Lieve mensen,

Het is goed dat jullie hier zijn om samen afscheid te nemen van Stephen. Stephen en ik hebben lang geweten dat deze dag zou komen, en waren in alle opzichten daarop voorbereid. Het maakt het niet minder verdrietig, maar misschien wel makkelijker om het verlies te dragen. Althans, dat hoop ik; de tijd zal het uitwijzen.

I feel extremely privileged that Stephen spent his last days at home, where he has stayed till today, his very last presence on earth. For myself, but also for Stephen’s and my own family, particularly his final days have been most memorable days, as we were able to witness the way Stephen continued to live till the very last moment in spite of death creeping up on him. For me, it was no surprise to see how Stephen could embrace life while at the same time accepting death. He went about the dying process in the same determined and focussed manner as he always did about living. The way he finished his last book – which he knew would only appear after his death – is a telling example. Stephen was an admirer of Caravaggio paintings. When it became clear that his end might be coming sooner than expected but than hoped for, he made sure that he would finish the book before he died. To keep himself on track he had replaced the private picture on his screen-saver with a painting by Caravaggio, the one where we see a representation of St. Jerome finishing his translation of the Bible, with death staring at him, waiting to take him away as soon as the job was finished. (For me this was reason to suggest that maybe he should leave the last bit undone…). Even with death approaching Stephen remained the person he has always been. Thanks to this, his death has been as good as his life. Even his sense of humour never left him.

I have loved this man for many years, and that love will not stop at death. I will cherish our memories both of living together and working together. With our shared interest in Africa, but with different academic backgrounds – Stephen as historian and me as a scholar of religion - we have been able to deepen and enrich our understandings of this continent that we have often travelled together. Stephen has made numerous friends there, as in other parts of the globe, where he has inspired academics, policy-makers, journalists and many others with a professional interest in Africa with his acute analyses of Africa’s past and present, but also impressed them with his generous personality. My mailbox has been overflowing with messages from around the world, messages of shock about his death and of awe for his exceptional character.

The following is not me boasting about my man, but a short summary of how others describe him on the basis of their experience: as a wonderful man and a superb scholar; as somebody without match in sheer range and depth; by far the most accomplished, productive and dedicated scholar of Africa of his generation, whose contribution will remain the gold standard with respect to modern scholarship on Africa; as somebody with a brilliant brain, an extraordinarily talented person with a terrific memory; a gem truly lost. The idiom of the fallen tree, one person wrote, is overused, but if ever there was a giant baobab it was Stephen Ellis.

But more importantly, at least for me and Stephen would think the same, is the way in which others have experienced him not only as a great scholar but above all as a great human being (and I quote again): a lovely man; a warm and witty person with a sharp mind; a person with no airs and graces; with a basic humility and humanity, who lacked arrogance and treated everybody as his peer, without a trace of condescension or suggestion of hierarchy; somebody
to be trusted and respected absolutely, who not only brought intellectual excitement but also much love and laughter in the lives of others.

To me this is the most important aspect of Stephen’s legacy, though proud as I am of his gigantic academic achievements. The world of academia is not always a nice world – to put it mildly – with too many big ego’s. Stephen was not one of them, and this is how he will go down in the history of African studies. His personal and intellectual integrity meant more to him than any other aspect of his life and work.

This is how I will remember him, and this is how I want you to remember him. It is the combination of his personal qualities that has ensured that in death, too, he could be happy. He never wasted his time fighting against death; instead he simply embraced life for as long as he had it, using his energy to direct it on what he thought was more important and feasible: working on the various projects that excited him while also finishing the tasks that were still awaiting him; and if he himself could no longer do them, to make sure that others would take over when he died. This also included the vital task - in his eyes - of getting assurances from family and friends that they would take over his task of caring for me. I hope I can make his spirit live on in me for all of you.

During the last year of his illness we have had continuous visits from family and friends from abroad, who all knew that Stephen had an incurable disease. Stephen and I were also able to travel abroad to say farewell to those who were not able to visit us, especially in Africa. For both of us this has been a precious period, joyful in spite of the underlying sadness, but with great gratitude for a life that might be cut short but was nevertheless fulfilled.

I thank you all present here for what each of you have been to him. All is well with Stephen, I know that he will rest in peace.