1780," *Studien zur deutschen und französischen Aufklärung* (Berlin, 1963), 63-71.

in his *Anti-Machiavel*.<sup>51</sup> There he had argued against Machiavelli—"the meanest, the most scoundrelly of men"—that "falseness and dissimulation can never prevail" against a public which "sees, hears, and divulges everything" and judges princes by their actions instead of their words.<sup>52</sup> His reign had begun in this spirit with an easing of censorship laws and a toleration of divergent views on religious questions. But as Lessing wrote to Nicolai in 1769, all this really amounted to was a freedom "to make as many idiotic remarks against religion as one wants." Freedom of expression was not extended into the political domain; and contrasting what could be said in Prussia about political issues with what was being written in Vienna, France, and Denmark, Lessing concluded that Frederick ruled over "the most enslaved land in Europe."<sup>53</sup> With the announcement of the Academy's question, such private doubts regarding the legitimacy and utility of censorship began to be discussed in public.<sup>54</sup>

The competition proved to be one of the most popular of the century with forty-four essays being submitted for consideration. Of the thirty-three essays which met the formal requirements and were passed on for consideration, thirteen answered the question in the affirmative and the other twenty found no utility in the deception of the public. The Academy, already chastened by Frederick's rejection of their initial proposal for the competition—a rather esoteric problem in Leibnizian metaphysics which Frederick dismissed as ignoring the point of the prize competitions in speculative philosophy (they were supposed to be "interesting and have a utility")<sup>55</sup>—prudently awarded prizes for both "yes" and "no" responses and published the two winning essays in 1780. Möhsen was not impressed. The decision to award two prizes only showed that the Academy had been unable to make up its mind. He urged his colleagues in the *Mittwochsgesellschaft* to take up the challenge which the Academy

<sup>51</sup> The book was written during the fall and winter of 1739-40, with Frederick submitting the work to Voltaire for criticism. Despite misgivings about Frederick's rather repetitious style, Voltaire offered to have the work published. Frederick quickly began to have second thoughts about the work, fearing it might offend other princes, and when he assumed the throne on May 31, 1740, he begged Voltaire to "buy up every edition of the *Anti-Machiavel*." Needless to say, Voltaire failed. See Paul Sonnino's introduction to his translation of the *Anti-Machiavel* (Athens, Ohio, 1981), 13-14.

<sup>52</sup> *Anti-Machiavel*, Ch. XVIII (tr. 112-13).

<sup>53</sup> Lessing to Nicolai August 25, 1769 in Lessing, *Sämtliche Schriften*, ed. Lachmann and Muncker (Leipzig, 1904), XVII, 298. For a discussion of Frederick's views on censorship, see Franz Schneider, *Pressefreiheit und politische Öffentlichkeit* (Neuwied, 1966), 64-66. For an examination of the rather limited range of public discussion in eighteenth-century Prussia, see Thomas Saine, "Was ist Aufklärung?" *Aufklärung, Absolutismus und Bürgertum in Deutschland*, ed. Franklin Kopitzsch (Munich, 1976), 332-38.

<sup>54</sup> For a discussion of the campaign for freedom of the press and freedom of speech in Prussia during the last quarter of the century see Möller, *Aufklärung in Preussen*, 208-25, and, more generally, Schneider, 101-45.

<sup>55</sup> See Frederick's cabinet order to the Academy of October 16, 1777, in Krauss, 69.

had fumbled and determine “if our efforts . . . are useful or harmful to the state and the government.”<sup>56</sup> To ask this question was to open a debate on the politically sensitive issue of whether there was a need to limit the enlightenment of the public.

