Without Christian Roots

A Critique of the Roots Analogy in Relation to European Culture

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Abstract

A major debate in the early years of the twenty-first century concerned whether the proposed European Union (EU) constitution should contain references to the supposed Christian roots of the continent. This paper considers a consistent use of the roots analogy, focusing on a published work by two important participants to this debate, Marcello Pera, President of the Italian Senate from 2001-2006, and Joseph Ratzinger, Pope Benedict XVI of the Roman Catholic Church from 2003-2013. It considers both the possibilities and limits of the roots analogy, and proposes a better analogy drawn from the work of Wittgenstein to understand the foundations of phenomena we group under umbrella terms like "European culture."

Keywords: roots, culture, Christianity, Europe, ancient city

An Essay

The role of religion in Europe and the continent's religious landscape have changed considerably. Europe was never religiously homogeneous; Jewish communities existed since Roman times and Muslim communities existed for centuries in Albania, Macedonia, and Bosnia (Sandri: 228, 263). Yet, many have considered Christianity a defining feature of the continent (Remond: 129), inspiring its art and culture and serving to legitimize political set-ups. Things have changed noticeably. The French Revolution give birth to the Secular State,

and the nineteenth, twentieth, and early twenty-first centuries saw a rise in religious indifference and a decline in church attendance. There is now widespread moral relativism, with many simply taking it for granted that there are no objective moral truths and, hence, no institution (e.g., the Church) that can provide objective standards regarding such matters (see Taylor). Countries that in the past had a predominantly Christian religious character (Britain, France, Italy, and Germany) have recently become home to sizable non-Christian religious communities, the most visible in the media being Muslim. Many consider these phenomena a challenge to Europe and to "European culture."[1]

An analogy that features frequently in debates about European culture in certain circles in Europe is the Christian roots analogy. Analogies play an important role in language and thought – in how we talk and think about particular phenomena. They "help [one] understand," illustrate something by pointing to the consequences and features that concern its analogue, or evoke some kind of attitude (Shaw: 167). The analogy in question is frequently used to explain the origin, nature, and existence (as well as the relation between these) of European culture, and is compared to a plant that stems from a set of roots – a set of Christian roots. This analogy is so popular in certain quarters that during the years that the European Constitution was being drafted (2002–2004), a number of politicians lobbied the EU to include a reference to the Christian roots of European culture in the constitution (Black). An important use of this analogy was made in the 2007 book, *Without Roots: The West, Relativism, Christianity and Islam,* co-authored by Joseph Ratzinger, Pope Benedict XVI of the Catholic Church from 2001-2013, and Marcello Pera, a devout atheist and President of the Italian Senate from 2001-2006. The book is important both because of the authors and because of the role it played in the debate regarding the origin and nature of European culture.

Comparing the origins of a culture to a set of roots, and pointing to these in order to explain the nature and existence of the culture in question, rightly suggests that one cannot understand a culture without looking at its past, without taking into consideration the diachronic and historical aspects of a culture. Yet, the Christian roots analogy suffers from the limits that typify monolithic explanations. A different analogy, drawn from Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, may be used to characterize phenomena like European culture. Wittgenstein draws an analogy between language and an ancient city, but this analogy can be used to characterize cultures and has most of the heuristic benefits of the roots analogy while avoiding some of its shortcomings.

Before discussing the two analogies, it is pertinent to define culture. In line with Fletcher, I understand culture as "The 'social heritage' of a community" consisting of "material, mental and spiritual 'artifacts'" and "distinctive forms of behavior," which are transmitted (and modified) from one generation to the other in the community in question (Fletcher: 191). Culture would then include systems of symbols, ideas, values and beliefs, aesthetic sensitivities, institutions (both governmental and non-governmental) and how these

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[1] "European culture" is a phrase that is highly contested and disputed in cultural studies. It is a phrase that involves disagreement, conflict, and tensions regarding what defines "European culture," what is (ought to) be included under it, or whether there is indeed such a thing. Yet, it is a phrase that is used quite cavalierly in a variety of political, religious, and everyday discourses, as well as in some academic texts.

