

Bach with a breeze from the Bosphorus

Europe and the Divine , Europe in search of self

European reflections on trips from Delft to Escorial and Istanbul and back

(between autumn 2003 and midsummer 2007)

by Willem van Hasselt

"puisque la crise de l'éternel existe depuis longtemps", Maurice Merleau-Ponty

"In the end, we can say that Europe's cultural identity resides in the absence of any fully formed identity – in other words, in uncertainty and unrest."

Leszek Kolakowski

Europe, autumn 2003 - spring 2005 : constitutional prelude and fugue?

One Sunday evening in late October 2003, I found myself in the Oude Kerk (the Old Church) in Delft, the home of the Protestant stadholder William the Silent, Prince of Orange (1533-84), playing the violin in a Bach cantata at the evening service. *'Wo soll ich fliehen hin?'* sang the choir. *'Wo soll ich fliehen hin, weil ich beschweret bin mit viel und großen Sünden? Wo soll ich Rettung finden? Wenn alle Welt herkäme, mein Angst sie nicht wegnähme....'*

For me the more pressing question was *'Wo soll ich fliegen hin?'* You see, a few hours later I would be travelling to the Escorial, the monastery/palace of the Catholic monarch Philip II, where I was to take part in a conference on a possible constitution for the European Union (later called constitutional treaty). My trip began with a brief stroll through the gardens of the Prinsenhof, past the unpretentious statue of William the Silent.



Photo: *William the Silent in the Prinsenhof, in the shadow of the Oude Kerk in Delft.*

Finding myself with some time to kill at Schiphol, I stopped off at the airport meditation room, a space for adherents of every conceivable religion – and humanists – in transit, a space for the wandering children of globalisation. Architecturally speaking, it is a space that tries, perhaps only half-heartedly, to achieve an almost impossible compromise. I leafed through the guestbook and found the following:

*“O people of scripture (Torah & Bible), do not exaggerate in religion.
O people of scripture, do not say anything about God except the truth.
Your God is the only God.
Do not say trinity.
Jesus, the only son of Mary, was the messenger and a word which he (God) sent to
Mary.
O people of scripture, come to the word that is common between us and you.
We will not worship anyone except Allah and not associate any partners to Him.
O people of scripture, do not exaggerate in your religion....”*

There was something that fascinated me about the text, which I copied down in my travel journal. When I left the room, a Muslim was deep in prayer and an orthodox-looking American Jew was about to go in. Three monotheists just passing through – in search of a moment of reflection, a spiritual time-out – before going their separate ways.

As the Boeing 737 lifted off into its technologically-guided transcendence, I turned the words from the guestbook over in my head: ‘Do not say trinity. Do not exaggerate in your religion.’ Take-off and landing: those are the moments when the risk of the infernal destruction of man and machine seems nearest.



Photo: Trinitarian transcendence

The Gloria, as sung in the Oude Kerk, still rang in my ears: ‘Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit, as it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be, world without end.’ Monotheism? Oh really? One God, but in three persons? $1 = 3!$ Are ‘we’ exaggerating? Are ‘we’ being inconsistent? After all, historical or theological reasoning is never going to lead us to the essence of a concept like the Holy Trinity. Isn’t it better to listen to Bach’s Mass in B minor? When you hear that deeply impressive and beautiful music (attaining sanctity that rises above Bach’s own Protestantism), you grasp the divine mystery in a way

that bypasses the logical mind. In that sense Bach's music is a kind of lender of last resort for believers who are left cold by the formalised language of organised religion.

Somewhere high above France – *'la fille aînée de l'Eglise!* – my musings turned to my imminent arrival in Spain, a country which was profoundly influenced by the encounter between Trinitarian Catholicism and Unitarian Islam. Consider the magnificent architecture or the 'enlightened' 13th-century philosopher Averroës. Sadly, that encounter would culminate in disaster! Difficult though it may be, this is why the EU's Barcelona Process, launched some seven centuries later, is so vital. This trans-Mediterranean dialogue is grounded in the realisation that Islam was a constituent factor of Europe in the broadest sense, that an enlightened Islam is capable of growth, even to the point of a constitution that guarantees the separation of church and state. Shouldn't the EU invest in modernising its southern flank by opening accession negotiations with Turkey, a Muslim country with a strictly secular polity? Such a long negotiation process (10 to 15 years) will require intensive contact between Turkish civil society groups and their counterparts in the EU member states. Can a comparison of these two processes of secularisation – one that has been going on for decades and the other for centuries – teach us anything? We, both Europeans and Turks, need to set aside our prejudices and try to see each other as we really are. And regardless of the outcome of the negotiations, should we not put our heads together and address the fact that Europe and its neighbours are under increasing pressure from new forces and new, ambitious and strong players?

