

## *A Narrative of Friendship*

***While Europe is desperately looking for its soul,  
it may wonder that its not necessarily to be found in its religious or  
philosophical heritage***

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The narrative of the European Union has been under threat over the last couple of years. “The project” as many still call (or ridicule) the now seventy-years-in endeavor of its member states seems to not keeping its promise: Peace and prosperity on one hand side would go alongside with social welfare, equality and justice. In the aftermath of the financial crisis in 2008, however, many young Europeans found themselves unemployed and deprived from many options they believed to be coming with an European Union membership.

To them no other conclusion was apt than that the union had outlived its purpose. Since then, Narrative wise, there has indeed only been wide emphasis on the peace side of things. “Never again” as the everlasting slogan for, the epitome of the political union of the Europeans. A mantra with no quality to redeem itself. But, frankly, what could a common new narrative for Europe look like, what would it embody?

There is an agreement that Europe until the present day has been abstinent from a strong tone of identification as one is used from nation states: there is not much fuzz about the flag, the anthem is not revered as one may expect. This makes no wonder: the European Union as a project is designed to outlive the nation state and is therefore all but keen to embrace the mechanisms that made nation states so attractive –and dangerous. The Union is governed by secular bureaucrats. That is useful and prevents wars from breaking out over god and fatherland. On the other hand it makes it difficult for the every day European to relate. God and fatherland have been re-introduced in the discourse through the various nationalistic right-wing movements on the continent that, in order to finger point towards the Muslims as the outsiders and outcast, emphasise on

the Christian heritage of Europe. The demons of the past are all but legit to heal the yearning of Europe for a new, fresh narrative. So what else is there?

Let me share my experience that I made for away from the shores of Europe, our beloved Old World, an experience I made during my years at Harvard University in New England. I was invited as a J. F. Kennedy Memorial Fellow to the Center for European Studies at Harvard in the fall of 2014. I returned for the academic years 2015-2017 and stayed affiliated with the university after those two years in the capacity of an Affiliate Professor.

As a European you realize very quickly that the kind of how you make a friendship is very much different here and there. Americans seem to always rather strive to make friends within the social group they are already assigned to: if you are in law school you only have friends from law school. My friends in law school would only have friends from law school. If you are in the football team, the teammates are your friends. The Europeans on the other hand explicitly seem to search for friends that are different from them. Europeans embraced the diversity, making friends with all sorts of other people, from other faculties and various backgrounds. Amongst ourselves there was an understanding for this way of becoming acquainted. Myself I made friends from all ankles of the Old World: Polen, France, Denmark, Bulgaria, Italy, you name it.

Europe is in search for a new narrative, for an identity: who are we? What defines us? The last time the continent engaged in such an endeavour was when a European constitution was drafted. It was argued whether the document should have an *Invocatio Dei*, if it should invoke God, as some of the European constitutions such as the German one, do. The other camp, led by France, recommended strongly to not bring God into the game. Finally the parties where making peace which the idea to mention the religious heritage of the continent, namely Christianity and Judaism. But what would be come of Islam. Many would argue that this religion, albeit monotheistic, has no place as an identity marker in European history. Others claimed the opposite. In the end the constitution was rejected in reference in both France and the Netherlands. Interpretation is that both electorates didn't want to have Turkey, a largely majority Muslim nation, joining the EU as member. But rejecting the constitution they also rejected this membership –and answered en passant the question whether Islam is welcome in Europe or not.

In the aftermath of these events every country has tried to defined what its believing, behaving and belonging, in short, its identity might be. The Germans for instance argue fiercely over a “*Leitkultur*” (dominant/leading/prevalent culture) that describes what it means to be a German. They have started with this quest in the beginning of the century and not yet come up with a solution. Some argue its the language and the history that makes the Germans German. But how about foreigners that learn German and integrate. Some –not many– would claim that Germanness is nothing you could

learn. The debate is now more than 15 years in and has not brought any real result. The Germany do not know who they are but what they are up against: when German president Christian Wulff stated in an address in 2012 that Islam is a part of Germany he was publicly flogged. The debate ranked from Islam is never and never will be a part of Germany's identity to Muslims belong to Germany but not their religion. The Germans are not alone when it comes to defining an "other": from England (where it triggered, amongst other reasons, Brexit), France, Denmark, the Netherlands, Poland or Hungary you find parts of the parties and the political elite who engage in demonising and scapegoating Muslims.

It is an old rhetoric of populism to pose an "other" against "us", with a double goal: it is to unite your own behind a common alleged enemy and to distract from the real problems a society may have. More bluntly you can observe these kinds of rhetorics in non-democratic societies such as Russia, where members of the LGTB community are outcast, beaten up, tortured and also killed. In Turkey there is a new wave of hunt against the Kurds to be observed and also Christians are a minority that faces severe incrimination by the Turkish leadership that aims to transform the laic republic into an Ottoman-style Muslim State.

