

THE TURKS OF PRAGUE: THE MUNDANE AND THE SUBLIME

The Prague Orloj

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One of the major tourist attractions of Prague is the famous *Orloj*, a large astronomical clock whose origins are shrouded in mystery. The *Orloj* takes up two or three stories on the outside wall of the city's old city hall. It has two clock faces, the one on top showing time (as well as astronomical models of the universe) and the one at the bottom the calendar. The upper clock face includes the figures of Vanity holding a mirror and of *, both of which wear a hat that has some elements recalling an Ottoman turban. There is also Avarice, represented before the post-World-War II renovation by the hooked-nosed figure of a Jew. Finally, there is a skeleton representing Death. Since an ingenious nineteenth century remodeling, every hour on the hour when the clock tolls, Death pulls on a string setting in motion a procession of Jesus' disciples. He also makes Vanity, Avarice, and * shake their heads, deliberately rejecting the message about the limits of Time.

Clocks were a common "*vanitas* device." Ordinary upright clocks used in private homes often featured a skull and the inscription, *tempus fugit* or "time is running (out)." The message was to oppose the eternity of Heaven to the fleeting character of earthly existence. The theme became extremely popular in the Renaissance. In the famous *Ambassadors* of Hans Holbein the Younger (1533, fig. *),¹ the two men's wealth may be considered an allegory of Avarice, the mirror of Vanity,* and the considerable girth of the men perhaps as Gluttony. But the focus here is not on these medieval categories of sin as much as on worldly pleasures and knowledge do not represent sin as much as the folly of relying on this world rather than the divine sphere beyond. Worldly pleasure is symbolized, as it would be frequently also in the next century, by music: here, a lute and pipes. Music, apart from being widely considered a particularly fleeting pleasure, helped to represent sensuality by invoking the sense of hearing. The carpets, like the rich garments, of the men stand for wealth and prestige, and they also bring in the sense of touch. The most important signs of worldliness, however, are those of scientific knowledge. One of the men holds a telescope; there are globes, scientific instruments and an open book. But although the two men are obviously competent in science, they are completely unaware of the foreshortened skull that flies by, as if in a different dimension, at the bottom of the scene. It reminds us but not them that neither worldly knowledge nor pleasure will save us at the Day of Judgment approaches, and are not worth much compared to Faith. That was and remains the standard interpretation of the opening verse of the biblical book of Ecclesiastes, which warns about all human endeavor being in vain: "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity," *vanitas vanitorum omnia vanita*,² - hence "vanity painting," "vanity device," the name given to works with this message, including Prague's astronomical clock.



Although the hourly parade of the figures on the *Orloj's* upper clock face dates in its present form only to a nineteenth century renovation, it captures this spirit of stressing the limits of the world, which the much older clock has no doubt long represented. Clocks themselves were a worldly achievement of what we now call technology and science, and one of the greatest inventions of the secular scientific spirit. Here a magnificent clock is forced here to pay obeisance to religion and so proclaims its own limitations.

What concerns us here is not so much the more spectacular upper clock face, but the more modestly decorated bottom of the *Orloj* composition. Under the calendar face there are two statues of "Turks," part of a set of figurines that was placed on it in the seventeenth century, most likely in 1659.³ Like one of Holbein's *Ambassadors*, one of the Turks holds a telescope and is popularly known as The Astronomer. The other Turk is holding a book, an item also found in the Holbein picture, and is popularly known as The Philosopher (fig. *).⁴ Next to the Philosopher stands the imposing, oversized figure of an angel. The angel holds a drawn sword in one hand and in the other (hidden behind a shield decorated with a cross) a pointer aimed at the calendar. No doubt it is the

Archangel Michael, the heavenly warrior whom Christian tradition expects to appear on Judgment Day to lead our souls to judgment. He points to the calendar to remind us that *tempus fugit*. Prepare for the Day of Judgment! But the two Turks, calmly staring ahead just like Holbein's ambassadors, are as unaware of the archangel's presence as the ambassadors are of the skull that whizzes by them.



