Co-lecture 26th Van der Leeuw-lecture – October 31th 2008

The eternal present

by

Abdelkader Benali

Last summer I went to Damascus, the capital of Syria, to learn Arabic.

In Damascus I met a student of Religious Studies from Groningen who had returned to this ancient city to continue his Arabic studies. We got talking during the breaks and decided one afternoon to visit the Umayyad Mosque in the Old City together.

I'll call this student Otto. He was in a class of Dutch students of Arabic who were turning their summer studies into a merry holiday, but he was particularly interested in Islam from a personal perspective as well as for his degree.

The attacks on the Twin Towers, the murder of Theo van Gogh and the annual phenomenon of Ramadan will certainly have played their parts in this interest. I think that it was also due to the fact that Islam, the desert religion, was suddenly emerging full of life in secular Holland. Perhaps he'd come to Damascus to discover the secret of Islam and thus better understand why it has become such a force in his home country.

After the Arabic lesson we stood on the side of the main street of Damascus, Mezze Autostrad, to catch a taxi to the Old City. One of the thousands of yellow taxis stopped.

The nice thing about Damascene taxis is that they often sweep past you even if they're empty. We climbed in, dripping with sweat.

'Are you a practising Muslim,' was one of the first questions Otto asked me. I answered in the negative.

'Do you tell Syrians that,' asked Otto.

I said that I tended not to talk about matters of religion with strangers. Not with Dutch people and not with Syrians either. I do occasionally with Finns, but I don't meet them very often.

‘I do. I tell anyone who wants to hear that I don’t believe in anything,’ said Otto. The taxi had no air-conditioning so we went on sweating. I wanted to open the window but there wasn’t any handle.

‘And what is the Syrians’ reaction?’, I asked him.

‘They look at you in disbelief,’ he said.

‘They look at you in disbelief,’ I said.

‘Yes. Can you imagine it?’ His expression revealed astonishment at the Syrians’ surprise at hearing a lily-white boy from Europe saying that he doesn’t believe in any god at all.

‘Everyone here is a believer. Even if you don’t believe in a religion you still believe in something because otherwise you’re a communist’, I said.
‘Communists are passé,’ he said. The taxi trundled on and we fell silent. I got the impression from Otto’s reaction that he thought that religion was old hat.

I suddenly doubted whether it was a good idea to be visiting the Old City with him. I can cope with Islam-bashing in Amsterdam, but I thought it was going a bit far in Damascus. The quiet afternoon that I’d been looking forward to appeared to be vanishing fast.

We got out in the Old City. Otto thanked the taxi driver in Arabic. The taxi driver asked me whether I was an Armenian. In Syria, all Eastern-looking people who speak broken Arabic are taken for Armenians.

Armenians, Alevis, Shiites, Kurds, Sunnis, Christians and just under a hundred Jews live in Syria and they all look alike.
‘No’, I said, ‘I come from the Netherlands’.
‘That’s OK too’, said the taxi driver.

Otto and I wound our way through the bazaar in the Old City. A hawker shouted something at me in Italian. ‘Signore, signore’. I told him in Arabic that I wasn’t an Italian. ‘That’s OK’, said the man, ‘but you’re still a mister’.

The Umayyad Mosque was basking in sunshine at the end of the bazaar. The Umayyads conquered Damascus and turned the city into their capital. They then began to expand the Islamic empire until the borders reached from Andalucía to India. The empire is long gone but the mosque is still standing.

You could just see the entrance to the mosque with people going in and out. A row of columns, a legacy of Roman times, flanked a sort of makeshift ramp leading to the entrance to the house of prayer.

There was a constant coming and going of people. Syrians, Persians, Iraqis and several other ethnic groups. The whole world appeared to have an appointment here at the same time. Otto and I made our way through the people.

I've visited mosques on all my trips to the Arabic and Islamic world. I don't pray in them – I just wander around in them. I look at them. I touch their walls. I try to read the calligraphy. I stand still in the house of a civilization. The silence inside appeals to me because I sense that I can hear the murmurs of centuries in the space, the murmurs of all the believers who have left their prayers here.

And every mosque tells its own story which can be read in the shape of the building.

Mosques, wherever they stand, bear the unique character of the culture they were built in. They are some of the first globalized houses of prayer. Greek temples had to look the same everywhere. Churches too, but mosques strongly betray the foundations on which they stand because they so often turn up in the most remote, harsh locations. Islam is the religion of places that are difficult to get to – deserts, mountain ranges. Nowhere was too hot or too steep for the Bedouin.

