

*LAUDATIO*

to conclude the public defence PhD thesis Djunatan, 10-2-2011, Erasmus University Rotterdam

by Wim van Binsbergen, supervisor (jointly with Bambang Sugiharto)

Dear Dr Djunatan, Dear Stephanus,

Today you have taken the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, and it is my privilege to congratulate you with this great achievement, as one of your two supervisors, also on behalf of my fellow-supervisor, my dear friend Professor Bambang Sugiharto from Parahyangan Catholic University, Bandung, Indonesia. It is customary to briefly review, on this occasion, the merits of the work, to overlook the trajectory that led to its completion, and to reflect on the interaction between supervisor and candidate.

The project you conceived was of global scope and so incredibly ambitious that its realisation was scarcely likely – yet today we celebrate that very realisation. Ultimately you have sought to address the ills of modern *Indonesian* society. However, your initial inspiration – already in the Master's thesis you completed under my supervision at this University in 2002 – derived from other sides of the globe, from a modern French philosopher, Giles Deleuze, to which you gradually added the French-American philosopher Paul Ricoeur. Since my teaching and writings had made you well aware of the hegemonic violence implied in the application of North Atlantic models to South East Asian situations, you progressively counter-balanced these North Atlantic elements with two East Asian forms of established philosophy: the modern work of the Japanese philosopher Nishida, and the Chinese Taoist classic 道德經 *Dao De Jing* from the middle of the first millennium BCE. You have taught Chinese philosophy at Bandung, and have taken the opportunity to re-access and re-affirm, in your thesis project, your own roots as a member of the contested Chinese minority in modern Indonesia. Still not satisfied that these textual explorations would give you an adequate grounding for the 'Principle of Affirmation' in your own, immensely complex and conflictive, often downright violent, Indonesian life world of today, you decided to undertake extensive fieldwork among the Sunda-speaking people of West Java – whom you accessed through your personal fluency in Sunda, and your talent (unmistakable, though reticent) for transcultural communication. The cult of the mountain shrine of Nagara Padang, not far from Bandung, offered you a setting in which to study affirmation as articulated within indigenous wisdom at the historic crossroads of Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, all coming in from the outside in the last two millennia, and Sunda traditional worldview and ritual going back, locally, to prehistoric times – as our joint research has meanwhile indicated. Not having been trained as an ethnographer, you borrowed your field method mainly from the African philosopher Odera Oruka, allowing me to add a few personal touches during my supervision visits to the Bandung region.

Thus your project spans all continents as well as several millennia. Your achievement has been to think *The Principle of Affirmation as an ontological and epistemological ground for interculturality* – demonstrating that a transcultural (but originally 'Western') theoretical inspiration does not necessarily have to dominate and subordinate the self-reflexive mediation of local constructions of a coherent,

inclusive, and therefore viable, life world. Also, in the process of seeking to elucidate *affirmation* in all these contexts, you increasingly found also an heuristic intercultural method that in itself is based on affirmation, thus closing the circle. How far you have travelled, and how much you learned in the process, is manifest when we compare your thesis of today with your Master's thesis of a decade ago: the same focus, but a world of difference in terms of scope, conceptualisation, precision, relevance, and mastery of English.

Soon after completing your Master's you came back to me and asked whether I would supervise your PhD project. I hesitated, partly because of the logistic problems involved in supervising, from the Netherlands, someone who permanently stays in Indonesia; partly because my initial training in Indonesian studies was then already over thirty years ago; partly also because your Master's thesis had not convinced me that you, or me, of all people, could walk the road to a philosophy of interculturality at the hand of Deleuze; partly because it had already been my experience that, from my specific – peripheral – position on the Dutch philosophical scene, I could not expect to find funding for your project. Over the years, you proved me wrong on all these counts, in an intensive and often disturbing process that was an exercise in interculturality in its own right.

Despite these achievements our collaboration has not been smooth sailing. What collectively-underpinned basis for constructive interaction could ever exist between two people as de-culturated, and as differently de-culturated, as you and me?

