

# **The Plurality of Europe**

Identities and Spaces



# The Plurality of Europe

## Identities and Spaces

Contributions made at an international conference  
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Edited  
by  
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in cooperation with  
Madlen Benthin



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# European civilisation from the perspective of the Muslim World<sup>1</sup>

Michael Dusche

Since its detachment from the common cultural area of the Mediterranean, which had been characteristic of Antiquity, Latin Western Europe has created a self-image by selecting a counterpart from which it distinguished itself and on whom it projected its fears and self-doubts. Until the period of modernity, this external counterpart was the Islamic World and, internally, Judaism. Nowadays, these conditions of an external and internal counterpart are no longer so unequivocal. Western Europe, at any rate, has almost completely departed from its self-image as the Christian Occident and integrated itself into a community of states which no longer orients itself primarily toward the commonness of religion, but toward cosmopolitan values such as democracy and human rights. Turkey has also oriented itself toward these values since Mustafa Kemal Pascha. Nevertheless, stereotypical images of Europe as the Christian Occident and Turkey as the Islamic Orient influence the way Europeans deal with immigrants who are perceived as foreign – because they are Muslim – and the way the European Union deals with Turkey. The German author Zafer Şenocak unmasks these inconsistencies in the construction of Europe's self-image in his novel "Gefährliche Verwandtschaft" [Dangerous Kinship]<sup>2</sup>, in which he permits the first-person narrator to remark in a dialogue with his wife:

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1 The submitted essay was written within the framework of the joint research project "Mobilisation of Religion in Europe" funded by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research and conducted at Erfurt University, where I led the project "Perception of Threat. Europe and the Islamic World" under the supervision of Jamal Malik. I am grateful to Jamal Malik for his support and friendship of many years. I owe gratitude to Andrew Wheatcroft for his appreciation and encouragement of my work. I also thank the members of the joint research project for their ideas and discussions. Alexandra Lason, whose exploration of the propagation of the idea of the Christian Occident by the Catholic Church I refer to (cf. n. 7), deserves special thanks. Finally, I would like to thank the organisers of the Leipzig Conference for a wonderfully stimulating conference, namely, Ulrike Freitag, for my invitation to her section. Naturally, the responsibility for any factual errors or errors of judgement is entirely mine.

2 ŞENOCAK, Zafer: *Gefährliche Verwandtschaft*. München 1998.

“The Armenians, this ever Oriental people, were turned into fictitious Occidentals, only because they lived as Christians in a Muslim environment. But the Turks who are more oriented toward the West than the all other peoples in the region, will never be accepted by the Europeans as such because they are Muslims. – You’re already talking like a Turkish politician [replies Marie]. You have to abolish torture if you want to become Europeans. – [to which the narrator replies:] Were the French not yet Europeans when they tortured and murdered in Algeria? The British, when they pillaged half of the world? Were they excluded from the European Council or the EEC for this reason? You Europeans play a false game, your tongue is forked. [A reminiscence of Winnetou follows:] White man speaks with forked tongue.”<sup>3</sup>

In today’s discourses on the identity of Europe, the accession of Turkey to the EU, and especially on how to deal with Muslim immigrants, the following alternatives are offered by the various parties: either Europe is Occidental and hence Christian, or Europe is part of the West and has reinvented itself with the French Revolution, the republican nation state, and democratic liberalism, as a part of a global civilisation of democracy, based on the remainders of Latin Christendom.

By putting an emphasis on the Occident, the advocates of the first option like to make it clear that they do not perceive the Turks as belonging to Europe, and that they do not wish to tolerate Muslim immigrants as equal citizens.<sup>4</sup> By converting the debate on the European constitution into a debate on who we Europeans actually are and who we are hence to remain in the future, the advocates of this option transformed the discussion on the constitution into a discussion on identity. This is reminiscent of the emergence of European ethno-nationalism in the aftermaths of the failed revolutions in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Wherever democratic participation was impossible because of lacking republican institutions, people used to be content with a surrogate of participation – and this initially only meant taking part symbolically in the imaginary community of the nation. By conducting the debate on the future constitution of Europe as a discussion on identity, a second option is obscured. The option is: a Europe, whose integration is not performed by a symbolic participation in an imaginary European identity, but by real political participation. However, considering the hegemony of the identity topos, the advocates of this option have the problem that by taking this recourse to cosmopolitan, liberal-democratic values they appear to not be referring to anything specifically European. The identity discourse requires a specification of Europe relative to all other states or state structures which are also democratically organised. However, the advocates of a democratically constituted Europe seem to lack this very speci-

