



Christianity Changes the Conditions of Government

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Foreword

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After a lot of ribbing about assuming a can-opener, empiricist rituals, and so-called experimental evidence, 20th-century economists gradually came to a number of realizations:

- that to better understand economic affairs they needed to better understand something they called ‘institutions,’
- and then culture,
- and then human nature—
- and, throughout the preceding progression, history.

Economists’ thought and sentiment have been enlarged.

The explananda (that is, the things to be explained) have gotten bigger. How to explain the Great Enrichment? Even bigger, WEIRD? Yet still, the remarkable historical arc, since Homer, say, of the western peninsula of the Eurasian landmass.

Big ideas, necessarily speculative, lurk above and beyond narrow findings and theories, which may be helpful as details in the contemplation of broad speculations about the course of human societies and about human ontology itself—that is, about the constitution of the human being. Max U may be helpful, but it is not sufficient.

For example, there are broad speculations about human nature being rooted

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in part in our existence as pack animals or members of small bands, instinctively responsive to manifest social nudges of our social environment. This speculation has led to interpretations of modern collectivist politics as a tapping into primeval bents and mentalities—that is, as an atavism, since collectivism is not apt for the modern world.

One speculation picks up the story in the ancient world, and then highlights a startling development—Christianity. This interpretation may be associated with our author here, the Frenchman Numa Denis Fustel de Coulanges (1830–1889), and his 1864 book *La Cité Antique: Étude sur le culte, le droit, les institutions de la Grèce et de Rome*. Fustel interprets the ancient city rather differently than it had been interpreted by thinkers during the so-called Renaissance and Enlightenment. Fustel’s ancient city is, as I see things, rather like an excrescence of band existence. The ancient world of the Greeks and Romans was an array or set of nested collections of human congelations, each firm in its manifest signals now elaborated as rites and rituals for its particular initiates.

Larry Siedentop builds on Fustel. His 2014 book *Inventing the Individual: Origins of Western Liberalism* tells a long story, claiming that Christianity made liberalism possible. He anchors the story in the ancient world.

Christianity began in the 1st century but liberalism emerges only much later—its arc cannot be said to have begun until sometime after Gutenberg’s printing press. So, why the lag? If Christianity made liberalism possible, why did it take some 16 or 17 centuries for liberalism to find elaborate expression?

I read Siedentop’s book shortly after it was published in 2014. From the dust jacket and opening pages, I gleaned the book’s contention, and thought to myself: Hmm, why’d it take so long? I would read a chapter, contemplate the developments explained in the chapter, and, indeed, found myself thinking: *That would take long*. And after the next chapter: *That, too, would take long*. And so on, chapter after chapter. Some of the developments are to political and jural organization within Western Christendom, developments that liberalism may be said to be predicated upon. To hear why it took so long to translate the moral intuitions of Christianity into social practice, then, you simply have to read the chapters of Siedentop’s book.

The story begins well before Christ, in Fustel’s antiquity. Fustel’s book is devoted to the ancient city. By entering into his understanding of the ancient city we better appreciate how transformative Christianity was. Today, we swim in the water of a world that is downstream of, as Siedentop (2014, 51) puts it, the world’s being “turned upside-down” by Christianity during its first several centuries. Only by projecting ourselves back into Fustel’s ancient city can we understand what social existence had once been, and the transformation that society underwent. The sweeping speculation gets us to rethink what we, after all, are, for the primeval and

ancient social forms are more native to us.

Fustel's final chapter, reproduced here, is entitled "Christianity Changes the Conditions of Government." It speaks of the transformative force of Christianity and opens the way to Siedentop's great telling. Fustel writes in his final chapter:

Christ...separates religion from government. ... It is the first time that God and the state are so clearly distinguished. ... Christ...proclaims that religion is no longer the state, and that to obey Cæsar is no longer the same thing as to obey God. ... [T]his new principle was the source whence individual liberty flowed. (Fustel 1956/1864, 393–394)

In *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Adam Smith described the apothotic delusions of Alexander the Great and then noted: "The religion and manners of modern times give our great men little encouragement to fancy themselves either Gods or even Prophets" (1790, 251).

