



**Speech by Federal President Joachim Gauck  
at the ceremony to mark the presentation of an honorary  
doctorate from Paris Sorbonne University to the Federal  
President during his visit to the French Republic  
in Paris/France  
on 26 January 2017**

"No quays and no old songs  
lamenting and dragging on,  
But love blooms there all the same,  
in Göttingen, in Göttingen...  
And too bad for those who are surprised,  
And may the others forgive me,  
But children are the same,  
In Paris and in Göttingen ..."

When the unforgettable Barbara wrote this song in 1964, her courageous contribution towards Franco German reconciliation, Paris and Göttingen were both very far away from me, indeed for all of us in the GDR and in the other countries behind the Iron Curtain.

It is therefore like a dream come true, something I could never have imagined, to be here in the heart of old Paris, to be welcomed in this wonderful way and to be awarded an honorary doctorate by the Sorbonne. I am delighted to be here and deeply moved by this occasion.

For Germans of my generation, Paris has always been the cultural capital of Europe – a city we longed to visit which was all the more attractive, the more out of reach it appeared to be.

Europe – that was a great promise following the Second World War. It began with the miracle of Franco-German reconciliation. Remember that in 1964 Barbara sang in her chanson that children in Göttingen were no different to those in Paris. At that time, only 20 years had passed since Hitler had ordered that Paris be laid to waste,

an order that General von Choltitz, thank God, failed to follow. No, Paris did not burn – thankfully for people here and for all of us who love this city.

Franco German reconciliation, which made possible the foundation of a free and united Europe, was – on closer inspection – not so much a miracle but more the result of committed and indeed sober work by wise politicians prepared to foster understanding. Many academics and artists whose works were received with great interest on the respective other bank of the Rhine also contributed to this reconciliation. The books of Albert Camus, to name just one example, were read with great interest in Germany.

In the years after 1989, the promise of Europe gained a new resplendence: the promise of freedom and solidarity, of participation and democracy, of liberality and the rule of law, also a legacy of the French Revolution, the 200th anniversary of which we celebrated in 1989, all that was now to apply to the entire continent and not just the western part of it. This had not been merely granted to us by a supernatural force but, rather, had been made reality piece by piece in word and deed by us Europeans.

Nowadays, however, many of us feel that this promise is fading away before our very eyes and that a work which we all regarded as so secure and so well established is slipping between our fingers.

On this special occasion, I do not want to list the facts which we find so alarming. Here at the venerable Sorbonne, I would prefer to recall some aspects of Europe's inherent structural principle, which has developed in the course of history and which supports and underlies our way of living, our way of dealing with each other and our way of seeing the world. I would like to talk of the precious and the valuable qualities which make our Europe what it is. It seems to me that few places can tell the story of Europe better than the old Latin Quarter and its immediate surroundings.

Let us begin with the Sorbonne itself: its universities are among Europe's most valuable inventions. What we call critical awareness and intellectual spirit have been systematically honed at these institutions since their establishment. Let us remember one of the most important scholars in Europe, Abélard, the academic star in 12th century Paris, before the university was founded.

He was the first to question the idea of proof by authority. For, as he saw with great clarity, there were – in the case of the Church Fathers, for example – grave contradictions on key issues! Not even the Bible, the highest authority in resolving disputes, was free of contradictions.

Doubt therefore became the most important basic academic approach, while the most important methods were textual criticism and

scholastic, that is to say rule based, disputation. And the instruments of criticism, which had to be sharpened time and again, were reason and judgement.

Enthusiastic students came in droves from all over Europe – and they did not have an Erasmus grant. Later their groups of origin and language formed the *nationes*. Yes, the *universitas*, that is to say the convent of students and teachers in Paris, as well as in Bologna, Oxford and elsewhere, were something like “united nations” – on a quest to find truth, always anxious to differentiate between reality and semblance.

The systematics and honour of this critical awareness meant that one had to be capable of elucidating the opponent’s position in a clear and comprehensible manner before disproving it. Above all, it was important to doubt one’s own opinion.

Today we can take note of the fundamental conviction that reality as such is recognisable and can be described. And there is truth, and this truth is accessible to the community of scholars engaged in disputation: “For through doubting we are led to inquire, and by inquiry we perceive the truth.”

A post factual attitude to reality or even a post truth philosophy was therefore just as inconceivable to these brilliant minds as it was later to encyclopaedists such as Diderot, for Enlightenment figures such as Voltaire or essayists such as Montaigne. And that also goes for other great European thinkers such as Hume, Locke, Leibniz and Kant.

There is something else which the first early era of critical reason taught us: religion needs criticism and self-criticism – and religion can withstand criticism and self-criticism. Any religion which prohibits criticism does not trust its own claim to truth. It is then a spent force in intellectual terms. Some of its supporters become violent in order to prevail – that was no different in the 12th century than it is in the 21st. We all know what I am talking about.

