INVENTING THE INDIVIDUAL

The Origins of Western Liberalism

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History does not study material facts and institutions alone; its true object of study is the human mind: it should aspire to know what this mind has believed, thought, and felt in different ages of the life of the human race.

Fustel de Coulanges

Prologue: What is the West About?

Does it still make sense to talk about 'the West'? People who live in the nations once described as part of Christendom – what many would now call the post-Christian world – seem to have lost their moral bearings. We no longer have a persuasive story to tell ourselves about our origins and development. There is little narrative sweep in our view of things. For better or worse, things have just happened to us.

Some may welcome this condition, seeing it as liberation from historical myths such as the biblical story of human sin and redemption or a belief in progress 'guaranteed' by the development of science. Others will argue that a more inclusive narrative about globalization has made anything like a Western narrative not only obsolete but also morally dubious.

I cannot agree. If we look at the West against a global background, the striking thing about our situation is that we are in a competition of beliefs, whether we like it or not.

The development of Islamic fundamentalism – and the terrorist movements it sometimes inspires – is the most obvious example. A view of the world in which religious law excludes a secular sphere and in which the subordination of women compromises belief in human equality is incompatible with moral intuitions widespread in the West. And that is only one example. The transmuting of Marxist socialism into quasi-capitalism in the world's largest country, China, provides another. In China the governing ideology has become a crass form of utilitarianism, enshrining majority interests even at the expense of justice or human liberty. That, too, offends some of our deepest intuitions.

But do these intuitions mean that the West can still be defined in terms of shared beliefs? It can offer beliefs usually described as

'liberal'. But here we immediately encounter a problem. For in the eyes of Islamic fundamentalists, and indeed in the eyes of not a few in the West, liberalism has come to stand for 'non-belief' – for indifference and permissiveness, if not for decadence. Why is that? And is the charge justified?

This book is an attempt to find out. Its argument rests on two assumptions. The first is that if we are to understand the relationship between beliefs and social institutions – that is, to understand ourselves – then we have to take a very long view. Deep moral changes, changes in belief, can take centuries to begin to modify social institutions. It is folly to expect popular habits and attitudes to change overnight.

The second assumption is that beliefs are nonetheless of primary importance, an assumption once far more widely held than it is today. In the nineteenth century there was a prolonged contest between 'idealist' and 'materialist' views of historical change, with the latter holding that social order rests not so much on shared beliefs but on technology, economic interdependence and an advanced social division of labour. Even the declining appeal of Marxism in the later twentieth century did not discredit that view. Rather, in a strange afterlife, Marxism infiltrated liberal thinking, creating a further temptation to downgrade the role of beliefs. That temptation became all the greater because of the unprecedented prosperity enjoyed by the West after the Second World War. We have come to worship at the shrine of economic growth.

This book, by contrast, will take moral beliefs as seriously as possible, by looking at a series of 'moments' when changed beliefs began to impact on social relations over a period of nearly two millennia. That is not to say that beliefs have been the only cause at work. The story of Western development is not simple or unilinear. No cause has been uniquely powerful at all times. Nonetheless, it seems to me that moral beliefs *have* given a clear overall 'direction' to Western history.

So I tell a story about how the 'individual' became the organizing social role in the West – that is, how the 'civil society' which we take for granted emerged, with its characteristic distinction between public and private spheres and its emphasis on the role of conscience and choice. It is a story about the slow, uneven and difficult steps which

have led to individual moral agency being publicly acknowledged and protected, with equality before the law and enforceable 'basic' rights.

A fundamental change in moral belief shaped the world we live in. But this is not to say that those who introduced or promoted that change foresaw or desired its eventual social consequences. My story is, in part, about the unintended consequences of that change of belief. Tracing those consequences is an important part of the story of Western liberalism.

Today many people in the West describe themselves as Christians, without regularly going to church or having even a rudimentary knowledge of Christian doctrine. Is this just hypocrisy or ignorance? Perhaps not. It may suggest that people have a sense that the liberal secular world they live in – and for the most part endorse – is a world shaped by Christian beliefs. If so, by describing themselves in that way, they are paying tribute to the origins of their moral intuitions.

Is it mere coincidence that liberal secularism developed in the Christian West? This book is an attempt to answer that question. Telling a story about the development of a concept over two millennia is, to say the least, not fashionable. Understandably, historians have become nervous of anything like teleological argument, surveying the damage done by historicist theories of 'progress' put forward in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. I have tried to avoid that danger.

Nor is that the only danger. The division of intellectual labour and the sheer accumulation of knowledge today pose a great risk for anyone trying to pick a way through such a long period. Specialists are bound to have reservations, noticing omissions and distortions, if not outright mistakes. But must we abandon the attempt to identify and follow longer threads in historical development? In my view, that would be too high a price to pay.

Inevitably, this book is a work of interpretation rather than of primary scholarship. It draws on sources which I have found to be the most penetrating and original, selected from the myriad of sources available. The process of selection has, I am sure, left many valuable sources aside. Nonetheless, there are a number of historians, living and dead, whose writings strike me as both towering achievements and crucial aids in pursuing answers to the questions I explore. I am greatly indebted to their example. They are the real heroes of this

book: Fustel de Coulanges, François Guizot, Brian Tierney, Harold Berman and Peter Brown. If this book does nothing more than draw their writings to the attention of a wider readership, it will have achieved something. Yet my hope is that this book may also contribute to a better understanding of that liberal tradition which is at the core of Western identity.