are understood, modes of organizing one's life and of congregating with others, rituals (both religious and civil), as well as material artifacts like distinctive ways of constructing and conceiving houses, places of work or worship, and works of art. It would also include how people within the community in question normally act, react, behave, and orient themselves in determinate situations. Phrases like "European culture," "Arab Culture," "Italian Culture," "London culture," "British-Bengali culture," (assuming their consistency and leaving aside the contested nature of these phrases), would indicate some "social heritage," material, mental, and spiritual artifacts, and distinctive forms of behavior that Europeans, Arabs, Italians, Londoners, or British Bengalis would somehow share, modify, and transmit from one generation to another. Although Ratzinger and Pera do not include an explicit definition of culture, their use of the term is consonant with this definition, and is the major reason why this characterization of culture is adopted in the paper.

The Roots Analogy and Its Use by Ratzinger and Pera

In everyday parlance roots are believed to have three functions. Roots provide nourishment to a plant; it is "the part of [the] plant that . . . absorbs water and nourishment from the soil" (Thompson: 695) and without roots a plant will die. Roots also anchor the plant solidly to the ground, providing stability against those elements that may displace it and possibly cause its death or some severe disfigurement. From this feature the verb "to root," which means causing something to be "fixed and unmoving," is derived. (Thompson: 695) Finally, roots are popularly thought to be the part of the plant that not only keeps the plant alive and anchored, but also explains its origin and nature (Thompson: 695). Thus, the expression "to be rooted in something" means "to have (something) as a cause or to originate in (this) something" (Fowler: 304). When used in relation to phenomena other than plants, the roots analogy would suggest something analogous to one, two, or all three functions.

In addition, a plant may only have one set of roots; its roots may belong to one and only one species. Thus an apple tree can only have one type of roots, one that belongs to one and only one type of plant, the apple. It may not also have roots that belong to another species of tree or plant.

A phrase like "the roots of European Culture" would then suggest that, behind the material, mental, and spiritual artifacts and the distinctive forms of behavior that are classified under European culture, there is some common source from which these originate and defines their nature. The analogy would also suggest that these roots explain the nature of European culture. Without them, this would stop being the kind of thing it is.[2] These roots would also give stability to the phenomenon/collection of phenomena called European culture. Without these roots, European culture would dither and vacillate. Indeed, the analogy suggests that if roots are what keep a plant alive, without these roots European culture would die.

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[2] The roots analogy seems to entail some form of essentialism, i.e. the idea that there is something, some essence, that is necessary for a thing to be the kind of thing it is throughout its existence (Meikle: 177).

A plant's roots are generally concealed beneath the ground. The roots of a culture are also frequently thought to lie beyond the material, mental, and spiritual artifacts and forms of behavior that constitute a culture. They might be thought to lie in some previous age, in some formative period, where the foundations of the culture in question were established. They may also be thought to lie somewhere else, for instance in some text, texts, or body of beliefs, as would be the case of someone who holds that the roots of American culture are the Bible and Constitution (see, e.g., wdleeper). The roots of a culture may also be considered as a combination of two different elements, such as is the case of those who might hold that the roots of the phenomena that are grouped under Islamic culture are the text of the Koran and the Sunna. In this case, diverse factors come together and form a set of roots that is qualitatively distinct from its constituent elements and, therefore, gives birth to and maintains the culture in question. Events and characteristics that occur or come into being after the formative period may affect this culture, yet not in a fundamental or essential manner.

The roots analogy is not always used consistently in socio-political, religious, and everyday discourse. Some use the analogy inconsistently, claiming that some phenomenon – culture in our case – has more than one set of roots, even roots that are inconsistent with each other. (This is to be distinguished from the example given in the previous paragraph where different elements come together and, having come together, give birth to something new which are the roots of the phenomenon in question.) This however, is a misuse of the analogy because the analogue with which the phenomenon (in our case a particular culture) is being compared, i.e. a plant, can only have one type of roots. On the other hand, a consistent use of the roots analogy is one where the similarities between the main aspects of the two analogues are for the most part respected. For instance, if the roots of a plant are held to be homogeneous in nature, those of a culture will be equally homogeneous.