Also reproduced here are two brief chapters from near the beginning of *The Ancient City*, "The Domestic Religion" and "Religion Was the Constituent Principle of the Ancient Family." Fustel writes: "[R]eligion dwelt not in temples, but in the house; each house had its gods; each god protected one family only, and was a god only in one house" (1956/1864, 38).

Hanging over everything is the belief—of Fustel and of Siedentop—that man is, in his essence, a spiritual creature. Economists who pretend to a better understanding of economic affairs must know institutions, culture, history, to know *the spirits* of the creatures they would teach us about.

Siedentop says that many thinkers and leaders of the Renaissance and thereafter—thinkers and leaders who, Siedentop says, did not recognize that many of their own presuppositions about man and society had been the result of Christianization—misunderstood the ancient world as quite secular, in the sense of church-state separation (as opposed to the irreligiosity sense of *secular*). They knew little of household-specific gods and rituals. They thought that the rituals and legends of the Greek and Roman pantheons of famed gods were the main gods of ancient religion. As they saw devotions to such gods as rather secondary to the business of ancient existence, utilized chiefly only ceremonially and opportunistically, their image of ancient social and political life was one in which religion was nonessential. Siedentop says:

The trouble with this account is that it *looks in the wrong place* for religion... As Fustel de Coulanges demonstrated in *The Ancient City*, the religion of the Greek and Roman pre-history...spoke to and through the family. And it is to the family that we have to look to find religion and priesthood. The ancient family was itself a religious cult, with the father as its high priest tending the

family alter and its ‘sacred flame’, the flame that made his ancestors visible. Ancient religion thus consisted in worship of divine ancestors through the paterfamilias, a radical inequality of roles within the family and a series of elaborate ritual requirements. The family was, at least originally, a self-contained moral universe. It did not seek or welcome any deep or ‘moral’ connection with humans outside. (Siedentop 2014, 351, italics added)

Arguing that Christianity made liberalism possible, Siedentop explores the nature of Christianity in depth and at length, far beyond Fustel’s final chapter. Siedentop’s contention—which I, for one, embrace—ought not to be judged merely on the basis of reading Fustel’s final chapter.

The chapters of Fustel reproduced here are superbly written and provide a concise statement of the large speculation one may associate with Fustel and Siedentop, among others. That speculation carries with it many large suggestions, for example, that the animus, from say 1500, against the institutional manifestations of Christianity—the Church—was perhaps often a reaction against blobbish accretions not essential to the spirit of Christianity, and that that animus often threw the baby out with the bathwater—and, again, while sustaining presuppositions afforded by long centuries of Christianization.

A brief biography of Fustel is provided after the selection below.

About the text and the present reproduction: *La Cité Antique: Étude sur le culte, le droit, les institutions de la Grèce et de Rome* by Fustel de Coulanges was originally published in 1864 in Paris (Durand, Rue des Grès). The English translation is by William Small, first published as *The Ancient City: A Study of the Religion, Laws, and Institutions of Greece and Rome* (Boston and New York: Lee and Shepard, 1874), the title page stating: “Translated from the last French edition.” To collect the text used here, I lifted the text from an online pdf of the book ([here](#)) and then made sure that the text matched my own physical copy of *The Ancient City* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1956). In the reproduction below, Fustel’s footnotes have been eliminated, except for two placed in square brackets and indicated as having been footnote material.

References

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Christianity Changes the Conditions of Government

Numa Denis Fustel de Coulanges

The Domestic Religion

We are not to suppose that this ancient religion resembled those founded when men became more enlightened. For a great number of centuries the human race has admitted no religious doctrine except on two conditions: first, that it proclaimed but one god; and, second, that it was addressed to all men, and was accessible to all, systematically rejecting no class or race. But this primitive religion fulfilled neither of these conditions. Not only did it not offer one only god to the adoration of men, but its gods did not accept the adoration of all men. They did not offer themselves as the gods of the human race. They did not even resemble Brahma, who was at least the god of one whole great caste, nor the Panhellenian Zeus, who was the god of an entire nation. In this primitive religion each god could be adored only by one family. Religion was purely domestic.