There is not much that can be done against that in autocratic, despotic, oligarchic countries. Democracies however are not defenceless. As long as there is a civil society you expose the public to counter-narratives. This is why in countries of this negative transformation such as Turkey, universities, the arts, as in movie and theatre, and the media, as much as NGOs and Think Tanks are attacked. They embody a plural society. You need to bring any opposition under control and start to govern with fear while you conspire to overthrow a plural society. Turkey to stick with this example for a moment, may by all means not be lost! The country was a democracy for more or less 90 years. Yes, it had a volatile history and the military stepping in. Not good. But, it has and is used to a multi-party democracy, to the separation of religion and state and to a free press. In the early Erdogan years the columnists were so mighty (as they were generally in the country), that Mr Erdogan would even at times call them up to discuss their op-eds in which they may have expressed dislike of certain policies. In the last election and in the referendum on changing the constitution half of the population has not voted for Mr Erdogan and his party. So we have to be patient and to see if and how the Republic of Turkey may heal itself from the tyranny of religious populism and autocracy.

The European Union to a large extend has, amongst its members, left "us versus them" behind. The example I was giving about the conviviality we Europeans felt at Harvard is a shining example for this. As the continent has been victim of atrocities, wars, and the Shoa because of the exploitation of so called differences on grounds of ethnicity, religion or denomination. So while we search for a European identity, arguing about whether God should be named in the constitution of the Union or not, what

role Islam may play in this European entity we miss the point: we already have created a narrative of friendship and mutual respect. We did so by deploying a deep common understanding of human relationships: how we build them, how we maintain them, how we cherish them. You may put a person from Island and another one from Italy in a room with someone from Greece and someone from Poland: I am very certain they will immediately find measures of interacting, a language and expose habits, themselves of conversation that will make them deeply satisfy on a human level. Who would have thought this fifty years ago? To some this may sound cheesy, but I would rather argue to invest money to explore and research what Europeans understand and mean when they talk about friendship. To make one thing clear: there is not one single law about friendship: we have laws about marriage and divorce, about birth and death. There is not one single law, at least not that I were aware of, that defines or regulates friendship and its aspects. In Spanish they say “El que encuentra un amigo, ha encontrado un tesoro.” This proverb is taken from the Scripture, the Book Jesus Sprach 6,14. It made its way into used Spanish and could be understood in all corners of the occidental world.

Today's Europe embodied in the European Union has the scope and the bandwidth to integrate a large variety of identities, regional customs, languages, religious and non-religious Weltanschauung. It was designed to overcome national and religious us versus them policies –successfully. That is of course at the expense of efficiency: in the Union there are a many official languages as there are countries. Conduct political affairs becomes an arduous endeavour. But it is worth the cost. Adversaries of the European Union, such as the protagonists of the Brexit referendum in the United Kingdom, had argued that certainly Britain could, as all other countries of the Union, be on friendly terms and live in peace and prosperity. Really? As a matter of fact they never did in the history of Europe. Despite the fact that they were all Christians they fought horrible wars against each other, in the name of nation and in the name of religion. It is for the first time in history and it is only thanks and due to the European Union.

It may be understandable that a young generation may not fully comprehend the horrors of World War II and the Shoa and therefore are not fully tuned in into the “never again” narrative. Also, as laid out before, to them social integration and welfare is an equally valid part of the European equation and promise. The narrative of friendship however is a logical development of a successful “never again” narrative and fully and wholeheartedly comprehended by the second generation of “Eramusers”, those students that study within the Union. It is also true for those who travel for vacation, conduct business or decide to leave for a certain while in another EU member state. Separatism such as in England or Catalonia endangers the European success, because its claims to be gaining Britain back –which has never been lost– or claims that there is an oppression by a central government which there isn't. “Better deals” as they argue for in Britain and Catalonia are to be achieved within the framework that has been established. Whatever

end you have in mind that needs to reinvigorate the outrageous means of “us versus them” has no place in the sphere of friendship that Europe has become.

Europe has drawn the conclusion from the emerge of the photo “Earthrise”, the first photo ever that has been taken from the universe of our planet. The understanding of the world has profoundly changed ever since then. And since we are more than used to this photo we have to bear in mind that thousands of years humans had no ideas about the limitless planet you see from above. From God’s perspective if you will there is no races, no religions and no boundaries. The photo “Earthrise” has sparked environmental and peace movements alike. It has also helped to totally reset our idea of a global friendship, brother and sisterhood and cosmopolitanism. A citizen of Germany today is a citizen of Europe alike as much as he is also an inhabitant of the world.