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JOSEPH RATZINGER

NOW

POPE BENEDICT XVI

AND MARCELLO PERA

WITHOUT  
ROOTS

THE WEST,  
RELATIVISM,  
CHRISTIANITY,  
ISLAM

FOREWORD BY GEORGE WEIGEL

TRANSLATED BY MICHAEL F. MOORE

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—*Embassy Magazine*



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# WITHOUT ROOTS

*The West, Relativism,  
Christianity, Islam*

JOSEPH RATZINGER  
NOW POPE BENEDICT XVI

MARCELLO PERA

Foreword by George Weigel

Translated by Michael F. Moore



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## *Foreword*

WHAT DRIVES HISTORY? Politics? Economics? Some combination of politics and economics? Or should we look elsewhere to find the engine of history—to the realm of the human spirit, perhaps? Might it be that culture—what men and women honor, cherish, and worship—is the most dynamic element in human affairs, at least over the long haul?

What is a civilization? Can we understand “European civilization,” for example, simply by looking at its artifacts—what Europe “makes,” technologically, agriculturally, and aesthetically? Or is that merely “civilization” on the surface? Might the sources of the civilization we call “Europe” be found in a distinctive encounter with, and a distinctive idea of, the sacred?

Indeed, is it possible to imagine anything properly called “civilization” that lacks a sense of the sacred?

These are some of the large questions explored in great intellectual depth in this small book, the result



of a dialogue between Professor Marcello Pera, a philosopher and politician, and Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger—at the time of their exchange, the Prefect of the Vatican’s Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, now Pope Benedict XVI. *Without Roots* was a stimulating exploration of the current state and future prospects of Europe when it was first published in Italy in 2004. Now, with Cardinal Ratzinger’s election as the 264th successor of St. Peter, *Without Roots* takes on a new life, as a window into the mind of a pope who was elected, in part, because of his long experience with, and profound understanding of, the current crisis of European civilization.

“Crisis” is an overused word these days, but in the present circumstances of Europe it is, unfortunately, appropriate. Europe, Joseph Ratzinger writes, has become hollowed out from within, paralyzed in its culture and its public life by a “failure of its circulatory system.” And the results of that hollowing-out are most evident in the unprecedented way in which Europe is depopulating itself. Generation after generation of below-replacement-level birthrates have created a demographic vacuum which, like all other vacuums in nature, is not remaining unfilled: the vacuum is being filled by transplanted populations whose presence in Europe is a challenge to Europe’s

identity, and could become a threat to European democracy.

What is happening when an entire continent, healthier, wealthier, and more secure than ever before, fails to create the human future in the most elemental sense—by creating future generations? There are obvious sociological and economic factors affecting Europe's demographic decline; might there be spiritual factors at play, too? Could Europe's disinclination to create the future have something to do with an apostasy toward the past—toward the spiritual roots of European civilization? And could that apostasy eventually threaten Europe's commitments to human rights, to equality before the law, to tolerance and civility among peoples of diverse convictions? Is it possible to sustain public commitments to those public goods on purely utilitarian grounds—because civility and tolerance “work better”? How can we speak of, and defend, “universal human rights” in a cultural climate in which the very idea of “truth” is under sustained assault?

These are some of the questions implied by the dialogue between Cardinal Ratzinger and Professor Pera—and these are some of the questions that Pope Benedict XVI will likely be raising during his pontificate. The questions are of urgent importance on both

sides of the Atlantic Ocean. The American “culture war” is, in fact, an ongoing debate—and a continuing political struggle—between those who believe that human beings can, however inadequately, grasp the truth of how we ought to live together, and those for whom any notion of transcendent “truth” involves an unacceptable “imposition” of someone’s “values” on someone else. Europe’s exponents of a thoroughly secularized public space have their counterparts in the United States (and, it seems, have seized the cultural and political initiative in Canada). Thus, the issues explored so carefully by Cardinal Ratzinger and Professor Pera have everything to do with the future of North American democratic culture, as well as with the future of Europe.

*George Weigel*

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## *Preface*

THIS BOOK WAS BORN from a personal encounter. After the lecture that I gave at the Pontifical Lateran University on May 12, 2004, Cardinal Ratzinger gave his own lecture the next day in the Capital Room of the Italian Senate. This juxtaposition of the two speeches was purely by chance. As we discovered immediately after reading each other's talks and in the private meetings that followed, however, there was nothing casual about the often complete coincidence—arrived at independently and from very different perspectives—that we found in our concerns about the spiritual, cultural, and political situation of the West, and particularly of Europe today, and also about the causes of the situation and the primarily cultural remedies that could improve it.