The mudbrick mosque in Mopti, Mali, is radically different to the rural mosque in the Middle Atlas mountains of Morocco with its square minaret, and yet they serve one and the same goal: the worship of the Most Great, the Al Rahman, Al Rahim, as he is called at the start of every prayer, the Beneficent, the Merciful. The function of all mosques is the same, worship, and that's why each can be different.

We walked into the mosque. Because Otto is not a Muslim, he had to enter through the back door and pay fifty lira. If he'd converted to Islam on the pavement in front of the mosque he'd have saved 70 eurocents – the equivalent of a taxi ride.

I'm now going to tell you a secret. A journalism student had come with us too. She was taking an Arabic course and doing some modelling work. Her name was Maja. The modelling work was in Germany so she had to go away for three days. I wasn't to tell anyone, she said to me. I promised I wouldn't tell anyone.

She also had to go in the side entrance where she would have to put on a pixie's costume, she knew this from a previous visit. I couldn't imagine what a pixie's costume looked like until I saw her again in the courtyard. It was a piece of grey material with a hood that reached to her ankles. She looked much cuter in it than she wanted to admit.

Only when she was in the gnome's costume did I understand why she was a model. She had a few freckles and a beautiful nose. That would look great in lingerie.

We went to sit in the shade of the gallery. The Umayyad Mosque has a marble courtyard measuring a hundred by fifty metres. The mosque is a special place of worship for both Muslims and Christians. For Muslims it's because it's where Hussein, the grandson of the prophet Mohammed is buried. Hussein is particularly honoured by the Shiites. Hussein was a member of the prophet Mohammed's family and lost the battle for power after a bloody conflict. Ever since, the Shiites have been mourning their loss.

The mosque is beautiful, even when the call to prayer resounds from four independent minarets. The first muezzin starts and the others follow in turn. Do they have agreements about this? In the seventh century, this place was a joint place of prayer. There was a church part and a mosque part. After the Caliph bought the church from the Christians it all became a mosque. The mosaics on the outside, unique in the Arab world where there is a strict ban on figurative art, were made by Byzantine artists who were given to the Caliph by the Byzantine Emperor. As a result the mosque looks more like an Italian church on the outside than a mosque. The mosaic depicts wonderful paradise-like gardens; the reward for the true believer in the hereafter.

In a different part of the gigantic mosque is the head of John the Baptist. It was significantly quieter there. John the Baptist was one of the disciples of Jesus Christ. He baptised Jesus Christ in the river Jordan (which is not in Amsterdam)[1]. I've visited that river in Jordan. There was a small sign in Arabic and broken English stating that this was the spot where Jesus was baptised.

As are all great places of worship, this mosque is built on top of an older house of prayer, in this case a Byzantine church, which in turn was built on top of a temple. Voilà, in one glance we can gaze over more than two thousand years of civilization, which to our eyes is still bursting with life because the gigantic inner courtyard is swarming with whooping, jumping and running children. It's a sort of eternal school

[1] In Amsterdam there is a part of the city called Jordaan; for some people this 'Jordan' is probably better known as the river, nowerdays.

trip. Because it was so hot and the impressions so overwhelming, the religious studies student, the model and I all fell silent. We sat in the shade of the mosque and enjoyed the nothingness in ourselves.

We were looking at the place where every few minutes dozens of Shiite pilgrims arrived to visit the tomb of Hussein. We watched them going in and out. In the area itself, in one of the corners of the mosque, the pilgrims were elbowing each other aside in order to catch a glimpse of the tomb. The Shiites were not hiding their emotions for this saint here. They were wailing, crying, sobbing in every possible way to demonstrate their great grief at the cruel way that this grandson who should have succeeded the Prophet was overcome. The history of Islam is one of overwhelming sadness at missed chances.

At that moment the pilgrims were not only making an emotional journey but also a chronological one. They were reliving that moment from fifteen hundred years ago. Anyone who saw those pilgrims understood that there was no such thing as the past, present or future. The tears that were being shed united the past with the present.

This thought fits the grammatical tense in which the Qur'an was revealed to the Prophet Mohammed. The voice of Allah speaks in the present tense, but appears to apply forever. The translator and Islam historian Khalidi called this 'the eternal present tense'.

Doesn't this expression, the eternal present tense, seem to contain the basic feeling of every religion? And wasn't this the reason why Otto and I, although we both had totally different ideas about belief, were visiting this place? And did we understand that by resting in that mosque, the longing for that eternal present tense would fill us, fill everyone, with a great feeling of strength?

Are praying at the Wailing Wall, commemorating the birth of Jesus and walking around the Kaaba in Mecca not one and the same expression of the poetic longing of man to jointly express time, both for now and for ever?