3 Ibid., 16.

4 WEHLER, Hans-Ulrich: Das Türkenproblem. In: Die Zeit, 12 September 2002, 9. – Cf. also: BOLLMANN, Ralph: “Muslime sind nicht integrierbar.” Interview with Hans-Ulrich Wehler. In: Die Tageszeitung, 10 September 2002, 6.

fiction. They therefore cannot make themselves heard in a discussion dealing with the paradigm of identity. From their perspective, the question of regulating the membership and borders of Europe will invariably appear arbitrary.

The solution to this dilemma can only be found if one understands Europe as a project which – on an admittedly arbitrarily chosen territory – exemplarily continues the unfinished project of modernity and thereby overcomes the paradoxes of the nation state. Its endangering potential both internally and externally would be contained by a higher legal order, while violent disputes between states as well as the discrimination of so-called ethnic or religious minorities would be prevented. If both of these things are guaranteed then questions regarding territory or identity increasingly become irrelevant. If brought to its logical conclusion, this project would at some point have to lead to a democratic global order of some kind or other. The completion of the European project would then lie in the extension of the principle of containing the nation state on a global scale, in the sense of having minimal global state structures – a cosmopolis, if you will.

However, the definition of identity has become of central importance to the debate on Europe, which means that the liberal and democratic cosmopolitans who represented the more instrumental and less exclusive definition of Europe have actually already lost. A modest objection is raised against the course of history – which is probably running in the wrong direction – if Wehler's declaration "Muslims [and Turkey] can not be integrated" is countered with the remark "because you don't want them". Social and cultural academic studies indicate that Islam is not necessarily the central feature of identity for German Muslims. The most recent study submitted by the Federal Ministry of the Interior refers to the fact that young Muslims are more religious than other Germans.

"Fundamental orientations that combine a close religious association, a high everyday relevance of religion, a strong orientation toward religious rules and rituals, accompanied with a tendency to marginalise Muslims who do not comply with them and a willy-nilly upgrading of Islam and devaluing of cultures influenced by Christianity, are very widespread. Approximately 40 percent of the overall population have such an orientation pattern."<sup>5</sup>

However, this is far from being identical to the extent of attitudes hostile to democracy among Muslims. For example, only

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5 BREITFELD, Katrin/WETZELS, Peter: *Muslimen in Deutschland – Integration, Integrationsbarrieren, Religion sowie Einstellungen zu Demokratie, Rechtsstaat und politisch-religiös motivierter Gewalt. Ergebnisse von Befragungen im Rahmen einer multizentrischen Studie in städtischen Lebensräumen*. Hamburg 2007, 493 (available online at the Federal Minister of the Interior: <http://www.bmi.bund.de>).

“12 percent of the resident Muslim population could be identified as having an authoritarian Islamic orientation. This orientation is characterised by a combination of strong moral criticism of Western democracy and Western societies.”<sup>6</sup>

Simply adding the remaining 88 percent of Muslims to this group does not add to the solution of the problem but only aggravates it. The study also reveals that experiences of discrimination and the perception of collective marginalisation contribute greatly to the radicalisation of young Muslims.

The religious confession of Muslims living in Germany is not the sole factor which determines identity. Most Muslims (60 %) do not Orient themselves primarily along the lines of religion when it comes to practical matters of everyday life. As a result, Islam cannot represent the primary obstacle to integration for them. Yet politicians and society persistently highlight this feature – an effective means if one wants to hide the fact that one personally does not want these people to be in Europe. The discourse on European identity appears to suggest that Europe has no use for Islam. People already have an identity, and this is shaped by Christianity.<sup>7</sup>

The reduction of one’s counterpart to being “Muslim” corresponds to the paradigm of the discourse on European identity, i.e. reducing oneself to being “Christian” or “Judeo-Christian”, as is often bashfully and euphemistically added. This stands in a stark contrast to the perspective of Europe that is still held by large parts of the Muslim world, that – according to the motto of Jacques Derrida – the task we are faced with lies in remembering what was once promised to the world in the name of Europe, “Alors le devoir de rappeler ce qui s’est promis sous le nom de l’Europe.”<sup>8</sup>

If one speaks with people of the so-called Islamic World, we often hear the complaint that Europe does not live up to its own claims of modernity, liberality, and democracy. Europe is still associated with cosmopolitanism and progress –

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6 Ibid.

