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Disentangling Europe's dialogue of religions

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Laudatory Speech by

Ed Noort

Professor Emeritus of Ancient Hebrew Literature and the History of Religion of Ancient Israel, University of Groningen, and Vice President of ALLEA

Vienna, 18 April 2016

Dear Laureate Rémi Brague,
Your Excellencies,
Dear Commissioner Hahn,
Dear Presidents,
Dear colleagues and guests,

Rémi Brague was born in Paris (1947) where he studied classic philosophy, Hebrew and Arabic. He had a lifelong career in academia and is now Professor emeritus of Arabic Medieval Philosophy at the Sorbonne (1990–2010) and Professor der Religionswissenschaft unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der europäischen Religionsgeschichte und der christlichen Weltanschauung at the Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München (Romano Guardini chair 2002–2013).

His work at the Sorbonne started as a teaching load on “Philosophy in the Arabic language”, a rather odd description, due to the French university system.

But to him it offered unexpected possibilities for he did not limit himself to Muslim philosophers, but widened the scope and understood his teaching charge in a broader sense, including Jewish philosophers who wrote in Arabic like Jehudah Halevi, the great poet and philosopher or the most important Jewish philosopher of the Middle Ages Maimonides and even several freethinkers. Nevertheless, looking at the rich contents of his lifelong work the Romano Guardini chair in Munich mirrors his special



Ed Noort, ALLEA Vice President, during the laudatory speech for the 2016 ALLEA Prize Laureate Rémi Brague.

interests in an excellent way: Science of Religion, Europe, Christian world-view. This all in an open way, looking for the rules of playing, I would say hermeneutics.

“Je suis donc français, catholique, philosophe de formation, universitaire de métier. Mon domaine de recherche, parti de la pensée grecque classique, s’oriente actuellement vers le Moyen Age; surtout juif et musulman”.

With these sentences Rémi Brague introduces himself in his book *Europe, la voie romaine*, making it clear where he comes from and where he stands at this very moment. It tells something about the way Rémi Brague starts a dialogue. He is aware of his own context, the influences of his nationality, his religion, his academic profession and he wants his readers to know that. In another article he repeats “a rapid presentation of myself”. The book *Legends of the Middle Ages* starts with a long, intensive interview with rich content and Rémi Brague publishes it as a tool that “helps the reader get a better grasp of the person who is speaking”. It is a modest way of self-presentation often with a touch of irony.

He is aware of the importance of context in the history of interpretation. And as the author, he himself belongs to that context and that very

situation. Not for a fast and cheap determination, but as an invitation to the reader to weigh his arguments. He tells what he knows — and that is impressive — and where he sees his own limits. What is more important he explains which questions he is asking and why. There is a Socratic touch in his writings when he describes an article as “little more than a questionnaire addressed to those more competent in this matter than I” and “I await the aid of my colleagues”, describing himself “a newcomer, a beginner, an outsider” when he moved from Plato and Aristotle to the philosophy of the Middle Ages.

However, he never left the Greek behind him and the combination of these two worlds, the Greek and the Middle Ages, made him what he is today, a European scholar and a scholar of Europe second to none. It made him not only a teacher but also a lifelong student.

It is this openness about his own person, which in reverse takes a burden off the shoulders of the author. For “the duty of the university professor is above all to reestablish what he or she believes to be the truth, whether it is agreeable or not. Whether anyone is listening no longer depends on him”. “Je prétends fournir des arguments, que l'on jugera pour ce qu'ils valent.” That is how knowledge is progressing in the humanities. Interpretation with all the historical and linguistic skills one needs resulting in a dialogue, exchanging arguments and may the best win!

This looks like a rather general and unspecified statement, so let me take you to a few stations on the vast road trip of our laureate. I used the word dialogue and that is also where Rémi Brague's work started: With a dialogue of Plato, the well-known Meno on the problem of virtue. But already in this first book Rémi Brague goes his own ways. It is titled only as a supplément aux commentaires du Ménon, but it is a passionate appeal on hermeneutics. He wants to take the form, the genre, the “Gattung” of a dialogue seriously.