Wisely, the nineteenth century designers of the upper face's mechanical show did not make the Turks' heads shake in denial along with those of Avarice, Vanity, and *. For the Turks' failing is not that they willingly contradict the supremacy of God over human science and pleasure, but that they are ignorant of it. What the *Orloj* is saying to us is that worldly knowledge is really disguised ignorance if it is not coupled with religion. If you have worldly wisdom but not the Holy Faith then you might as well be a Turk.

A Turk? Classic Church doctrine has it that the gates of heaven remain closed to those who have not been baptized. Those who died before Christ cannot get in; even Abraham and Plato must languish in Purgatory. Muslim philosophers (philosophy then included science and medicine, as well as alchemy and astrology) were often classed with these righteous non-Christians, especially the Greeks whose knowledge they inherited and transmitted to the Christian world. In Rafael's *School of Athens* the Arab savant Avicenna (****_****) is anachronously included with Plato and the rest; in Dante's Purgatory, too, he lingers with Hebrews and Greeks. The Muslim scholars' wisdom like the Greeks' was pre-Christian, not in chronological terms but in terms of the logic of Christianity: it figured at the limits of worldly knowledge where Christians could enter with a higher Truth.

The vogue for *vanitas* devices should not be misread as a reassertion of medieval faith, where “this world,” the source of vice and repository of pain, was but a way-station to the other. Scientific and technological discoveries, and the intense interest in ancient pre-Christian thought that was aided by the importation of Arabic translations of and commentaries on Greek philosophy, had caused, during the Reformation, a reevaluation of the meaning and value of “the world,” that is, of the world conceived of independently of God. Hegel located in the Reformation “the recognition of the Secular as capable of being an embodiment of Truth; whereas it had been formerly regarded as evil only, as incapable of Good – the latter being essentially ultramundane.” * ref Asad 192 The suggestion that before the Reformation the world was not thought of as capable of Good is strange, considering that at the very beginning of the Bible God surveys his creation and notes to his satisfaction that “it was good.” But even if Hegel exaggerates (as I think he does) it is the case that in the Reformation the possible goodness and truth of this world became a topic of intense debate and contemplation. This is true especially if one includes under “Reformation,” the Catholic variety also known as “Counter-Reformation,” but which is now widely and more correctly labeled the “Catholic Reformation.”

Hegel does not speak much of the Renaissance, but it is that period that saw the beginning of the Reformation, so we can rephrase his statement to mean that the change in the western evaluation of the Secular began in the Renaissance. This revolution of the imagination took place in the context of tremendous advances in the practical applications of “secular knowledge.” There were momentous advances at the time in various sciences and technologies, economic organization, finance, and artistic technique. The term “Renaissance” itself, especially when contrasted with “Dark Ages,” reflects the judgment that these advances represented an awakening of the human spirit, and that stirring development is usually associated with scientific and artistic exploration of “this world.” Not only the later generations, but Renaissance people themselves considered their own age to be a blessed one, especially in they were Italians. That feeling of fulfillment came from the confidence – though it was, as we shall soon see, not an unshaken confidence - that this world, the secular world, was capable of being True and Good.

It was against this backdrop of increased confidence in worldly knowledge that the vanity device was employed, to make the warning that mundane science must be coupled with a recognition of the higher wisdom of religion. The point is not that the telescope and the book of the *Orloj's* Turks, like those in Holbein's *Ambassadors*, like indeed the sensuous textiles and carpets often present in such works, represent evil or falsehood. The artists of the Renaissance and Baroque periods, as much as the scholars, felt that researching the world was morally and religiously not only justifiable but deeply desirable. It is just that they were advised to pursue worldly knowledge not for its own sake alone, but in order to discover in it the imprint of Divine Providence.