We must illustrate this important point; otherwise the intimate relation that existed between this ancient religion and the constitution of the Greek and Roman family may not be fully understood.

The worship of the dead in no way resembled the Christian worship of the saints. One of the first rules of this worship was, that it could be offered by each family only to those deceased persons who belonged to it by blood. The funeral obsequies could be religiously performed only by the nearest relative. As to the funeral meal, which was renewed at stated seasons, the family alone had a right to take part in it, and every stranger was strictly excluded. They believed that the dead ancestor accepted no offerings save from his own family; he desired no worship save from his own descendants. The presence of one who was not of the family disturbed the rest of the manes. The law, therefore, forbade a stranger to approach a tomb. To touch a tomb with the foot, even by chance, was an impious act, after which the guilty one was expected to pacify the dead and purify himself. The word by which the ancients designated the worship of the dead is significant; the Greeks said *πατριάζειν*, the Romans said *parentare*. The reason of this was because the prayer and offering were addressed by each one only to his fathers. The worship of the dead was nothing more than the worship of ancestors. [*Footnote*: In the

beginning at least; for later the cities had their local and national heroes, as we shall see.] Lucian, while ridiculing common beliefs, explains them clearly to us when he says the man who has died without leaving a son, receives no offerings, and is exposed to perpetual hunger.

In India, as in Greece, an offering could be made to a dead person only by one who had descended from him. The law of the Hindus, like Athenian law, forbade a stranger, even if he were a friend, to be invited to the funeral banquet. It was so necessary that these banquets should be offered by the descendants of the dead, and not by others, that the manes, in their resting-place, were supposed often to pronounce this wish: "May there be successively born of our line sons who, in all coming time, may offer us rice, boiled in milk, honey, and clarified butter."

Hence it was, that, in Greece and Rome, as in India, it was the son's duty to make the libations and the sacrifices to the manes of his father and of all his ancestors. To fail in this duty was to commit the grossest act of impiety possible, since the interruption of this worship caused the dead to fall from their happy state. This negligence was nothing less than the crime of parricide, multiplied as many times as there were ancestors in the family.

If, on the contrary, the sacrifices were always accomplished according to the rites, if the provisions were carried to the tomb on the appointed days, then the ancestor became a protecting god. Hostile to all who had not descended from him, driving them from his tomb, inflicting diseases upon them if they approached, he was good and provident to his own family.

There was a perpetual interchange of good offices between the living and the dead of each family. The ancestor received from his descendants a series of funeral banquets, that is to say, the only enjoyment that was left to him in his second life. The descendant received from the ancestor the aid and strength of which he had need in this. The living could not do without the dead, nor the dead without the living. Thus a powerful bond was established among all the generations of the same family, which made of it a body forever inseparable.

Every family had its tomb, where its dead went to repose, one after another, always together. This tomb was generally near the house, nor far from the door, "in order," says one of the ancients, "that the sons, in entering and leaving their dwelling, might always meet their fathers, and might always address them an invocation." Thus the ancestor remained in the midst of his relatives; invisible, but always present, he continued to make a part of the family, and to be its father. Immortal, happy, divine, he was still interested in all of his whom he had left upon the earth. He knew their needs, and sustained their feebleness; and he who still lived, who labored, who, according to the ancient expression, had not yet discharged the debt of existence, he had near him his guides and his supports—his forefathers. In the midst of difficulties, he invoked their ancient wisdom; in grief,

he asked consolation of them; in danger, he asked their support, and after a fault, their pardon.

Certainly we cannot easily comprehend how a man could adore his father or his ancestor. To make of man a god appears to us the reverse of religion. It is almost as difficult for us to comprehend the ancient creeds of these men as it would have been for them to understand ours. But, if we reflect that the ancients had no idea of creation, we shall see that the mystery of generation was for them what the mystery of creation is for us. The generator appeared to them to be a divine being; and they adored their ancestor. This sentiment must have been very natural and very strong, for it appears as a principle of religion in the origin of almost all human societies. We find it among the Chinese as well as among the ancient Getae and Scythians, among the tribes of Africa as well as among those of the new world.

