Chapter 12

Roots of European Cultures

In a society where groups of considerably different religious and cultural outlooks coexist, and which is governed on the basis of a democratic political system, it is imperative that there is a broad consensus about basic values underlying norms, laws, rules and procedures in the public realm. For instance, modern European states base their legislation on the principle of equality of men and women. But if part of the population is not in agreement, there is a problem. Can they be forced to accept female doctors in hospital to treat their men?

Many other examples could be given in the areas freedom of opinion, abiding with the laws implemented through democratic procedures, the prohibition of polygamy, and so forth. Such and other basic values are enshrined in our constitutions, guaranteed by European treaties.

The question, then, is why do we give fundamental importance to these values instead of others ones? The answer is, quite simply because these values are the outcome of the conundrum of European history. They are rooted in cultural and religious traditions that have shaped our society. That’s why in Europe, even in a pluralist and multicultural society, most people do not wish to legalise, for example, polygamy. That’s why we are attached to social welfare and public assistance to the poor. That’s why we find tolerance a basic value, even to the point of not tolerating intolerance.

Immediately, another question comes up. What are the roots of Europe? In this connection, mention is often made of its ‘Christian roots.’ When Christians insist on this, they can create the impression that our cultures are mainly, or solely the fruit of Christianity. If this is what they intend to say, they should not be surprised when others are very uncomfortable with the idea of being part of such a ‘Christian Europe.’ Some reject the idea entirely, saying that modern western culture is rooted in the Enlightenment. People taking this position are usually highly critical of the role of churches in the past, accusing them of intolerance and opposition to progress.

Who is right? What are the roots of Europe? This is a delicate issue. Entrenched positions abound in both camps. In this chapter we will present a nuanced view of the roots (plural) of European cultures. We are particularly interested in the role of Christianity in relation to other roots.

12.1. Which Roots?

What are the common origins of the various European cultures? Pamela Sticht argues that they are rooted in a number of heritages: the Greco-Roman
civilisation, Christianity and Judaism, as well as all the forms and concepts that have resulted from them, such as, for example, humanism and rationalism.\textsuperscript{142}

However, most scholars writing about the subject agree that there are three main sources. In this respect, the French philosopher Paul Valéry is often quoted for his classic summary, given in a lecture at the University of Zürich in 1922, devoted to the future of Europe. He asked the question: how can we recover from the First World War, not just economically but also spiritually? In his view, Europe was profoundly affected by a ‘crisis of the spirit,’ which could only be overcome by looking again at the origins of our cultures and drawing from these spiritual sources. He defined them eloquently as follows:

Every race and each territory that has been successively Romanised, Christianised and submitted, as far as the spirit is concerned, to the discipline of the Greeks, is absolutely European.\textsuperscript{143}

Since the Renaissance, says Paul Valéry, these three have combined to form European humanism, and this in turn has become the basis of all the various cultures in the European cultural zone. What exactly do we owe to these three sources? Let us mention the most significant elements. Our cultures are indebted to:

- Hellenistic philosophy, with its foundational emphasis on reason, humanism, republic and democracy, art, science and technology;
- Roman thought, with its emphasis on linguistic precision (Latin), law, written documentation, administration of territories, expansive imperialism; and
- Christianity, with its monotheism, its moral values such as forgiveness and the love for our neighbours, and its expansive moral missionary endeavour.

To put it in the more prosaic terms of the same Paul Valéry again, the basis of European cultures is the interplay of three distinct influences.

The first is the influence of Rome, [the] eternal model of organised and stable political power. This curious power, superstitious and reasoned at the same time, steeped in a judicial spirit, a military spirit, a religious spirit, a formalistic spirit, was the first to impose on the conquered peoples the benefits of tolerance and good administration, and these peoples have recognised the majesty of its institutions and its laws, the apparatus and the dignity of its magistracy.

\textsuperscript{142} Pamela Sticht, Culture européenne ou Europe des cultures? p. 38.
\textsuperscript{143} Quoted by Jérôme Broggini, Une idée d’Europe. See bibliography for details. Our translation from French.
The following influence was that of Christianity...which was aimed at the deeper level of consciousness and reached it progressively.

