



HISTORICAL REFLECTIONS ON EUROPEAN SYNCRETISM

R.C. Van Caenegem

Mr. Chairman,

I would like to thank you and the Sarton Committee very warmly for the invitation to speak here today in the prestigious and internationally renowned series of Sarton Lectures. I consider your invitation not only a great honour, but it has also given me pleasure on a more personal level. I have been an admirer of George Sarton for many years, not only because the history of science is a fascinating subject *in se*, but also because the international *periplous* of my famous fellow-citizen from Ghent has been so dramatic and full of unexpected twists : a graduate of our University who emigrated first to Britain and then to America, went to live in the Lebanon to learn Arabic, and ended by occupying a chair specially created for him in Harvard !

Mr. Chairman, dear colleagues, ladies and gentlemen,

Although you may be somewhat surprised to hear me lecture in English in my own university, I hope this does not come as a shock to you. There have been English Sarton lectures before and, after all, English became Sarton's own adopted language in the course of his career.

I agreed with the Committee that a lecture in English would be suitable, considering the international character of the subject and the intention of the Committee to publish it. And there was also the practical factor that I disposed of a first draft in English, as a lecture I gave in 1991 in Harvard, where I held the lectureship in the History and Civilisation of the Netherlands and Flanders¹. Moreover, I am happy to let you know that, at the invitation of a young colleague and friend in the

University of Leuven, a Dutch version will also be published in the near future.

The present address is given under the auspices of the Law Faculty, and the history of law — and particularly constitutional law — will predictably receive a good deal of attention. But although the series is called after a great historian of science I shall, pleading my *ignorantia crassa* in the matter, not specifically deal with physics or astronomy. My purpose anyhow transcends law and science, as I intend to sketch in very general terms the sort of rhythmic movement that produced European civilization in the course of many centuries. Law and Science occupy, of course, an important place in this narrative, but their ups and downs were connected to a wider movement, to which I hope to draw your attention.

I have just used the term 'European civilization' as a matter of course. Indeed, it would be hard to deny that in the gallery of the great world civilizations — made famous by Spengler and Toynbee — European civilization occupies an eminent place and has a countenance of its own beside those of China, Greece and Rome, India and Islam. However, if asked to give a definition of European or Western Civilization, I would be hard pressed and, on this occasion at least, I would like to say no more than that most people recognize the Western world and its products when they see them, even if they cannot give an exact and exclusive description. Similarly we recognize a friend when we see him, even though we would be hard put to it to give a detailed description of the lines and proportions of his face.

Some people wonder how it is possible to speak of a European civilization when the people of Europe have been for centuries in the habit of slaughtering each other. I would counter this objection with the following considerations. Nobody doubts that there was such a thing as Greek civilization and that it was one of the wonders of the world, and yet the city-states of ancient Hellas were often at war with each other. Also the linguistic diversity among Europeans never obscured the fact that they shared a common heritage. There was no problem, of course, in the arts and music, but even in philosophy, science and literature the linguistic diversity was never a serious handicap to internal European communication. For many centuries Latin was the common language, and for the rest translators went to work, starting with the scholars of the

twelfth and thirteenth centuries who rendered Arabic and Greek books into Latin (which was itself later translated into the vernacular languages). I admit, however, that the term 'civilization' is problematic, for it presupposes civilized behaviour, and on that count Europeans have a bad record. How could such uncivilized people — a murderous and rapacious lot — produce such a remarkable 'civilization' ? It is possible that another term will have to be devised, but I have not yet come across any valuable alternative, so I just go on using the traditional term out of habit more than conviction. But enough of these preliminary observations : let us come to the proper theme of today's lecture.