7 What it means to be a Christian seems, in the meantime, to be forgotten by the majority of people in Europe. This is therefore a good occasion to remind Europeans of this within the framework of a re-evangelisation policy, as propagated by the Catholic Church. – Die europäischen Bischöfe und die Neu-Evangelisierung Europas. Ed. by the Sekretariat der Deutschen Bischofskonferenz und the CCEE Sekretariat. Bonn-St. Gallen 1991. – See also: Die Krise der europäischen Kultur ist die Krise der christlichen Kultur. Ansprache des Papstes an die Teilnehmer des 5. Symposions des Rats der Europäischen Bischofskonferenzen in Rom am 5. Oktober 1982. In: Die kollegiale Verantwortung der Bischöfe und Bischofskonferenzen Europas in der Evangelisierung des Kontinents. 5. Symposium des Rats der Europäischen Bischofskonferenzen in Rom vom 04.–08. Oktober 1982. Ed. by the Sekretariat der Deutschen Bischofskonferenz. [Bonn] 1982 (Stimmen der Weltkirche 16).

8 DERRIDA, Jacques. Mémoires, réponses et responsabilités L’autre cap. In: Le Monde, 29 September 1990 or: [http://www.litt-and-co.org/citations\\_SH/a-f\\_SH/derrida\\_l-autre\\_cap.htm](http://www.litt-and-co.org/citations_SH/a-f_SH/derrida_l-autre_cap.htm) (15 January 2008).



not with isolating itself from the world and withdrawing into a faith which the majority of Europeans have long stopped practicing. The Islamic World has already seen enough of this. Despite all criticism of the West, and thus implicitly of Europe, one would still like to perceive Europe as a role model for a civilisation based on freedom and respect for the individual rather than self-subjugation to a religiously or ethnically defined collective, and based on democracy and human rights rather than an essentialism of identity.<sup>9</sup>

In the following, I would like to provide an insight into how Europe is perceived by “the other”, particularly the Muslim other, using some examples of migrant literature written in German.<sup>10</sup> An important additional source is a document from the Stuttgart Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen (ifa) (“Institute for Foreign Cultural Relations”) on the European-Islamic cultural dialogue, entitled “The West and the Muslim World”.<sup>11</sup>

First, the manner of such an approach shall be revealed on the basis of a rather amusing topos, which is about the change of the image of the European from the ill-shaven berserk to the elegant man of the world. This dual perception of the European – as a conqueror and oppressor in a negative sense, and as the epitome of modern civilisation in a positive sense – still carries much currency in the so-called Muslim world even today. For example, the authors of the abovementioned study speak of a “paradox” in this regard.<sup>12</sup> On the one hand, European nations are described as “aggressors” or “exploiters”, yet on the other hand one follows European role models such as the French Revolution and the Era of Enlightenment.<sup>13</sup>

It has not always been that way. In the semiotic frame of reference of Middle Eastern cultures the West was, first of all, the direction in which the sun sets, and was thus associated with the end of all things. In the imaginary geographies of Egypt, Greece, and Rome, the West was often associated with death. This is where Osiris starts his journey to the underworld in order to be reborn in the falcon god Horus in the East, thus beginning the next solar cycle anew. The Greeks

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9 For criticism on identity discourses, see: MEYER, Thomas: *Identitäts-Wahn: Die Politisierung des kulturellen Unterschieds*. Berlin 1997. – SEN, Amartya: *Identity and Violence. The Illusion of Destiny*. London 2006.

10 DUSCHE, Michael: *The Study of Migrant Identities through Migrant Literatures*. In: *German Studies in India. Aktuelle Beiträge aus der indischen Germanistik/Germanistik in Indien*. Ed. by Dorothea JECHT and Shaswati MAZUMDAR. München 2006, 81–116.

