

## Europe – the tragic continent

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Two weeks ago, in his lecture in this series on Europe, Neal Ascherson asked two intriguing questions: ‘*Where* is Europe?’, and ‘*When* is Europe’. Intriguing because it turned out that these seemingly simple questions are very hard to answer. Today I want to add a third question, as simple as the other two and as difficult to answer. This question is: *What* is Europe? In a sense, we may regard this third question as the primordial one, as we can start our search for Europe in time and space only when we at least have a slight idea of *what* we are actually looking for. So the question I want to address this afternoon is: what is it that makes Europe European? And as the title of my talk already indicates, the answer I will defend today is that Europe first and foremost is a tragic continent.

Before explaining why this is the case, let me make two introductory remarks. First, I want to emphasize that my perspective on Europe is limited in the sense that I will approach the question ‘What is Europe?’ from a philosophical perspective. This means I will not talk about that which distinguishes European politics, economy, or culture. My aim is to explain what we may call the ‘tragic worldview’ of Europe. This may sound like a rather abstract category. However, as every worldview it is embodied in more concrete phenomena, like politics, economy and culture. In my talk I will compare the European to the ‘American worldview’. Because these continents, for a variety of historical reasons, have so

much in common, and therefore are often taken together as parts of the 'the Western world', it is very instructive to focus on the difference in their identity.

With my second introductory remark I hope to counter a possible objection to my approach. One might argue that my approach rests on the essentialist illusion that there would be such thing like *the* European or *the* American worldview. Both Europe and America are not one. These names are just umbrella terms, which refer to a heterogeneous variety of subcultures, each with their own beliefs, convictions and worldviews. It is difficult to see what the worldview of – for example – liberal intellectuals at the campus in Ann Arbor have in common with the worldview of members of evangelical communities in the rural Midwest, or with the worldview of the African Americans that populate the Detroit's depressed neighbourhoods. And the same counts for Europe, a continent that on top of the aforementioned religious, ethnic and economical differences is characterized by a great variety of nationalities and languages. Liberal intellectuals in the United States, our critic might add, may actually have more in common with their European counterparts than with other subcultures in the United States.

I fully agree that Europe and the US are heterogeneous varieties rather than monolithic monocultures; in my talk I will even emphasize this heterogeneity and the resulting tensions. The two worldviews I will distinguish are not so much empirical realities, but rather ideal types, heuristic fictions if you like. Nevertheless, my claim is that these fictions can help us to better understand the

real existing differences between the United States of America and the less United States of Europe.

My talk consists of five parts. In the first one, I'll explore "The Idea of Europe."

## **1 The idea of Europe**

George Steiner's essay 'The idea of Europe' provides a good starting point for my quest for the European worldview. Steiner presented this text as the tenth Nexus Lecture at the Tilburg University in The Netherlands in 2003. It was a prelude to a series of gatherings organized by the Nexus Institute, on the eve of the Intellectual Summit during the Dutch Presidency of the European Union in 2004. The Nexus Institute is an organization whose mission it is to promote European culture. As a warm up for the referenda about the new European Constitution, which were perceived by the European population with a mixture of indifference and critique, the Dutch government asked the Nexus Institute to organize a series of conferences on 'the idea of Europe'. The series culminated in the aforementioned Intellectual Summit, held in Rotterdam on December 4, 2004, entitled 'Europe. A Beautiful Idea?' (Given the results of the referenda the question mark in the title was perhaps not such a good idea). Steiner was invited to start the series of events in the tenth Nexus Lecture with an attempt to define this beautiful idea of Europe.

In his lecture, Steiner argued that Europe can be defined by 'five axioms'. The first three of these axioms – the coffee house, in which intellectual and

political debate takes place, the landscape on a traversable and human scale, and the streets and squares named after statesmen, scientists, artists, and writers of the past – mainly refer to the material infrastructure in which the European worldview could emerge, flourish and be passed on across generations. As important as this infrastructure may be, I will focus on the fourth axiom, which refers to what Steiner calls “the substance” of the idea of Europe. This substance “derives from a primordial duality, [...] the twofold inheritance of Athens and Jerusalem”. “This relationship, at once conflictual and syncretic, has engaged European theological, philosophical and political argument from the Churchfathers to Leon Chestov, from Pascal to Leo Strauss. To be a European is to attempt to negotiate, morally, intellectually and existentially the rival ideals, claims, *praxis*, of the city of Socrates and that of Isaiah” (Steiner, 2004, 24).