*The Limits of Enlightenment.* In the discussion which Möhsen’s lecture provoked, the amorphous and seemingly harmless topic of the current status of public enlightenment was transformed rather quickly into a debate on the utility and legitimacy of press censorship. The members of the *Mittwochsgesellschaft* divided into two camps. Some followed Möhsen’s lead and argued that the proper remedy for the difficulties that enlightenment faced was a simple one: more enlightenment. Others took up Zöllner’s response to Biester and warned that if the public embraced the teachings of enlightenment too eagerly, the conventional mores and beliefs on which society rested might be undermined.

Mendelssohn’s initial response to Möhsen’s lecture, dated December 26, 1783, took a rather skeptical stance towards the fear of too much or too rapid an enlightenment of the public. He requested that those troubled by such prospects provide “examples from history . . . where either enlightenment in general, or unrestricted freedom of expression in particular, have done *actual* harm to public happiness.”<sup>57</sup> He reminded the fainthearted that “When weighing the advantages and disadvantages brought about by enlightenment and the revolutions which have arisen from it, one should differentiate between the first years of a crisis and the times which follow. The former are sometimes only seemingly dangerous and are the grounds for improvement.” And even if one conceded that it might be true that “certain prejudices, held by the nation, must on account of circumstances be spared by all judicious men,” Mendelssohn asked whether this deference to prejudices should “be set through law and censors” or whether, like “the limits of prosperity, gratitude, and sincerity,” it should be “left to the discretion of every individual.” He closed his *Votum* by noting that recently the Montgolfier brothers had made the first successful hot-air balloon flight. Even though it was uncertain whether the “great upheaval” caused by their achievement would lead to “the betterment of human society,” Mendelssohn asked the membership, “would one on account of this hesitate to promote progress?” Answering his own question, he concluded, “The discovery

<sup>56</sup> Keller, 75.

<sup>57</sup> When the lecture and the attached *Vota* reached the privy finance counselor Wloemer the next February, he suggested that the final phase of “the history of the Greeks and Romans” provided the examples Mendelssohn requested (Keller, 87).

of eternal truths is in and for itself good; their control is a matter for providence."<sup>58</sup>

Mendelssohn's arguments were seconded by many in the society. Dohm for instance, wondered whether much could be learned from reviewing the Academy's prize essays: "it is not so difficult a thing to determine that one must not deceive the people and that truth and enlightenment always make men happy and that artifice here serves nothing." Echoing Mendelssohn's call for some actual historical examples of the alleged harm caused by too much enlightenment, he concluded, "Surely no one can cite a case where the momentary harm of the crisis (or the unrest bound up with the downfall of despotism and superstition) has not resolved into a greater good."<sup>59</sup> Von Irwing agreed with Mendelssohn and Dohm and suggested that those frightened by the prospects of enlightenment should remember that similar fears greeted Jesus and Luther.<sup>60</sup> And the publicist Nicolai, an outspoken champion of the freedom of expression, argued that the press was now so oppressed that "one has more to fear in terms of disadvantages to truth and happiness from the smallest restriction than from the greatest extension" of the freedom of the press.<sup>61</sup>

But others in the *Mittwochsgesellschaft* were more wary of the consequences of an unfettered enlightenment. The jurist Klein was willing to concede that in general "every truth is useful and every error harmful." But he also insisted that it was necessary to consider the practical impact of enlightenment on different groups within society. Because it is sometimes difficult to assimilate individual, isolated truths, these truths will remain unconvincing and without effect. It is thus possible that "for a certain class of men, a certain error can serve to bring them to a higher concept of things which are worthy of greater attention." In such cases a "useful error" will do more to promote the public good than the truth.<sup>62</sup> Svarez agreed with his colleague, noting that the morality of the general public rests on beliefs which are "uncertain, doubtful, or completely wrong" and suggesting that enlightenment is dangerous when it "takes from the people these motives of ethically good behavior and substitutes no other." In such cases "one advances not enlightenment but rather a corruption of morality."<sup>63</sup>

The points raised by Svarez and Klein were seconded by Gedike, who stressed that enlightenment was a "relative" concept which was differ-

<sup>58</sup> Keller, 80-81 (also in Mendelssohn, *Gesammelte Schriften* VI/1, 113). For a discussion of the excitement which greeted the first balloon flights, see Darnton, *Mesmerism and the End of the Enlightenment in France* (Cambridge, Mass. 1968), 18-22.