11 BAKR, Salwa et al.: *Der Westen und die islamische Welt – eine muslimische Position*. Ed. by Jochen HIPPLER et al. *Europäisch-islamischer Kulturdialog*. Stuttgart 2004, see also [http://universes-in-universe.org/deu/islamic\\_world/articles/2004/the\\_west\\_and\\_the\\_muslim\\_world](http://universes-in-universe.org/deu/islamic_world/articles/2004/the_west_and_the_muslim_world) (15 January 2008).

12 *Ibid.*, 40f.

13 For example, the modernists of the so-called Arabian Renaissance, such as Mohammed Abdu and Qassim Amin: *Ibid.*, 42.

suspected that the islands of the blissful, the Hesperides – which give their name to Hesperus, the evening star – lay in the West. In this regard, Hans Kippenberg makes the following comments:

“Etymologically, the Greek designation seems to go back to a Semitic root “ereb”, meaning “dark” or “evening”. An analogous word creation, perhaps formed from the same root, is the Arabic word “maghreb”, denoting the areas in northern Africa which were lying to the West.”<sup>14</sup>

Cultures of the Levant associated underworld, death, and devil with the West. Still today in traditions of Eastern Christendom, godfathers first turn to the West in order to ward off Satan before turning themselves and the child in question to the East to welcome faith.<sup>15</sup> The semiotic reference-frame of the Islamic World also stands in this tradition. The first experiences which the Eastern Christians, Jews, and Muslims made with Europeans appear to confirm this prejudice at first.

Since the European crusaders of the 11<sup>th</sup> to the 13<sup>th</sup> century beleaguered Byzantium, the Levant, and the Holy Land, Europeans are referred to as *al-franj* or *firanj*, which is derived from groups of pilgrims in arms,<sup>16</sup> frequently dominated by Franks (French knights). The expression spread over trade routes along the shores of the Arabian Sea and the Indian Ocean to East and Southeast Asia. In China, Europeans are called *falang*, in the Malayan Archipelago they are referred to as *farang*, in Hindi, Urdu, and other Indian languages *farangi*, *firangi* or *feringhee* is the word still common today to designate Europeans, Westerners, or whites in general.<sup>17</sup> Along with the corresponding stereotypes, the expression came back to Europe – the Arabs brought it to Al-Andalus. According to a study conducted by Eva Lapedra Gutiérrez, Arabic historians used the expressions *frenk*, *frenj* or *ferinj* to refer to Christians in the Spanish context of the 9<sup>th</sup> to 14<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>18</sup> The image associated with the expression *al-franj* was one of an unhappy people who

14 KIPPENBERG, Hans: Europa: Schauplatz von Pluralisierung der Religionen. Vorlesung im Rahmen der Ringvorlesung “Mobilisierung von Religion in Europa”, Erfurt, 16 October 2007 [unpublished manuscript].

15 WIEDEMANN, Charlotte: Ein Volk lehrt Toleranz. In: Die Zeit, 22 February 2007, 15.

16 The expression “crusader” is an invention of later date.

17 For example in “Firangi Mahal”, the house of a European trader used as a domicile by Aurangzeb in Lucknow. Cf. ROBINSON, Francis: The Ulama of Firangi Mahal and Islamic Culture in South Asia. Lahore 2002.

18 This means Christians in general, whereas in the eastern part of the Mediterranean only Latin Christians were referred to in this way. Greek or Syrian Christians, in contrast, were referred to as *nasrani*. Terms such as *frenj*, *adūw Allah* (“enemy of God”), *kafir* (“infidel”) or *ily* (“uncivilised”) described European Christians in gradations of hostility. Cf. LAPIEDRA GUTIÉRREZ, Eva: Como los musulmanes llamaban a los cristianos hispanicos [What the Muslims used to call Spanish Christians]. Alicante 1997, quoted in WHEATCROFT, Andrew: Infidels. The Conflict between Christendom and Islam 638–2002. London 2003.

had lost their morality in the rough climate of the North and whose hearts were frozen in the cold. These people hungered like animals for strife and prey. Even their manner of writing was opposed to nature, for they wrote away from the heart, not toward it. The *firanj* were compared with dogs or pigs, neither of which conjure up favourable connotations in the Islamic frame of reference. Franks were just considered to be ritually and physically impure, a concept which still influences the image of the Westerner in our time, for example, in India.