However, when religion faces reason, the intellectual seed of secularisation is sown. The long road from the medieval investiture controversy to the clear and salutary separation of religion and politics, of church and state in modern history is part and parcel of Europe’s identity, even if this principle has been implemented in different ways in our countries, France and Germany.

Before we leave the university as a *lieu de mémoire*, let us also remember that Abélard, with his firm conviction that all conventions and authorities should initially be doubted, experienced and recorded a love story which serves as a model for all passionate love stories in Europe.

Abélard, a professor and celibate priest, and Héloïse, a young student: their love affair was known throughout the city. It was

considered scandalous, and it could not be. So the lovers were forcibly separated. Reading Héloïse's letters and digesting Abélard's autobiography, even today we sense the enormity and the coherence of this love.

It is Europe's first real, non-mythological love story handed down to us in literary form – and it stood at the beginning of a long story at the end of which, after many centuries, the idea of a love marriage was finally generally accepted: the idea that only those who truly love each other should live together; no forced marriages, no arranged marriages are now part of European culture – and those who love each other should not be prevented by anyone from living out this love.

Who knows, perhaps the story of the professor and his student, which spread across Europe, was the reason why Paris first became known as the city of love. At any rate, Peter the Venerable, the scholar and priest of the greatest renown back then, the famous Abbot of Cluny, personally took Abélard's mortal remains to the convent where Héloïse was abbess. Thus they ultimately shared a grave. The two now have a joint tomb here in Paris. And the inscription reads: "Beauty, intellect and love should have made this couple happy all their lives, however, they were only happy for an instant."

Philosophical questions regarding the true nature of insight and those regarding the true nature of love and desire – somehow they are linked. Related to this are questions regarding the political implementation of the rights of very different ways of life. Since the 12th century, they have time and again dominated the thinking on the left bank of the Seine, up until Michel Foucault. Time and again, thinkers from the seminar rooms and collèges of the Latin Quarter have greatly influenced Europe's culture, indeed that of the entire world.

It is only a few steps from here to Rue Saint Jacques, named after the saint who is revered on the very edge of Europe, in Santiago de Compostela. In the network of European pilgrim routes to Santiago, there is a very important one running right through the heart of Paris, which thus connected the city with the known Christian world at that time. It was in some sense a Europe on the move. There was a coming and going on the traditional pilgrim routes. Europe lived, and indeed still lives, from exchange. No European region has ever flourished culturally by isolating itself. The culture of the European cities would not exist without the roads leading in and out of it.

The pilgrims were under way on these roads, helping to shape Europe step by step. The students were under way, spreading new ideas. The merchants, without whose economic clout there could have been no progress or prosperity, were under way. And the troubadours were under way, sharing gossip and truth, poetry and music.

And the artists and master builders were under way, learning and passing on new aesthetic solutions. At some point they all came through Paris and created models which inspired the entire European culture, for example Notre Dame Cathedral, just a few steps away from Rue Saint-Jacques.

While the intellectuals on the Left Bank subjected every sentence of faith to scrutiny, a powerful affirmation of the Christian belief in heaven, Notre Dame Cathedral, was erected on the Île de la Cité. Emanating from Saint Denis and the Île de France, the first truly new architecture suddenly sprang up everywhere in Europe: not only did the Gothic cathedral stand at the heart of the European city, it was itself like a city with gates, towers, pinnacles and paths and, above all, an unheard-of and previously unseen mysterious light.

The cathedral itself was an entire cosmos: it represented not only the heavenly Jerusalem but also life on Earth, from agriculture to the craft guilds and political and spiritual power. More than one thousand years after the birth of Christ, Europe had become a self confident Christian world.

However, those who did not belong, for example the Jews, were oppressed and persecuted. The – even amongst critical scholars – almost customary anti Judaism, one of the darkest chapters in our continent's long history, reached the pinnacle of its cruelty in Germany, my homeland, with the Shoah in the 20th century.

I have to confess, as we are still standing before Notre Dame Cathedral on our imaginary tour, that I am always moved by the story of the little Jewish boy whose parents were deported, whose mother died in Auschwitz, who was taken in by Catholic foster parents, was baptised, became a priest and who was then installed as the 139th archbishop of Paris in 1981. He also preserved his Jewish identity and decided that at his burial before the requiem began in the cathedral the Kaddish, the Jewish prayer for mourners, would first of all be recited in front of the cathedral portal.

As a Protestant, I bow my head before this Catholic Jew – and as a German before the French immigrant child with Polish roots who is commemorated in Notre Dame with his Jewish and his Christian names: Aron Jean Marie Cardinal Lustiger. So much European history in one life!

But let me go back to the construction of the cathedral in the 12th century: nothing was too precious, nothing was too expensive for the new Gothic architecture rising heavenwards. This is demonstrated in particular by the unprecedented rose windows, of which Paris has three of the most beautiful. Nothing was technically too complicated to be tried out with the aim of building something even more elegant, even more bold and even more spacious. Cathedrals and churches

from Paris to Milan and Cologne, as well as in many other European cities, showed what Europe is capable of in its best moments: using all artistry and esprit to honour the good and the sublime.