Mr. Chairman, dear colleagues, ladies and gentlemen,

Some of you may have been struck, as I was, by a demographic statistic drawn up by the United Nations a few years ago, in which the world population was divided into seven main areas : Africa, Latin America, North America, Asia, Europe, the then Soviet Union and Oceania. The document not only provided figures about the existing situation, but contained a forecast for the year 2025, from which it appeared that Europe, with 10% of the world population today, will have gone down to about 6%. The Asian proportion on the other hand will according to that prognosis have increased to about 57%. These figures made me wonder what European civilization, supported by 6% of the world population, will signify in the global context of the twenty-first century. However, this was mere speculation and, as I am an historian and no futurologist, I have not pursued it, but instead turned to another question — more in line with my professional training : what has been the significance of European culture for world history ? Which was, and which will remain its own specific contribution, even if Europe might one day contain only 5 or even 1% of mankind ? What struck me particularly, as I reflected on this question and, in the spirit of Max Weber, Arnold Toynbee and Oswald Spengler, compared Europe with the other world civilizations, was its unremitting and constantly renewed syncretism.

I first tentatively broached this subject many years ago in my lectures on the cultural history of the Middle Ages in the Institute of Art History and Archaeology at my home University in Ghent, and recently

three invitations to give public lectures on a theme of general interest — in Münster, Harvard and Ghent — presented me with an excellent opportunity of going more deeply into the problem and putting my reflections in writing in view of publication.

I will deal with European, more particularly West-European history, starting with the Latin-Christian, mainly Roman-Germanic world which emerged after the fall of the *Pars Occidentis* of the Roman empire, and was one of the three heirs of Antiquity, beside Byzantium (the example par excellence of a timeless and unruffled civilization perpetuating its ancient and unchallenged heritage) and the world of Islam. I shall, however, not limit myself to that fundamental period commonly known as the Middle Ages, but encompass Modern and Contemporary Europe as well. It will appear that my story of discrepancy and synthesis and of equilibrium ruptured and restored, has been a continuous process right through these three traditional periods, in a typical syncretistic way. I am certainly not suggesting that syncretism² has been an exclusively European experience, but that it has nowhere else been so pronounced, marked and manysided³.

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In the first part of my lecture I shall concentrate on the metaphysical dimension of civilization, i.e. the *Weltanschauung*, man's reflection — whether scientific or mythological — on his own nature, the meaning of his existence and his position in the universe. The second part will be devoted to syncretism in law and political institutions.

Our European ancestors received their first lessons in syncretism in the early Middle Ages and more particularly in the Roman-Germanic empire of Charlemagne, who admittedly was a Roman emperor, but not a Roman from Antiquity. He was to all intents and purposes a medieval Frank — Frankish was his mother-tongue or rather his father-tongue, as it was then called — who styled himself *rex Francorum et Langobardorum*, adding after Christmas 800 *et Romanum Imperium gubernans*, thus providing a fine epigrammatic expression to this early European amalgam. However, already at that early stage the inherent tensions and

contradictions of syncretism were noticeable. Charlemagne was indeed a Roman emperor, but he was averse to the Byzantine Roman empire, which was the political framework of the Greek Christian world of his day. And the monks copied ancient texts, thus saving them for posterity, but their consciences objected. Ovid and Horace deserved to be read, as the best Latin could be found in the classical authors — and Latin was the language of the Church, the chancery and scholarship —, but pagan poetry contained passages that were scandalous to Christians, and particularly to monks. They were nevertheless read and copied for the sake of learning, but not without anxiety, sleepless nights and bad dreams. Centuries later, Gratian, in his *Concordia Discordantium Canonum*, devoted a whole *Causa* to the question as to whether it was appropriate for clerics to read pagan literature and, after carefully listing authoritative pronouncements for and against, he came to the conclusion that such reading was permissible, but only for the sake of learning and not for pleasure.