But our mind is fully European only when it can make use of tenets that distinguish them most profoundly from the rest of humanity and which have come to us from Greece. To Greece we owe the discipline of the spirit, the extraordinary example of perfection in all the orders...a method of thought by which one tries to relate all things to man, to man as a complete being, the best of our intelligence, the fineness and the solidity of our knowledge, the clarity, the purity and the distinction of our arts and our literature, [the quest] for a system of references in which all things should finally be integrated.144

When we say that these three influences are at the root of European societies and cultures, we are saying at the same time that they no longer exist as such. Rome has fallen. Athens is no longer the scholarly centre of the intellectual world. Christianity has developed far beyond Jerusalem and the stages of the early church. There has been a long process of interaction with the cultures of Germanic, Celtic, Slavic and other people groups, on which the Greco-Roman world had looked down as uncivilised 'barbarians.' After they had overran the Empire and conquered Rome, they did not put an end to its civilisation. On the contrary, they adopted the religion of those they conquered (Christianity), as well as their administrative skills and literary skills. As a result, this 'mixed multitude' of tribes became interconnected. But they perpetuated this heritage each in their own Germanic, Celtic and Slavic contexts, through a variety of cultural expressions. The root influences of ‘Rome,' ‘Athens' and ‘Jerusalem' accounts for a certain unity. This is our common heritage. But we should always keep in mind the paradoxical truth that this unity only exists in diversity. Pamela Sticht puts it well when she writes that 'the heterogeneous European cultures are characterised by the antagonisms of which they are made up.'145

12.2. The Mediating Role of Christianity

‘On the path of Christianity's pilgrimage, Europe was born, and the Gospel was her mother tongue.’ Quoting this line by Goethe, French cardinal Paul Poupard comments that ‘the Gospel has had on her [Europe] not just an occasional or

145 Pamela Sticht, Culture européenne ou Europe des cultures? p. 40.
For any unbiased reader of history, it goes without saying that the spread of Christianity was the single-most important factor in making Europe more than just a geographical unit. Without the conversion of the tribes north of the Roman Empire to Christianity, there would never have been the idea of ‘Europe’ as encompassing all the peoples of this continent.

We should not exaggerate the importance of Christianity to the point of making it the only constitutive force in the making of Europe. Surely, neither Goethe nor Cardinal Poupard would ignore our indebtedness to Greek cosmology and rational thinking and Roman administrative skill and law. Nor should we overlook the Hebrew Bible.

The church transmitted Greco-Roman and Jewish-Biblical heritage
But they point out that Christianity played a unique and crucial role, even with respect to these other roots. It is doubtful whether the European peoples would have embraced a Greco-Roman heritage if Christian scholars and artists had not transmitted it on to them. Commenting on the way in which the three heritages intersected, Jérôme Broggini explains that Christianity has forged European culture, in the sense that it has transmitted the heritage of Rome, but in the context of a Christian worldview. 'In a similar vein, the Romans had recognised their indebtedness with respect to the Greeks, as they assimilated the culture of the logos.'

This pattern, Broggini goes on to say, was also followed with respect to the to Christianity’s Judaic past. 'Remember that on a religious level, Christendom saw itself as the continuation of the Old Covenant [with the people of Israel].'

In other words, patterns of assimilation were repeated. The Romans embraced the rational philosophy of the Greeks and then the church embraced Roman administration along with the Greek legacy. At the same time, the church also incorporated its own Jewish and Biblical background. Subsequently, the church transmitted this heritage, together with its own message and worldview, to the peoples of Europe.

To be more precise, the Greeks and the Romans have left us with a worldview in which the natural dominates the spiritual, which in turn is the basis of critical and theoretical rationalism, as well as a political order in which the reason of the state has precedence over any religious reason. Christianity has served as a bridge between this heritage and the peoples in the realm of Christendom, and

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it founded the moral and humane values which the majority of European people have in common. In so doing, it played a crucial role in the making of 'Europe.'

Today our cultures drink from the wells of Athens, Rome and Jerusalem. But the interesting question is why this is so. Why haven’t these old civilisations fallen into oblivion? The fact that we still speak of Rome and Athens and Jerusalem today, is due to Christianity. It was the Christian church that transmitted the legacies of Greek philosophers, Roman administrators, and Biblical prophets. Christian theologians combined Greek philosophical thinking with the message of the Gospel. Christian rulers built on Roman legal and administrative ideas, as they structured the Christianised society. This in turn provided the basis for the development of European science and arts. Whether this was a good thing to do, is a matter of opinion, but there is no question about the fact that this has determined the development of European cultures.

The Christian synthesis
The late Pope John Paul II was keen to both admit the multiple sources of European cultures and the special role of Christianity. In his message to the Congress of the European Federation of Catholic Universities in 2003, he affirmed:

If a new European order is to be adequate for the promotion of the authentic common good, it must recognise and safeguard the values that constitute the most precious heritage of European humanism. Multiple are the cultural roots that have contributed to reinforce these values: from the spirit of Greece to that of Roman law and virtue, from the contributions of the Latin, Celtic, Germanic, Slav and Finno-Ugric peoples, to those of the Jewish culture and the Islamic world. These different factors found in the Judeo-Christian tradition the power that harmonised, consolidated and promoted them.

