



Letter to the Editor

Concerning “Without Roots”

Wolfgang Jilek, *Advisor to the Editor-in-Chief*

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Dear Dr. Bartocci,

I am impressed by the excellent book reviews published in WCPRR. Special attention deserves the masterfully written review-essay by Goffredo Bartocci on “Without Roots”, because the lectures and correspondence by Cardinal Ratzinger (now Pope Benedict XVI) and Senator Professor Pera, forming the content of this book, are of considerable relevance to cultural psychiatry. Senator Pera defies currently fashionable political correctness by rightly characterizing the attempt to export Western social and political institutions to non-Western cultures as an act of imperialism; a similar statement could be made about attempts to export specifically Western types of psychotherapy to non-Western cultures. However, his assertion that only Christian religion is empowered to boast a universal nature, sounds like the “cultural hegemony” he criticizes, and is reminiscent of analogous claims for Islam by Islamists. Senator Pera is not correct in stating that «almost all laudable achievements are derived from Christianity», and that even secular (Western) institutions of government are inspired by it. He must be aware that Western civilization without the cultural heritage of ancient Greece and Rome would be unthinkable, and so would be the theology and institutions of the Catholic Church without the input from Hellenistic philosophy and Roman tradition.

Cardinal Ratzinger emphasizes that the heritage of Western Christianity has to be “re-introduced” in Europe, which implies that he perceives this significant aspect of European cultural identity as lost. Cultural identity, as an important component of the individual’s personal identity, is also of relevance to mental health. Regaining one’s cultural identity can have therapeutic effects, as I was able to show in indigenous people who through regaining their cultural identity overcame the anomic depression engendered by colonialist deculturation.

Both authors criticize the negative influence of relativism in contemporary Western societies. As psychiatrist, I have no objection if this refers to ethical relativism. However, when Senator Pera includes in his criticism of relativism the «comparison between aspects of Western culture and their counterparts in other cultures», I have to raise my objection, because the scientific comparison between aspects of cultures, including religious traditions, and the exploration of their effects on the human psyche, is the legitimate concern of our discipline. On the other hand, the validity or “truth” of any faith cannot be judged by the criteria of positive science, because religious beliefs and acts are manifestations of sentiments, as the great Italian scholar Vilfredo Pareto has shown.

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The Editor replies

Dear Dr. Jilek,

I read with great interest your letter to the Editor.

I admit that it was a bit unexpected: in fact, to my regret, my personal experience has shown that not many of our colleagues like to get involved in subject matters that are, only apparently, on the fringe of the competence of psychiatry, as is the case with religious issues in the West.

So, Prof Jilek's opinion that the issues raised by my review are of "considerable relevance to cultural psychiatry" demonstrates that the problems under consideration do exist and deserve the attention of scholars in cultural psychiatry.

In particular, the expression quoted from Pareto, whereby faith is described as a "*manifestation of sentiments*", entirely coincides with my conviction as to the advisability of using great care and sensitivity in adapting the "criteria of positive science", which is the focus of our work, to this dimension of human nature. Jilek's words are surprisingly in line with those expressed by Prof Rovera who, having also to his credit a university degree in philosophy, has at length delved into the connection between positive science and religious faith. In fact, Rovera has always insisted on considering religion as an expression of the *sentiment of deity*, a specific yearning of the human species enabling it to avoid remaining trapped within the limits of its bodily confinement, thus finding the means through which to transcend the boundaries of human matter. There would be no psyche without the thrust that enables Man to experience the redness of red, far beyond the red that is crassly perceived through our senses.

Luckily, psychiatric scientific literature has proven in different ways that this cosmically key issue is not only left to the competence of philosophers and theologians.

As for me, exactly in consideration of the epistemological dimension of our scientific method, I have often reiterated the responsibilities shouldered by cultural psychiatrists in dealing with this field of knowledge: religious faith appears to be so deeply embedded both in the human mind and in the cultures produced thereby that I would consider it somewhat cowardly if we were to refrain from focusing our analytical observations on this ferment-raising subject.

At the closing of the WACP Congress in Beijing, Renato Alarcon stated that it is now up to hybrid sciences like *bioculture* to express themselves on the complex issues raised by a globalised and hybridised world. The study on the interface between psychology and the manifestation of religious sentiments is one of these issues. In order to develop research of this type, it is nonetheless necessary to acquire a minimum consensus from cultural milieus within societies that are capable of appropriately performing this type of work. The risk of giving the impression of being secular fundamentalists or, worse still, provocateurs acting against mainstream cultural ethics, would immediately dampen the enthusiasm of any agnostic researcher.

I insisted on writing this reply by levying upon the cultural method, thus adopting the proposal by H.B.M. Murphy (1977) who, in an article entitled "Transcultural Psychiatry Should Begin at Home", exhorted researchers to deal with *local* facts which should then be compared with other local facts.

Living in Italy and having the opportunity to closely follow the ongoing debate "between the two banks of the Tiber" (this is a euphemism widely used in Italy in order to avoid counter-opposing Science and Faith) on the heuristic capability of religious faith, with my Review, I intended to "export" beyond the Italian borders some of the issues of this debate that have already been brought to light by the publication of a book which, being manifestly and prejudicially opposed to the use of historical relativity in studying the forms through which religious faith is expressed and manifested, risk perpetuating an epistemological stagnation that is detrimental for both religious and secular thinkers.

CONCERNING “WITHOUT ROOTS” (LETTER)

I don't think that the West can react to the reinforcement of a fundamentalist Islamic cultural identity – that I am mentioning here only because it is the most explicit in its presentation and also the most widely echoed by Western media – by putting a ban on the study of the polymorphism of religious phenomena. Creeping fundamentalism remains in hiding only as long as it is expressed with a pseudo-scientific language that inhibits the use of a secular language to describe the phenomenon of religious experience, just like anything else.

Moreover, the fact that psychiatry always bows out when it comes to addressing the sacredness of religious sentiments represents an epistemological hiatus that highlights the wobbly foothold of Psychological sciences when faced with the taboo of a *mysterium* that is undoubtedly *fascinans* but that would be much less *tremendum* if were to apply the method dictated by our discipline: flexibility and comparison between different cultural aspects.

So I would like to express my thanks to Prof. Jilek for having further underscored the fact that cultural psychiatrists do not intend to invade the realm of “ethical relativism” but only deal with matters falling within their own scope of competence: the essential psychic manifestations of Man that present themselves almost invariably, albeit with different phenomonic expressions.

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