Hence was born the idea for this book. It brings together the two lectures—my own in a revised and longer version than the brief text I delivered at the

Pontifical Lateran University—with the addition of a direct exchange of letters between us in which each tries to understand the other’s reasons, clarify his own, and compare them with those of a broader public.

It is up to the readers to decide whether our intention—to examine and reflect on the great issues of our time, including the West, Europe, Christianity, Islam, war, and bioethical questions—has achieved its goal. Whether our concerns can be addressed. And whether our suggestions deserve to be pursued.

We hope that these pages will help to pierce the curtain of reticence and timidity that impedes discussion of our destiny today. The only thing worse than living without roots is struggling to get by without a future.

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# WITHOUT ROOTS



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*Relativism, Christianity,  
and the West*

MARCELLO PERA

*A Symptom*

At the beginning of his famous essay, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Max Weber raised the following question: “A product of modern European civilization, studying any problem of universal history, is bound to ask himself to what combination of circumstances the fact should be attributed that in Western civilization, and in Western civilization only, cultural phenomena have appeared which (as we like to think) lie in a line of development having *universal* significance and value.”<sup>1</sup>

Weber was speaking in particular about “the most fateful force in our modern life, capitalism,” but the



same question might be asked of quite a few institutions not included on his list. Modern science, for example, is a Western invention that has a universal value. So, too, are liberalism, separation of civil society and state or church and state, the rule of law, the welfare state, democracy, as well as the “universal” conventions, declarations, and bills of rights. These and other institutions originate in and are characteristic of the West, particularly Western Europe. They belong to specific periods of Western history, have spread and imposed themselves in other parts of the world, and claim to have universal value.

The explanations that have been offered for these unique phenomena diverge, sometimes markedly. I will not enter into the merits of the solutions, although I feel obliged to mention that no serious attempt to account for these great moments in history has ignored the contribution of Christianity—direct or indirect, causal or concomitant, determinant or auxiliary, supportive or critical—thereby confirming that Christianity has been the greatest force in Western history. Instead I wish to focus on a new and paradoxical fact.

While the explanations have varied widely, the basic validity of the question has always been upheld. Today, by contrast, exactly one hundred years

after the publication of Weber's essay, the *question* itself is the first thing to be questioned, criticized, and ultimately refuted. The thinking that currently prevails in the West regarding the universal features of the West is that none of them has universal value. According to the proponents of these ideas, the universality of Western institutions is an illusion, because in reality they are only one particularity among many, with a dignity equal to that of others, and without any intrinsic value superior to that of others. Consequently to recommend these institutions as universal would be a gesture of intellectual arrogance or an attempt at cultural hegemony, imposed by arms, politics, economics, or propaganda. Moreover it only goes to follow that seeking to export these same institutions to cultures or traditions that are different from our own would be an act of imperialism.

Samuel Huntington summarized this widespread Western trend in his celebrated book, more reviled than read, on the clash of civilizations. He summarizes his political thesis as follows: "In the emerging world of ethnic conflict and civilizational clash, Western belief in the universality of Western culture suffers three problems: it is false; it is immoral; and it is dangerous."<sup>2</sup>

One case in point is the question of “exporting” democracy. This issue has been the subject of extensive debate in relation to the second Iraq war and the “Greater Middle East” initiative launched by the President of the United States, George W. Bush. Opponents of these two initiatives have argued that democracy should not be exported. They do so not because the social, economic, legal, and institutional conditions of the countries affected are still backward, which would make the entire operation *premature*. Not because the institutions typical of democracy—the vote, equality, laws, parliaments, courts, and so forth—inevitably undergo sometimes profound modifications when they are grafted to different cultures (from England to India, for example, or from France to Algeria), which would make the operation *unilateral*. Instead they argue that exporting democracy would amount to imposing one form of life on other equally legitimate, worthy, respectable forms of life, which would make the operation *violent*.

One particularly revealing symptom shows the extent to which this mixture of timidity, prudence, convenience, reluctance, and fear has penetrated the fiber of the West. I refer to the form of self-censorship and self-repression that goes by the name of political correctness. “P.C.” is the newspeak that the West uses

nowadays to imply, allude to, or insinuate rather than to affirm or maintain.