This interesting quote reveals that Christianity not only played a mediating role in relation to previous heritages but also provided the framework for the cultures of the peoples that converted to Christianity. These cultures were not altogether suppressed but rather were transformed through the Biblical message and the practice of the ‘new’ religion. The practice of pagan religions was forbidden, but many popular traditions could live on in a Christianised form. There was a fusion of the Christian worldview with a great variety of ethnic and regional ways of life. At the same time, it was the story of the Bible that created a bond between the peoples of Europe. The interaction between Jewish, Greek, Roman, but also Germanic and Slavic cultures, combined with the spirit of

148 Jeff Fountain, Deeply Rooted, p. 75.
Christianity and the ideals of the Enlightenment, has brought about a synthesis. On this foundation, Europe and its cultures have developed, through a complex and dynamic process.

The 'European experience'
The view of a threefold common heritage is shared by most historians. 'Europe' has emerged out of the combined influence of Athens, Rome and Jerusalem. Initially, it took the form of a Christianised realm, or rather a dual realm, one Latin and Catholic, the other Greek and Orthodox.

Some find this too reductionist. They point to other common sources that developed at a later stage and to which European cultures are also indebted: the concept of the nation state, the ideas of the Enlightenment such as the natural rights of every human being and the separation between the state and religious institutions, the influence of rational science and technology, and the French Revolution.

These developments together are referred to as the 'European experience,' in which all the peoples on the continent participated in one way or another. Anthony Pagden, for example, writes that the key influences of this 'shared experience' were 'the Roman Empire, Christianity, the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution.'

We agree that later developments have played an important role in forging societies and cultures. Their influence can be felt all over Europe today. But they would almost certainly not have come about, at least not in the form they took, if there had not been the prior developments which are at the basis of the European experience and which we call our common roots.

It was Christianity that paved the way. We agree with Cardinal Walter Kasper when he said:

The Christian tradition holds a mediating position. The heritage of antiquity has been transmitted through monks and clerics. On the other hand the modern Enlightenment, for all its opposition to the established churches of its time, cannot be understood without the preceding Christian history. Ideas of human rights are already found among the Scholastics in the seventeenth century, who in turn referred to the fundamental Christian view of man as it is found in the Bible. Inversely the modern Enlightenment has had repercussions on the modern forms of Christianity that have contributed greatly to the spread of ideas of tolerance and religious freedom.

150 Walter Kasper, public address at the occasion of the seventieth anniversary of Erwin Teuffel, former Prime Minister of Baden-Württemberg, in Tübingen, 12 October 2009.
Other roots

The beginning of the European identity lies in Christianity and in the Christian synthesis of other heritages. On this basis, the identity has developed through subsequent movements that have exerted a decisive influence.

During the Renaissance of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, there was a revived interest in Antiquity, especially in Greek and Roman literature, architecture, and philosophy. This coincided with an emphasis on the value of humanity. Personal expression, beauty and creativity, rational enquiry and moderate tolerance were emphasised, over and against superstition, traditionalism and violent strife over religious and doctrinal issues. Erasmus of Rotterdam is a well-known example of this intellectual outlook called Humanism.

The Reformation reinforced this humanistic outlook. Luther and other Protestant leaders emphasised the value of personal faith and individual responsibility before God. They paved the way for a religious pluralism within one and the same country. They also contributed to the liberation of the state and its institutions from the hold of the church, even though the emancipation of the state has certainly gone beyond what Luther and Calvin had wished. Protestantism has been a major intellectual force. Many sociologists subscribe to the thesis of Max Weber that the Protestant work ethic is the origin of capitalism.

The Enlightenment of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries continued along these lines, with an emphasis on individual freedom, and scientific development free from preconceived doctrinal ideas. Immanuel Kant coined the famous slogan: ‘people should “dare to further develop their knowledge.’ One of the main challenges put forward by Enlightenment philosophers was the reorganisation of political structures. They rejected the divine right of kings and emperors and the Constantinian alliance between throne and altar. Instead, they defended the sovereignty of the people, given expression through its elected representatives in a parliamentary system. In line with their political vision, they called for a balance between legislative, executive and judicial powers, as well as a separation of the institutional church and the state.

Surely these movements have moulded the modern mind. They have given birth to the scientific-technological adventure to which Europe has given itself so wholeheartedly. The Enlightenment sparked of the French Revolution which in turn sparked a series of political reactions throughout the nineteenth century. Ultimately, the Enlightenment ideal of parliamentary democracy became the standard political system throughout the continent.

Yet ambiguously related to Christianity

However, it should be kept in mind that the Renaissance and the Enlightenment were not meant as alternatives to Christianity as such, but rather protests against a kind of institutional Christianity that they labelled suppressive and intolerant. We should see them against the background of religious wars
between Protestant and Catholic princes. The protagonists of the Renaissance developed their humanism on the basis of their Christian convictions. While all Enlightenment philosophers were highly critical of established churches, only few of them rejected Christianity as such. Most of them were deists (i.e. they believed that God existed and created the universe, but not that he intervened in the history of humanity). They stressed the moral values of the New Testament, and promoted a rational enquiry into the origins of Christianity.