This first brush with syncretism was child's play compared with the blow dealt to Latin theology by the Aristotelian wave which started to flood the Occident in the twelfth century. Western scholars came into contact with the Stagirite through Latin translations from the Arabic and later directly from the Greek. They discovered a world that was alien to the familiar pattern of the Christian Revelation and of Platonic thought, which had been predominant in the past. Here they met a philosopher who observed and speculated on man and nature not from the vantage point of a divine revelation, but on the basis of human reasoning; his world was not animated by spirits but consisted of physical matter obeying its own laws; he belonged to a polytheistic world, to which monotheism was a hardly imaginable, unbearable aberration. The impact was violent and the ensuing conflict bitter, especially in thirteenth-century Paris. It seemed impossible to combine a world-view based on purely human reflection, natural observation and experiment, with the belief in one, truthful divine message and a supernatural world order. Nevertheless, scholasticism managed just that and produced a synthesis of these incompatible elements, by combining two contradictory ways of thought : Christian faith and dogma, and Aristotelian argumentation and observation of nature. The peace which was thus established, mainly thanks to

Thomas Aquinas, was, however, not to last for long : the restless West soon subjected it to sharp criticism. Scholasticism became a term of abuse — as later happened to 'Gothic' — and the Middle or Dark Ages were given their condenscending nick-name (which the period still carries), as being a mediocre period lost between two cultural peaks, Antiquity and the age of Humanism and the Renaissance. The new cultural gurus reproached their predecessors with spoiling the heritage from Antiquity, making a barbaric mess of the fine Latin language and ignoring Greek.

The Occident thus discovered the classical world for the third time — the first contact had taken place in the Frankish period and the second in the scholastic lecture rooms — and again the latest rediscovery was more profound and enthusiastic than its predecessors. It did not mean, however, that medieval world-representations and the medieval Church were destroyed. On the contrary, the new wave was again absorbed and a new synthesis, of Christian Humanism with Erasmus as its main spokesman, arose. Though in several respects still a medieval figure — see, for example, his 'Manual for the Christian Knight' —, he was anti-medieval in many others, ridiculing medieval superstitions and extolling the classical sources of our civilization, particularly the illustrious Greek texts which the medieval ignoramuses had themselves confessed they "did not read" (*Greca non leguntur*).

Yet at the very moment that Erasmus was erecting the new building of an unscholastic, classically coloured Christianity, a quite different storm of protest and innovation was gathering strength, which attacked the medieval order much more violently, and would bring to an end the most impressive organization the world had seen since the Roman empire, the unified Roman Church, which for a thousand years had linked together Germanic, Romanic, Celtic and Slav elements in the western world. Ideological peace and quiet was obviously not to be the Occident's lot, and every attempt in that sense was soon rejected. The ruin of the familiar common West-European house brought about by the Reformation — the Protestant as well as the Catholic — caused an unimaginable trauma. The roof under which people had lived together for a thousand years collapsed. The pope, once a universal father figure, overnight became the Antichrist, and the beloved omnipresent saints, the

last refuge for toothache and puerperal fever, were unmasked as chimerical idols. Could Europe survive this shock ? Many in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries doubted it and suspected that a satanic conspiracy was threatening Christianity itself and aiming at a devilish domination, whose acolytes and symptoms were the witches. Nevertheless, Europe survived even this laceration. Christendom was saved, although ecclesiastical unity, the old institutional shell, was lost. People have learnt to live with religious pluralism, with Catholic and Protestant countries and, spurred on by natural law (or *Vernunftrecht*, the law of reason) they have managed to coexist in a sort of *Pax Christiana*. But as soon as this resting point was established in the seventeenth century, a new wave of unrest and change, eighteenth-century rationalism, came on the European scene.

This time the mutation went even deeper, for the Christian dogmas themselves were contested. In the sixteenth century the one western Church had disappeared and with it the unity of interpretation of Holy Writ, but the Christian faith had survived. Now the unimaginable took place : the Christian Revelation itself was questioned and dethroned. Human reason and scientific research would create a new world-view and give Europe a new common ideology which, independent from theology and Churches, would turn its back on the old Christian denominations and their bloody conflicts. Christianity would become superfluous, except possibly in a rationalized, miracle-free form : supernatural interference with the laws of nature was in any case out of the question. This was the epoch of the Temples of Reason, the triumph of the exact sciences and of the liberal and free-thinking Europe of the nineteenth century, which attracted the anathemas of the anti-modernist *Syllabus Errorum* and the First Vatican Council.