Particularly at a time when critical debate on Europe is rife, we need to remember that Europe can be extravagant and expansive and has the patience for projects whose realisation lasts longer than a lifetime. That, too, is a message of the cathedrals whose founders never saw their completion: that there are realities that transcend us; it is worthwhile to build something that is not for us, and that will only come to fruition in the lifetimes of our children and our children's children. What made Europe great is the readiness to look beyond our own lives and our own generation – and to develop commitment and passion beyond our own interests.

This attitude applies not only to art and architecture but also to society. Directly opposite Notre Dame, just a stone's throw away, stands the Hôtel Dieu. There has been a hospital on this site since the 6th century. Caring for the sick and dying, looking after the poor and the homeless was from the outset a hallmark of Europe, the European idea.

The biblical story of the Good Samaritan is in some ways the story of the origins of European ethics. Countless people have followed this example. Children in Europe have been hearing for centuries the stories of Saint Martin of Tours, who shared his cloak with a poor man, or Elizabeth of Thuringia, who took bread and succour to the poor in the face of all opposition from her aristocratic surroundings. This spirit subsequently gave rise in the political sphere to the idea of solidarity, the voluntary assistance provided by the strong for the weak, the marginalised, the oppressed.

As well as the good, Europe has brought forth and experienced very many terrible things. Every conceivable kind of atrocity has been inflicted here. There is truly no reason to paint just a rosy picture of a golden Europe. After all, there has never been a golden age, and there probably will never be one. But there is the fight for humanity, for freedom and law, for peace, justice and democracy which we have to take up time and again.

I would like to conclude our little spiritual tour of the Left Bank with a brief visit to the Hôtel de Cluny. Here we encounter a motif which sums up an awful lot of what we have encountered up to this point.

I am talking here about the six world famous tapestries known as the Lady and the Unicorn. In the mysterious tapestries we see a lovely example of the culture of inwardness: this very special state of being with oneself, the concentrated perception of the world with all one's senses.

For this inwardness is a key feature of European culture and way of life. Internalising something, understanding and implementing something with heart and soul: that is a recurring theme. Whether in the olden days in the sermons of Meister Eckhart or in the Passions of Johann Sebastian Bach, whether in Mona Lisa's smile or in the throng of the Demoiselles d'Avignon, whether in Goethe's poems or in a shot from a Jean Renoir film: the aim is always to penetrate through the outward appearance to the inner truth.

It is not great splendour and refined artistry that are the ultimate aim of our culture. Rather, the objective is to experience the inner richness of our souls, the wonder of nature, the secrets of the world – and to gain an inkling of what perhaps transcends us. Ultimately, however, it is all about the genuine encounter with the Other: with the seemingly familiar face of what is close to us and the seemingly disturbing face of the unfamiliar.

In the Hôtel de Cluny, where we still are on our tour, we also stand before the original heads from the Gallery of Kings in Notre Dame, before the wonder of how, after the set models of the Romanesque period, something like individual faces, if not yet true portraits, are depicted. Perhaps the start of humanism: human faces to which we can relate.

In the 20th century, one philosopher, Emmanuel Levinas, devoted his attention to the demeanour of an individual and the face. He highlighted the "alterity" of the other whom we meet. The other always remains unattainably self-assured to us, and their demeanour is, at the same time, the demand to behave appropriately towards them. The familiar unfamiliarity which places us under a moral obligation: that is the demeanour, the face of the other. That is the essence of anti-authoritarian thinking.

In Emmanuel Levinas we find a paradigmatic intellectual existence in 20th century Europe: a Jew born in Eastern Europe, in Lithuania, who studied in both France and Germany, namely in Strasbourg and Freiburg. He learned from French philosophers, from Germans such as Husserl and Heidegger, lost his brothers and parents in the Shoah death camps and spent time himself in a prisoner of war camp in Germany. In 1967 he became a professor in Nanterre, which in 1968 saw the emergence of what many considered a revolutionary movement. He steadfastly developed his philosophy of the face of the other – and was finally appointed to a permanent chair. And where? At the Sorbonne, of course!

So here we are again, at the end of our tour of the little Europe of the Left Bank: We have remembered the Europe of poetry and song, of criticism and of academia, of passion and of faith, of great projects and the elegance of success, of charity to those around us and of

solidarity, of freedom and of inwardness, of the individual and the human face.

A Europe which is worth remembering and preserving because it can only have a future if it holds on to the values it fought to defend over so many centuries. Our little walk through the Latin Quarter has opened up more possibilities and opportunities, and has been more an encouragement and a call to action, truly much more than a journey of nostalgia and remembrance.

So many great, beautiful and precious things have been conceived, created and completed before us and for us.

Why should we not do the same? Pourquoi donc pas nous?

À Paris ou à Göttingen ...

Merci beaucoup!