Moreover, it is highly significant that these movements of thought arose in a European context. The question can and should be asked: Why did these movements originate in this part of the world and not somewhere else? The answer is that they are indebted to Christianity. They are the fruits of the seeds sown by the church, even though the church was very reluctant to harvest them! The Swiss historian Mariano Delgado asks the same question and explains:

Why did the American and the French Revolutions, which have to be considered as the foundations of parliamentary democracy and aimed at universal implementation, only emerge in the bosom of a world marked by western Christianity? Would they have been possible without the Christian reception of Antiquity and without a theology that had been so much in favour of reason, historical progress and the moral equality and freedom of all men?¹⁵¹

The same can be said of modern technology and the Industrial Revolution, as well as the reaction of socialism, which have deeply marked our modern European societies. They would not have emerged, at least not in the form which they have taken in Europe, without the influence of the Christian message with its emphasis that nature is not divine, that humanity is created in the image of God and called to dominate the earth, and so on. What is socialism if not secularised Biblical social ethics? What is the dream of an ideal communist state if not a secularised version of the eschatology of Biblical prophets?

One can also think of freedom of religious practice and tolerance, which are foundational to the modern pluralist democracy. These values are generally attributed to the influence of Humanism and the Enlightenment. Historically, they have developed from the struggle for tolerance within the Christian world. Discriminated and persecuted Christian minorities have fought for it throughout the period of the religious wars. It was precisely to defend their cause that Enlightenment philosophers in the seventeenth and eighteenth century argued for freedom of conscience and religion. There is a direct relation between the

universal human rights of today and the moral teaching of the church, which in turn is based on the ethical commandments of the Bible.

Moreover, the rationalism that characterizes European science and technology and that has given birth to the secular worldview of modernism is an offspring, not only of Greek philosophy but also of Christian thought.

All of this is now couched in secular terms, but the fact that it developed in Europe and not anywhere else is in itself a telling indication of its close connection with Christendom. This was the context in which the social and political values of Europe emerged.

12.3. Jewish and Muslim Influences

We have been concentrating on Christian roots. What about the influence of other religions? In a preceding paragraph we quoted a lecture given by the late Pope John Paul II in which he described the roots of 'European Humanism.' Interestingly, he included 'the contribution of the Islamic world.' But he was careful to add that this was integrated, together with other elements, 'in the Judeo-Christian tradition.' In this one statement, he touched on a delicate question that is a live issue: to what extent are Judaism and Islam part of the roots of Europe, and should they be mentioned explicitly?

Judaism and the making of 'Europe'

To begin with is the question of the influence of Judaism on the development of European societies and cultures. Today, it is commonplace to speak of Judeo-Christian instead of Christian roots, because this is more politically correct. In doing so, people mark their distance from the persecution of European Jewry in the past. We appreciate this motivation. We agree that the Jewish communities dispersed all over the continent have been an integral part of our history. Two things should be kept in mind.

Firstly, the Jewish communities in Europe were marginalised for a very long time. Churches depicted Judaism in a very negative way. Many spheres of society were closed to those Jews who did not convert to Christianity. Granted, there were contacts between Jewish rabbis and Christian theologians (mainly Protestants). Individual Jews have played an important role in commerce, finance, science, philosophy and arts, but this was the exception rather than the norm.

Secondly, the Jews in Europe have become an influential minority since their so-called Emancipation. Beginning at the end of the eighteenth century, one country after the other granted them civil rights. From then on, they have come out of their isolated ‘ghetto’ communities to fully participate in the social, economic, and cultural development of the country in which they lived.
But it should be noticed that many of them assimilated to a large extent. Even though they were inspired by Judaic notions of justice, the value of man, or by the Messianic dream of a better world to come, they acted more or less like ‘Europeans’ and not so much in a distinctly Judaic way. Think of the many Jews in the forefront of the socialist and communist movements, for example. In fact, Jews who maintained their traditional way of life and the religious practices of Judaism were less integrated in society, less influential, less involved.

Thirdly, the major contribution of the Jewish people to Europe was the Hebrew Bible. Judaism passed on this heritage from generation to generation within the context of the Jewish communities. Judaism was not a missionary religion; its intent was not to bring other peoples into its fold but rather to ensure the continued presence, if not the survival, of the Jewish people. Meanwhile, the church transmitted the message of the Hebrew prophets to the European peoples, albeit in a Christianised form.

We would argue, therefore, that Judaism as a religion has played a secondary role in the making of ‘Europe.’ Talking about the Judeo-Christian roots can be misleading because it might create the impression as if the two religions, Judaism and Christianity, have exerted equal influence, as if they have worked side by side to forge our cultures.

Having said this, there is no way of denying that the influence of the Jews as a community and as individual members of society is very remarkable indeed. They are an integral part of our history. Their contribution is an element of ‘the European experience.’

