### Suzanna VERGOUWE

# What's Love got to Do with it?

## **Reflections on Europe**

The film Bleu by director Krzystof Kieslowski is one of three in a trilogy, which all carry the names of the colours of the French tricolour, metaphors for three ideals that have changed the history of Europe: liberté, égalité, fraternité. Bleu is about freedom. And about love and reconciling with past and present. In this contribution, I want to use some elements from the movie as well as their combinations as a looking glass, and a perspective on reconciliation, i.e. coming to terms with each other as citizens of Europe.

#### THE HEALING LOVE

In the title song of the film *Bleu* the words from chapter 13 of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, the well-known chapter about Love, are sung. The words are voiced by a soloist alternated with parts sung by a choir of women voices. They reflect one of the main themes of the movie. In blue and black colours, it tells the story of a woman, who, after having lost her husband and her only child in a car accident, struggles to find a meaning for her life again, and to become liberated from old hurt and untold stories. She keeps a few pieces of blue glass in her pocket, objects once belonging to her daughter, as a symbol of the past and the scatteredness of her existence, she carries them with her.

Although broken, her life continues, until she finds wholeness again, when she realises that she cannot escape from her past, because it formed her into the per-

son she is. She reconciles with herself, with what was before, and encounters and is found by love. For, in the end, what meaning does freedom have, if one cannot or does not experience love? If there is no one whom to share life and joy with? This is the sharp edge of liberty: there is personal liberty, but at the same time, there is the liberty, or the occurrence of life itself, which cannot be influenced by human beings.

The title of the song, however, is not as one would expect related to love, but to a rather abstract, geographical entity: Europe. A grand theme with a grand message, 'Song for the Unification of Europe'. Is it a coincidence that the title of the movie and the colour of the flag of the European Union are the same? Or that the song is in Greek, the language of the Old Testament and of the philosophies which have shaped European thinking? The question popping up is: what does love have to do with the unification of Europe?

#### **EUROPEAN IDEAS**

The vision of a unified Europe is not a recent one, but has been given various meanings in different contexts.

NAPOLEON framed his dream as 'but one people in Europe' at which he aimed by attempting to conquer European states. His method was a tribute to the reign of his admired ALEXANDER the Great, and the Roman emperors. Today, the aim is not a unified Europe in the sense NAPOLEON meant it.

The establishment of a union of states in Europe is not based on warfare and the establishing of hegemony, but on political and economic co-operation between them in the first place. Joint action in these areas, as well as in security matters, employment, and legal issues is considered to be more effective, with as final aim the creation of 'an area of freedom and justice'. At its foundations lay the lesson politicians drew from the disasters accompanying two world wars, which have made people in Europe realise that war does not lead to unity.

If one analyses the discourse on the enlargement of the European Union, however, it becomes clear that two different entities are mixed up. It was quite shocking to read European Commission President Romano PROD's expression when Hungary signed the access treaty between this country and the EU: 'We are opening our arms to welcome 75 million new European citizens [today]. This is now your homeland too. It is up to you to make it your home'. Bluntly speaking, this attitude is nourished by a mistaken concept of what Europe, and what the European Union is. That is the equation of a number of states cooperating on economic and legislative level, with the

whole geographic entity of Europe.

The churches in Europe hold a strong plea for the attention which is to be paid to non-materialised aspects such as diversity, traditions, and identity. I think that we also have a strong word of warning to speak in this discourse that makes use of an inclusive and exclusive language. Old borders are broken down, as in the case of Central European countries that will join the European Union next year. But also new borders are drawn up which leads to uncertainties. Because the borders entail a division of atmosphere, between those who are or are not, or have or do not have.

In Central and East European countries there is fear of the unknown, for the future. People involved in agriculture live in anxiety because of fears connected with the liberalisation of the market and the drop of subsidies and competitive situations in the future. Some are afraid of an invasion of foreigners buying cheap houses thus driving up the house prices. There are others who are not interested at all, or who feel annoyed by the continuous media bombardments about the 'accession'.



