Sing: "Precious shouts of murderous crowds".
Bach and mission's third act.

On the eve of two centuries of triumphalist mission activity, Bach's art contained an evangelising urge that was sidelined in main-stream missiology. An aria in his Markus Passion shows an approach that questions the strategies of proselytism and social-economic development, and also modifies our views on the interreligious dialogue. It harbours a missionary undertow urging a form of solidarity that challenges the Christian mind as much as Nietzsche's call for a radical evangelisation: “be at one with the murderous crowds, not as their victor, but as an associate of their bewilderment”.

When a religious fatwa allowed King Farid to welcome Western troops on Arabian soil for the 1991 operations against Iraq, his opponents jeered that their new national anthem would be "Onward Christian Soldiers". Whatever their fears of Sadam's hegemonic designs, the Western designs scared them even more. And not without reason. The West's motives in 200 years of colonial and missionary expanse remains a hot issue in disciplines as different as anthropology and theology. As the 'subcutaneous' alternative to the Christian soldiers motive has been the main subject of Rogier van Rossum's interest, I wish, in offering a reflection on a curious aria in Bach's Markus Passion (BWV 247), to follow up on our joint publication in that vein, rather than to jump on some Bach-2000 bandwagon.1 In the early 1700's, probably 1731, Bach wrote this work in a manifestly missionary understanding of his art. His Passions were outright mission statements. But in which sense? Did they just express the Pietism that pervaded both Protestant and Catholic faith at the time? Or did he, on the eve of our modern mission era, see other vistas amidst the Enlightenment's nascent rationalism? An aria in the recently reconstructed Markus Passion invites us to a closer inquiry. The various Markus Passion reconstructions have deployed Bach's other musical output. Simon Heighes' version, with sober recitatives and rather few of the ornate arias we tend to associate with Bach's work, surprises us by aria n.34 in which, at the heart of the work, a treble is made to sing, in melodic and rhythmic exuberance, what to our cultured ears must sound as utter cynicism: Angenehmes Mortgeschrei.2 Keeping this text's rhythm - and its affront to our religiosity - I

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2 The relative simplicity of Heighes' version could have matched the poor performing conditions in one of Leipzig Churches. The fine artistry of our aria marks its central place in the work. As my article was at the editor's, the version by Ton Koopman became available, with more of the lush
translate: Precious shouts of murderous crowds. What is this to mean? Why so much prominence given to this shocking text? If indeed Bach saw his art as kerygmatic, the aria puzzles us. Could its exaltation of the mob's murderous cry for Jesus' death reflect a missionary undertow that we come to recognise only a quarter millennium later? Its theme touches a raw nerve in our age, red with the blood of holocausts and genocides. Is the aria and its aesthetic adulation of the lynch mob’s cries more than the old felix culpa theme, with a pietist stress on the value of Jesus' crucifixion? As a provocative product of Bach's genius, it reminds us of the earlier Johannes Passion. But before studying its missiological undertow, let us first listen to the text and appreciate the extraordinary twist given to what might seem a straightforward pietist verse:

Angenehmes Mort Geschrey  
Jesu soll am Kreute sterben  
Nur damit ich vom Verderben  
Der verdamnten Seelen frey  
Und damit mir Kreutz und Leiden  
Sanffte zu tragen sey.  

Welcome cry for murder;  
Jesus must die on the Cross;  
Solely that I of the perdition  
of the damned souls be free;  
and that cross and suffering  
be light to bear for me.

The cords struck here are not just the bourgeois "Blood and Wounds"-theology (Ritschl), so much abhorred by people like Nietzsche. They are on a different emotional scale than Peter's sorrowful "I am burdened by sin" in the preceding aria. Could Nietzsche have sensed this, when he told his friend how, in one week's time, he had attended three performances of the "divine Bach's Mattheus Passion" and had understood what true evangelising should be about? What did Nietzsche - a musician himself, and great admirer of Bach - perceive in that early 1700's message? What did he see as lost in later mainstream Christianity and what did "restoring the Gospel beyond its Christian deformations" mean to him? Had he furtively influenced me listening to this aria? Or was it René Girard's theory that the lynch mob is religion's true birthplace? Reflecting on the extraordinary complex of imageries and emotions in Bach's kerygmatic jewels, on the eve of the

Bach idiom. For our case, it is interesting to note that Koopman too has this aria (n.45) sung by a boy (alto) in an ornate and cheerful style. I follow Heighes’ version


4 See Pelikan, J.,Bach among the theologians., Philadelphia, Fortress Press,1986. We obviously heed W. Desmond warning: "Nietzsche should be honoured as an antagonist, not as a secret fellow traveller for forms of religious reverence he himself vehemently repudiated". (See "Caesar with the soul of Christ" in: Tijdschrift voor Filosofie 1999, 1, p. 27-61). The choice of R. Strauss' Nietzsche-inspired "Also sprach Zarathustra" as opening music for the millennium celebration at Bethlehem, was therefore rather risqué, even if one rejects P. Sloterdijk's view that this work is Musikgewordene Nihilismus and an Einübung in die Semantik der Gotteserlasshentheit. (See Sloterdijk, P., Der Zauberbaum., Frankfurt am M., Suhrkamp,1985, 86-87)