The sacred fire, which was so intimately associated with the worship of the dead, belonged, in its essential character, properly to each family. It represented the ancestors; it was the providence of a family, and had nothing in common with the fire of a neighboring family, which was another providence. Every fire protected its own and repulsed the stranger. The whole of this religion was enclosed within the walls of each house. The worship was not public. All the ceremonies, on the contrary, were kept strictly secret. Performed in the midst of the family alone, they were concealed from every stranger. The hearth was never placed either outside the house or even near the outer door, where it would have been too easy to see. The Greeks always placed it in an enclosure, which protected it from the contact, or even the gaze, of the profane. The Romans concealed it in the interior of the house. All these gods, the sacred fire, the Lares, and the Manes, were called the consecrated gods, or gods of the interior. To all the acts of this religion secrecy was necessary. If a ceremony was looked upon by a stranger, it was disturbed, defiled, made unfortunate simply by this look.

There were neither uniform rules nor a common ritual for this domestic religion. Each family was most completely independent. No external power had the right to regulate either the ceremony or the creed. There was no other priest than the father: as a priest, he knew no hierarchy. The pontifex of Rome, or the archon of Athens, might, indeed, ascertain if the father of a family performed all his religious ceremonies; but he had no right to order the least modification of them. *Suo quisque ritu sacrificia faciat*—such was the absolute rule. Every family had its ceremonies, which were peculiar to itself, its particular celebrations, its formulas of prayer, its hymns. The father, sole interpreter and sole priest of his religion, alone had the right to teach it, and could teach it only to his son. The rites, the forms of prayer, the chants, which formed an essential part of this domestic religion, were a patrimony, a sacred property, which the family shared with no one, and which they were even forbidden to reveal to strangers. It was the same in India. “I am strong

against my enemies,” says the Brahmin, “from the songs which I receive from my family, and which my father has transmitted to me.”

Thus religion dwelt not in temples, but in the house; each house had its gods; each god protected one family only, and was a god only in one house. We cannot reasonably suppose that a religion of this character was revealed to man by the powerful imagination of one among them, or that it was taught to them by a priestly caste. It grew up spontaneously in the human mind; its cradle was the family; each family created its own gods.

This religion could be propagated only by generation. The father, in giving life to his son, gave him at the same time his creed, his worship, the right to continue the sacred fire, to offer the funeral meal, to pronounce the formulas of prayer. Generation established a mysterious bond between the infant, who was born to life, and all the gods of the family. Indeed, these gods were his family—*θεοὶ ἐγγενεῖς*; they were of his blood—*θεοὶ σύνναιμοι*. The child, therefore, received at his birth the right to adore them, and to offer them sacrifices; and later, when death should have deified him, he also would be counted, in his turn, among these gods of the family.

But we must notice this peculiarity—that the domestic religion was transmitted only from male to male.

This was owing, no doubt, to the idea that generation was due entirely to the males. The belief of primitive ages, as we find it in the Vedas, and as we find vestiges of it in all Greek and Roman law, was that the reproductive power resided exclusively in the father. The father alone possessed the mysterious principle of existence, and transmitted the spark of life. From this old notion it followed that the domestic worship always passed from male to male; that a woman participated in it only through her father or her husband; and, finally, that after death women had not the same part as men in the worship and the ceremonies of the funeral meal. Still other important consequences in private law and in the constitution of the family resulted from this: we shall see them as we proceed.

Religion Was the Constituent Principle of the Ancient Family

If we transport ourselves in thought to those ancient generations of men, we find in each house an altar, and around this altar the family assembled. The family meets every morning to address its first prayers to the sacred fire, and in the evening to invoke it for a last time. In the course of the day the members are once more assembled near the fire for the meal, of which they partake piously after prayer and libation. In all these religious acts, hymns, which their fathers have handed down,

are sung in common by the family.

Outside the house, near at hand, in a neighboring field, there is a tomb—the second home of this family. There several generations of ancestors repose together; death has not separated them. They remain grouped in this second existence, and continue to form an indissoluble family.