Others are positive, happy that their citizenship will no longer be a hindrance for travelling throughout the world. It is a fulfilment of their dreams, a Europe without borders.

In any case, easily speaking about the creation of a European identity does not do jus-

tice to people's feelings and experiences. We will have to accept that identity, especially European identity, has different meaning in different circumstances, shaped by varying historical experiences and cultures. Still, this does not mean that they are not European.

Somehow I feel that attention for these experiences and the own dynamics of developments in the countries which are in focus now, is missing. The focus is rather from the dominant perspective, 'they are joining Europe' but there is another side as well. Then, the question inevitably arises: how can we go about these different expectations and backgrounds? What could it look like, a unified Europe? Let me share some experiences with you from Central Europe.

#### WHICH LANGUAGE DO WE SPEAK?

In 2001, students from five Central European countries (Austria, Czech R., Hungary, Poland and Slovakia) established the Central European Subregion of WSCF Europe. The main reasons being the need they felt to share past experiences and look towards the future together. What is the most important thing happening during the seminars which are organised, is the coming into existence of friendships. We exchange opinions, we dance and pray, we sit around the same table and say grace together. These friendships across borders in fact do increase understanding, and the vanishing of commonplace images about each other.

After each conference, people voice what they have learned, and how these fora contribute to their understanding of what it means to be a young Christian in today's world. They also find each other in a shared perception of having a Central European identity. I have experienced among them great openness towards each other and towards 'the West', but a distinct feeling of having their own background and dreams. Their own identity as Central Europeans.

After having experienced this, it seems even shameful to

look at differences as a problem. They vanish in the light of the following: are not our European societies largely based on the same value systems of Christianity, Greek philosophy and Roman law? So, which language do we choose to speak? Can we go beyond oppositions and divisive systems?

#### DECONSTRUCTING BOUNDARIES

In 1 Corinthians 13, Paul speaks about a uniting force: Love with capital L, Love for and in community, about *Agape*. In the preceding chapter he touches upon various



spiritual gifts granted to the members of the congregation, and upon the unity of the people with these different gifts and elements in the body of Christ, the community living in the spirit of Christ. In chapter 14 he proceeds with his speech on gifts of the Spirit.

When perceived as part of a movement, chapter 13 can be seen as the centripetal and centrifugal centre, as the move from a broader perspective on Christian society and life, to the heart of Christian faith. He speaks about Love as "the most excellent way". It is an action, which comes from within, and if given space, it leads to freedom. In its most ideal form, Love is the driving force behind reconciliation and unification. In love relationships people come closer to each other, whether they are friends, lovers or relatives. They discover a new space together, which would not be there without the other, a space which has its own dynamics.

Love deconstructs boundaries. The clearest example of this is perhaps marriage between people from different backgrounds. A married couple from Serbia, she Magyar, he Romanian, learned each other's language, raising their kids bilingual. For them, cultural differences were not a barrier to be lovers and spouses.

The same goes for two other friends, who are united in marriage but were raised and belong to different denominations. Their love for each other does not suffer from these differences, because they take it as a fact belonging to their relationship, and to the very being of the other person. Out of respect and deep interwovenness with each other, they do not force the other to accept the same denomination or the same way of thinking. Love unites them above all. Of which yet another example, phrased by a participant of one of the WSCF seminars in Central Europe where nine nationalities were represented: there was so much love concentrated and materialised in one place in a way that he had not experienced for a long time.

Diversity united through love in community. A way in which we can live out the message of the letter to the Corinthians. Realising that we are shaped by our experiences and backgrounds, and that we cannot escape from them. But freeing ourselves from physical and psychological boundaries which underline otherness. We should rather look for ways how we can be a colourful body, and start with sharing and saying grace around the same

table. A promising song for the unification of Europe.

Suggested Reading VOLF MIROSLAV, Exclusion and Embrace. A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation. Nashville, 1996. http://europa.eu.int/comm/publications/booklets/eu\_glance /12/txt-en.htm#1

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