Islam and the making of ‘Europe’

What about the role of Islam in the making of ‘Europe.’ The growing numbers of Muslims in Western Europe and their increased visibility (mosques, traditional dress, halal butchers, segregated migrant areas, etc.) provoke mixed reactions, varying from tolerance and acceptance to discrimination and rejection. As a result, such feelings easily interfere with the historical question about their role in the development of Europe. Did Islam contribute to the common heritage of Europe? This question is easily linked with another question: does Islam have a place in Europe today? To what extent should Muslims adapt their religious practice to ‘European’ norms and standards? However, we should try and dissociate these two questions.

When we look to the past, we can distinguish three periods of interaction between Europe and the Muslim World. Firstly, we think of the Moors on the Iberian Peninsula, from the eighth century until 1492. Under their rule, Jews and Christians were tolerated minorities, which allowed for intellectual and artistic exchanges. This period is often presented as a haven of peaceful coexistence, a golden age of science and philosophy, ‘an Indian summer of interfaith
collaboration between Christians, Muslims,’ as David Levering Lewis put it, in contrast to the rest of Europe, where Jews and ‘heretics’ were discriminated, persecuted, expelled. We should not exaggerate the contrast. In the Muslim emirate, Christians often experienced hardship. There were periods of severe discrimination as well.

Be that at this may, it is an anachronism to speak of ‘Muslim Spain,’ as often happens today. During the Muslim presence, this was Al-Andalus. Moreover, the Moors considered themselves as part of the House of Islam, not of Europe. Spain came into existence much later, as a merger of the Christian kingdoms that gradually took possession of the Iberian Peninsula. Spain was Catholic from its very beginning. It came after the Muslim emirate.

Including Al-Andalus in ‘Europe’ is yet another anachronism, because at that time, there was still great uncertainty about the confines of Europe as a geographical entity. But one thing stood out, ‘Europe’ was a Christian realm. The Muslims were considered to be a foreign element. That was the bottom line of the reconquista, the recovery of all the land that once had belonged to the ‘Christian’ world so as to integrate it into ‘Europe.’ It took seven centuries to fully realise this.

Two kinds of interactions between Muslims and Christians characterized this period. On the one hand, there was intellectual exchange, as Arab scholars passed on Greek philosophy and Babylonian science to Jewish scholars and via them to Christian scholars. ‘Toledo transmitted most of what Paris, Cologne, Florence, and Rome would know of Aristotle and Plato, Euclid and Galen, Hindu numbers, and Arab astronomy.’ On the other hand, there was confrontation, as the world of Islam was seen as foreign in Europe, as a world that should be kept at bay.

The same pattern can be observed during the Crusades in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Of course, this was first and foremost a violent clash between two worlds over the control of what Christians called the Holy Land. Crusaders against Muslim forces: that is the classic picture. While most Europeans have forgotten about it, it is still very much alive in the collective memory of Muslims in the Middle East. However, this is not the whole picture. There was also interaction between Muslims and Christians as Europeans came in contact with a highly developed culture and new products. Commercial relations developed. Venice and Geneva became the prosperous centres of this new trade of spices, foods and other merchandise.

Moreover, there were attempts to spread the Christian faith among Muslims through peaceful dialogue and exchange of ideas. Raymond Llul

152 David Levering Lewis, God’s Crucible, p. 125.
153 Idem.
sought contact with religious leaders in Andalusia; Francis of Assisi even went as far as Egypt.

The third interaction between Europe and the Muslim world took place in the Balkan region, where the Turkish Ottomans ruled from 1453 till the beginning of the twentieth century. Again, we see the two aspects mentioned above. There was a constant drive of the European powers to push the Ottomans back to Asia. The Turks did not try and convert the whole population by force. The large majority remained Orthodox or Catholic, the Turks developed a judicial system in which each religious community constituted a Milit. Each Milit was allowed freedom of religious practice and a large extent of local autonomy provided that the churches did not try and convert people. Granted, in order to join the army and the civil service, people had to convert to Islam. Even so, only a minority of the population became Muslim. As a result, this region has always been characterised by religious diversity and interaction on a social, economic and cultural level.

The Turks living north of the Bosporus and the indigenous Muslim communities in and around Bosnia and Albania are part of ‘the European experience,’ as far as the Balkan region is concerned. But they have not contributed significantly to the development of Europe as a whole. That is because for a very long time, Islam has been considered as a religious, political and cultural frontier.

We would argue therefore, that Islam is not part of the foundational sources of European cultures. However, the Muslim World did play an important role in the intellectual development of Europe, as it made people on the continent familiar with non-European science, philosophy. The commercial development of Europe owes much to the opening of new markets in the lands of the Star and the Crescent.

