

Lies in the Perception of Other Cultures and Religions

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1. Introduction

A Cretan once said: “Every Cretan is a liar” (*pas krêtês pseutês*).¹ This classical example of a sophism illustrates the question: What are lies? There are conscious lies and distortions, there are stereotypes and there are inaccuracies. Many people tell lies without realising that they lie; other people tell them, knowing very well that they are not telling the truth. There are people who, when someone who is lost asks the way, tell this person exactly where to go although they have no idea. They do so because they want to be friendly and helpful, do not wish to disappoint the other person or to admit to themselves that they do not know either.

Distortions and stereotypes, whether intended or not, favourable or unfavourable, are often necessary for our mental well-being. By means of stereotypes we put order into the complex reality we live in. Our cultures, societies and personal lives are full of stereotypes: “Germans are hard working people”, “Southern Europeans enjoy life more than Northern Europeans”, “Austria and art go together”. Or on a personal level: “I am a serious person”, “I am tolerant”, “I like foreigners” etc. It is important to be aware of such stereotypes, ‘de-construct’ them and smile at them. Stereotypes can also lead to bigotry, reinforce it or be the result of bigotry: “Gypsies are dirty”, “Greeks are lazy”, “Orthodox are nationalists” etc. In this case, smiling at them is not enough. If stereotypes are harmful to others, it is necessary to take the poisonous sting out of them by exposing them, analysing them and injecting antidotes (education, measures against poverty, unemployment and discrimination etc.).

Here, I shall limit myself to several rather arbitrary examples with respect to the perception of other cultures and religions. I shall also limit myself to South-Eastern Europe. I am, however, well aware of the important regional differences and distinctions in this part of

¹ The author wishes to thank all who took part in the discussion on the subject of this communication on 30 October 2004 in Bucharest. He also thanks Ania Lentz-Michaelis (Amersfoort), who carefully revised the English text.

Europe – what may be true for one region may not be true for another – and also of the fact that many similar examples can be found in other parts of the world. This may not be a pleasant paper but that is – hopefully – only because of its theme.

2. First example: Judaism

Quite a number of citizens of South-Eastern European countries are convinced that, on 11 September 2001, about 4,000 Jews who allegedly worked in the World Trade Center in New York did not go to work because they had been warned by the Israeli government that the centre would be destroyed. Those “cunning” Jews, as they are negatively stereotyped, did not pass on their knowledge to their colleagues. Thus they escaped death and are responsible for the perishing of so many innocent others. In reality, there were many Jews among the casualties, but the lie lives on. A rumour became a legend, became ‘truth’. The same people are convinced that the “Protocols of the Wise Men of Zion” are an authentic Jewish document. According to this document, the main Jewish aspiration is to gain absolute control of the whole world. Actually, this text is a forgery, made by order of the Russian secret police at the end of the nineteenth century. It is widely spread in South-Eastern and Eastern Europe and can be obtained in many ecclesiastical bookshops. Although, as a result of the Holocaust during the Second World War and emigration to Israel and Western countries after the war, Jewish culture and religion have almost entirely disappeared from South-Eastern Europe, anti-Semitic statements are not at all rare. Remarks such as ‘it is a pity that Adolf Hitler could not finish his job’ and that ‘all Jews should have been ‘turned into soap’ are extreme but not exceptional. An important reason why the Jehova’s Witnesses are rejected by many Orthodox and Catholic Christians is that allegedly they are a “Jewish sect”. At the end of the 1990s, the influential and famous Greek composer, Mikis Theodorakis, stated that there are four “aggressive” religions, viz. Judaism, Islam, Catholicism and Protestantism, and one “peaceful” one, viz. Orthodoxy. Hardly anyone in Greece protested against this distortion of reality, a distortion because the history of all five religions shows both aggression and peacefulness.²

² Cf. B. Groen, *Dominant Orthodoxy, Religious Minorities and Human Rights in Greece*, in J. Sutton & W. van den Bercken (eds.), *Orthodox Christianity and Contemporary Europe: Selected Papers of the International Conference held at the University of Leeds, England, in June 2001*, Leuven 2003 (= *Eastern Christian Studies*, Vol. 3) 439-454, here 451-452. See also the bibliography in that article.