Between the living part and the dead part of the family there is only this distance of a few steps which separates the house from the tomb. On certain days, which are determined for each one by his domestic religion, the living assemble near their ancestors; they offer them the funeral meal, pour out milk and wine to them, lay out cakes and fruits, or burn the flesh of a victim to them. In exchange for these offerings they ask protection; they call these ancestors their gods, and ask them to render the fields fertile, the house prosperous, and their hearts virtuous.

Generation alone was not the foundation of the ancient family. What proves this is, that the sister did not bear the same relation to the family as the brother; that the emancipated son and the married daughter ceased completely to form a part of the family; and, in fine, several other important provisions of the Greek and Roman laws, that we shall have occasion to examine farther along.

Nor is the family principle natural affection. For Greek and Roman law makes no account of this sentiment. The sentiment may exist in the heart, but it is not in the law. The father may have affection for his daughter, but he cannot will her his property. The laws of succession—that is to say, those laws which most faithfully reflect the ideas that men had of the family—are in open contradiction both with the order of birth and with natural affection. [*Footnote:* It must be understood that we here speak of the most ancient law. We shall soon see that, at a later date, these early laws were modified.]

The historians of Roman laws, having very justly remarked that neither birth nor affection was the foundation of the Roman family, have concluded that this foundation must be found in the power of the father or husband. They make a sort of primordial institution of this power; but they do not explain how this power was established, unless it was by the superiority of strength of the husband over the wife, and of the father over the children. Now, we deceive ourselves sadly when we thus place force as the origin of law. We shall see farther on that the authority of the father or husband, far from having been a first cause, was itself an effect; it was derived from religion, and was established by religion. Superior strength, therefore, was not the principle that established the family.

The members of the ancient family were united by something more powerful than birth, affection, or physical strength; this was the religion of the sacred fire, and of dead ancestors. This caused the family to form a single body, both in this life and in the next. The ancient family was a religious rather than a natural association; and we shall see presently that the wife was counted in the family only after the

sacred ceremony of marriage had initiated her into the worship; that the son was no longer counted in it when he had renounced the worship, or had been emancipated; that, on the other hand, an adopted son was counted a real son, because, though he had not the ties of blood, he had something better—a community of worship; that the heir who refused to adopt the worship of this family had no right to the succession; and, finally, that relationship and the right of inheritance were governed not by birth, but by the rights of participation in the worship, such as religion had established them. Religion, it is true, did not create the family; but certainly it gave the family its rules; and hence it comes that the constitution of the ancient family was so different from what it would have been if it had owed its foundation to natural affection.

The ancient Greek language has a very significant word to designate a family. It is *ἐπίστιον*, a word which signifies, literally, *that which is near a hearth*. A family was a group of persons whom religion permitted to invoke the same sacred fire, and to offer the funeral repast to the same ancestors.

Christianity Changes the Conditions of Government *[The final chapter of the book]*

The victory of Christianity marks the end of ancient society. With the new religion this social transformation, which we saw begun six or seven centuries earlier, was completed.

To understand how much the principles and the essential rules of politics were then changed, we need only recollect that ancient society had been established by an old religion whose principal dogma was that every god protected exclusively a single family or a single city, and existed only for that. This was the time of the domestic gods and the city-protecting divinities. This religion had produced laws; the relations among men—property, inheritance, legal proceedings—all were regulated, not by the principles of natural equity, but by the dogmas of this religion, and with a view to the requirements of its worship. It was this religion that had established a government among men; that of the father in the family; that of the king or magistrate in the city. All had come from religion,—that is to say, from the opinion that man had entertained of the divinity. Religion, law, and government were confounded, and had been but a single thing under three different aspects.

We have sought to place in a clear light this social system of the ancients, where religion was absolute master, both in public and private life; where the state was a religious community, the king a pontiff, the magistrate a priest, and the law

a sacred formula; where patriotism was piety, and exile excommunication; where individual liberty was unknown; where man was enslaved to the state through his soul, his body, and his property; where the notions of law and of duty, of justice and of affection, were bounded within the limits of the city; where human association was necessarily confined within a certain circumference around a prytaneum; and where men saw no possibility of founding larger societies. Such were the characteristic traits of the Greek and Italian cities during the first period of their history.