And can't we also hear that longing in a Bach sonata or the merry major keys of Mozart, and see it in the torn faces of the British painter Francis Bacon? Doesn't all great art catch a glimpse of this grammatical plan?

Jorge Luis Borges, one of my literary heroes, was a twentieth-century Argentinian writer who tried to capture the mystery of the eternal present tense in his stories.

One of his stories, 'Aleph', is the crowning masterpiece. The aleph, the first letter of the Semitic alphabet, i.e. of both Hebrew and Arabic, is a point that comprises all time and space in Borges's story. It is the $e=mc^2$ of literature, perhaps of all art. The narrator has a friend who is a poet; his poetry is bad but, as is often the case with mediocre artists, he can talk it up well. He calls him one day to tell him that his parents' house is going to be torn down. The narrator completely understands the poet's fear. No-one likes to see the house he grew up in torn down; it feels as if someone is writing part of your obituary. But there's more. According to the pedantic poet, that house contains the Aleph to which he owes all his inspiration.

And now I quote the Dutch translation by Barber van der Pol[2]: "It's right under the dining room, in the cellar," he explained. In his distress, his words fairly tumbled out. *"It's mine, in's mine*; I discovered it in my childhood, before I ever attended school.The cellar stairway is steep, and my aunt and uncle had forbidden me to go down it, but somebody said you could go around the world with that thing down there in the basement. The person, whoever it was, was referring I learned later, to a steamer trunk, but I thought there was some magical contraption down there. I tried to sneak down the stairs, fell head over heels, and when I opened my eyes, I saw the Aleph."

"The Aleph?" I repeated.

"Yes, the place where, without admixture or confusion, all the places of the world, seen from every angle, coexist."

The narrator thinks that the poet has gone mad. He goes to find him and after a glass of fake cognac he's allowed to visit the cellar where the Aleph is. He lets himself be locked into the cellar and lies down in the position he's been told to. The narrator doesn't feel at ease. He's afraid it's a plot.

"It was then that I saw the Aleph." The narrator doesn't have the right words to describe it.

[2] Not from the translator: for your convenience we use the English translation by Andrew Hurley, in: Borges, J.L., *The Aleph and Other Stories*, London, 2000)

“In that unbounded moment, I saw millions of delightful and horrible acts; none amazed me so much as the fact thatall occupied the same point, without superposition ans without transparency. What my eyes saw was *simultaneous,* what I shall write is successive, because language is successive.”

What happens next is a labyrinth of impressions that take the narrator into a dreamlike state from where there seems to be no way out. He decides to say nothing about his experience and he suspects that there are other Alephs in other places.

“The faithful who come to the Amr mosque in Cairo, who know very well that the universe lies inside one of the stone columns that surround the central courtyard ..... No one, of course, can see it, but those who put their ear to the surface claim to hear, within a short time, the burstling rumour of it ..... The mosque dates to the seventh century; the columns were taken from other, pre-Islamic temples, for as Ibn Khaldūn has written: *In the republics founded by nomads, the attendance of foreigners is essential for all those things that bear upon masonry*.”

Then something happened for which I sadly have no slides, so I’ll have to tell you about it.

A group of girls in headscarves was standing staring at us. I can’t think what I could have done wrong to make them stare at me so. One of the girls approached us and, after three fits of giggling, said to the Dutch model in broken English that she must cover her legs properly. You could hardly see that her calves were white. They had to be chaste, however. She walked away. ‘That’s the Hezbollah’s fault’, I thought. The Dutch model chastely drew her legs together but that didn’t solve the problem that her calves could still be seen. A minute later the girl came back. I looked at my trouser legs. There was nothing to see. She wasn’t after me then. If she starts again about the model’s calves I’ll make it clear to her that she shouldn’t act like the vice squad, I decided. The girl had a bag of chocolate in her hands and offered some to us. She was giggling again. She asked if she could join us. She couldn’t keep her eyes off the blond Dutch model. We started a conversation in Arabic that turned into English. The girl wanted to become a doctor, or something like that. After about five minutes she said goodbye.

It got hotter and hotter. The pilgrims wailed louder and louder. Otto and Maja and I had become thirsty in the heat. We moved on. In the days after I would have

many conversations with Otto about belief and non-belief. I'll have to tell you about them another time. Shortly before I left the mosque, one of the pillars caught my attention. I walked up to it and thought I could hear something. I pressed my ear against the cool stone. What I could hear was a murmer that gradually turned into clear, Arabic sounds. *In the republics founded by nomads, the attendance of foreigners is essential for all those things that bear upon masonry*." That is what I thought I could hear. I then rejoined Otto and we walked outside, into the harsh sunlight in which everyone disappears.

(Translated by the University Translation and Correction Service)