With regard to the seminal role of Hellas, Steiner points at music, mathematics and speculative thought, “three pursuits or addictions or games of a wholly transcendent dignity”. Though music, mathematics and speculative thought are to a certain extent global phenomena, only in Europe and, by direct transfer, in North America, they have entailed “the miracles of meaning” which are conveyed to us by Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, Euclid, Pythagoras, Von Riemann, Gödel, Plato, Spinoza, Kant and Wittgenstein, to mention just a few of the names so generously dropped by Steiner. When he discusses the legacy of Jerusalem, he emphasizes that there is scarcely a vital node in the texture of western existence, that has not been touched by the heritage of the Hebraic. “The monotheistic challenge, the definition of our humanity as in

dialogue with the transcendent, the concept of a supreme Book, the notion of law as inextricable from moral commandments, our very sense of history as purposeful time, have their origin in the enigmatic singularity and dispersal of Israel". Steiner adds that this also counts for secular Europe. Marx's messianic historicism, Freud's assumption of an original crime, and Einstein's trust in cosmic order, to mention just a few examples, are no less than Christianity descendants of Sinai.

"This is true of the positivist, of the theist, of the agnostics as it is of the believer [...]. It is a cliché to cite Marx, Freud and Einstein (I would add Proust) as the begetters of modernity, as the artisans of our current condition. But underneath the cliché lies a formidably complex situation: that of secular Judaism and of the translation into secular terms and values of profoundly Judaic antecedents. Marx's rage for social justice and messianic historicism are directly concordant with that of Amos or Jeremiah. Freud's strange assumption of an original crime—the killing of the father—mirrors, graphically, the scenario of the Adamic fall. There is much that is wonderfully close to the promise of the psalms and of Maimonides in Einstein's trust in cosmic order, in his tenacious refusal of chaos. Judaism and its two principal footnotes, Christianity and utopian socialism, are descendants of Sinai, even where Jews themselves were nothing but a despised, hunted handful." (idem, 26-27).]

Steiner's claim that the substance of the European worldview is rooted in Greek rationalism, on the one hand, and the Jewish-Christian tradition, on the other, is not particularly surprising. In fact, the claim is rather obvious and Steiner

certainly is not the first to make it. However, Steiner also points at the fact – and this is less common – that the two traditions on which the idea of Europe rests, are “at once conflictual and syncretic”. That Steiner mentions the conflictual nature of this relationship first, is not without reason. From the very beginning their relationship has been full of tensions. The time that their mutual struggle was settled on the stake lies fortunately behind us. Given to the fundamental secularization of Europe over the past two centuries, Christianity and rationality live in a relatively peaceful coexistence. However, their principles still are diametrically opposed. To realize that, we only have to think, for example, of the debate between evolutionists and defenders of intelligent design.

Moreover, during recent decades Europe has begun to face a new, and since 9/11, increasingly violent confrontation with Islam. This seems to have started a new chapter in the tense relationship between rationality and religion. Old and new Europeans seem to be forced to make a choice between the two conflictual principles again. However, this time the choice is not between Athens and Jerusalem, but between Athens and Mecca.

## **2 Fundaments and fundamentalisms**

The opposition between monotheistic belief and enlightened reason is conveniently arranged. Reality, however, is more complex. Christianity and Enlightenment sometimes enter in surprising coalitions. Let me give you an example taken from my home country. Since 9/11, in The Netherlands there is often heated debate about the role of Islam within Dutch culture. Islam is a rather

new phenomena in Dutch culture. In spite of its cosmopolitan orientation as a trading country, until the Second World War, Dutch society has been relatively closed and mono-religious. Of course the cultural differences between Protestantism and Catholicism should not be overlooked, but they remained branches of the same religious tree. Although, in the period that when Indonesia was still a Dutch colony, the Netherlands had the largest Islamic population of all countries in the world, Islam never became part of Dutch culture.