But little by little, as we have seen, society became modified. Changes took place in government and in laws at the same time as in religious ideas. Already in the fifth century which preceded Christianity, the alliance was no longer so close between religion on the one hand and law and politics on the other. The efforts of the oppressed classes, the overthrow of the sacerdotal class, the labors of philosophers, the progress of thought, had unsettled the ancient principles of human association. Men had made incessant efforts to free themselves from the thralldom of this old religion, in which they could no longer believe; law and politics, as well as morals, in the course of time were freed from its fetters.

But this species of divorce came from the disappearance of the ancient religion; if law and politics began to be a little more independent, it was because men ceased to have religious beliefs. If society was no longer governed by religion, it was especially because this religion no longer had any power. But there came a day when the religious sentiment recovered life and vigor, and when, under the Christian form, belief regained its empire over the soul. Were men not then destined to see the reappearance of the ancient confusion of government and the priesthood, of faith and the law?

With Christianity not only was the religious sentiment revived, but it assumed a higher and less material expression. Whilst previously men had made for themselves gods of the human soul, or of the great forces of nature, they now began to look upon God as really foreign by his essence, from human nature on the one hand, and from the world on the other. The divine Being was placed outside and above physical nature. Whilst previously every man had made a god for himself, and there were as many of them as there were families and cities, God now appeared as a unique, immense, universal being, alone animating the worlds, alone able to supply the need of adoration that is in man. Religion, instead of being, as formerly among the nations of Greece and Italy, little more than an assemblage of practices, a series of rites which men repeated without having any idea of them, a succession of formulas which often were no longer understood because the language had grown old, a tradition which had been transmitted from age to age, and which owed its sacred character to its antiquity alone,—was now a collection of doctrines, and a great object proposed to faith. It was no longer

exterior; it took up its abode especially in the thoughts of man. It was no longer matter; it became spirit. Christianity changed the nature and the form of adoration. Man no longer offered God food and drink. Prayer was no longer a form of incantation; it was an act of faith and a humble petition. The soul sustained another relation with the divinity; the fear of the gods was replaced by the love of God.

Christianity introduced other new ideas. It was not the domestic religion of any family, the national religion of any city, or of any race. It belonged neither to a caste nor to a corporation. From its first appearance it called to itself the whole human race. Christ said to his disciples, "Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature."

This principle was so extraordinary, and so unexpected, that the first disciples hesitated for a moment; we may see in the Acts of the Apostles that several of them refused at first to propagate the new doctrine outside the nation with which it had originated. These disciples thought, like the ancient Jews, that the God of the Jews would not accept adoration from foreigners; like the Romans and the Greeks of ancient times, they believed that every race had its god, that to propagate the name and worship of this god was to give up one's own good and special protector, and that such a work was contrary at the same time to duty and to interest. But Peter replied to these disciples, "God gave the gentiles the like gift as he did unto us." St. Paul loved to repeat this grand principle on all occasions, and in every kind of form. "God had opened the door of faith unto the gentiles." "Is he the God of the Jews, only? Is he not also of the gentiles?" "We are all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or gentiles."

In all this there was something quite new. For, everywhere, in the first ages of humanity, the divinity had been imagined as attaching himself especially to one race. The Jews had believed in the God of the Jews; the Athenians in the Athenian Pallas; the Romans in Jupiter Capitolinus. The right to practice a worship had been a privilege.

The foreigner had been repulsed from the temple; one not a Jew could not enter the temple of the Jews; the Lacedaemonian had not the right to invoke the Athenian Pallas. It is just to say, that, in the five centuries which preceded Christianity, all who thought were struggling against these narrow rules. Philosophy had often taught, since Anaxagoras, that the god of the universe received the homage of all men, without distinction. The religion of Eleusis had admitted the initiated from all cities. The religion of Cybele, of Serapis, and some others, had accepted, without distinction, worshippers from all nations. The Jews had begun to admit the foreigner to their religion; the Greeks and the Romans had admitted him into their cities. Christianity, coming after all this progress in thought and institutions, presented to the adoration of all men a single God, a universal God, a God who belonged to all, who had no chosen people, and who made no distinction

in races, families, or states.