However, while the enlightened architects of the *paix bourgeoise* were still happily confident that the victory of their model over the outdated and condemned ultramontaniam was only a question of time — the world-wide extension of western culture also being written in the stars ("even in the Kirgiz and Kalmuk areas") —, a new philosophy arose at the centre of the old European continent, which radically subverted all existing traditions and declared war upon the enlightened bourgeoisie as well as the traditional Churches. This new product of the West's

restlessness and critical urge was, of course, Marxism, a monistic philosophy that again rejected the world which had produced it. It was exceptionally radical and left no taboo untouched. Whereas it was not the only manifestation of the nineteenth-century *Umwertung aller Werte*, Marxism was the most comprehensive and politically explosive. It was one more example — and a most daring one — of western self-dissatisfaction and love of novelties. Its materialist and atheist standpoint rejected several traditional cultural cornerstones. There had, of course, been individual atheists before and there were in the nineteenth century atheists in non-marxist circles, but they plotted no political or social revolution. And there had also been egalitarian movements, such as the Puritan 'levellers' and 'diggers', but the latter's inspiration had been biblical and anything but atheistic. Even the enlightened eighteenth-century thinkers were deists rather than atheists, and the French Revolution could not carry on without a divinity and temples, even if the latter were devoted to the goddess of reason. In the marxist view the disappearance of God would go hand in hand with that of the existing political and social and economic order. In this respect also there had been precursors, such as the Münster anabaptists, but their inspiration was Christian, not atheistic. Marxism united all the radical currents. Its starting point, atheist materialism, was metaphysical (or should one say anti-metaphysical ?), but also social and economic. It combated property and rejected the existing political and legal institutions which, being expressions of capitalist exploitation, would disappear under the impact of proletarian dictatorship. This violent onslaught also has been to a certain extent assimilated by the civilization that produced it, for even though Marxism has won its greatest — temporary — victories outside the western world, even here it was a motor of political action and, particularly after the Second World War, a pole of attraction in various intellectual circles. What the lasting impact of marxist philosophy in the West will be, is difficult to foresee. Recent events in central and eastern Europe have seriously impaired its prestige as a blueprint for political and social and economic reform, but it is possible that, as a technique for the analysis of man and society and the interpretation of history, it may yet to some extent be incorporated in the mainstream of western thought. As a monolithic system and sole road to salvation its chance of success in

Europe, which is used to ideological pluralism, must be considered slim, but it may conserve some usefulness for the study of the relation between the material, institutional and intellectual strands in society.

However this may be, it is surprising that so many and so divergent elements coexist in our western world. The ideological currents which mark our century are so different, even contradictory, that the question must arise as to why we are not all schizophrenic, or, if we are, why our condition is not much worse than it is. Does our society possess the required minimum of mental coherence ?

It should indeed be noted that these coexisting world-views are not only distinct, but, as I said, actually contradictory and mutually exclusive. It is, however, a state of affairs with which Europe has learned to live from the Middle Ages onwards. And what about the 'post-modern' future ? It is well known that Giambattista Vico combated the notion of a possible 'perfect society in which the excellences of all cultures would harmoniously coalesce'⁴, because he believed each one of the great civilizations to be autonomous and not really open to cross-fertilization — a thesis that was emphatically endorsed by Spengler and to a lesser extent by Toynbee. However, am I wrong in seeing modern western civilization as just such a 'coalescence' of diverse elements — whether excellent or not — from numerous cultures, and could it therefore be the springboard for a future global culture ? Or is this asking too much of a culture that, according to some observers, shows clear signs of 'metal fatigue' ? But let us return to our syncretism.