A few hours later I was approaching the Escorial monastery. It was built by King Philip II as a way of thanking God for his victory at the battle of St. Quentin in 1557 over the troops of Henry II, king of France. It is one of the largest religious establishments in the world. The floor plan of the building evokes a grill shape; this was traditionally thought to have been done in honor of St. Lawrence, who was martyred by being roasted to death on a grill. St. Lawrence's feast day is August 10, which is the same date on which the Battle of St. Quentin took place. I marvelled at its superhuman (almost inhuman) dimension, that – in its massive severity, the polar opposite of the modest, intimate atmosphere of the Prinsenhof in Delft – made the tectonic tension between the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation suddenly become concrete, visible and tangible. When you think of Europe, the religious factor is never far away, despite all our Enlightenment, modernity and postmodernity. Indeed, isn't the religious factor already beginning to manifest itself in a new form? Later this century, I wonder if it will be possible to speak of a post-secular culture.



Photo: The Escorial, the monastery/palace of Philip II, so different from the intimacy of Delft

At the conference on a possible European Constitution, the question arose of whether to include an explicit reference to Europe's religious traditions and spiritual roots. Such a reference has its pros and cons if you give it a serious thought. During the discussion at the Escorial with the Spanish foreign minister Ana Palacio (a member of the Convention's presidium), I suggested that the problem could be solved with a reference to Abraham, the patriarch of Jews, Christians, Muslims and, I added, the humanists of a globalising culture. After all, Abraham is not only the patriarch of the Judeo-Christian and Islamic cultures. When he heeded the call to leave his home village (and its local gods), he also broke free of the closed culture of his forefathers, the culture of a single place. In doing so, he also became the patriarch of the place-less culture. With admittedly a bit of a mental leap one might say that this process would ultimately also evolve into what we now call globalisation.

The descendants of Isaac and Ishmael took very different paths. This might explain the Islamic criticism of the doctrine of the Trinity discussed above: whereas Islam - which arose in the deserts of the Arabian peninsula - called for a direct relationship with God, Christianity - which was based in Rome and Constantinople, with their intricate institutional culture (especially Rome) - evolved into a more complex faith, which later underwent a major metamorphosis during the Reformation. Are there parallels between Islam and Protestantism? Simplicity, perhaps, or the emphasis on a direct relationship between individual man and the Divine? The Christian relationship to the four Gospels on the life of God's only begotten Son is far removed from the culture of a single Koran. In retrospect, the question arises: could the early acceptance of multiple interpretations of reality (four biographies of a single figure) in the Christian tradition be regarded as a first step on the road to modernity or even postmodernity – the road to the West?

Should Europe's religious traditions be anchored in the constitutional treaty or not? Isn't the essence of this question to be found in the *content* of the Treaty and its *application* rather than in an explicit nod to our religious tradition in the preamble? In the way that Europe is succeeding in transforming its rich diversity of cultural and religious traditions into a 'benign voluntary empire', which offers to the rest of the world a credible mixture of hard and soft security?

Meanwhile I am preparing myself for the next Bach cantata in the Oude Kerk in Delft:

Erhalt uns, Herr,
Bei deinem Wort,
Und steur' des Papsts und Türken Mord.
Die Jesum Christus, deinem Sohn,
Stürzen wollen von seinem Thron.

Lutherans, Roman Catholics and Turkish Muslims are sworn enemies in this Lutheran text from 1542. Is this the language of faith? It is, in any case, an expression of the *Zeitgeist* in that part of Europe: Bach takes us right into the midst of the clash of civilisations which had held Europe captive since the start of the 16th century. Would the completion of European integration in the 21st century put an end to that once and for all, two centuries after Immanuel Kant's visionary mini-masterpiece *Zum ewigen Frieden*?