<sup>59</sup> Keller, 86.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 77-78.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

entiated according to such criteria as “place, time, rank, sex.” “Thoroughgoing equality of enlightenment,” he assured his fellow members, “is as little desirable as full equality of ranks, and fortunately just as impossible.” Gedike saw the enlightenment of a nation as consisting of “the collective summation of the differentiated grades of enlightenment among the different ranks.” It begins of necessity with the middle class and “the rays of enlightenment only *gradually* spread to the two extremes, the upper and the lower ranks.”<sup>64</sup>

Because enlightenment is differentiated according to the differing ranks in society, it falls to the censor to determine, in Svarez’s words, “the degree of enlightenment of powers of comprehension, of capacities of thought and action, and of expressive capabilities” appropriate to each class.<sup>65</sup> The censor is concerned with neither the truth nor the comprehensiveness of a work. Rather, attention is directed to the work’s potential audience and to the probable effect of the work on that audience. “If I wrote a morality for the common man,” Klein explained,

the censor cannot condemn my book because I have nothing to say about the duty to take oaths. If I said, however, that the soldier is obliged to nothing through his oath to which he is not already bound as a citizen of the state or by virtue of its initial contract, the censor must prohibit the publication of the book, even if he is of the same opinion. It is entirely different if I express this proposition in a philosophical treatise. I can assume that such writings will not come into the hands of soldiers.<sup>66</sup>

Svarez agreed. He saw no need for the censorship of scholarly books and journals directed at the enlightened part of the nation; here an unrestricted freedom of the press was appropriate. But writings directed at the general public were an entirely different matter. While Svarez expressed an admiration for the efforts of his colleagues to refine and rationalize morality and religion, he nevertheless hoped that they would “not seek to explain away and define away hell and the devil, in the usual sense of these words, from the heart of the common man.”<sup>67</sup> Nothing maintains public order better, it would seem, than a little superstition.

*Enlightenment and the Social Order: Mendelssohn and Kant.* In Möhsen’s lecture, and in the discussion which followed, the difficulties which faced the *Mittwochsgesellschaft*—and, beyond it, the *Aufklärung* in general—came to the fore. To ask “What is Enlightenment?” in 1783 was to enter into a nest of contradictions. The *Mittwochsgesellschaft* was a society committed to the enlightenment of the public—but for reasons

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

of prudence, its members felt compelled to conceal even the existence of the society from the public it sought to enlighten. The results of their discussions were to reach the public through the *Berlinische Monatschrift*—but, as Mendelssohn himself recognized, any publication of these discussions would of necessity have to remove all references to the most important thing the *Mittwochsgesellschaft* discussed: the question of how much could be revealed to the public.<sup>68</sup> The aim of both the *Mittwochsgesellschaft* and the *Berlinische Monatsschrift* was the enlightenment of the public—but an enlightenment of the citizenry might very well result in the erosion of those customs and prejudices on which public order rested.

For the members of the *Mittwochsgesellschaft* the “enlightening of the citizenry” was a matter of public policy, and the attainment of the goal involved such down to earth questions as how clergy might combat the superstitions of their congregations, how schools might be reformed, and how the administration of justice might be rationalized. So long as enlightenment was treated as a political question, discussions of the nature of enlightenment were forced to consider what it would mean to enlighten a society where individuals enjoyed rights only insofar as they were members of particular ranks or estates. In their work on the *Allgemeines Landrecht* Svarez and Klein coupled a theoretical conception of the state as a social contract between free and equal individuals with a codification of laws which conceived of civil society as a union of estates and corporations, each with their own peculiar rights and privileges.<sup>69</sup> A similar collision between general ideals and concrete political realities pervades the *Mittwochsgesellschaft's* entire discussion of the nature of enlightenment. Citizens have a right to be free from fear, superstition, and prejudice, but only as free from fear, superstition, and prejudice as their rank in society permitted.