How did our ancestors manage to combine Christian monotheism with Greek polytheism ? Are we really aware of the chasm that existed between these two world-views ? On the one hand a universe planned, created and directed towards its final completion by one God, who takes an interest in mankind; on the other hand a world dominated by *moira* and *anangkè* and a tribe of gods and goddesses, who seldom bothered with humans, and then in a wayward and heartless way. Do we truly realize what an abyss exists between an absolute and certain knowledge, based on the apodictic revelation of a holy book, and the purely human, tentative search for the meaning of the universe, supported only by our own understanding and observation ? And what about the contradiction between the geocentric idea of our planet as the hub and the *raison d'être*

of the universe, and heliocentrism which reduced the earth to a fortuitous byproduct of the sun, itself one of the smallest stars in existence ? The dethronement of the earth as the centre of the universe went hand in hand with that of man as the aim and crowning achievement of creation. Is man a unique product of God's creative urge or the consequence of a chain of chemical reactions, which took place by chance on our planet in the course of a blind and haphazard evolution ? How can people happily and harmoniously live together when they are in no agreement on the fundamental question whether man is a product of God's plan or the result of blind chance, which in the course of millions of years produced thousands of living forms, one of which was the *Homo*, whom we call *sapiens* ? How can so many contradictory opinions and beliefs coexist in one and the same civilization and provide the elements for one culture ? I believe that the explanation is provided by the ancient and continuous power of absorption of the Occident, which was more than any other prepared (or forced by circumstances) to take in the most diverse influences and to digest and process them without losing its own identity. One consideration may be relevant here. Western absorption of alien cultural elements did not take place under pressure of foreign domination. The Greek, Roman or Arabic impact on medieval and modern Europe was not the result of Greek, Roman or Arab conquest and occupation : the Greek and Roman world had long been dead and the Arabs never occupied more than a part of Europe. This is quite different, for example, from the modern European impact on the Arab world, which took place in conditions of colonial domination, but it is comparable to some extent with the Meiji revolution in Japan, which was based on that country's free choice, even though some show of western force had been involved.

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I come now, as promised, to the second part of my lecture, devoted to law and political institutions. Here again we will be struck by a marked and, frankly, amazing syncretism. Indeed, the Europeans have learnt to live with mutually exclusive political systems — monarchism and republicanism, unitary and federal constitutions. They have managed

to combine feudal and Roman law, at first sight two incompatible legal systems. They have experienced monarchy, aristocracy and democracy, three very different ways of ordering public life, as Europeans very well realized. They were even proud of this paradoxical mixture. It is well known that seventeenth-century English authors, among others, have observed with pleasure that their constitution was a successful synthesis of the three forementioned elements, monarchy being embodied in the crown, aristocracy in the House of Lords and democracy in the Commons (the 'democratic' nature of the latter House was somewhat exaggerated, but the overall picture was not totally misleading). This is the general theme that I now propose to analyse in some detail.

Some great civilizations have enjoyed a remarkable constitutional stability. They have at an early stage established a particular pattern of government, found that it suited them, and stuck to it in the course of centuries or even millennia. China comes to mind, with its empire, that was both celestial and perennial, and its mandarin bureaucracy. There have been crises, 'times of troubles', when war lords caused a temporary anarchy, but these were passing breakdowns and not new models of organization. They were a form of illness of the body politic which recovered and returned to the one true Chinese pattern (which only finally broke down in our own century). Something similar may be observed in Japan's age-old rule of emperors and samurai, which lasted until Meiji-days. Classical Greece also found its appropriate pattern at an early date and conserved it until alien regimes took over : the *polis* or city-state was the very expression of the Greek way of life. Rome went through three successive stages. After the fall of the kings, the republic held sway for several centuries, to be followed by an empire which became ever more autocratic. However, throughout these three phases one Roman law prevailed and developed as one recognizable system to ever greater maturity, from the Law of Twelve Tables (c. mid-fifth cent. B.C.) to Justinian's *Corpus Juris* (sixth century A.D.); it even went on unperturbed for another nine centuries in Byzantium.

In Western Europe the story is very different. Here we find a succession of heterogeneous constitutions, of very different inspiration and with incompatible techniques and foundations; but not a mere

succession in which one phase simply replaced another, but a mixture of growing complexity in which each new phase conserved elements of the previous one and at the same time experimented with diverse solutions, producing a constitutional mix. The consequence was that, say in thirteenth-century Europe, there coexisted, in a bewildering variety, a universal Roman empire, an equally universal papal theocracy, national feudal monarchies, republican city-states and even a few free peasant communities.