Ratzinger and Pera use the roots analogy in a consistent manner and take for granted its appropriateness to illustrate the nature, origin, and existence of European culture; they consider no other possible analogies through which the origin, existence, and nature of this culture could be understood. Their use of the analogy recalls the three functions (anchoring, keeping alive, and explaining the nature) that the roots of a plant have. They refer to the "circularity system" of European culture that starts from the roots and spreads to the rest of the organism, keeping it alive and vital (viii). Additionally, their use of the analogy also recalls the anchoring function that roots have, suggesting that the roots of a culture are what keeps the latter stable and in place (35). They also suggest that the roots of European culture explain its nature (32).

They also state that the roots of European culture lie hidden behind the material, mental, and spiritual artifacts, and the distinctive forms of European behavior. As George Wiegel, the enthusiastic writer of the book's forward, claims, we cannot understand European culture "simply by looking at its artifacts" (Ratzinger and Pera: vii). Behind these artifacts there is something hidden: a set of roots that sustains and accounts for these artifacts. This hidden root is Christianity, by which the authors understand a "synthesis of reason, faith and life" (23). This synthesis occurred at a definite moment in history, a moment when the roots in question came into being. This formative moment serves as the principle from which European culture originates (23). This formative moment occurred "in

a fully conscious manner under the reign of Charlemagne" (54). The "European continent [and European culture were] born from the rise of the Carolingian Empire" (54). This formative moment entailed a synthesis of the Greco-Roman legacy, to which the Frankish empire "constituted itself as the heir" (54), and the Bible and the ancient Church.[3] This synthesis created the "Christian roots" that constitute both the origin and the "essence of the [European] continent" (58). A "European culture" with a "definitive nature," and an "emerging sense of self-consciousness and a sense of mission" (54) was born.

Given that Ratzinger and Pera use the roots analogy in a consistent manner, European culture can have one and only one set of roots:

> . . . almost all of the achievements that we consider most laudable are derived from Christianity, or were influenced by Christianity . . . our values, rights and duties of equality, tolerance, respect, solidarity and compassion . . . even our institutions . . . including the secular institutions of government (56).

Other sources of the mental, material, and spiritual artifacts and forms of behavior that some group under the contested phrase "European culture" are either ignored, dismissed as not pertaining to the fundamental characteristics of European culture, or, as with pagan Greek culture which nurtured the thought of many Christian theologians, assimilated to the formative configuration of the Christian roots.

Limits and Possibilities of the Christian Roots Analogy

The Christian roots analogy has notable benefits as well as important shortcomings in relation to explaining the origin, nature, and existence of the material, mental, and spiritual artifacts and the distinctive forms of behavior one might group under European culture. As with anything done by or pertaining to human beings, these artifacts and forms of behavior do not occur in a vacuum. They do not exist *ad hoc*; they are not features that belong to the natural set up of human beings and they are not newly created by each generation. The roots analogy captures this aspect, pointing to the fact that these material, mental, and spiritual artifacts and distinctive forms of behavior emerge and stem from somewhere; they are inherited by persons inducted into a culture.

The Christian roots analogy as used in relation to European culture would, however, entail that only those material, mental, and spiritual artifacts and forms of behavior that originate from the supposed Christian roots of this culture can pertain to European culture. Thus, artifacts and behavior that do not derive from these roots, even though geographically existing on the European continent and possibly involving people who consider themselves and are considered by others to be European, may not be a part of the continent's culture. To give a concrete example, if the culture of the Islamic communities we find today in Europe does not stem from these supposed Christian roots, then their material, mental, and spiritual artifacts and distinctive forms of behavior cannot pertain to European culture. Phrases like "European Islamic culture" or "European Islam" would be oxymorons. Islam in Europe and Islamic communities that are geographically located in the old continent and

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[3] Obviously, the groundwork of this synthesis predates this formative moment. Christian theologians had already made use of Greek philosophical ideas to formulate doctrines and interpret holy texts.

who have a culture of their own may not be European Islam. *Mutatis mutandis*, the same would apply to all cultural phenomena the roots of which are not ultimately reducible to the same supposed roots of European culture.