**12.4. Christian Roots... Presuppositions and Interests**

We are not just discussing a subject of historical interest. The roots of European cultures are a matter of considerable debate.

*Constitution Controversy*

This discussion became a real political issue when the EU decided to design a constitution. In 2004, a draft constitution was presented for ratification by all member states. The text not only defined the decision-making process, the governing structures and the legal procedures of the EU, but also its philosophical basis and common values. While most governments left it to their national parliaments to discuss, two countries organised a referendum: the French in 2005 and the Dutch in 2006. In both cases, the majority voted against.
What was the problem with the draft constitution? In Christian circles, the discussion focussed on the fact that the constitution mentioned ‘our common cultural heritage’ without specifying the Christian roots of Europe. Many people found this unacceptable. Some objected that the text did not make any reference to God as supreme authority.

It is not clear, though, to what extent these considerations layed a role in public opinion. In public discussions, the criticisms focussed on other points. Some argued that this constitution would lead us too far down the road to a federal European state; they didn’t want to lose national sovereignty. Others found that it favoured the liberal free market, to the detriment of social protection. For many people, rejecting the constitution was just a way of voicing dissatisfaction with their national government, or an occasion to protest against the introduction of the common currency, the euro.

Whatever the reasons, public opinion had serious reservations about the so-called Constitutional Project. This made other governments apprehensive. Opinion polls indicated that if they had subjected the constitution to a referendum, the majority would have rejected it. Instead of pushing the matter forward, European leaders decided to abandon this constitution. Instead, they opted for a simplified version of it, which would concentrate on the administrative structure and the procedures of decision-making. This became the Treaty of Lisbon, adopted in 2008. Unlike the draft constitution, it did not elaborate on the common values and the common identity of Europeans.

The Constitutional Project triggered off a debate about the roots of Europe, in which the central issue was the significance of Christianity in the making of Europe. Some downplay this, even to the point of ignoring it completely. Others explicitly emphasize our Christian roots. Why is there so much debate and polemic around this question? Because opinions about this matter are not just opinions, they are related to certain presuppositions and agendas which we will now clarify.

Hidden agendas
Clearly, the question of our historical cultural roots is related to the question how people of different cultural origins can live together in one modern society. The connection between these two questions is not a problem in and of itself. When we recognize that Europe has Christian roots, we are not necessarily implying that the practice of another religion has no place in our society. It can also be an argument for religious tolerance.

Problems arise when we present a ‘story of how Europe was made’ that is biased by political interest or by ideological presuppositions, or both. They can come into play unconsciously, because of our presuppositions that make us blind to certain elements of our common history. For example, staunch socialists tend to consider the French Revolution as the major reference point
of modern European history. As they focus on the organisation of social justice, the redistribution of wealth, the political consciousness of the citizens, and the guiding role of the state, they tend to bypass religious institutions, or even consider them to be a hindrance to progress. On the basis of this presupposition, they tend to ignore Europe’s Christian roots.

Postmodern philosophers would say that any ‘grand saga’ of Europe is like a meta-story that claims to explain everything. But more often than not, such a ‘story’ serves to impose one particular vision, to fit everything into a system of thought, in the interests of those who dominate society. One needs to ‘deconstruct’ them in order to discern in what ways they are used as instruments of power, to defend certain interests.

We will not go into this postmodern approach to history. Suffice it to say that it is always useful to detect hidden agendas, ideological presuppositions and political interests. This is particularly true when it comes to the common roots of Europe.

**Secularist agenda**

People with a secular worldview are prone to relegate the practice of the Christianity, and of other religions for that matter, to the past. They do not easily acknowledge that religion could contribute positively to improved living conditions, social peace, and so on. When they combine this presupposition with a secularist agenda for society, they try and keep any religious practice within the private sphere. Furthermore, they believe that we should draw from non-religious sources of inspiration for the advancement of the public sphere. As a result, Christianity is excluded from the political discourse about values and norms as are Judaism and Islam. When people with this worldview and this agenda look back to the making of Europe, they are prone to wilfully or unconsciously downplay the Christian roots and focus on the heritage of Renaissance Humanism and the Enlightenment only.

**Evangelism through idealising the past**

On the Christian side, many people insist on Europe’s Christian roots in order to arouse interest in Christianity among their secularised fellow Europeans. Clearly, their agenda is to communicate the Gospel. In order to show the relevance of the Biblical message for social justice, reconciliation between peoples, moral values, etc., they emphasize the way in which the church and individual Christians have contributed to the development of our societies. They point to the rich cultural heritage, from cathedrals to universities, from classical music to popular local traditions. In their zeal to gain a hearing for the Gospel, they are prone to draw a very positive picture of Christianity’s role in the past; too positive perhaps, while downplaying or even ignoring the harm that has been caused in the name of the same religion.
We see this happening time and time again. The Roman Catholic Church aggressively does this as it pushes for an official and explicit recognition of Europe’s Christian roots. Behind this endeavour might be operating an idealised image of the way in which the church held together the European peoples in the Middle Ages. Others might cherish the age old dream of Europe as a Christianised body of peoples, cultures and institutions of which the Roman Catholic Church is the (religious) ’soul.’