It had all started with the catastrophic collapse of the western Empire and its replacement by tribal kingdoms. Even if some of these Germanic chiefs donned Roman imperial garments, like Chlodovech at Tours in Gregory of Tours' description, they were in no way Roman officials — even if Constantinople sent them a 'codicil' granting them the — minor — title of 'consul'. Nothing could be further removed from the universal Roman empire than those tribal patrimonial kingdoms. Much more serious than the travesty in Chlodovech's day was the ambitious plan to resurrect the West-Roman empire in the person of Charlemagne and under the inspiration of such intellectuals as his *éminence grise*, Alcuin of York. It amounted to a fine exercise in political syncretism, which tried to weld together some strange bed-fellows. Leo III, who crowned the king of the Franks and the Lombards on Christmas Day 800 in Rome, represented the Latin Church, the supernational institution which had never given up the old idea that the universal Roman state was the natural political organization for civilized life. The new Roman emperor in the West symbolized the return to the normal situation, lost when Romulus Augustulus was deposed. However, it soon became clear that the revived empire had in no way replaced the existing kingdoms, but merely added another dimension to them. Charlemagne continued styling himself *rex Francorum et Langobardorum* and showed where his priorities lay when in 806 he ordained the future partition of his realms, and himself fixed the shares of his three sons and prospective heirs. Reality finally overtook imperial dreams when the state of Louis the Pious was divided into several kingdoms. In the meantime the feudal system had arisen and the outcome was the establishment of the 'feudal monarchies', which were very remote indeed from the Roman model. Yet, strangely enough, the medieval — or shall we call it the neo-

Roman ? — empire which had ingloriously disappeared in the early tenth century, was revived by Otto I and continued in various guises and with varying shades of unreality. The feudal kingdoms themselves had in the meantime developed their very original constitution, which was neither the old tribal chieftainship, nor the biblically inspired model of Charlemagne-*'David'*. The *'monarchie féodale'* — to speak with Petit-Dutaillis — was a real monarchy, with a ruler by God's grace and subjects, but that ruler also was a feudal overlord who was bound to his vassals, as they were bound to him, by a contractual relationship, freely entered into. This involved rights and duties on both sides and entailed the subjects' claim to lawful resistance. For a long time these kingdoms controlled their respective churches, appointing the bishops and receiving them into their vassalage. The Gregorian Reform changed this. It freed the Church from worldly control and proceeded to turn the western Church into a theocracy, a universal, spiritual leadership, which throned above emperors and kings. It succeeded temporarily in imposing on western Europe a supernational order, a sort of clerical neo-Roman empire, beside and, of course, in competition and conflict with the *'real'* Roman empire.

As if this syncretism of German-Roman empire, papal theocracy and feudal kingdoms was not complicated enough, another formation appeared on the horizon around the thirteenth century : republicanism. In Italy first, in the Low Countries and Germany afterwards, communal autonomy led to the establishment of free cities. They achieved various degrees of sovereignty, were not subjected to royal rule, broke free from the feudal world and developed a new and typical constitution of their own. It was based on the *'ascending theory of power'*, free citizens ruling themselves through elected officers and freely discussing their internal and external policies. Thus, in an atmosphere of urban culture, the modern type of the citizen arose, distinct from the subjects of the crown or the feudal knights. This latest acquisition was, however, not the last, for at the end of the Middle Ages yet another political experiment began to take shape, which was destined for a glorious future, the federal state.

The medieval nation states were unitary monarchies, even though some achieved this aim much earlier than others. Thus the unity of the kingdom of France was established by the absorption, in the course of centuries, of a variety of autonomous duchies and counties. In the late

Middle Ages, when in France this process was moving towards completion, a different development was taking shape in the Low Countries, which was eventually to lead to the Republic of the United Netherlands, one of the most successful experiments of Modern Times (and, incidentally, a source of inspiration for the federal organization of the United States of America). It all started with the Burgundian Netherlands. Here, as in France, a monarchy arose which united old duchies and counties into a new state of European significance. But, unlike their French cousins, the dukes of Burgundy, counts of Flanders, Hainaut and Holland, dukes of Brabant and so on, proceeded to no annexation, but respected the existing identity and autonomy of those provinces, even though they were united in the person of their common prince. Above the old regional organs of government, which were conserved, new central ones arose around this common ruler : Great Council, Parlement of Mechelen etc.