The Christian roots analogy would suggest that the presence in Europe of cultures that do not have the same roots as European culture is akin to the presence of an organism on another plant which would be its host. In biology this presence may have three possible consequences: i. the two organisms may exist indifferently together or in symbiosis with each other; ii. one organism may be a parasite on the host plant; iii. the guest organism may inoculate the plant in question and change completely its nature. Three analogous consequences may be envisaged regarding the presence in Europe of cultures – of material, mental, and spiritual artifacts and forms of behavior – that do not originate from the supposed Christian roots. Ratzinger and Pera do not present a consistent view in this regard, but at times suggest possibilities that are similar to i) and iii).

The most innocuous consequence is the first, where two (or more) cultures might exist in symbiosis with each other. The different cultures might exist in the same physical space or within the same national or continental boundaries in peaceful proximity, with little tension between them. Some passages in Ratzinger and Pera's book suggest that the best one might hope regarding Islam in Europe is that the material, mental, and spiritual artifacts and behavior that pertain to this culture co-exist in harmony with the artifacts and forms of behavior that may be grouped under the umbrella term, European culture. Yet, it is implicitly assumed that the two may not be culturally integrated, which entails a novel and revised understanding of the phrase "European culture." Furthermore, no fruitful interchange between the two is envisaged (70).

The second possible consequence is having one culture existing in a parasitic manner on the other. This may, at best, entail an uneven relation between guest and host and, at worst, harmful consequences for the host. The first consequence is frequently envisioned by those who cite the principle of reciprocity in relation to its alleged non-existence or violation, regarding European culture and Islam. Some of these hold that while Muslims are enjoying benefits of European culture, such as tolerance and freedom of worship, their culture does not accord similar benefits to others. A more harmful, uneven relationship is foreseen by those who believe that Europe's growing Muslim population constitutes a threat to the continent's very existence. These possibilities are not mentioned by Ratzinger and Pera.

The third possible consequence seems to entail an equally extreme outcome, something akin to inoculation. Just as a plant that inoculates another changes the nature of the latter, a foreign body transplanted on the European continent might fundamentally alter the nature and culture of the latter to the extent that European culture would come to an end and be replaced by something else. When discussing the abandonment of Christianity by some Europeans and its replacement by "pre-Colombian American, Islam or Asian mysticism," Ratzinger and Pera refer to Europe's "circulatory system" (Christianity) being "paralyzed," and compare pre-Colombian rituals, Islam, and Asian mysticism to "transplants that erase [Europe's] identity" (66)[4]

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[4] This interpretation is confirmed by Wiegel's Forward to Ratzinger and Pera (viii).

But is the analogy from which these supposed consequences stem appropriate to explain those phenomena we might call European culture? I believe that it is not. The Christian roots analogy cannot explain the origin, nature and existence of the material, mental, and spiritual artifacts and the distinctive forms of behavior of all European cultures. Many, including Ratzinger and Pera, suggest there are material, mental and spiritual artifacts and the distinctive forms of behavior, apart from Muslim and other new communities in Europe, that cannot be included under European culture and do not stem from the Christian roots.