Unfortunately, an important source of inspiration for Christian anti-Semitism is the hard language on the Jews in Christian worship, in particular during the Good Friday services. For centuries, in Roman Catholic tradition, the priest prayed for the “infidel Jews” (*pro perfidis Judaeis*) on Good Friday. In the so-called *Improperia*, Christ accuses his people of betrayal. Although the *Improperia* refer to the Christian community, these texts were often taken to refer to the Jews and it is no coincidence that many pogroms took place on Good Friday. The anti-Jewish interpretation of the *Improperia* was reinforced by several parts of the Good Friday matins in which the Jews were accused of being the murderers of God. The historical truth, however, is that, during Jesus’ lifetime, several Jewish leaders wanted to get rid of him, but Jesus was not executed by them but by the Romans. For Pontius Pilate, who had over 6,000 Jews executed, one more victim was no issue of concern. Although Jewish leadership handed Jesus over to the Roman authorities for execution, the assertion that the entire Jewish people is responsible for Jesus’ death is incorrect. Unfortunately, the two New Testament writings composed by St.-Luke – his Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles – already more or less acquit the Romans and put the blame on the Jewish side.

Liturgical renewal in the Roman Catholic Church during the second half of the twentieth century revised the texts just mentioned,³ but there is still a long way to go, e.g. with respect to sermons and the corpus of hymns. This road is even longer in Byzantine rite, to which most Christians in Romania, Bulgaria, Serbia-Montenegro, the Former Yugoslavian Republic of Macedonia and Greece adhere. Here, in particular, in the Good Friday liturgical texts, we meet with hard statements on the Jews. In an even more drastic way than used to happen in Catholic worship, the Jews are accused of the murder of God. For this crime they have to be severely punished. We even meet with invective, of which I only quote one verse: “According to Solomon, the mouth of the felonious Hebrews is a deep hole.” Even the source is not correct because in the Old Testament writings attributed to King Solomon, we cannot find any such statement.⁴

Liturgical rites are important for religious and cultural behaviour. If they contain negative distortions and the faithful hear these again and again throughout the centuries, they influence the believers’ way of thinking and acting.

³ Cf. H. Wolf, ‘Liturgischer Antisemitismus? Die Karfreitagsfürbitte für die Juden und die römische Kurie (1928-1970)’, in F. Schuller, G. Veltri & H. Wolf (eds.), *Katholizismus und Judentum: Gemeinsamkeiten und Verwerfungen vom 16. bis zum 20. Jahrhundert* (Regensburg 2005) 253-269.

⁴ Cf. B. Groen, ‘Antijudaismus in der heutigen byzantinischen Liturgie’, in A. Gerhards & H.H. Henrix (eds.), *Dialog oder Monolog? Zur liturgischen Beziehung zwischen Judentum und Christentum*, Freiburg i.B. 2004 (= *Quaestiones Disputatae*, Vol. 208) 210-222. See also the bibliography in that article.

3. Second example: Islam

Another religious culture that many people find difficult to deal with and picture correctly is Islam. This is partly due to the fact that Islam was the religion and culture of the conquerors: for the Byzantine Empire the Arabs and the Turks; the latter also for the Balkans. Muslims were often portrayed as cruel oppressors. Although in general oppressors are not at all peaceful, the Turks were certainly not merely bloodthirsty killers. They knew that one should not slaughter the chickens whose eggs are needed: they wanted taxes. Actually, during the first centuries of Ottoman dominance in the Balkans, regions such as Greece flourished economically and culturally. Only later did the Turkish regime become harder. However, the thesis that the entire period of Turkish domination was a “dark age” and a “disaster for the Christian Balkans” – as can be read in numerous Bulgarian, Serbian and Greek schoolbooks – does not correspond with historical truth. The “flight to the mountains” theory – according to this, the Greeks, Serbs, Bulgarians etc. fled to the mountains to escape from the Turkish conquerors⁵ – certainly does not apply to the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Neither is the thesis that the entire Orthodox leadership resisted the Islamic regime, correct. Although examples of clerics fighting the Ottomans and Islam are well-known, many others were satisfied with the privileges given to them as national leaders by the Ottomans and therefore did not want rebellion against the Sultan.

4. Third example: Nation and religion

Religious history books often highlight the shining exploits, omit the dark sides of their own culture and denomination and stress the black phases of the others. In Croatian Catholic history books, it is quite common that the crimes committed by Serbian Orthodox are explicitly mentioned but the atrocities in the Kraina (1995) overlooked. Until recently, Greek history books denounced Western Catholic evil deeds, such as the sacking of Constantinople (1204), or the Islamic massacres. However, they remained silent about the Greek atrocities during the war of independence in 1821 or the Greek-Turkish war of 1922. The fact that, in the massacre of Bosnian Muslims at Srebrenica (1995), not only Serbians but Greek volunteers also participated is still something that most Greeks do not know or do not want to know.

⁵ One of the foremost representatives of that theory was the Greek historian, Apostolos Vakalopoulos.