Turks, Catholics and Protestants

There was a factor additional to scientific progress and philosophical debate that encouraged attention to the profane world as separate from the sacred. Talal Asad has pointed out that as a response to the fragmentation of Christendom during the “wars of religion,” there developed by the seventeenth century a new concept of “religion” as a

universalizable concept putting on a theoretically equal footing Protestantism and Catholicism and by extension other religions such as Islam.⁵ (Previously, “religion” was more or less synonymous to “true religion” or piety. Christianity was not regarded as a particular instance of some general category to which Judaism and Islam, let alone pagan beliefs and practices, belonged.) The result of this invention of the Religious was the separating out of a corresponding sphere: the Secular. The *Orloj's* Turks resist this innovation: they equate Christianity with religion and secular knowledge with Islam. As such they are evidence of the conservative agenda of the Catholic authorities under whose watch the *Orloj's* seventeenth century renovation took place. They were taking aim not only at Muslims but also at a more immediate enemy. Subtly, the Turks of the *Orloj* also ostracized the alleged godlessness of the Protestants.

These figurines are an aspect of the troubled history of Prague and the Kingdom of Bohemia, of which it was the capital. In spite of its ancestral Czech tongue, Bohemia, an electoral state of the “Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation,” was politically and to a great extent culturally and linguistically part of Germany. For several centuries it had been a hotbed of religious agitation against the perceived abuses of the Church. The decisive victory, which secured the Bohemian throne for the Catholic Habsburg dynasty, came in the Battle of the White Mountain in 1620, a few decades before the *Orloj* Turks were installed. A few more battles ensued before the Catholic ascendancy was ensured, but soon the Catholic party (which included nobles greatly enriched by the confiscation of their Protestant peers’ property) was able to mark its triumph with the architectural and artistic pomp that was fostered by the Counter-Reformation in its battle for Europe’s souls. Prague received an ideologically motivated facelift. Though the long-standing belief among art historians that the baroque style was religious and political propaganda is now certainly open to challenge,⁶ Prague does appear to give support to it. Gothic and Renaissance buildings were widely replaced by new structures in baroque style. In this urban renewal, the figure of the “Turk” played a role beyond the *Orloj*. On Charles Bridge, another famous tourist attraction, one limestone composition celebrates a hero who converted thousands of “Jews” and “Turks” (presumably by force); another bemoans the fate of Christian captives in Syria. If you follow the bridge to the Lesser Side (*Malá Strana, Kleine Seite*) of the river, you arrive at the Church of St. Nicholas, where the statuary of the nave is dominated by the figures of Christian saints active in the Orient. At the Church of Loreto, not far off, is a statue of a crucified woman in an oriental costume and wearing an oriental woman’s slippers, and sporting a rich, bushy beard. The work, bordering on the ludicrous, represents the martyr St. Wilgefortis. She was a legendary Christian woman promised to a Muslim by her father, some say in Portugal, others in Syria. Wilgefortis prayed to God to disfigure her body so the Muslim would not marry her, especially since she had vowed chastity as a bride of Christ. Her wishes were fulfilled: she grew a beard (a very bushy one if her Prague statue is to be trusted), and it scared off her fiancé. In retribution, her father had her crucified “like Him you adore.”⁷ With a naïve ignorance of its psychoanalytical and gender-political complexity, the story was meant to praise the heroism of a Christian girl who would rather die than be possessed by a Muslim. The placement of St. Wilgefortis in a chapel of a church recalling the “flight” of the Holy House from Asia to Europe is, given what we have said earlier, completely understandable.

Prague was not an unlikely a place for such anti-Islamic propaganda. The Habsburg realms had continuous and mostly hostile contact with Muslim forces until the very end of World War I, making their experience of the Orient more immediate than that of the western naval powers with their overseas colonies and spheres of influence.⁸ Indeed, after the refurbishing of the *Orloj* the worst was yet to come for the Habsburg realms. We have seen that only in 1683, with the decisive help of the Polish-Lithuanian king, were the Muslims laying siege to Vienna decisively repelled. rep * The Ottomans had been aided in the battle by Magyar Protestant allies, whose leaders hoped to establish Calvinist rule in Transylvania, Hungary, Austria, and Bohemia with the support of the Turks.