There is another reason for the emotional character of the debate on Islam. The debate is strongly connected with two politically and religiously motivated murders, extremely rare phenomena in the Dutch political landscape. With the exception of the Second World War, The Netherlands hasn't had any political murders for almost three centuries. The two men who have been murdered – the populist politician Pim Fortuyn and film director Theo van Gogh – both were radical critics of the Islam, about which they often spoke in a rather offensive way.

In the Dutch debate about monotheistic religion – both in its Islamic and Christian form – is often opposed to Enlightenment. This is not so strange, given the fact that The Netherlands - the country of Spinoza! - gave birth to what historian Jonathan Israel has called 'Radical Enlightenment'. Within this context The Netherlands has developed a solid wall of separation between church and state. Moreover, The Netherlands is among the most secular countries in the most secular continent on earth. In particular, the Dutch Liberal Party (the VVD: Party for Freedom and Democracy), though rather conservative with regard to

economics, traditionally has been quite progressive with regard to issues like abortion and euthanasia. For that reason Frits Bolkestein, the former leader of the Liberal party and former European Commissioner for the internal market, taxation and the customs union, former, who is generally considered to be the most intellectual among the liberals (at least he regularly refers to Immanuel Kant and the Enlightenment), in a speech given in 2003 about the relationship between religion and politics, surprised both friends and enemies when he claimed that the value of European culture is foremost connected with the Jewish-Christian tradition. He made this claim within the context of the debate about Islam, so one could imagine that this was an unfortunate “Own Irrationalism First” outpouring. However, Bolkestein’s version of the Enlightenment shares at least one characteristic with Christian fundamentalist movements, as we find them in the US in the political neighbourhood of George W. Bush, and Islamic fundamentalism, as we find it as a daily practice on the Arabian Peninsula.

What characterizes fundamentalism is the belief that the principles one adheres to are absolute and universally valid, and for that reason are not open for any negotiation. Such a fundamentalist belief motivated imam Ahmad Salam in 2004 to refuse to shake hands with the liberal State Secretary Immigration and Integration Rita Verdonk; surprisingly the leader of the Liberal Party, Frits Bolkestein, turned out to be no less fundamentalist. In 2000, in the so-called Multatuli lecture - named after a famous Dutch nineteenth century liberal writer who spent a part of his life in Indonesia where he became a severe critic of Dutch



colonialism – Bolkenstein firmly stated: “The separation of church and state, the freedom of speech, tolerance and non-discrimination are principles that originally were products of European history. However, liberalism claims that these principles have universal validity and value”. After arguing that Islam has a rather poor history regarding these principles, he continued, with somewhat less tolerance: “Here the dialogue ends and we have to take a stand. These principles are not negotiable. Not even a little bit”.

I wholeheartedly subscribe to the principles Bolkestein mentioned – separation of church and state, freedom of speech, tolerance and non-discrimination. However, what worries me is the dogmatic tone of his defence. Precisely for liberals who repeatedly refer to the Immanuel Kant and Enlightenment, we may expect radical willingness to be critical not only towards the bias and presuppositions of others, but also towards one’s own bias and presuppositions, instead of making them into dogmatic principles. The fact that Bolkestein and other ‘Enlightenment fundamentalists’ do not show this willingness, is connected with a particular belief they share with religious fundamentalists, the belief that there is only one universal truth (of God, Allah, or Reason) which enables us to make unmistakable distinctions between what is true and false, good and bad, beautiful and ugly. Unfortunately for them, the world isn’t that simple. In the global village we are constantly confronted with an abundance of contradictory truths, values and tastes. And since 9/11 and the terrorists attacks in Madrid and London this confrontation has become more violent. At least in the sense that the violence moved from Afghanistan, Iraq, and

the West Bank to cities in the US and Europe. However, this does not prove, as Born-again Enlighteners claim, the bankruptcy of cultural relativism. On the contrary, it shows how different cultures actually are. Cultural relativism, understood as an empirical theory, does not claim that every culture is equal or that anything goes, but rather that cultures are not equal and that for that reason many things do not go at all.