- an ethnic and somatic Chinese whom modern Indonesian history has forced to dissimulate that identity, only to find refuge in the educational institutions of Roman Catholicism in an overwhelmingly Islamic country – and
- an ethnic and somatic Dutchman whose conflictive (likewise Roman Catholic) childhood and transcultural professional life as an Africanist anthropologist and intercultural philosopher have largely expelled from any identification with Dutch culture and society, to embrace African social and spiritual forms.

My suspended Dutchness at least made it easier to come to terms with another strand of modern violence: you were born in Ceribon, site of the greatest war crimes of the Dutch in recent history, and your father's house is at that historic spot.

It may have been our shared outsidership that did the trick – as on that memorable but painful occasion, in April last year, when at the height of the *komunitas*-creating pilgrimage ritual at Nagara Padang, and forced to consume the collective *slamatan* meal with just our one Dayak colleague, we were still spatially and verbally identified as outsiders amidst the seething crowd of *desa*-dwelling or university-attending Indonesians: '*Look now, orang sina, orang belanda, orang dajak*'.

Our collaboration has been a struggle to achieve interculturality by inventing it as a dyadic compromise between just you and me, learning – often the hard way – what the practical meaning was of the principles of affirmation and interculturality we so loftily write about. Today, your book and your degree demonstrate that we managed, and there are few things that could make me happier and more optimistic. Meanwhile, the repeated exposure to Indonesian society, and to Nagara Padang in particular, greatly inspired me in my own ongoing research work.

Today marks the end of the long assessment process of your thesis, and it is not the supervisors' role to come up with fundamental criticism at the very last moment. Yet in all fairness, a few critical notes are in place here. Inevitably, despite so many rounds of copy-editing, your text still shows that it was not exactly written by a near-native speaker of English; this is a handicap that nearly all Indonesian intellectuals are facing, and we have tried to make the best of it without depriving you of your own distinctive voice and of the audacious flight of your transcultural argument. Specialists on Chinese Taoism may like to see more of an explicit and critical grounding of your reading of *Dao De Jing* in centuries of critical scholarship on this wisdom text, both in the East and in the West. Anthropologists of religion may scan your account of Nagara Padang, largely in vain, for a comprehensive grounding of that cult in the social organisation and regional history of Sunda-speaking Western Java, and its place in today's heated politics of identity in the region. Today, many more objections have been phrased by our Committee. This is, however, as it should be: your self-chosen task has not been to contribute to any of these ancillary disciplines, but exclusively to make coherent and innovative intercultural philosophy out of the heterogeneous mix that makes up your primary data. In my opinion you succeeded in doing just that, in an exemplary and inspiring manner.

It is time to end with words of thanks. In the first place, I want to thank you, Stephanus, for the immense trust you have put in us, your supervisors, over the years, for the receptive and creative ways in which you have implemented our advice (albeit selectively, of course). Then, although I have been speaking also on behalf of my fellow-supervisor, I wish to explicitly thank Professor Bambang Sugiharto (holder of a PhD in postmodern philosophy from Rome, and a prominent philosopher of art) for his crucial part in our prolonged and ultimately successful division of labour. Over the years, Parahyangan Catholic University has supported and facilitated Dr Djunatan's thesis project, reducing his teaching load even in the face of urgent faculty needs to the contrary, and welcoming me during supervision visits. In the more advanced stages of the project, substantial support was given by the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Indonesia. Also the Philosophical Faculty, Erasmus University Rotterdam, and its Dean Professor Wiep van Bunge have been exceptionally generous towards this thesis project – subsidising much of the extra costs of intercontinental travel and copy-editing that this project entailed. Finally, this doctoral examination could only take place thanks to the specialists, both in philosophy and in Indonesian studies, who have been willing to join the two examination committees and to critically read and assess a fascinating, but rather long text.

Dear Stephanus, the degree you obtained today may be even more than a source of pride to you, your wife Lydia, your parents and further relatives, and your colleagues in Indonesia – to all of whom I extend my congratulations. Your doctorate is a reminder that, in the words of that controversial philosopher Karl Marx, the philosopher's task is not so much to describe the world, but to change it (*Thesen über Feuerbach*). Interculturality ranks among the handful of major problems of our world today – and of Indonesia in particular. Your hope has been to cast light on that problem, and to advance aspects of its solution, with the Principle of Affirmation. May your hope come true in a practical sense in the next few decades.

Thank you.