For this God there were no longer strangers. The stranger no longer profaned the temple, no longer tainted the sacrifice by his presence. The temple was open to all who believed in God. The priesthood ceased to be hereditary, because religion was no longer a patrimony. The worship was no longer kept secret; the rites, the prayers, the dogmas were no longer concealed. On the contrary, there was thenceforth religious instruction, which was not only given, but which was offered, which was carried to those who were the farthest away, and which sought out the most indifferent. The spirit of propagandism replaced the law of exclusion.

From this great consequences flowed, as well for the relations between nations as for the government of states.

Between nations religion no longer commanded hatred; it no longer made it the citizen's duty to detest the foreigner; its very essence, on the contrary, was to teach him that towards the stranger, towards the enemy, he owed the duties of justice, and even of benevolence. The barriers between nations or races were thus thrown down; the *pomoerium* disappeared. "Christ," says the apostle, "hath broken down the middle wall of partition between us." "But now are they many members," he also says, "yet but one body." "There is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcision nor uncircumcision, Barbarian, Scythian, bond nor free: but Christ is all, and in all."

The people were also taught that they were all descended from the same common father. With the unity of God, the unity of the human race also appeared to men's minds; and it was thenceforth a religious necessity to forbid men to hate each other.

As to the government of the state, we cannot say that Christianity essentially altered that, precisely because it did not occupy itself with the state. In the ancient ages, religion and the state made but one; every people adored its own god, and every god governed his own people; the same code regulated the relations among men, and their duties towards the gods of the city. Religion then governed the state, and designated its chiefs by the voice of the lot, or by that of the auspices. The state, in its turn, interfered with the domain of the conscience, and punished every infraction of the rites and the worship of the city. Instead of this, Christ teaches that his kingdom is not of this world. He separates religion from government. Religion, being no longer of the earth, now interferes the least possible in terrestrial affairs. Christ adds, "Render to Cæsar the things that are Cæsar's, and to God the things that are God's." It is the first time that God and the state are so clearly distinguished. For Cæsar at that period was still the *pontifex maximus*, the chief and the principal organ of the Roman religion; he was the guardian and the interpreter of beliefs. He held the worship and the dogmas in his hands. Even his person was sacred and divine, for it was a peculiarity of the policy of the emperors that, wishing to recover the attributes of ancient royalty, they were careful not to forget

the divine character which antiquity had attached to the king-pontiffs and to the priest-founders. But now Christ breaks the alliance which paganism and the empire wished to renew. He proclaims that religion is no longer the state, and that to obey Cæsar is no longer the same thing as to obey God.

Christianity completes the overthrow of the local worship; it extinguishes the prytanea, and completely destroys the city-protecting divinities. It does more; it refuses to assume the empire which these worships had exercised over civil society. It professes that between the state and itself there is nothing in common. It separates what all antiquity had confounded. We may remark, moreover, that during three centuries the new religion lived entirely beyond the action of the state; it knew how to dispense with state protection, and even to struggle against it. These three centuries established an abyss between the domain of the government and the domain of religion; and, as the recollection of this period could not be effaced, it followed that this distinction became a plain and incontestable truth, which the efforts even of a part of the clergy could not eradicate.

This principle was fertile in great results. On one hand, politics became definitively freed from the strict rules which the ancient religion had traced, and could govern men without having to bend to sacred usages, without consulting the auspices or the oracles, without conforming all acts to the beliefs and requirements of a worship. Political action was freer; no other authority than that of the moral law now impeded it. On the other hand, if the state was more completely master in certain things, its action was also more limited. A complete half of man had been freed from its control. Christianity taught that only a part of man belonged to society; that he was bound to it by his body and by his material interests; that when subject to a tyrant, it was his duty to submit; that as a citizen of a republic, he ought to give his life for it, but that, in what related to his soul, he was free, and was bound only to God.

Stoicism had already marked this separation; it had restored man to himself, and had founded liberty of conscience. But that which was merely the effort of the energy of a courageous sect, Christianity made a universal and unchangeable rule for succeeding generations; what was only the consolation of a few, it made the common good of humanity.