That does not necessarily imply a normative relativism. We *can* defend certain principles and values against others, and - as the finite creatures we are, bound to our family, tribe, group, religion, culture - we often *do* so. However, we should acknowledge the tragic dimension of the clash of incompatible principles. Not only can such a clash of principles arise – as Huntington has argued in his *The Clash of Civilizations* (1996) - between different cultures – for example between Western culture and Islamic culture, but it can also arise within a culture, as the aforementioned tension between Christian and rationalistic traditions in Europe show. Clashes can even arise within one single tradition. This happens, for example, when the liberal principles of non-discrimination and freedom of speech – both part of the constitution – violate each other. In The Netherlands we have seen various examples of this in the past decade. Because when the populist politician Pim Foruyn called Islam a backward religion, and film director Theo van Gogh started to call Muslims as ‘goath fuckers’. There can even arise an unbearable tension within one single principle, for example when we feel ourselves forced to be intolerant against those who preach or practice intolerance.

### 3 Tragedy

If we want to understand the nature of these kinds of unbearable conflicts, we have to take a third European tradition into account, a tradition that perhaps even more than Christianity and rationalism characterizes the 'idea of Europe'. I mean the tragic worldview, as it found its classical expression in the fifth century B.C. in the tragedies of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides, and its modern expression in the works of Shakespeare, Lessing, Ibsen and Sartre, in the tradition of the European novel and film.

Tragedies are stories that deal with fateful events. Fate has many faces: accidents, natural disasters, war, addictions, illness, the loss of our beloved ones, our own death. Fate hounds us all and sooner or later we all have to face it. In ordinary language the word 'tragic' is often used to refer to fateful events. However, not all fateful events are tragic. An event becomes tragic when the actor himself, against his own will, causes the fateful event. When somebody gets a fatal illness, that is terrible, but it is not a tragedy in the more restricted sense. When a policeman during an arrest accidentally kills his colleague, that's a tragedy. Tragedies presuppose some freedom of action. The life of a slave may be miserable, but it is no tragedy. Tragedies occur when a person executes his own fate in freedom. In William Styron's novel *Sophie's Choice* we find a shocking example of a tragic event. In the story a sadistic doctor in a Nazi concentration camp forces Sophie to make a choice which of her two children is

to die and which one is to survive. Losing a child is a terrible fate; to be forced to make such choice makes it into a unbearable tragedy.

Calling Europe the tragic continent, is not the same, of course, as claiming that events are restricted to Europe. Tragedies occur everywhere on earth. However, ever since the birth of the classical tragedy Europe has been characterized by a specific *awareness* of and *attitude* towards the tragic dimension of human life, as well by a sublime aesthetic *expression* of this tragic dimension. In his well-known book *The Death of Tragedy*, published in 1961, George Steiner repeatedly emphasizes that the literary genre of the tragedy is a uniquely European phenomenon.

In this light it was somewhat surprising that in his Nexus Lecture in 2004 Steiner does not include tragedy as one of the pillars on which Europe rests. However, he seems to allude to it, when stating that the fifth and last of the axioms that define Europe consists of “an eschatological self awareness” (idem, 27). In that context he even speaks about “a more or less tragic finality’ and at the very end of his lecture the word ‘tragic’ appears once more. After having criticized the growing Americanization of European culture, he expresses his hope that ‘the European dream’ can be dreamed again, and he continues: “It is only in Europe, perhaps, that the requisite foundations of literacy, that the sense of the tragic vulnerability of the *condition humaine*, could provide a basis” (idem, 35).

The use of the word ‘perhaps’ indicates that Steiner is not fully convinced that the European dream can be dreamed again. This might not only have been

motivated by the overwhelming power of the process of Americanization, but also with the development of European culture itself, as he describes it in his aforementioned book, *The Death of Tragedy*. According to Steiner, the tragic worldview only could arise in a culture that was inhabited by gods and which was ruled by “an aristocracy of suffering” that revolted against these gods. According to Steiner, in modern, secularized Europe there is no longer a place for tragedy. Hence the melancholic title and tone of his book.

However, tragedies do not necessary presuppose a religious worldview and an aristocratic elite. I am almost inclined to say: on the contrary. The emergence of tragedy in the fifth century before Christ in Athens, reflects two important cultural transformations. Greek tragedy emerged in an era, in which the fatalistic worldview in which everything was determined by the will of the gods, was replaced a more rational worldview. Especially in the tragedies of Aeschylus and Sophocles the conflict between the old *mythos* and the new *logos* is constantly present. However, already in Euripides’ tragedies the conflict is no longer between men and the gods, but rather between human beings (among which many women and aliens!) or between conflicting desires and principles within a single individual. Seen from this perspective it seems no coincidence that the second Golden Age of tragedy in the sixteenth and seventeenth century took place in an age in which again there was a transformation from mythos (this time in the form of Christianity) to logos (the secular, scientific worldview) again.