In the essays by Kant and Mendelssohn this tension between the ideals of enlightenment and the realities of politics is less obvious. When Kant defined enlightenment as “man’s emergence from his self-incurred immaturity” or when Mendelssohn presented enlightenment as working together with “culture” (*Kultur*) and “education” (*Bildung*) to fulfill the “destiny of man” (*Bestimmung des Menschens*), the question of enlightenment is no longer being treated as a matter of practical politics.<sup>70</sup> From within the *Mittwochsgesellschaft*, Mendelssohn looked back to the legacy of Wolffian philosophy and drew up a “catalogue of problems, a dense compendium of the themes which characterized the contemporary

<sup>68</sup> Mendelssohn, “Über die Freiheit seine Meinung zu sagen,” *Gesammelte Schriften* VI/1, 123-24.

<sup>69</sup> For a discussion of the tension in the *Allgemeines Landrecht* see Reinhart Koselleck, *Preussen zwischen Reform und Revolution* (Stuttgart, 1967), 52-77.

<sup>70</sup> Kant, AA, VIII, 35 (*Political Writings*, 54); Mendelssohn, “Über die Frage: was heisst aufklären?,” in *Gesammelte Schriften*, VI/1, 115.

discussion of Enlightenment.”<sup>71</sup> Outside the immediate circle of the *Mittwochsgesellschaft* Kant reformulated the notion of enlightenment in the terminology of the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Both essays step back from the immediate practical concerns on which the discussions within the *Mittwochsgesellschaft* had concentrated. But something of the tension between ideal and reality survives, even in the more abstract discussions of Kant and Mendelssohn. Indeed, now that we have examined the debates within the *Mittwochsgesellschaft*, the political dimension which Venturi found absent from discussions such as Kant’s should be a bit easier to see. For both Kant and Mendelssohn no less than for Möhsen and his cohorts, the question “What is Enlightenment?” was intimately intertwined with the problem of how far enlightenment could be pursued without having an adverse effect on society.

After announcing that the “destiny of man” is the goal which enlightenment must always keep in sight, Mendelssohn considered the possibility of a tension between the “destiny of man as man” and the “destiny of man as citizen.”<sup>72</sup> While the “enlightenment of man” (*Menschenaufklärung*) knows no audience other than “man as man” and hence pays no heed to social distinctions or to the maintenance of social order, Mendelssohn insisted that the “enlightenment of the citizen” (*Bürgeraufklärung*) must adjust itself according to the ranks of society it addresses. “Certain truths which are useful to man, as man,” he noted, “can at times be harmful to him as citizen.”<sup>73</sup> So long as the “collision” between the Enlightenment of man and the Enlightenment of citizen is confined to matters which do not directly address the “essential” destiny of man as man or of man as citizen—and thus do not put into question either those aspects of man which distinguish him from animals or those civic duties which are necessary for the preservation of public order—Mendelssohn saw little cause for concern and argued that rules can easily be drawn up to resolve potential conflicts.<sup>74</sup> But when a conflict arises between the “essential” destiny of man as citizen and either his “essential” or his “fortuitous” destiny as man, the choices facing the partisan of enlightenment become more difficult. The most severe conflict occurs in those “unhappy” states when the “essential” destinies of man as man and man as citizen collide. In such cases the enlightenment which man, as man, requires cannot spread “through all classes of the realm” without threatening the very fabric of society. “Here philosophy lays its hand on

<sup>71</sup> Hinske, “Mendelssohns Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung?,” 88.