At any rate, Roman Catholic bishops explicitly remind Europe of its Christian roots. During a mass meetings in the vicinity of Paris, the late Pope John Paul II cried out: ‘France, what have you done with your baptism?’ In other words: ‘return to the Church!’ Clearly, this message was part of the program of New Evangelism, launched by the same pope in 1982.

Writing under his name Joseph Ratzinger, Pope Benedict XVI insists: ‘Believing Christians should think of themselves as a creative minority and contribute to Europe’s recovery of the best of its heritages and thus to the service of all mankind.’ Similarly, we find Protestants idealising their golden age, and Russian Orthodox expressing their nostalgia for the glorious past of their great nation; while Evangelicals like to recall the revivals in the eighteenth century that transformed British society and perhaps protected it from the excesses of the French Revolution taking place in their country.

**Multiculturalism and our ’religious heritage’**
Those who are concerned about a peaceful development of the multicultural society suspect that emphasising our Christian roots to the exclusion of other religious roots might be taken by Muslims as a message that there is no place for them in Europe. For that reason, they prefer to present the story of its origins in more general terms, downplaying the important role of Christianity in the past. Sometimes, this concern for social peace is combined with the ideal of multiculturalism. Multiculturalists plead for tolerance and dialogue, but are opposed to any exclusive claims to truth and efforts to affect religious changed (denoted as ’proselytising’). The basic understanding is that all religions are equal. According to this point of view, people will avoid mentioning Europe’s Christian roots and prefer to speak in general terms of a ’religious heritage’ that leaves it to the reader to include or exclude particular religions.

**Nationalist movements insisting on Christian roots**
On the opposite side of the political spectrum are nationalist movements and political parties, sometimes labelled ’populist’ or ‘extreme right wing.’

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154 Joseph Ratzinger, Europe, Today and Tomorrow, p. 33.
They are basically a form of protest against the multicultural society, especially against the ideology of multiculturalism. In the last few decades there has been an upsurge of these movements all over Europe. Their agenda is to safeguard a national or a regional culture. Immigration is their target. In particular, they are very concerned about the growth of the Muslim population and its increased visibility in society. Their agenda is assimilation, a sort of ‘inculturation.’

Interestingly, patriotic politicians often emphasise the Christian roots of their nation, and of Europe as a whole, even when they are not practicing Christians themselves. For them, Christianity is first of all a cultural reference. Faced with the customs of other religions, they lean on the traditional values and the lifestyle of their ‘own’ people, which are indeed bound up with the traditions of Roman Catholicism, Protestantism or Eastern Orthodoxy.

Their agenda is not to promote Christianity, or a particular expression of it, but to present it as an integral part of the national history. In their zeal to preserve traditional culture, they are prone to exaggerate certain facts and ignore others, to turn certain events into legends, so as to create a ‘national myth’ that tells the story of the people in an idealised way. It usually goes like this: out of the shadows of history arose a people; at a certain moment its king was baptised and the people became part of the Christian realm of Europe; other people groups were conquered and made part of the ‘nation’; several heroes have fought against its foes; we are proud of our heritage; our obligation is to maintain our identity, and to work for prosperity and peace in our land.

Reappraisal of Christian roots

The debate about Europe’s roots goes on. Arguments are exchanged, and history is called up as witness. But what do historians tell us? Whatever their personal opinion about Christianity, they cannot honestly ignore the fact that the European cultures today owe more to the influence of Christianity than to anything else.

Lately, the tide seems to have turned. Church leaders are no longer alone in reminding Europe of her Christian roots. Intellectuals, politicians and the media are less hesitant to recognize that the cultural heritage of Europe has been shaped by Christianity. For example, the influential German philosopher Jürgen Habermas emphasised, in a series of essays, the need to recognize clearly and without ambiguity the place of Christianity in the cultural heritage of Europe and the values that are now generally recognised as foundational for society.

Christianity, and nothing else, is the foundation of liberty, conscience, human rights, and democracy, the benchmarks of Western civilisation. To this day, we have no other options. We continue to nourish ourselves from this source.
Everything else is postmodern chatter....Recognising our Judaeo-Christian roots more clearly not only does not impair intercultural understanding, it is what makes it possible.\textsuperscript{155}

Statements to this effect are heard increasingly often. It seems that there is a general reappraisal of Christianity as one of the major roots of European societies today. We think that this is necessary in order to do justice to its determinative role in the making of Europe.