The second transformation that accompanied the birth of tragedy in Athens is closely connected with the transformation from mythos to logos. It is

the transformation from aristocracy to democracy. As I already mentioned, tragedies occur when fateful events are the result of free action. In this sense the genre of tragedy can be regarded as a reflection on the consequences of the democratization of the Greek polis. It's an artistic attempt to phathom the nature and the limits of human freedom. It seems no coincidence that both performance of the tragedy and political meetings in Athens took place in the Dionysos theatre.

Steiner mistakenly supposes that that the end of mythology and aristocracy demarcates the death on tragedy. Whereas in theocracy only a revolting king could be tragic, in a liberal society we witness a democratization of tragedy. The secularization and democratization of tragedy undoubtedly have had their impact on the contents, the characters and the style of tragedy. However, though tragedy has undergone important changes in the course of its long history, the basic structure of the tragic conflict has remained the same. Tragedies depict persons that wrestle with a fundamental problem. They are torn apart between contradicting circumstances, motives and or principles. They do not lack drive or dedication. If they do not survive their tragic struggle, it's not because they lack determination (Hamlet is the exception that proves the rule), but rather because of their almost superhuman dedication. What make these heroes tragic is that they, despite their freedom and responsibility, become part of a fateful chain of events. Because of miscalculation (*hamartia*), blindness (*ate*) or overconfidence (*hubris*) the tragic hero puts a unbearable guilt on his shoulders, as unintended as inevitable.

The fateful adventures of tragic heroes in Greek tragedies often are remarkably topical. Take Sophocles' *Antigone*, for example, first performed in 442 B.C.. The tragedy takes place against the background of a civil war. After her brothers Étéocles and Polyneikos, belonging to the conflicting parties, have killed each other in a man-to-man fight, their uncle Creon takes over power and attempts to unite the citizens of Thebe again. For that reason he decides that Étéocles should be buried with all possible military honours, whereas the body of Polyneikes is thrown outside the city wall as prey for the vultures and wolves. However, Antigone is of the opinion that it is her holy duty to bury her brother Polyneikes. While her sister Ismene and Hamon (who is both her fiancé and the son of acting king Creon) try to persuade Antigone to obey the law of the city, she persists obstinately. Creon becomes increasingly stubborn, too. He also has his principles. He cannot tolerate subversive action, even not – precisely not - from a relative. While the chorus in its stationary songs comments on the awesomeness of man and the fragility of human happiness, and the blind seer Teresias tries to bring Creon back to reason, a spiral of violence unrolls. After Antigone has buried Polyneikes not one, but two times – the deed must be seen! – Creon punishes her by burying her alive. Creon's son Haimon and his wife Eurydike commit suicide and Creon is left completely broken. When Creon and his retinue leave the stage, the chorus conclude:

*Of happiness the chiefest part*

*Is a wise heart:*

*And to defraud the gods in aught*

*With peril's fraught.*

*Swelling words of high-flown might*

*Mightily the gods do smite.*

*Chastisement for errors past*

*Wisdom brings to age at last.*

Antigone is not a battle between good guys and bad guys. Antigone is no exemplary Hollywood heroine waging war against the 'Empire of Evil'. She explains that she acts out of love, but in her stubbornness she is simply heartless towards her sister, her uncle and her fiancé. Creon is laudable because he attempts to bring 'the storm-tossed ship of state' back safely to port and refuses to favour his niece Antigone. But his lack of managerial flexibility furthers the decline of the city instead. Both Antigone and Creon are highly ambiguous characters. This reflects the tragic insight in the fact that in reality it's often difficult to distinguish firmness from inflexibility, courage from recklessness, confidence from overconfidence. Moreover, an excess of something good easily can turn to the opposite, and sometimes the opposites even coincide.