<sup>72</sup> Mendelssohn took the concept of the “destiny of man” from a book by his fellow member of the *Mittwochsgesellschaft*, J. J. Spalding, *Betrachtung über die Bestimmung des Menschen*, first published in 1748 and reprinted in numerous editions in the eighteenth century. For a discussion of the centrality of the notion in Mendelssohn’s work, see Hinske, “Mendelssohns Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung?” 94-99.

<sup>73</sup> Mendelssohn, *Gesammelte Schriften*, VI/1, 117.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*

its mouth! Necessity may here prescribe laws, or forge fetters, which are applied to man, to force him down, and hold him under its yoke!"<sup>75</sup> When man's "essential" destiny as a citizen collides with his "fortuitous" destiny as man, the consequences are less grim. Here it is not a question of a state violating man's essential humanity, but rather of a situation where "certain useful and—for mankind—adorning truths may not be disseminated without the current fundamental propositions of religion and morality being torn down."<sup>76</sup> Despite the skepticism voiced in his initial *Votum* on Möhsen's lecture, Mendelssohn came to agree with those of his colleagues in the *Mittwochsgesellschaft* who saw a need to set limits to enlightenment and concluded that in such cases the "virtue-loving *Aufklärer* will . . . endure prejudice rather than drive it away along with that truth with which it is so tightly intertwined."<sup>77</sup>

Many of the same concerns haunt Kant's defense of enlightenment. After the spirited opening definition of *Aufklärung* as man's exit from his self-imposed immaturity, Kant invokes a distinction between "public" and "private" uses of reason which countless subsequent commentators—beginning with Mendelssohn himself—have found puzzling at best.<sup>78</sup> The "public" use of reason is that use "which anyone may make of it as a man of learning addressing the entire reading public [*ganzen Publikum der Leserwelt*]." The "private" use of reason is that use which "a person may make of it in a particular *civil* post or office [with] which he is entrusted."<sup>79</sup> In one's private use of reason, one behaves "passively," as "part of a machine," bound by an "artificial accord" (*künstliche Einhelligkeit*) to promote certain "public ends." In this context it is "im-permissible to argue." In one's public use of reason, one acts as "a member of the complete commonwealth [*ganzes gemeinen Wesen*] or even of a cosmopolitan society [*Weltbürgergesellschaft*]." Here an individual "may indeed argue without harming the affairs in which he is

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>78</sup> In a *Votum* in response to a discussion of Kant's essay within the *Mittwochsgesellschaft*, Mendelssohn described Kant's distinction between public and private uses as "somewhat strange" (*Gesammelte Schriften*, VIII, 227). Subsequent commentators have found it stranger still: Susan Meld Shell finds it odd that Kant should classify the "discourse of the public official" as a "private use of reason" (*The Rights of Reason* [Toronto, 1980], 171), while Ronald Beiner characterizes Kant's distinction as "something of an inversion of traditional liberal priorities on the part of one of the leading fountain heads of liberal thought" ("Hannah Arendt on Judging," Hannah Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy* [Chicago, 1982], 123). The difference between Kant's argument for toleration and the typical liberal defense is discussed at length in O'Neill, "The Public Use of Reason," 523-51.

<sup>79</sup> AA, VIII, 37 (*Political Writings*, 55). In his *Votum* Mendelssohn glossed Kant's distinction as a contrast between "vocational" and "extra-vocational" uses of reason; *Gesammelte Schriften*, VIII, 228.

employed in part in a private capacity.” Restrictions on the private use of reason in no way contradict the goal of enlightenment, but the public use of reason must remain free, since “it alone can bring about enlightenment among men.”<sup>80</sup>

Kant’s distinction between public and private uses of reason becomes a bit less puzzling once it is recognized that for him the private sphere is “never a conception of the merely individual or personal.”<sup>81</sup> Private uses of reason take place in a sphere of contractual agreements where individuals alienate their talents to others for the purpose of advancing common goals. Thus, to invoke Kant’s examples, an army officer has agreed to carry out the commands given by superiors, citizens have agreed to pay those taxes which a state has imposed, and a clergyman has agreed to deliver sermons to pupils in catechism or to his congregation which conform to the guidelines established by his faith.<sup>82</sup> Kant gave scant attention to the first two examples and chose instead to concentrate on the question of the responsibilities of the clergyman. The choice is not arbitrary, nor need it be written off to the exigencies of censorship.<sup>83</sup> The explanation of Kant’s interest in the question leads us back once again to Zöllner, Mendelssohn, and the *Berlinische Monatsschrift*.