There was often, beginning with the reign of Charles the Bold, a tug of war between governmental centralization and provincial pride, and also between absolutist aspirations and attachment to old privileges. It all came to a head, of course, under Philip II and the Revolt of the Netherlands, whose outcome was the state of the United Provinces, an extraordinary experiment both in republicanism and in federalism. Indeed, as the Union of Utrecht had provided, the seven northern provinces which escaped Spanish reconquest maintained their respective sovereignty, but lived nevertheless under common institutions and common leaders such as the States General, the stadholders and the grand pensionaries.

What an extraordinary constitutional landscape modern Europe presented — the result both of autochthonous creation and the rediscovery of ancient models ! It seems not unreasonable to talk again, as I did in the cultural field, of a schizophrenic situation. Instead of the quiet and stability of one universal empire, Europeans were confronted within their own civilization with the most diverse and mutually exclusive forms of government, veering from unitary absolutist and unitary but constitutional and parliamentary monarchies, to federal republics, minor absolutist principalities, free Swiss peasant cantons and the oligarchic city-republic of Venice, without forgetting the so-called Holy Roman empire, which was in reality German and had little in common with an empire except the name : in fact nobody knew what the real nature of the German

empire of the Ancient Regime was, so that Pufendorf called it in despair *irregulare aliquod corpus et monstro simile*. The above picture of European public law could be applied also, *mutatis mutandis*, to private law. Here again we find the odd spectacle of various legal systems coexisting within one and the same civilization and even within the same country. France was divided in a northern zone of *droit coutumier* of Germanic and feudal origin and a southern zone of *droit écrit*, i.e. Roman law. Germany gave up its medieval customary law to adopt, around A.D. 1500, the learned product of medieval law faculties. But some influence remained of its older ways and at the height of pandectism the nostalgia for the old truly German law was strong enough to cause heated discussions among Romanists and Germanists. And to crown it all, England produced its own common law, a very different system from the continental *famille romano-germanique*. Three incompatible legal systems coexisting ! At least, one could say until recently, the English common law is (in European terms) a localized purely national phenomenon, with which the rest of Europe does not have to concern itself. This may have been true for many centuries, but no more : European law and European courts necessarily bring civil and common lawyers together so that here again a certain amount of mutual influence is bound to take place instead of the old blissful ignorance of each other's idiosyncracies.

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Mr. Chairman, ladies and gentlemen,

I have taken you on a trip through many countries and centuries. It has been a long trip, and I much appreciate your patience. I hope nevertheless that you found the voyage worth while and I thank you for your attention.

NOTES

1. I lectured on to-day's topic for the first time in Münster on 26 October 1990 in the Festival Hall of the Landeshaus, where the thirtieth anniversary was celebrated of the agreement of collaboration between the province of West-Flanders and the Landschaftsverband Westfalen-Lippe. The lecture was entitled *Historische Betrachtungen über den europäischen Synkretismus*.
2. I.e. the combination and reconciliation of differing schools of thought, sects, ideologies and cultural elements.
3. According to the *communis opinio* Chinese culture is one of the most monolithic, which remained loyal to native confucianism throughout the centuries and consistently rejected foreign import (with the notable exception of buddhism) because of an ingrained feeling of superiority. Recently some scholars, such as the famous sinologist and professor at Leiden, Erik Zürcher, have questioned this Chinese monolithism and they speak of "numerous Chinese cultures". They are however, referring to autochthonous innovations and not to borrowings from foreign worlds.
4. Quoted from I. BERLIN, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity. Chapters in the History of Ideas*, New York, 1991, p. 67.