Perhaps it's just because of their fundamental ambiguity that we can identify ourselves with tragic heroes such as Creon and Antigone. Witnessing the spiral of violence that overwhelms the protagonists, we experience – to quote Aristotle's famous definition of tragedy – 'pity and fear', and become aware of the fact that this also could happen to us, 'effecting the proper purgation of these



emotions' (*pathèmaton katharsin*). The tragic hero might also experience catharsis, however, in his or her case the resulting wisdom often comes too late, after the catastrophe has taken place.

What classical tragedy teaches us is that absolute principles might be good for the gods, but somewhat 'oversized' for finite beings like mortals. As finite beings we should constantly beware of the pitfalls of miscalculation, blindness and overconfidence. Tragic wisdom is that we have to live with the restrictions, the contradictions and the pain that are part of the finitude of human existence.

In this respect tragedy is the opposite of Christianity and Islam: grand narratives that are based on clear distinctions between truth and falsehood, and good and bad, and that promise their believers a happy end, and that, for that reason, rather belong to the genre of the melodrama or the comedy. However, tragedy no less opposes the secular optimism that characterizes the Enlightenment. The best of possible worlds is out of our reach; what our tragic wisdom can achieve at best is to avoid producing more suffering than is inevitable.

If there is something Europe has learned from its long and tragic history, it's that we should be utmost careful regarding human happiness, that prosperity often rather is a result of our luck than of our merits. And that we, for that reason, must have compassion for those that are being pursued by fate. Perhaps we should call this attitude humanist. And it is precisely this tragic humanism that distinguishes Europe from the United States. This brave new world has

surpassed Europe both in religious fundamentalism and in the rationalistic faith that the world is makeable thanks to our technologies.

Let me be clear at this point. I am not claiming that Europe is morally superior to the US. For several reasons, the situation is more complex and less flattering for Europe. The first and most obvious reason is that the history of Europe until now has been characterized by real tragedies rather than by tragic wisdom. We only have to think of the wars of conquest, fought by Alexander the Great and the Roman Empire, of the crusades in the middle ages, the religious wars in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the history of European colonization, or the First and Second World Wars in the twentieth century, which not without reason have been called European Civil Wars and which produced the concentration camps after which, according to the famous words of Adorno, the writing of poetry is no longer possible. The Europe I am talking about, this must be clear, is rather an idea than a reality.

So if we should call Europe the tragic continent, it is first and foremost because it has a history full of real tragedies. However, just because of these tragedies European history also produced an awareness of this tragic dimension of human life and the sublime expression of it in its literature, visual arts, music and speculative thinking. Europe not only can be called the tragic continent because its history is marked by an abundance of real tragedies, but also because, as idea and ideal, it embodies a tragic wisdom that stems from these catastrophes and that still may speak to us.

#### 4. Contemporary tragedies

I would like to illustrate this with the help of two examples. The first one is the tragic struggle of Ayan Hirsi Ali against Muslim fundamentalism, a struggle that in several respects reminded us of Antigone's tragedy. Although Theo van Gogh was the main victim of the murder by a young Muslim terrorist, Hirsi Ali without doubt played the leading role in this remake of Sophocles' play. With her movie *Submission*, directed by Theo van Gogh, she wanted to support the countless women worldwide who are suffering oppression in the name of Islam. In this remake the role of Kreon was originally played by orthodox Imams like Ahmad Salam, whereas Theo van Gogh and his murderer Mohammed B. played the roles of Etéokles and Polyneikes with verve (that Mohammed B. wasn't killed by the police, actually was a production failure, as it was his intention to die as a martyr). Moderate Muslims like Ahmed Aboutaleb – at the time of the murder Alderman of the city of Amsterdam – played the roles of Haimon and Ismene, whereas Job Cohen, the Mayor of Amsterdam, was cut out to play the role of the blind seer Theresias in his desperate attempts to bring the others to reason.

One can only have admiration for Hirsi Ali, who, as a critic of Islam and like Antigone, was prepared to hazard nothing less than her life. And in a certain sense, after she was forced to hide in a protected safehouse, she was buried alive as well. At the same time, again just like in the case of Antigone, she gives us the uncanny feeling, as she seemed to be on course for catastrophe. Whereas Antigone buried her brother twice, Hirsi Ali immediately after the murder of Van Gogh announced that she was working on *Submission II*. Of course it is her

right, and after the murder of Theo van Gogh perhaps even her duty, to raise her voice against fundamentalists who assume the right to kill dissenters, but what makes her struggle tragic is that she does this in a rather counterproductive way. Like Antigone, she claims to speak out of love for suppressed women, but she acts heartlessly towards Islamic women who do not agree with her westernized lifestyle. In doing so she brought about the opposite of what she hoped to realize.