The legitimacy of the oaths of allegiance which clergymen were required to swear to the “symbols” of their faith had become a matter of heated discussion in the decade before the writing of Kant’s essay. In 1773 Nicolai had written a satirical novel about a Lutheran minister who was dismissed for deviating from his oath, and Mendelssohn, in his recently published *Jerusalem*, had mounted an extended attack on the practice of requiring such affirmations of faith.<sup>84</sup> Mendelssohn’s argument had been criticized both by Zöllner and by Johann David Michaelis, an Orientalist who had earlier argued against the extension of civil rights to Jews on the grounds that any oaths they might swear could not be taken seriously.<sup>85</sup> Mendelssohn dispensed with Michaelis’s personal—and

<sup>80</sup> AA, VIII, 37 (*Political Writings*, 56).

<sup>81</sup> O’Neill, 530; see also Thomas Auxter, “Kant’s Conception of the Private Sphere,” *The Philosophical Forum*, 12 (1981), 295-310.

<sup>82</sup> AA VIII, 37-38 (*Political Writings*, 56). In his discussion of freedom of expression, Klein had used the examples of military officers criticizing orders and writers addressing religious issues; see “Über Denk- und Druckfreiheit,” *Berlinische Monatsschrift*, 3 (1784), 327-28 (Hinske, 404-5).

<sup>83</sup> Laursen, “The Subversive Kant,” 589, suggests that Kant focused on the clergy and matters of religion because “he probably felt that this would meet the least opposition from Frederick the Great’s censors.”

<sup>84</sup> For Mendelssohn’s critique, see *Gesammelte Schriften*, VIII, 131-42 (*Jerusalem*, tr. Allan Arkush [Hanover, N.H., 1983], 63-75). For a discussion of the Lutheran symbolic books and of Nicolai’s novel, see Altmann’s commentary in Arkush’s translation of *Jerusalem*, 192.

<sup>85</sup> Johann David Michaelis, review of *Jerusalem, Orientalische und Exegetische Bib-*

anti-Semitic—attack in an essay published in the January 1784 issue of the *Berlinische Monatsschrift*.<sup>86</sup> But Zöllner's criticisms were more serious. He argued that Mendelssohn's indifference to the distinction between "religion" and "church" obscured the fact that a church, as a community of individuals devoted to the cause of advancing a religion, is free, as other societies, to demand that its members affirm their allegiance to its general principles.<sup>87</sup> While Mendelssohn was justified in arguing that the vocabulary of "rights" and "duties" was inappropriate in discussions of the relationships between God and the faithful which constitute *religion*, this did not mean that *churches*, as social institutions, could not impose duties on their members.<sup>88</sup>

This question of the limits of those duties which bound an official of a church stood at the center of Kant's discussion of the relationship between public and private uses of reason. With Zöllner—and implicitly against Mendelssohn—Kant argued that, insofar as they were fulfilling their responsibilities to the church as an institution, clergymen must adhere to the teachings of the church even in those cases where they might have reservations as to their truth. What an individual taught as an officer of the church "is presented by him as something which he is not empowered to teach at his own discretion, but which he is employed to expound in a prescribed manner and in someone else's name."