It is this historically based association of the Turk with the Protestants that holds the key to the sectarian message of the *Orloj* and the other anti-Muslim monuments of Prague. The artistic and architectural commissions to celebrate the victory over the Turks were, in this context, also an allusion to the victory of the Catholics against the Protestants.⁹

Perhaps it is significant that Loreto is in Catholic Italy and that the Orloj's Turks are in Catholic Prague. Though the difference is more in degree than in kind, the "withdrawal from Asia" we discussed in the last chapter was more complete among Catholics than among Protestants. The use of "Turks" as a metaphor for worldly scientists and philosophers might suggest that the withdrawal of Christian religion from the East left the East as the site of the mundane; that it distilled in the imagined Orient a region of the secular free of religion. In fact, it was a survival from the late Middle Ages, when the rediscovery of Greek sources as discussed in Arabic among Muslims, and the importing of scientific advances and artistic styles from the Muslim Orient helped to spur on the cultural revolution of the Renaissance. The inclusion of Avicenna in Rafael's *School of Athens* as a kind of an honorary Greek is an illustration of the recognition by Renaissance personalities themselves of this fact. It is itself symptomatic, perhaps, of the withdrawal from Asia – the oriental philosopher is "translated" to a gathering of the sages of the West. (In a sense, such occidentalization of oriental knowledge attempts to do for secular knowledge what the legend of Loreto does for the religious, though "secular" and "religious" were categories that were just beginning to take on their modern shape.) But for all that mental effort, the stubborn fact remained that – now that the mental world was divided into Occident and Orient – the Bible was inescapably oriental.

The issue, then, became the Bible itself. It was a matter of how seriously one took the biblical text. Catholics were taught to respect the Church's interpretation of the Bible as of equal authority with the Bible itself, found it relatively easy to re-imagining biblical revelation *as if* it had taken place in the West, the European continent now defined as the Christian homeland. Protestants, for reasons to be explored shortly, on the other hand encouraged the faithful to connect directly with the biblical text. This reintroduced, so to speak, religion into the imagined Orient. The biblical Orient, now imagined after a Muslim model, became the target of intense investigation. Protestants wanted to know what sort of a land it was that was at the same time maximally worldly (it rejected the Savior and ejected the true faith westward) *and* yet God's chosen theater of revelation. While the Catholic designers of the Prague Orloj (during the seventeenth century Baroque period, once known in art history as "the second Renaissance") were content to represent their "Turks" as the embodiment of this-worldly knowledge, Protestants saw

the Orient not as the secular hinterland whence religion had been withdrawn, but rather as a kind of metaphor for the general condition of Man living in this world without but blind to or even deliberately rejecting the presence and the grace of the Lord. In other words, to Protestants the Orient was a theater where the relationship between this world and God's world, between the secular and the religious, between the profane and the sacred, or in more modern philosophical terms between the immanent and the transcendental, was being worked out. As such, the Orient was the ground on which to imagine one of the most vexing issues that early modern thought in the West had to wrestle with. It was the issue of the Sublime, of the possibility of a world beyond that open to sensory experience.

God and the World

The preoccupation with the Sublime was the effect of the emergence of "this world" as the possible site of the True and the Good, which caused a crisis in the way that the world's relationship to God was imagined. The elevation of the world and of worldly knowledge to a worthy object of thought and investigation went hand in hand with changes in the social structure of the West: it indexed the appearance of capitalist modernity. Modern advances in worldly human knowledge and ingenuity that began in the Renaissance produced a sense of achievement at least among the rich burghers who sponsored them. But the pursuit of prosperity gained from earthly wisdom and labor did not fit easily the values inherited from feudal society, and least of all the values of the Christian church. So the affirmation that the science of the world confirmed the religion of God was plagued by doubt. We see this in the agonized, ecstatic affirmation of the divine over the mundane in the preaching and writing from early on in the Reformation: in this case both the Protestant and the Catholic, from Savonarola to Calvin. Martin Luther, far from being an advocate of the Secular as the locus of the true or the good, frequently used the phrase "prince of this world" (John xii.31) to refer to Satan. The Reformers' near-pathological fear of "the world" can still be heard reverberating awesomely in Bach's cantatas, as in his music for Luther's famous poem *Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott* ("A Mighty Fortress is Our God"), which exhorts us to fight for Jesus "in the war against Satan's host, and against the world and sin."¹⁰