An episode from the time of the crusaders, ascribed to the Muslim warrior Usamah ibn-Munqidh of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, may illustrate the potential origin of such a way of thinking. Usamah reports of an occurrence in a public bathhouse (*Hamam*) in the Holy Land, which was also frequented by Franks. These crusaders behaved “improperly”. They were “depraved”, “shameless” and “without the slightest sense of honour”.

“One day, a Frankish knight entered. The Franks do not abide by our custom of wrapping a towel around their hips while they stay in the bathhouse. This brute extended his hand, tore my linen away from my hips and threw it away. Then he saw that I had just shaved off my pubic hair. ‘Salim!’ the Frank shouted. I drew closer to him and he pointed out to that part of my body. ‘Salim! That is wonderful! You must do this to me, too!’ And he lay down flat on his back. His hair down there was just as long as his beard. I shaved him and when he touched his pubic area and felt it pleasantly smooth, he said: ‘Salim, you must also do this to my Dama’. Dama means Mistress in their language. He sent his servants to fetch his wife and when they returned and the servant led her in, she lay down on her back, while the husband stood aside and watched me. He then thanked me and paid me for my services.”<sup>19</sup>

What seems to have baffled Usamah was the inconsistencies of these Franks. On the one hand, they appeared to have no sense of honour at all, for example when putting their intimate body parts or even those of their women on public display. The liberality of the Franks offended the Muslim notions of licit (*halal*) and illicit (*haram*). On the other hand, they seemed to abound of a sense of honour when it came to fighting. For only people with a great deal of honour can muster the vigour needed for fighting, which in Usamah’s mind could only originate from defending to the bitter end one’s hurt sense of honour. Ravenousness and a lust to kill were inadequate motives. According to common belief, impure motives would weaken the fighter’s vigour.

Owing to their lacking sense of decency, the behaviour of the Franks constituted a permanent and most visible violation of sacred concepts relating to shame and disgrace.<sup>20</sup> The omnipresence of the Christian cross in particular was a permanent slight to Muslim feelings. The representation of God on the cross infringed

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19 Ibid., 190.

20 Ibid., 191.

upon the Islamic concept of a God being fully transcendental and the ban on God being presented in any shape or form, let alone as a human being. The comparison of God with any earthly creature is a taboo. It is unimaginable to represent God as something which has been besoiled by a bloody birth, a low existence, and an even more humiliating death.

Andrew Wheatcroft summarises the reciprocal perception of the Muslims and the Christians in the Holy Land as follows:

“Muslims and Western Christians developed complex and nearly symmetrical opinions of each other. [...] Christians saw Muslims as inherently cruel and violent; Muslims felt the same about the people in the West. [...] Both sides were also initially capable of recognising heroic and noble qualities in the respective other. [...] Nevertheless, negative mental attitudes did not prevent the many forms of political and economical connections between the adversaries, even in times of war and acrimonious propaganda.”<sup>21</sup>

“From the late Middle Ages onward [however] there was a shift in the image which the two communities, the Christians and the Muslims, had of each other. Both [concepts] were hostile and suspicious. However, while the Western image of the East seemed to be in a state of constant change, the Islamic image [of the West] [...] grew firm. Images of non-believers [were] recognisable to Muslims without difficulty, who had always known that the Western Christians were essentially base. They had heard that the Franks were dangerous, deceptive, and vile, and both materially and spiritually corrupt.”<sup>22</sup>

These were the perceptions which the Europeans and the Muslims had of each other in the Middle Ages. The longevity of these stereotypes is confirmed by their reiterated occurrences in recent discourses, which are also documented in the contemporary literature of migrants. Here are two examples: In the novel “Nur der Hauch vom Paradies” [Only a Whiff of Paradise]<sup>23</sup> Alev Tekinay describes a scene from the childhood of Engin, the protagonist.<sup>24</sup> Engin accompanied by his Turkish father and his sister, goes to the Ungerer outdoor swimming pool in Munich where, to the father’s horror, they discover a fellow countrywoman showing her naked breasts in the public area of the pool:

“Suddenly we saw a fellow countrywoman. [...] She sauntered past without deigning to look at us and then jumped into the chlorine water blue. ‘Whore’, I heard my father hiss. ‘Whore. There are limits to everything, even to assimilation. She would

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21 Ibid., 202.