\section*{12.5. Turn Roots Into Sources}

Drawing this chapter to a conclusion, we would underline that the influence of Christianity is a decisive factor in the making of Europe as a cultural zone. It is one thing to recognize this as an historical fact; it is another thing to take up the responsibility that it implies. Roots only function when they nourish life. If not, they are just dead wood. A root functions when it takes nourishment from the soil and transports it to the living organism above the ground.

Dutch Reformed pastor and president of L’Abri Fellowship, Wim Rietkerk, concurs. Our common Christian heritage has provided the spiritual infrastructure of our civilisation, he writes, the public philosophy of European culture, if you like. ‘When we ask ourselves what to say to our fellow Europeans today, we must realise that we already have the seed that we must sow in our pocket. This seed is our common Christian heritage.’\textsuperscript{156}

Our message to the Western European should be: focus less on the fruits and more on the roots themselves. If our Lord would address the European Parliament in Strasbourg today, in answer to the question, ‘What shall we do with this whole civilisation?’, I believe he would say something like Micah said to the Israelites: ‘I have shown you, oh man, what is good and what the Lord requires of you. It is to act justly, to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God (Micah 6:4).

The basic problem with European man is not that he does not know what justice is. He does know. And he knows what mercy is. But he believes that he can achieve them without walking humbly with his God. That is the key point today. The biggest mistake he ever made was to think that he could keep

\textsuperscript{155} Jürgen Habermas, in a lecture given in 2006, quoted in Philip Jenkins, \textit{God’s Continent}, p. 264f.

\textsuperscript{156} Wim Rietkerk, ‘God’s Experiment’. See bibliography for details [16 May 2010].
enjoying the fruits without the roots, without walking humbly with his God. There is no future for a Western civilisation cut off from its roots. We should state very clearly that it is impossible to keep believing in man’s calling, if we do not believe that man was given that calling from God, and to keep up all social structures, family life, morality and values of our society without being rooted in nutritious soil.\textsuperscript{157}

Because these values are part and parcel of our cultural tradition, we can defend them. We can argue for their plausibility, explain their origin. These values help us to show that Christianity is relevant for society today. And we can link them with the invitation to be reconciled with God. In other words, they are bridges for the communication of the Gospel. In so doing, we are turning these roots into a spiritual source.

At this moment, these values are under attack. Take the value of the dignity of man for example. Witness the danger in new legislation on the handicapped, the unborn and the terminally ill. There is a tendency to limit the medical costs spent on them. Think also of experiments with human embryos, genetic engineering, and cloning, presented as technological ‘advances’ but also as means to ‘improve’ human beings.

We notice in passing that Pope Benedict XVI in particular has identified this as one of the major intellectual and ethical frontiers in Europe today. Wherever he speaks, he insists that when scientists and politicians lose sight of the fundamental value and dignity of each individual human being, as it is rooted in the Biblical message of man created in the image of God, man runs the risk of becoming the enemy of mankind.

A specifically European feature today appears to be precisely the separation from all ethical traditions and the exclusive reliance on technological reasoning and its possibilities. But will not a world order with these foundations become in reality a horrific utopia? Does not Europe need...some corrective elements derived from its great tradition? The inviolable nature of human dignity ought to become the fundamental, untouchable pillar of ethical regulations. Only if man recognizes that he is an end and not a means, only if the human being is sacred and inviolable, can we have confidence in one another and live together in peace....Faith in God the Creator is the surest guarantee of man’s dignity.\textsuperscript{158}

\textsuperscript{157} Wim Rietkerk, \textit{op.cit.}
\textsuperscript{158} Joseph Ratzinger, \textit{Europe Today and Tomorrow}, p. 42-43.
He notices a curious, paradoxical situation. The European culture of technology and commerce has spread victoriously through the entire world, but the culture steeped in a Christian worldview and based on Biblical values seems to be fading away.

With the triumph of the post-European technological, secular world, with the globalisation of the way of live and its manner of thinking, one gets the impression everywhere in the world...that the very world of European values – the things upon which Europe bases its identity, its culture and its faith – has arrived at its end and has actually left the scene; that now the hour has come for the value systems of other cultures....Europe, precisely in this hour of its greatest success, seems to have been hollowed out....There is an interior dwindling of the spiritual strength that once supported Europe. 159

As individual believers and as churches, we represent Christian roots. That’s fine and that’s interesting. That is also very challenging. We have the opportunity to draw spiritual truth from the Bible, apply it to the problems facing us today, and transmit the truths to men and women here and now, to their families, enterprises, schools, hospitals, and governments. In so doing, we reconnect our contemporaries to the very spiritual sources that are at the origin of our cultures.

During a colloquium on the cultural and spiritual roots of Europe in 2008, the philosopher Francis Jacques challenged the participants by saying: ‘As representatives of the heritage in which European cultures are rooted, we are challenged to turn these roots into spiritual sources.’ 160 He was ever so right.

European and the Gospel: Past Influences, Current Developments, Mission Challenges