He will say: Our church teaches this or that, and these are the arguments it uses. He then extracts as much practical value as possible for his congregation from precepts to which he would not himself subscribe with full conviction, but

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*liothek* (1783), 22:326, 59-99 and 22:332, 165-70. J. F. Zöllner, *Über Moses Mendelssohns Jerusalem* (Berlin, 1784).

<sup>86</sup> "Über die 39 Artikel der englischen Kirche und deren Beschwörung," *Berlinische Monatsschrift*, 3 (1784), 24-41 (Mendelssohn, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 8, 213-24). Mendelssohn's criticism of the Anglican equivalent of the symbolic books, the "Thirty-Nine Articles," had prompted Michaelis to charge that Mendelssohn had slandered the English clergy and to solicit a letter from England critical of Mendelssohn's discussion of the Thirty-Nine Articles. The relevant parts of Michaelis's review are reprinted in Mendelssohn, *Gesammelte Schriften*, VIII, 207-13; for a discussion of the affair, see Altmann, *Moses Mendelssohn*, 530-31, and Eberhard Günter Schulz, "Kant und die Berliner Aufklärung," *Akten des 4. Internationalen Kant-Kongresses, Mainz 1974*, Teil II, 1: Sektionen, ed. Gerhard Funke (Berlin, 1974), 60-80. Schulz's essay is virtually unique in the literature on the exchanges between Kant and Mendelssohn in that it offers a reason for Kant's suggestion that his reflections and Mendelssohn's might "coincide by chance": AA VIII, 42 (*Political Writings*, 60). Schulz speculates that Kant had read Mendelssohn's response to Michaelis and guessed that the announced essay on "What is Enlightenment?" would, like Kant's own essay, respond to the points raised by Zöllner.

<sup>87</sup> Zöllner, 58-59. As Schultz notes (64-65), Zöllner's distinction between church and religion was later employed by Kant in his *Rechtslehre* (AA VI, 327).

<sup>88</sup> For a discussion of Zöllner's argument, see Schulz, 64-66. In Mendelssohn's defense, it should be noted that *Jerusalem* was not completely indifferent to the distinction between religion—as a set of beliefs—and the church—as an institution. See Mendelssohn, *Gesammelte Schriften*, VIII, 110 (Jerusalem, 41) and Altmann's commentary to the translation, 143, 168.

which he can nevertheless undertake to expound, since it is not entirely impossible that they may contain truth.<sup>89</sup>

The interest of Kant's clergyman is in the practical, not the dogmatic, dimension of religion. It is "not entirely impossible" that the doctrines of the church are true—but in any case the lesson of the *Critique of Pure Reason* is that religion is a matter of practical faith, not of theoretical certainty.<sup>90</sup> There is, however, a limit on how far a clergyman may go in maintaining this separation between official dogma and personal conviction: "nothing contrary to the essence of religion" must be present in the teachings of the church, for if this were the case the clergyman "would not be able to carry out his official duties in good conscience, and would have to resign."<sup>91</sup>

In much of this Kant was simply invoking existing Prussian policy.<sup>92</sup> In cases brought before the "Spiritual Department" in 1776 and again in 1783, Baron von Zedlitz, the head of the department, ruled that while clergy may write whatever they please in theological or philosophical articles addressed to the reading public, they must be careful to distinguish these scholarly opinions from their responsibilities as representatives of the church in their parishes.<sup>93</sup> Kant was undoubtedly familiar with the cases: the 1776 case involved the Königsberg clergyman Johann August Starck, and the 1783 case involved a book by Johann Heinrich Schulz which Kant reviewed in the Königsberg *Räsonnirenden Bücherverzeichnis* shortly after its publication.<sup>94</sup> In equating "the age of enlightenment" with "the century of Frederick," Kant must have had in mind decisions such as these. Under Frederick's "enlightened" rule, Kant wrote, "venerable clergy, without offense to their official duties, may in their capacity as scholars [*Gelehrten*] freely and publicly submit to the judgment of the world their verdicts and opinions, even if they deviate here and there from orthodox doctrine [*angenommenen Symbol*]."<sup>95</sup> Those consequences of enlightenment which troubled the members of the *Mittwochsgesellschaft*

<sup>89</sup> AA VIII, 38 (*Political Writings*, 56).