If, now, we recollect what has been said above on the omnipotence of the states among the ancients,—if we bear in mind how far the city, in the name of its sacred character and of religion, which was inherent in it, exercised an absolute empire,—we shall see that this new principle was the source whence individual liberty flowed.

The mind once freed, the greatest difficulty was overcome, and liberty was compatible with social order.

Sentiments and manners, as well as politics, were then changed. The idea

which men had of the duties of the citizen were modified. The first duty no longer consisted in giving one's time, one's strength, one's life to the state. Politics and war were no longer the whole of man; all the virtues were no longer comprised in patriotism, for the soul no longer had a country. Man felt that he had other obligations besides that of living and dying for the city. Christianity distinguished the private from the public virtues. By giving less honor to the latter, it elevated the former; it placed God, the family, the human individual above country, the neighbor above the city.

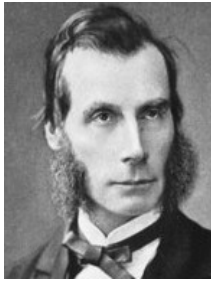
Law was also changed in its nature. Among all ancient nations law had been subject to, and had received all its rules from, religion. Among the Persians, the Hindus, the Jews, the Greeks, the Italians, and the Gauls, the law had been contained in the sacred books or in religious traditions, and thus every religion had made laws after its own image. Christianity is the first religion that did not claim to be the source of law. It occupied itself with the duties of men, not with their interests. Men saw it regulate neither the laws of property, nor the order of succession, nor obligations, nor legal proceedings. It placed itself outside the law, and outside all things purely terrestrial. Law was independent; it could draw its rules from nature, from the human conscience, from the powerful idea of the just that is in men's minds. It could develop in complete liberty; could be reformed and improved without obstacle; could follow the progress of morals, and could conform itself to the interests and social needs of every generation.

The happy influence of the new idea is easily seen in the history of Roman law. During several centuries preceding the triumph of Christianity, Roman law had already been striving to disengage itself from religion, and to approach natural equity; but it proceeded only by shifts and devices, which enervated and enfeebled its moral authority. The work of regenerating legislation, announced by the Stoic philosophers, pursued by the noble efforts of Roman juriconsults, outlined by the artifices and expedients of the pretor, could not completely succeed except by favor of the independence which the new religion allowed to the law. We can see, as Christianity gained ground, that the Roman codes admitted new rules no longer by subterfuges, but openly and without hesitation. The domestic penates having been overthrown, and the sacred fires extinguished, the ancient constitution of the family disappeared forever, and with it the rules that had flowed from this source. The father had lost the absolute authority which his priesthood had formerly given him, and preserved only that which nature itself had conferred upon him for the good of the child. The wife, whom the old religion placed in a position inferior to the husband, became morally his equal. The laws of property were essentially altered; the sacred landmarks disappeared from the fields; the right of property no longer flowed from religion, but from labor; its acquisition became easier, and the formalities of the ancient law were definitively abolished.

Thus, by the single fact that the family no longer had its domestic religion, its constitution and its laws were transformed; so, too, from the single fact that the state no longer had its official religion, the rules for the government of men were forever changed.

Our study must end at this limit, which separates ancient from modern polities. We have written the history of a belief. It was established, and human society was constituted. It was modified, and society underwent a series of revolutions. It disappeared, and society changed its character. Such was the law of ancient times.

About the Author



Numa Denis Fustel de Coulanges (1830–1889) was a French historian and became an eminent professor in the chair of history at Strasbourg and subsequently the École Normale Supérieure and the Sorbonne. His most famous work is *The Ancient City* (1864; English translation 1874), which emphasized that in ancient Greece and Rome, the person's most important religion was located in the family, its ancestors, and its domestic house. He subsequently wrote a multivolume work on the political institutions of ancient France. Another work by Fustel available in English is *The Origin of Property in Land*, a translation of an article he published in French in 1889. In that work Fustel questions the historiographical basis for claims to the effect that agricultural land had been communally owned before it was privately owned.

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