Form and content should be kept together. Interpreters need all the characters, the whole structure, the staging of the dialogue. A sole spotlight on Socrates is not enough. Plato wrote it in the form of a dialogue and that should be respected.

From here Rémi Brague turns to the concept of time in four studies on Plato and Aristotle. The point of departure is the famous definition from

Plato's Timaios (37d), “when he (the creator) set in order the heaven, he made this image eternal but moving according to number, while eternity rests in unity, and this image we call time.” Looking at the history of reception, “l'histoire de sa transmission”, Rémi Brague demonstrates that the fame and the traditional understanding of the passage rest on a false reading of the text. Again a new approach. The four studies including Plato and Aristotle are connected by the same method, the strict concentration on the text itself and the aim of bringing to light the original meaning in its own context.

The field is widened again with *Aristote et la question du monde. Essai sur le contexte cosmologique et anthropologique de l'ontologie*. Both cosmology and

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anthropology will return in his later books.

After this intensive philological, exegetical and reception-historical walk in the garden of classical philosophy he published *Europe, la voie romaine*, his groundbreaking study on the identity and non-identity of Europe.

We write the year 1992, the treaty of Maastricht with its emphasis on political and economic unity is signed. These are the years in which many countries break away from the former Soviet Union. The years in which Germany is reunified. The years in which a bloody war in the heart of Europe starts. In this situation Rémi Brague asks “what is Europe?” beyond the political, economic and even geographical definitions. It is his most successful book, translated in 15 languages among them many Central- and Eastern-European languages.

Not every translation wanted to adopt the original title “la voie romaine”, the Roman way. In Germany it appeared only in the subtitle under a

market-conform title *Europa, seine Kultur, seine Barbarei*. The English edition chose: *Eccentric Culture. A Theory of Western Civilization*, translating eccentric culture maybe as the most fitting heading.

What does Rémi Brague mean with Romanity in the title Europe, la voie romaine? His quest for Europe aims at l'essence de l'Europe, sur ce qu'elle est en son fond, the essence of Europe. How does he do that? Firstly he says to the Europeans: vous n'existez pas! You don't exist! L'Europe est une culture, Europe is a culture. Secondly, if a living culture is nothing you inherit, but something you have to work for, what kind of models do you have then?

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Here, Rémi Brague states that the sources of the European civilization come from outside, symbolized by the names of two cities: Jerusalem and Athens. Jerusalem stands for the tradition of Judaism and Christianity and Athens for the Greek philosophical heritage. And as he states: there are several ways to describe those opposed poles: “the religion of obedience



From left to right, ALLEA President Günter Stock, ALLEA Vice President Ed Noort, 2016 ALLEA Prize laureate Rémi Brague, and European Commissioner Johannes Hahn.

versus the religion of beauty, ethics versus esthetics, beliefs versus reason, tradition versus autonomous research etc.”

To these two symbols Rémi Brague adds a third one: ROME. Neither the cultural content, nor the political or military power of the Roman Empire are the criteria. Even the Latin language is no reason for adding Rome to Athens and Jerusalem. It is the way in which Rome appropriated both Jerusalem and Athens. How it handled an earlier superior culture. Appropriation by inclusion. “La voie romaine” means standing between a Hellenism to be followed and a barbarism to be overcome. The way in which Romanity appropriated Hellenism has been compared with an aqueduct. Roman culture is a pass-on culture with the consciousness of “secondarity”. In this way the roots of European culture may be symbolized by the triad Jerusalem, Athens, Rome. Europe found a way of integration and appropriation of eccentric influences. The actuality of this conclusion in our days cannot be overseen.