<sup>90</sup> For a discussion, see Allen W. Wood, *Kant's Moral Religion* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1970).

<sup>91</sup> AA VIII, 38 (*Political Writings*, 56-57). Significantly, Kant does not discuss whether there are cases when military officers would be justified in resigning their commissions rather than carrying out orders; nor is there a suggestion as to whether there might be cases when citizens would be justified in renouncing their citizenship, rather than supporting their government's actions. Kant's failure to consider examples of possible clashes between private and public uses of reason in areas other than the particular example of the clergy lends support to Schulz's suggestion that the distinction between public and private uses of reason was largely formulated as a response to the discussion of religious oaths in Zöllner's critique of Mendelssohn's *Jerusalem*.

<sup>92</sup> This was first pointed out by Beyerhaus, "Kants 'Program' der Aufklärung."

<sup>93</sup> Beyerhaus, 161-64, reproduces the relevant documents.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 158-59 and Schulz 69; for Kant's review of J. H. Schulz's *Versuch einer Anleitung zur Sittenlehre für alle Menschen, ohne Unterschied der Religion*, see AA, VIII, 9-14, and the brief discussion in Michel Despland, *Kant on History and Religion* (Montreal, 1973), 21-22.

<sup>95</sup> AA, VIII, 40-41 (*Political Writings*, 58-59).

were avoided by Kant thanks to a compromise which found a pithy summary in the maxim he credited to Frederick: “*Argue as much as you like and about what you like, but obey!*”<sup>96</sup>

While Mendelssohn suggested that a conflict between the “enlightenment of man” and the “enlightenment of the citizen” could force philosophy into silence, Kant saw little need for concern. The “enlightenment of man” was advanced by scholars addressing the reading public; what Mendelssohn had called the “enlightenment of the citizen” was a matter for the “private” use of reason. There was no need to fear the consequences of enlightenment: the free public use of reason was “the most innocuous form” of freedom, since the scholarly reflections which take place in the public sphere pose no threat to the functioning of the private sphere.<sup>97</sup> The private sphere remained undisturbed because of a “strange and unexpected pattern in human affairs”: “A high degree of civil freedom seems advantageous to a people’s intellectual freedom, yet it also sets up insuperable barriers to it. Conversely, a lesser degree of civil freedom gives intellectual freedom enough room to expand to its fullest extent.”<sup>98</sup> Frederick could well afford to let citizens argue as much as they liked; he had on hand “a well-disciplined and numerous army to guarantee the public security.” A ruler of a “republic” (*Freistaat*) could not risk allowing the same freedom of public discussion—in the absence of a large army, the free public use of reason might have less than innocuous consequences.<sup>99</sup>

It is thus only at first glance that the essays of Kant and Mendelssohn lead us away from questions of power and politics and tempt us with a “philosophical” definition of the enlightenment. Both essays were contributions to a tradition of discourse in which the question “What is Enlightenment?” was not a matter of idle speculation but rather a troubling political dilemma. Kant and Mendelssohn attacked the question at a higher level of abstraction and, in so doing, provided a few stirring quotations for commentators who would subsequently discuss the question “What is Enlightenment?” with little appreciation for the political significance of the issue in eighteenth century Prussia. Yet neither Kant nor Mendelssohn could ignore the problems which troubled those “friends of enlightenment” who, taking a respite from their chores within the Prussian bureaucracy, gathered every other Wednesday evening and asked what enlightenment was, why there was so little of it, and what might happen if there was too much of it.

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<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 37 (*Political Writings*, 55).

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 36-37 (*Political Writings*, 55).

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 41 (*Political Writings*, 59).

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*