Any mental, material, and spiritual artifact or form of behavior that is not traceable to Christian roots would have to be deemed as foreign or non-European, even if it is plays an integral part in how various European people might live their lives and interact with one another or with their environs. A link tracing it to the supposed roots of European culture would have to be artificially and fallaciously drawn. Consider an example from the book, the "rights and duties of equality, tolerance, respect" and the "secular institutions of government," which Pera considers to be amongst the most laudable European legacies. I trace them to Christianity and its influence. However, prior to the Second Vatican Council (a council that Pera seems to castigate in the book) the Catholic Church used to condemn such rights and institutions and considered them to be antithetical to Christ's teaching. Even Ratzinger has mixed feelings about these rights and institutions, which he suggests were born out of the French Revolution.[5] Either the pre-Conciliar Church, which Pera seems to favor over the modern post-Conciliar one, was spectacularly mistaken regarding these rights and institutions, or these cannot be traced to the root he postulates.

A consistent use of the roots analogy would ignore the fact that phrases like "European culture" conceal sites of conflict, bargaining, tensions, and interaction, where different actors and interested sets of people compete and interact with each other as to what is to be included and excluded regarding the artifacts and behavior that are to be contained under such a phrase. The roots analogy suggests something rigid, monolithic and neutral with regards to the different actors and interests involved.

The Ancient City Analogy

A different analogy through which one may attempt to understand European culture may be borrowed from Wittgenstein's later philosophy. Here Wittgenstein was primarily concerned with language rather than culture. Yet, an analogy he uses to characterize the former – the analogy of an ancient city – may be used fruitfully to characterize even culture.

In *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein considers whether language can ever be complete (something that cannot be improved upon and/or to which nothing may be added), suggesting that it cannot. If language were ever complete, it would not be possible to introduce new uses of language as in fact occurs. Wittgenstein compares new uses of language to suburbs that are added to a city. Language as a whole is compared to an

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[5] According to Ratzinger, Western Europe experienced a number of tremors, the latest and most important being the French Revolution, when "the spiritual framework of Europe which [the Holy Roman Empire] had provided and without which Europe could not have been formed [was] shatter[ed]" (62).

> ancient city: a maze of little streets or squares, of old and new houses, and of houses with additions with various periods; and this surrounded by a multitude of new boroughs with strait regular streets and new boroughs (18).

Wittgenstein's city is a whole that is made up of diverse parts. The different streets, buildings and boroughs that make up the city may share common elements, but there need not be an element or a number of elements that are common to all buildings, streets, and districts. The city has a diachronic element, though it is not a town which is built according to some rational plan, or which grows according to one single project.[6] Truly, Wittgenstein does speak of "new boroughs with strait regular streets." But these are only features of these boroughs, not of the city as a whole. Moreover in Wittgenstein's characterization there seems to be no founding moment, no foundational time that defines how the city will evolve in the future. At one point Wittgenstein rhetorically asks, "how many houses or streets does it take before a town begins to be a town?" (18), a question which indicates the difficulty of even determining when a city begins or starts being a city rather than a mere agglomeration of streets and houses. Or, if there was such a moment, some solemn act and day of foundation, this was lost in time and does not rigidly determine what follows later, as testified by the city's unsystematic development. Later additions are not mere accretions added to a fundamental core. Wittgenstein's town is a city that does not rule out that streets and buildings are wiped out and re-built, while remaining the same city it is.

This analogy may be used to characterize how the material, mental, and spiritual artifacts and the distinctive forms of behavior are what make up European culture. As with a city, even a culture is a whole made up of various distinct elements. The analogy is appropriate because just as a city is a human artifact, so also are language and culture, and because both language and culture involve elements (words and sentences on the one hand; material, mental and spiritual artifacts on the other) that are used by humans in determinate ways and contexts.[7]

If European culture is compared to an ancient city, the diachronic element of this culture is explained in terms of the history and the successive developments of the town. There is nothing beyond the mere addition of boroughs and neighborhoods to the city to explain this. Moreover, the town Wittgenstein depicts does not grow according to some design or pre-set arrangement. Unlike roots, which are thought to rigidly determine how a tree grows and develops, the past of the town Wittgenstein illustrates is not something that impinges in a deterministic manner on how the city develops. The town's old quarters, though structurally related to the new sections and neighborhoods, do not rigidly determine