The resemblance with Antigone's struggle against Creon only grew when Hirsi Ali came into collision with Rita Verdonk, her sister-in-arms in the struggle against Islam. In an interview Hirsi Ali told that during her application for asylum in 1997, she had lied about her name, age, and country of origin, as well about the reason for her application. Rita Verdonk, member of the same liberal party as Hirsi Ali and State Secretary for Immigration & Integration at the time, started an official investigation against Hirsi Ali. Like Creon, Verdonk is the kind of person who believes that Rules are Rules and that they should be applied without fear or favour. As the findings of the investigation were that Hirsi Ali had not legitimately received Dutch citizenship, Verdonk tried to outlaw Hirsi Ali by annulling her citizenship.

With this action, Verdonk created a political crisis, as a overwhelming majority of the parliament supported their colleague Hirsi Ali, which finally led to the fall of the government. Hirsi Ali nevertheless resigned from Parliament and moved to the USA, where she took up a position at the American Enterprise Institute, published her autobiography, *Infidel*, and is currently working on another book, *Shortcut to Enlightenment* [ a philosophical fantasy about a visit by

Muhammad to the New York Public Library, in which he examines the ideas of various Enlightenment philosophers, compares them to the state of Islam today].

Hirsi Ali may be called a real tragic hero because although she is a bright woman, she seems to be blind to the fact that her actions had led to the growth of fundamentalism rather than to a decline. And whereas she originally received much support from the Dutch population, through a series of miscalculations she managed to alienate many of her sympathizers. And with her glorification of the moral superiority of enlightened liberalism, she comes close to hubris. In all these respects her struggle against Islamic fundamentalism reminds us of president George W. Bush's 'war on terrorism'. A war that brings another Greek tragedy to mind: Aeschylus' *The Persians*.

This tragedy - the earliest of the plays that still exist, performed in 472 BC and based on experiences in Aeschylus' own life, specifically the Battle of Salamis, 8 years earlier – deals with the decisive battle in the so-called Greco-Persian Wars. Around 600 B.C. Persia was the biggest power in the region and also controlled Greek colonies in Asia Minor. In 499 B.C. most of the occupied Greek cities in Asia Minor and Cyprus rose up against their Persian rulers; King Darius of Persia invaded Asia Minor and defeated the Ionians decisively in 493 B.C. Because Athens had supported the Ionian 'terrorists' king Darius started a punitive expedition against the democratic city state of Athens. Although Darius succeeded in destroying several Greek cities, after the Persians lost the battle in Marathon in 490 B.C. Darius withdrew his troops from Greece. King Darius, However, had 'a wayward son, spiteful and wrathful', named Xerxes, who wanted

to finish the job of his father. Xerxes went with an army, overwhelming in size and power—modest estimations made by scholars hold that the Persian fleet numbered more than 1,200 triremes and 3,000 ships and more than 200,000 land forces. Xerxes was quite determined. He was going to bring tyranny to Greece within a couple of months. The Battle of Salamis, in which Aeschylus participated, marked the turning point of the campaign. According to a story related by Herodotus, before the battle, Xerxes had set up a throne on Mt. Aegaleo, so he could watch his great victory over the smaller Greek fleet. However, the narrow gulf provided little room for his heavy triremes to maneuver, allowing the lighter Greek ships to flank and destroy them.

Aeschylus' *The Persians* focuses on the popular Greek theme of hubris blaming Persia's loss on the overwhelming pride of its king. However, what is remarkable is that the play is entirely written from the perspective of the Persians. The action takes place in Susa, one of the capitals of Persia, and focuses on Atossa, the mother Xerxes awaiting news of the expedition against the Greeks, especially on her growing fear and despair after a messenger brings the news of the catastrophic Persian defeat at Salamis to Atossa, the mother of the Persian King Xerxes. Although Aeschylus took part in the battle, his play does not cheer the Greek victory, but rather excels in showing compassion for the defeated enemy.