Orthodox leadership in Greece tends to identify the Greek nation and culture with Orthodoxy. It seems as if the real Greek is Orthodox and the real Orthodox Greek. There seems hardly any place left for the non-Orthodox Greeks, although the latter also consider Greece as their homeland. During the war against Italy and Germany in 1940-1941, it was not only the Orthodox that fell for their country but Jews, Catholics and Protestants as well.

In an effort to show the “pure Hellenic origin” of the current Greek population and names of Greek cities and villages, many Slavonic and Turkish toponyms have been erased and replaced by Greek ones. This has sometimes led to curious results. The name of the village of Merbaka (not far from Nafplion and Argos) sounded “Turkish” and therefore, during the 1960s, the mayor renamed it *Hagia Triada* (Holy Trinity; a common village name), thus overlooking that the place had been named after the Flemish Dominican, Willem van Moerbeke (1215-1280).⁶

The phenomenon that certain nations and cultures are identified with certain denominations can also be observed in other South-Eastern European countries: with respect to Orthodoxy in Bulgaria, Romania and Serbia, with respect to Catholicism in Croatia and with respect to Islam in Bosnia. Inhabitants of the Former Yugoslavian Republic of Macedonia have a difficult position. Many Bulgarians regard them as a Bulgarian “tribe” and their language as a Bulgarian dialect. Many Greeks refuse to accept that the Macedonian language has an official status but see it as only a Slavonic “dialect”. Macedonians tend to see themselves as the successors of the successful compatriots of Alexander the Great.⁷

We also meet with the tendency to reserve certain aspects of national cultural history for one’s own confession only. Romania, for example, has been influenced by Roman Latin culture, Byzantine Greek civilisation and the Slavonic environment. Currently, in their confrontation with the Orthodox, the Romanian Greek-Catholics, who are united with the Church of Rome, often assert that they – not the Orthodox – are the real representatives of the Latin and Roman traditions.

5. Several other observations

The phenomena which I describe are certainly not an exclusive South-Eastern European privilege. Many Austrians, for instance, have strong prejudices concerning Islam

⁶ H. Scholte, *Scholte’s Griekenland: Vasteland* (Amsterdam 1987²) 195, 208.

and are convinced that Islam is a fanatical religion. Most Austrian politicians want to keep Islamic countries, in particular Turkey, out of the European Union. One of their main arguments is that Islamic culture and Turkey are allegedly not European, thereby putting aside that the history of the Balkans and Spain is unthinkable without Islam.

As to Judaism, anti-Semitism is a real danger to multicultural and multi-religious coexistence, in Western Europe too. Incidentally, the lie about the Jews in the World Trade Center did not originate in South-Eastern Europe but in the Middle East. Furthermore, in Poland and Italy, for instance, we also find the identification between the Polish or Italian people and their culture with one denomination, viz. the Roman Catholic Church.

The issue of lies, prejudices or severe inaccuracies in the perception of other cultures and religions is a delicate one. It often concerns strong myths that define national, cultural and religious identity. Any change of these myths may cause uncertainty for many or the loss of power and influence.⁸ However, in a world of growing intercultural and inter-religious encounters, these distortions must be examined and – if necessary – corrected, i.e. injected with antidotes (see above). This may sound like a clear task, but in reality it is a most complex process which cannot be simplified.

The task becomes even more complex if one takes into account that many problems do not lie in the dialogue between different cultures and religions but *within* these cultures and religions themselves. Jews, for example, are deeply divided about the issue of Palestine, the state of Israel and its policies. Many Christian churches are split between ‘modernists’, ‘secularists’, ‘liberals’, on the one hand, and ‘fundamentalists’, ‘conservatives’, on the other. Liberal Catholics often get along better with modern-thinking Protestants than with conservative fellow-Catholics. Since the 1960s, Roman Catholicism, for example, has been deeply divided on the issue of renewal and to what extent reform is required. Several Orthodox theologians who, for instance, live in Bulgaria, often look reservedly at fellow-Orthodox who live and teach in Western Europe or the United States of America, suspecting them of betraying Orthodoxy and having become crypto-Protestants or -Catholics. Many ‘real’ Muslims consider Muslims who communicate with other religions as no “real” performers of Allah’s will. So the problem of fundamentally different attitudes towards other cultures and religions *within* faith-communities is at least as big as that of difficulties related to intercultural and inter-religious contacts and dialogue.

⁷ In almost all periodicals on South-Eastern Europe, articles on these and similar issues can be found. Numerous scholarly books have appeared. Here, I only refer to a German popular study: M. Weithmann, *Balkan-Chronik: 2000 Jahre zwischen Orient und Okzident* (Darmstadt 1997).

⁸ Cf. F. Thual, *Géopolitique de l’Orthodoxie* (Paris 1994).