We read and hear this newspeak every day. According to its dictates, everything can be compared and evaluated *within* the confines of Western culture—be it Coca-Cola with Chianti, Gaudí with Le Corbusier, Darwinism with intelligent design—and many comparisons can be made *between* aspects of Western culture and their counterparts in other cultures, such as hospitality, social customs, individual behavior, clothing, and so forth. Yet should one attempt to place in a hierarchical order these cultures or civilizations—such as the ones that Max Weber described in the past and Samuel Huntington describes in the present—or to simply organize them according to a scale of preferences, from better to worse, out pop self-censorship, prohibitions, and linguistic restraints. Consequently, as one can easily document in today’s newspeak, whenever a culture lacks or flatly rejects our institutions, we are not allowed to say that our own culture is *better* or simply *preferable*. The only thing that politeness allows us to say is that cultures and civilizations are *different*.

To me this form of linguistic re-education is unacceptable. I reject it on moral grounds, which are the ultimate reason for refuting an intellectual position.<sup>3</sup>

To justify this rejection, I will outline my argument in the following manner.

First, by way of introduction, I will refer to a concrete application of newspeak: our relationship with Islam. Then I will move from the political symptom to the cultural cause, and attempt to refute this cause—relativism—in the two philosophical embodiments of relativism that the West has served up for many years now. Finally I will examine three practical consequences of this philosophy: the negative influence of post-conciliar relativism on Christian theology, which helps to explain the current weakness of the Church and the failure to obtain recognition of the Christian roots of Europe in the new (and now defunct) European Constitutional Treaty; the malaise of Europe, a rich continent that is unsure of its identity and its future and powerless to solve the resulting problems; and finally, the West's boredom with its own principles and values, at the very moment in which it has been targeted by a deadly war declared and conducted by Islamic fundamentalism.

The world is filled with concern but also with hypocrisy. Hypocrisy on the part of people who see no evil and speak no evil to avoid becoming involved; who see no evil and speak no evil to avoid appearing rude; who proclaim half-truths and imply

the rest, to avoid assuming responsibility. These are the paralyzing consequences of the “political” correctness (as well as intellectual, cultural, and linguistic correctness) that I reject. Of course I may be wrong. Indeed, I would like to think that my worst fears stem from a faulty analysis of the situation. If this were so, all I would need to know is that these fears have helped something or someone.

### *The Double Paralysis of the West*

After years of virtual or remote anthropology exercises conducted by philosophers and scientists to prove that cultures cannot be arranged in hierarchical order, the case of Islam is finally real, at hand, and ever present.

In 1992, a French expert on Islam, Olivier Roy, wrote that “Political Islam cannot resist the test of power. . . . Islamism has been transformed into a neo-fundamentalism that cares only about re-establishing Islamic law, the *sharia*, without inventing new political forms.”<sup>4</sup> As proof, he pointed to a long list of shortcomings and failures. Islam has not produced its own political model, economic system, autonomous public institutions, division between the family and

the state, equal rights for women, or community of states founded on anything except religion. In other words, he considered Islam a failure. Rather than open itself up to new prospects, “The Islamic parenthesis has closed a door, the door of the revolution and the Islamic state.”<sup>5</sup>

I wonder whether the thesis of Olivier Roy, and of so many Westerners who are thinking along the same lines, is true or false.<sup>6</sup> If it is true, can one then say that the Western model is better than the Islamic one?

The response to the first question depends solely on empirical research and analysis. The response to the second question does not, mainly because it patently expresses an evaluation (“better”). At this point, it would be useful to make a preliminary distinction: the difference between making a judgment and making a decision; in other words, the difference between affirming a thesis—in this case a value thesis of the type “A is better than B”—and taking a stand, in this case a political stand of the type “follow A,” “fight against B.” The two questions are related, although not in a logical, deductive manner. To argue that the model of Western democratic institutions and rights is better than the Islamic model does not imply taking any particular course of action. One

could say that the West is better than Islam and still tolerate Islam, respect Islam, dialogue with Islam, ignore Islam, or even obstruct Islam, clash with Islam, among the many possible stances. According to the old proverb, it's one thing to say, another to do. To rephrase this proposition in logical terms, there are no formal implications between "is" and "ought" (*ab esse ad oportere non valet consequentia*, as one says in Latin).

The dominant culture in the West, however, thinks the opposite, and reveals its prejudices through a major flaw in reasoning. It thinks that "ought" descends from "is." According to this way of thinking, if a person maintains that the West *is* better than Islam—or, to be more specific, that democracy is better than theocracy, a liberal constitution better than *sharia*, a parliamentary decision better than a *sura*, a civil society better than an *umma*, a sentence by an independent tribunal better than a *fatwa*, citizenship better than *dhimma*, and so forth—then he or she *ought* to clash with Islam. This is an error of logic that compounds the error of believing that our institutions have no right or basis to be proclaimed as universal.<sup>7</sup>

The consequence of these two errors is that today the West is paralyzed twice over. It is paralyzed



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