Not only does the war in Iraq take place in the same region as *The Persians*, but the present protagonist is also 'a wayward son' who wants to finish a job started by his father. And though the rhetorics may have changed - the

present aim is to bring democracy to Iraq instead of tyranny to Greece – Bush, no less than Xerxes, seems blinded by miscalculation and hubris. The Bush administration was as convinced about its political and military superiority as Xerxes was. And though the tragedy has not ended yet, according to many spectators it already can be named a catastrophe. The only difference seems to be that Osama Bin Laden has not yet published his tragedy *The Americans*.

If the conclusion is that George W. Bush is a tragic hero par excellence, then we are faced with a paradox. In the foregoing I have argued that the difference between Europe and the United States of America is not to be found in the two pillars mentioned by Steiner, Christianity and rationality, because in that case the US would be far more European than Europe. I argued that the distinguishing characteristic rather is to be found in the European tradition of tragedy. However, the war in Iraq – no less than the war in Vietnam – seem to show that the USA also has surpassed Europe in tragedy as well.

This, however, is only partly the case. The distinguishing point between the USA and Europe is not so much the level of miscalculation, blindness and hubris, but rather the difference in tragic awareness that accompanies the (self-)inflicted catastrophes. If Northern America is a tragic continent, then this is not the case because of its tragic awareness, but rather because of the lack of it.

I want to repeat that it's not my intention to conclude from this observation that Europe would be morally superior. An excess of tragic awareness can be paralyzing factor, whereas a lack of tragic awareness sometimes can help to put an end to tragedies. We should only think of the civil war in former Yugoslavia,

which Europe wasn't able to handle. Moreover, behind the façade of tragic awareness we often find cynical self-interest. The unwillingness of France, for example, to join the war in Iraq may be inspired by tragic awareness, but without doubt the French government also had their economical interests in the Arabic world in mind.

## **5. A tragicomic conclusion**

Let me conclude. It goes without saying that the confrontation with violent Muslim extremism is a great challenge for the Western world, both for the USA and Europe. The question is not if we should take up this challenge, but rather how it should do this. The War on Terror is one option. It is not only popular in the Bush administration, but also some European leaders are of the opinion that violence should be answered with violence. German Secretary of State Otto Schily, for example, answered the perpetrators of the terrorist attack in Madrid, who provokingly claimed that the Western world could never win the battle, because Westerners love life, while Islamists love death, with a no less provoking. 'If you like death, you can have it'.

Another option is to try not to forget the tragic idea of Europe. A tradition that warns us against the catastrophic logic of violence. A tradition that cultivates compassion and solidarity, and enhances our moral sensibility and ability to take the perspective of those who do not share our truths, values and deepest beliefs.

And let us not forget tragic irony. The irony of tragic heroes is that they often bring forth the opposite of what they intend. Tragic irony not only evokes



fear and pity, but can also help us to ridicule conflicts. Tragic humor evokes laughter in the face of fate. Few things are as de-escalating as the ability to laugh together about the prejudices of the other and ourselves. It was not without reason that in Athens after the performance of a trilogy of tragedies the festival concluded with the performance of a comedy, that often dealt with the same type of conflict depicted in the tragedy. Long before Marx the tragedians already know that history always repeats itself, first as tragedy, second as farce.

Since 9/11 in Europe a whole series of so-called multicultural tragicomedies have been produced, in which both the backwardness of 'new Europeans' and the complacency of 'old Europeans' are ridiculed. Such tragicomedies are very successful with both groups and perhaps contribute more to integration than serious debates and movies like *Submission*. After the Muhammed cartoon controversy we should acknowledge that it probably is still a bit too early for a Monty Python—inspired *Life of Ahmed*, and as the war in Iraq still continues it also might be too early for a remake of the black comedy *MASH, situated in Iraq instead of Korea*. But at least I hope that *Submission II* will be a little bit more humorous. And we may comfort ourselves with the knowledge that not all tragedies end badly. Sometimes the tragic wisdom comes just in time. Perhaps nobody was more aware of this than the sixteenth-century humanist Michel de Montaigne, when he wrote that in matters of conviction, he is prepared to walk to the stake, but certainly not one step further!