At the beginning of 2005, Europe had seen the 'return' of former involuntary members of the Warsaw Pact. Yet, the EU-27 seemed to be too big and heterogeneous for many of its own citizens to grasp, but it remained a beacon of light and a model for strife-torn regions elsewhere in the world. Which would prove the more influential in the end? A new constitutional treaty or starting negotiations with Turkey as agreed in december 2004? An open question, and a loaded one at that.

Europe, May-June 2007: tremendous forces in a tiny garden

Where does this European constitutional treaty stand now? It has been – since summer 2005 – at the centre of intense European debate. According to Philip Stephens (Financial Times, 22-6-07), this debate was "haunted by shared delusions" of sceptics and dreamers alike. No, it wasn't the issue of whether to mention 'the Eternal' or 'Abraham' that was the bone of contention. It was the tug-of-war between effectiveness and legitimacy, an issue that is as old and tough as human history itself: the 'eternal' tension that is Europe, the very tension that has allowed Europe to come as far as it has in the integration process!

Moreover, this debate was about the very (constitutional) nature of this half a century old entity called European Union, about how it relates to the challenges within and without its borders and to the European people that are primarily citizens of the EU's member states.

The constitutional ambition has gone (for the time being?) but a new and simple treaty is born: a new compromise (apart from certain Polish second thoughts) on a better mix between effectiveness and democracy for an EU-27 to deal with the many challenges, both at home and around the world. The new treaty is another step on the road since Rome 1957. Yet the debate itself will go on, because as Larry Siedentop writes at the very end of his 'Democracy in Europe' (2000): "These are not matters for a few years. These are matters for decades, probably for generations."

Negotiations with Turkey have started as planned in October 2005. As with all lengthy and complex negotiations, no one knows their outcome. It will be very useful to organise intensive and unprejudiced informal European debate with all sorts of Turkish civil society groups and with Turkish military people as well, even on sensitive issues, in a process parallel to the formal negotiations itself.



Photo: 'Diary of an EU-Turkey negotiator ,3-10-05 (A view from Cihangir, Istanbul' www.lizstrick.nl)

Between early May and late June 2007, I travelled between Delft's Oude Kerk (to play in a Bach cantata again) and Istanbul (to attend an excellent example of very lively and enlightening informal discussions, the yearly so-called 'Turkey-EU observatory'-meeting) and back again.

Just before leaving Istanbul, I sat down on a stone on the lush lawn in the shadow of lovely trees close to the walls of Topkapi palace, close to Irene-church. It was about midday and extremely hot, yet a light breeze came in from the Bosphorus. I sensed Eden's garden.....and my inner ear heard the 'Sanctus' from Bach's B Minor Mass. Only a few days later I was back in the intimate garden (of his Delft home Prinsenhof) around the statue of Prince William the Silent in Delft, with my violin on my back on my way to playing another Bach-cantata in the Old Church ... the sense of Eden's garden once again! Thinking of four centuries of European history since William the Silent was murdered in his Delft home, I heard Winston Churchill's words, spoken 10 May 1946 in another old Dutch University town (Leiden), to a student audience in the main hall of Minerva student club: "I feel tremendous forces in this room." I felt the tremendous forces of European history in this tiny Delft garden around Williams statue. Wasn't the movement that started the Dutch Republic – a mix of burgher-talent and ambition (early civil society) and enlightened nobility - the beginning of a trend that would ultimately lead to this fairly recent process of voluntary European integration, against the strong forces of centuries of unchecked governance, be they absolute monarchy or of more modern totalitarian nature? The forces in and around Delft were the 'winning game', the world of Escorial would only join the Delft-trend – so to say – in 1986, when democratic (at last) Spain became a member of the EC.