The insistence on the primacy of God over the world indexed an insecurity as to what the relationship between God and the world really was. Does the world really show evidence of being created by God? Do the affairs of the world show that it is ruled by God? Is the structure of the physical universe and of the body, of which the western world was learning so much that was new, a reflection of the mind of God? The unspeakable and so largely unspoken dread was that world was actually not connected to God. The loss of a naïve faith in the divine government of the world as taught by the Church led to the possibility that the world was either completely random or ruled by a God who was neither good nor rational but simply a capricious tyrant. As opposed to this nightmare scenario (which was always raised, if at all, only to be rejected), the fervent hope was that the world did make sense, that it was still the site of divine revelation and divine care.

In Protestantism especially, the distrust of "this world" was coupled with a longing for divine grace, for a recovery of the sublime. "This world" was, of course, experienced as the familiar, western world. The "withdrawal from Asia," paradoxically,

left the imagined Orient outside both familiar space and time. It was there, the Bible taught, in that exotic region half imagined and half real, that God had proven his willingness to enter a godless world. The Orient was the place where the mundane met the sublime.

¹ ref *

² Eccl. 1:2.

³ Zdenek Horský, *Pražský Orloj*, 1st ed., *Edice Pragensia*. (Prague: Panorama, 1988), 108. My information on the history of the Orloj is taken from Horský's book. The message of the Orloj remains the same even if some of Horský's dates should turn out to be wrong.

⁴ The Astronomer-Astrologist is accompanied by a figurine that is not, without a stretch of the imagination, a "Turk." Dressed in what seems like a medieval European robe, this statuette is probably the one added by Anton Schumann in 1787, who noted that one of the figurines, though its pedestal was still present, had been lost. It is popularly described as "The Chronicler." If so then it is perhaps understandable that he is not a Turk. Speculative and natural philosophy (the latter we now call science) were known to owe much to Muslims; history writing not quite so.

⁵ Asad 1994, 40.*

⁶ For a critical discussion of the history of this idea, see Evonne Levy, *Propaganda and the Jesuit Baroque, Ahmanson Murphy Fine Arts Imprint* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

⁷ Eva March Tappan, ed., *The World's Story: A History of the World in Story, Song, and Art* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1914). The cult of Wilgefortis usually represents her father and her intended as "pagan" rather than Muslim. But in Prague the crucified Wilgefortis wears clothes and golden slippers unambiguously recalling the Muslim Orient. The artist has understood "pagan" as "Muslim" (a frequent confusion then as before and, perhaps, a correction since a Portuguese ruler who knew Christianity could well have been a Muslim). See also Ilse E. Friesen, *Female Crucifix: Images of St. Wilgefortis since the Middle Ages* (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2001).

⁸ The conflict between German-language lands and the Ottomans is given its proper due in the introductory chapter of Nina Berman, *Orientalismus, Kolonialismus Und Moderne : Zum Bild Des Orients in Der Deutschsprachigen Kultur Um 1900* (Stuttgart: M & P, 1997). It is now generally recognized that Said was wrong to suggest that German orientalism was derived from the English and the French, although scholars have still not paid sufficient attention in this context to Austria's conflict with the Ottomans.

⁹ This is not to say that the link between Protestants and the Ottoman Muslims can necessarily be generalized. The Bohemian king George of Podebrad, a follower of the proto-Protestant preacher Jan Hus may be said to have been the first European monarch to dissent religiously from Rome, and he appealed for all Christian sovereigns to unite to fight the Turk – surely an attempt in part to paper over differences between himself and

the rest of still Catholic Europe. On the complex and changing attitudes of Martin Luther to the Ottomans, see Nina Bergmann, *.

¹⁰ The libretto by Salomo Franck included direct quotes from Luther. Given here is Joshua Rifkin's translation from his notes for *L'oiseau lyre* CD 417 250-2, a 1987 recording of *Ein feste Burg* and *Herz und Mund und Tat und Leben*, with himself conducting the Bach Ensemble.