22 Ibid., 200.

23 TEKINAY, Alev: *Nur der Hauch vom Paradies*. Frankfurt/Main 1993.

24 The following is a quotation from a novel within a novel. Coincidentally, the novel bears the same title as the novel it contains.

never dare to run around half-naked in her home country. But this country is capable of seducing people into sin.' Numerous German girls and women were also topless, but they rarely annoyed anyone, for their bodies were usually well shaped. But as to them, something disturbed us too, something which Emel noticed first. 'Ugh', she said, 'the body hair. Why don't they bother to remove their body hair. Above all Germans, who, of all people think they know so much about hygiene.' I thought that Emel was right. In the underarm pits of these women there were jungles of body hair which made nudity appear unaesthetic. Although I was an adolescent boy who was irresistibly attracted to the female physique, the nudity of the women appalled me that day at the Ungerer outdoor pool facility."<sup>25</sup>

While the father is bothered by the nudity of the woman per se, the children are only offended by the woman not having shaved. It seems that the father sees the influence of the barbarian and corruptive West in his fellow countrywoman, whereas the children within the West differentiate between true civilisation (people shave) and barbarianism (people do not shave). This differentiation becomes even clearer in the following quotation. I again take this second example from Şenocak's novel "Gefährliche Verwandtschaft", in which the unemployed teacher Halil says:

"Then there is the matter of hairy legs. My mother always found them especially disgusting. To her, the observation that most German women did not shave their legs was evidence of the fact that they also did not wash themselves well. I do not know how she came to this conclusion. I cannot confirm it based on my own experience. Of course, given the elementary humanistic education I enjoyed, people tried to tell me that the hair growing on a woman's leg does not matter in a relationship. But it did not help. Leg hair also disturbs me. How happy I was when I discovered that most of the French and American women belonged to the Turkish shave-your-legs-no-matter-what fraction – so many noble nations just could not be wrong. But the Germans remain obstinate."<sup>26</sup>

The barbarian Frank from the time of the crusades is clearly no longer the issue here. Instead, the modern French man (or the modern French woman) has become the epitome of Western civilisation.

## Conclusion

The thesis represented here is that, in Europe, we need less a debate on identity than a debate on inclusion and political participation based on the cosmopolitan values of democracy and human rights. Only when these are not granted right from the beginning is a strategic switch to the subject of identity called for. The

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25 TEKINAY (cf. n. 23), 151.

26 ŞENOCAK (cf. n. 2), 100f.

topic of this essay was therefore the processes of constructing essentialising self-perceptions and perceptions from outside. These processes were discussed from the perspective of inclusion and exclusion and the accompanying discrimination against 'others' in a European context. The suggestive force and the tenacity of such reciprocal stereotypes of Europe and its 'other' (Turkey and the Muslim world) were subsequently demonstrated. This took place by looking at the historical roots of this dichotomy in the Middle Ages. Its suggestive force emerges from the fact that the historically formative character of this dichotomy cannot be denied for the emerging Latin Europe. Its longevity ensues from the recourse to contemporary literature written in German by authors possessing a migratory background and cultural access to the semiotic referential frames of the Muslim World. However, it is contested that its normative validity may be derived from the suggestive force, historical effectiveness, and tenacity. This would be the equivalent of a naturalistic fallacy. Reference has been made to the fact that Europe has departed from its parochial traditions more than once and claimed to implement norms of global validity as examples for other parts of the world, i.e. in the shape of liberal democratic constitutional states embedded in a supranational structure such as the EU. Behind this claim, the concept of Europe should not be regressively narrowed down to an Occidental identity. Accordingly, the exemplary civilisational power of Europe does not primarily lie in its return to its Latin-Christian roots, but in welcoming all other religions, including Islam.