After roughly four years of observing and discussing European issues, playing Bach, travelling between Delft, Escorial and Istanbul, I look back at the fate of this short lived constitutional treaty, and I wonder:

- What is Europe? *"Europe, sometimes you see it, sometimes you don't"*, according to filmmaker Wim Wenders in his empowering speech at the Berlin conference 'Giving Europe a soul', late 2006.
- What is the EU? Let me try: The EU is a benign voluntary 'empire' (a 21st century kind of loose Holy Roman Empire ?) with a legal space, a common market, with (in many places) a common currency, It is famous for it's soft power but is not yet capable of convincing and focussed soft and hard power-projection in a world that is quickly changing, that sees new rising powers, new kinds of power-play, dangerous economic and humanitarian imbalances, while the earth's gardens of Eden are at great risk by climate change. It has 27 member states but when will the member state's citizens - having formal European citizenship – be part of it with heart and mind? Let us face it: the EU has no distinct political face yet. Sharing sovereignty is one thing, projecting authority internally and externally in an effective and legitimate

way is another thing. There is no EU-wide consensus about a match between the two either.

- What is a European? The answer of Adam Zagajewski (the Polish poet who attended the the last of the 5 EU Nexus–conferences ‘Europe? A beautiful idea?’ during the Netherlands EU presidency, 2004): *” A European has a good memory, remembers what was splendid and what was evil in European history. He’ll never be arrogant because the amount of evil prevents any presumption. He respects the accomplishments of the Enlightenment, but doesn’t despise the Middle Ages with their faith. He knows that there is a place in Europe both for analytical thinking and for prayer, for physics and for music. He does not think that the US is a military giant and an intellectual dwarf. He hopes that the taste of his favourite cheese will not be entirely determined by Brussels pundits. He is not very optimistic about the future of the common foreign policy. Yet he believes Europeans should not forget that Europe is an admirable fiction (like so many other things that help us live). He loves European landscapes and blackbirds singing ecstatically every spring in each city and town between Portugal and Ukraine. If he is from the ‘old and rich’ Europe he is not condescending and does not feel that his humanity outshines that of the ‘new’ and poorer Europeans. If he is from the ‘new’ Europe he knows that there are serious responsibilities alongside privileges. He enjoys culture because the democratic system in which he dwells is intellectually vague and does not offer enough spiritual sustenance. He needs culture to counter democracy’s tendency to deride itself as well as to demolish silly utopian longings for a perfect political system.”* Zagajewski concluded that the EU's negative imperative - its wish to avoid war - limits its vigour: *” The EU lacks the fabulous energy of a march into the unknown. For those who, consider this disappointing, there is the comforting thought that the ‘real’ Europe lives on in the narrow streets of old towns and in human minds of Europe. The idea of Europe comprises not only a half real, half symbolic space that we wish free from nationalism and dictatorship, war and famine, but also involves a certain delight in contradictions.”*

Concluding reflection on Europe and Europeans, The Hague, 1 July 2007 (while listening to Bach’s concerto for piano & orchestra nr 1 in D minor, played by Glenn Gould)

The last two years year of European debate have seen stronger political and public demand for defining the borders of our European project more precisely. In a very recent Berlin conference on culture and Europe (‘Kultur macht Europa macht Kultur’) the Swiss author

Adolf Muschg stated that Europe as a cultural idea was and should by definition be an open concept, whereas Europe as a political project needed precise borders. But he defined these borders in cultural and religious terms.

Admittedly, I was more convinced by Erik Holm (Danish author of 'European Anarchy', Copenhagen, 2001) when he said this in our Istanbul-meeting: *"I shall maintain that Europe can be defined in political terms as an idea of a secular-liberal political culture and in economic terms as an idea of a social-liberal economic culture. These ideas have taken different shapes in different countries determined by different historical and social conditions, and they have nowhere been fully realised. But all those people who are honestly striving for approaching such a political-economic culture are by definition European, no matter where they live. In that sense "Europe" can be said to be an ideology. "*

May all of us Europeans, from around the Baltic to around the Bosphorus, who are empowered and driven by the 'tremendous forces' contained in this normative idea of Europe – conscious of the fact that the debate about Europe goes on - get ourselves, get our act, together at the beginning of the 21st century with it's exciting as well as extremely dangerous challenges!

About the author: During the period covered in this text (2003-2007), Willem van Hasselt was a staff member of the think-tank of the ministry of Foreign Affairs in the Hague. He is an active amateur-violinist. This essay was written on a personal title.

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