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[6] Contrast Wittgenstein's city to Leon Battista Alberti's ideal city, a city that is: "clearly laid out, with good main streets conveniently connected with the bridges and gates of the town. The streets must be wide enough not to be congested but not so wide as to be too hot . . . streets shall be so designed that symmetry may reign between the houses on the two sides of the street, and . . . a standard design maybe repeated for a whole street" (Blunt: 8)

[7] Regarding language, Wittgenstein calls such contexts language-games. Given Wittgenstein's theory of meaning, people make use of words and sentences in a language-game, and this use is the meaning they have. By implication, material, mental, and spiritual artifacts are also used in language-games, and these uses account for their meaning.

(though they may influence) the nature of the latter. If European culture is compared to a city, the manner in which the material, mental, and spiritual artifacts that pertain to this were used in the past or how they are used now, does not determine (though they do influence) how they will be used in the future. The same holds for the distinctive forms of behavior.

The roots analogy as used by Ratzinger and Pera entails that a plant – in our case a culture – cannot have more than one set of roots. In contrast, Wittgenstein's town has a myriad of constituents coming together at different points in time, having no single starting point or common design. Wittgenstein's city contains boroughs and districts that exhibit different designs (if any). If European culture is compared to an ancient city, then the material, mental, and spiritual artifacts and the distinctive forms of behavior included under this term may have various origins, not all of which are consistent with each other. Not only is there no unique source, but the sources are not brought together in one coherent synthesis at some formative period that would determine later development.

There is nothing beyond or above these houses, streets, and borough; nothing akin to a set of roots is required to anchor to the past the material, mental, and spiritual artifacts used by people belonging to a particular culture. The fact that people in the past and the present have used similar material, mental, and spiritual artifacts and engaged in similar distinctive forms of behavior is what links present and past. If there is nothing more than the mere use of artifacts and behavior, there is no set of roots for what is connoted by the term "European culture." Consider an example discussed previously, "European Islam." The phrase would not necessarily be an oxymoron. The inclusion of Islamic mental, material, and spiritual artifacts and forms of behavior *with* the artifacts and behavior that are commonly included under the term "European culture" would be permissible. It would mean that some new houses and streets are added to the city. *Mutatis mutandis*, the same would hold for other mental, material, and spiritual artifacts and forms of behavior that are relatively new to the European continent.

Though Wittgenstein's illustration of the ancient city is bereft of political connotations, the analogy is amendable to capture this aspect. A city is not merely a site where people live their lives, where goods and merchandise are traded, and where rituals are enacted. It is a site where power relationships, negotiations, and interactions between different groups and parties occur. This is reflected in the nature of the city itself – the structural plans, the decisions and the management of the town, the divisions of different groups of people within the city, and the relationship between these, and so on. Similarly, with regard to something like European culture, which mental, material, and spiritual artifacts and forms of behavior are included under this term, and which are excluded or die out, relates to processes and relations of power. The roots analogy, on the other hand, suggests something that is not merely beyond history, but is neutral and objective, beyond the interests and machinations of different groups and institutions. In doing so, it may abet the interests and machinations of dominant groups and hamper those who are excluded.

Conclusion

I have highlighted the limits and possibilities of a consistent use of the roots-plant analogy in relation to European culture. I have also shown the benefits of adopting the

ancient city analogy. If the metaphor that European culture has Christian roots is problematic, does this eliminate the distinctive role that Christianity plays in Europe's culture?

Abandoning the roots analogy does not eliminate the contributions of the multiple phenomena, frequently included under the term "Christianity" (such as theology, art, values, ways of considering the human being and the world, institutions, characterization of God and of God's relation to the world), that have been given to the European continent. Many streets and buildings in the ancient city that is European culture bear Christianity's mark. Ignoring this would be unfair, incorrect, and fallacious. This would not exclude, however, streets and buildings bearing a different mark and character in both the past, present, and future. Christians and people of other religious traditions, as well as people who are not religious, contribute to European culture by seeking the common good and respecting the particularities and differences of each other.[8]

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