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This general analysis on the roots of Europe has been followed by two methodically related books. A first one on cosmology: *La Sagesse du monde. Histoire de l'expérience humaine de l'univers* (1999). He studies the changes in the way people have experienced the universe in which they have lived. It is a fascinating travel through different landscapes in which Greek and Medieval models, ending up in the 16th century with a new cosmography, reflect on the position of humans as beings-in-the-world. It were the Greek who spoke of a coherent universe, who used the word “kosmos” with an implied anthropology. But this relation between man and cosmos broke down in the modern era. There is no connection any longer between cosmology, being-in-the-world and e.g. ethics. To reestablish such a connection both the ideas of man and world should be reformulated. A same thematic longitudinal section appears in *La Loi de Dieu. Histoire philosophique d'une alliance* (2005). How did those who

belonged to the roots of our European culture understand the relation between the divine and law. Ancient Greece as natural law, Ancient Israel as divine revelation of oral and written law, Christianity presuming that the law had been fulfilled in the person of Christ, Islam as a dictate from God, the changes in the Middle Ages and modern societies that reject the idea of a divine law. Law is understood now as the rules human societies impose upon themselves. Rémi Brague states that “our societies with their agenda of a law with no divine component, are in fact made possible, in the final analysis, by the Christian experience of a divine without law”. As in the case of cosmology he asks what we have lost and which possibilities we have to re-think the norms for human action.

Rémi Brague is the laureate of the 2016 All European Academies Madame de Staël Prize for his significant scholarly contributions to the cultural and intellectual values of Europe. He is an outstanding scholar with an unsurpassed knowledge of the philosophy of Ancient Greece, and medieval Jewish, Christian and Islamic philosophy and theology. His linguistic skills enable him to use and present the original texts for his historical reconstructions.

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He opens the treasures of the past not only as a weapon against the Great Forgetting. The constants, movements and changes in the intellectual history he describes are interconnected with the actual problems of a European culture.

In his texts one recognizes the pleasure with which he undermines or corrects general statements and judgements. Sometimes it is the terminology and the concepts behind them like the “three Abrahamic religions”, “monotheism”, or the three “religions of the book” where he spells out the different concepts, or the different function and use of authoritative scriptures.

Sometimes Rémi Brague surprises with his approach. In his Legend of

the Middle Ages he describes Jewish, Christian and Muslim philosophers. Normally they are portrayed with their differences and their similarities. Rémi Brague however, asks whether in disputations the arguments of the adversary are not accepted just because of the different religion of the other. Only because the other is a Jew, a Christian, a Muslim or belonging to a specific ethnic group. Normally that was not the case. Not the religious or ethnic separation, but the valuable argument is what counted. Rémi Brague writes in a brilliant and clear style. It is a real pleasure to read him and that is rather unusual for philosophers. He opens wide horizons with his concepts of the intellectual history. At the same time he demonstrates philological craftsmanship on the square centimeter in a search for the etiological, semantic and contextual meaning of expressions and ideas.

We are accustomed to speak of science in the narrow meaning of the so-called hard sciences. What Rémi Brague is offering us is “science” because of his precise philological and traditio-historical analysis. At the same time there is beauty in his writings, it is a work of art too.

His instrument is the essay as an invitation for debate. The clearness of his language is possible because only a man of his stature is able to handle the disciplinary tools so masterly that a real interdisciplinary result comes out.

A last word on theology. When Rémi Brague brings in theological arguments, when he brings in Christian belief and world-view there is nothing apologetic in the bad sense of the word. What he is doing is remembering, observing, arguing, reconstructing and proposing.

Therefore, thinking of one of the books of our laureate on the divine law, in Hebrew the Torah, I quote the praise from TANAKH, the Hebrew Bible, from the first song of the Book of Psalms—

אשר־יהאיש אשר בתורת יהוה חפצו ובתורתו יהגה יומם ולילה

(Happy is the man whose delight is in the Law of YHWH and meditate on his Law day and night)

My heart-felt congratulations to our laureate 2016, Rémi Brague. I thank you all for your attention.