A lifetime of reading, conversation and argument has shaped the pages that follow. Some of the most important friendships which have influenced me are now, alas, matters of memory: friendships with Paul Fried, Myron Gilmore, John Plamenatz, Isaiah Berlin and John Burrow. Burrow read the larger part of the manuscript before his death, providing, as always, comments that were penetrating, helpful and witty. Others who have read and commented on virtually the whole manuscript include Guglielmo Verdirame, Henry Mayr-Harting, Diarmaid MacCulloch and Edward Skidelsky. Their comments and criticisms have been invaluable. To Guglielmo and to Henry Newman I owe a special debt – for innumerable evenings when conversation ranged over all the issues of our time. Their generosity and loyalty helped to make this book possible.

Finally, I want to salute Ruth Dry, at Keble College, Oxford, whose patience in the face of the successive revisions of the manuscript has been remarkably good-humoured.

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The Ancient Family

If we in the West are to understand the world we have created, we must first of all understand another world very remote from our own – remote, not in space, but in time.

The distant past often lives on in surprising ways. Let us take the practice of a man who carries his bride over the threshold of their new home. Who would suppose that this amiable custom is the survival of beliefs that underpinned a society utterly different from our own? It was in many ways a repugnant society. It was a society in which the worship of ancestors, the family as a cult and primogeniture created radically unequal social identities, not just between men and women but also between the first-born son and other male offspring.

So to understand a custom that in its origins was not amiable but stern and obligatory, we must put our preconceptions to one side. We must imagine ourselves into a world where action was governed by norms reflecting exclusively the claims of the family, its memories, rituals and roles, rather than the claims of the individual conscience. We must imagine ourselves into a world of humans or persons who were not 'individuals' as we would understand them now.

Since the sixteenth century and the advent of the nation-state, people in the West have come to understand 'society' to mean an association of individuals. Until recently that understanding was accompanied by a sense of difference, a sense that other cultures had a different basis of organization, whether that was caste, clan or tribe. But in recent decades the Western impact on the rest of the world through capitalism, the spread of democracy and the language of human rights has weakened such a sense of difference. Globalization has made it easier to project an individualized model of society – one

that privileges individual preferences and rational choice – onto the whole world.

We have become victims of our own success. For we are in danger of taking this primacy of the individual as something 'obvious' or 'inevitable', something guaranteed by things outside ourselves rather than by historical convictions and struggles. Of course, every human has his or her own body and mind. But does this establish that human equality is decreed by nature rather than culture?

Nature, in the form of genetic endowment, is a necessary, but not a sufficient condition. A legal foundation for equality, in the form of fundamental rights for every person, is also required. In order to see this, it is important to understand how far the Western world has moved away from its origins, as well as how and why. We need to follow the steps between then and now. It will not always be easy. Widespread complacency about the victory of an individualized model of society reflects a worrying decline in historical understanding. For example, to regard Aristotle's definition of slaves as 'living tools', or the presumption in antiquity that women could not be fully rational agents, merely as 'mistakes' – symptoms of an underdeveloped sense of justice – scarcely advances comprehension of the past. After all, radical social inequality was far easier to sustain and more plausible in societies where literacy was so restricted.

It is commonplace to locate Western cultural origins in Greece, Rome and Judaeo-Christianity. Which of these sources should be considered the most important? The question has received different answers at different periods. In the middle ages, Christianity was seen as the crucial source, a view that the sixteenth-century Reformation preserved. The eighteenth-century Enlightenment saw things differently, however. In their attack on 'superstition' and clerical privileges, Enlightenment thinkers sought to minimize the moral and intellectual distance between modern Europe and Graeco-Roman antiquity. They did this by maximizing the gap between the 'dark' middle ages and the 'light' of their own age. For them, natural science and rational enquiry had replaced Christian belief as the agency of human progress. The liberation of the individual from feudal social hierarchies – as well as the liberation of the human mind from self-serving clerical dogmas – represented the birth of modernity.

So the millennium between the fall of the Western Roman empire and the Renaissance became an unfortunate interlude, a regression in humanity. Gibbon's famous history of Roman decline and fall invited modern Europeans to share in elegant mourning for antiquity, mixing sadness with the fun of anti-clerical mockery. As for the moral import of Christian beliefs, it often received short shrift. Gibbon's comment about a late Roman matron who gave her daughter to Christ because she was determined to be 'the mother-in-law' of God says it all. For Gibbon and many of his contemporaries, the modern era of individual emancipation was a return to the freer, secular spirit of antiquity – a view that remains widespread, even if it is now largely purged of virulent anti-clericalism.

But just how free and secular were ancient Greece and Rome? In order to answer that question, we have to probe the religious and moral beliefs that originally gave rise to the institutions of the ancient city-state, the *polis*. For those beliefs shaped a distinctive conception of society, a conception of society that was not seriously challenged until the first century AD.

Once we look closely at the beliefs and practices which shaped Greece and Rome in their infancy, and which survived in large part at their apogee, we find ourselves drawn back to an utterly remote moral world – to an Indo-European world that antedated even the polytheism we normally associate with Greece and Rome. We find ourselves entering a mind-set that generated a conception of society in which the family was everything. It was not only (in our terms) a civil but also a religious institution, with the paterfamilias acting not only as the family's magistrate but also as its high priest.

To recapture that world – to see and feel what acting in it was like – requires an extraordinary imaginative leap. The writer who has best succeeded in making that leap into the minds of the peoples settling Greece and the Italian peninsula several millennia ago was a French historian, Fustel de Coulanges. His book *The Ancient City* (1864), one of the most remarkable books of the nineteenth century, reveals how prehistoric religious beliefs shaped first the domestic and then the public institutions of Greece and Rome. It exposes the nature of the ancient family. 'The study of the ancient rules of private law enables us to obtain a glimpse, beyond the times that are called historic,

of a succession of centuries during which the family was the sole form of society.'[1]

Working backwards from the earliest Greek and Roman law codes, Fustel de Coulanges explores a world in which ancestor worship created a domestic religion. His book remains by far 'the most influential of modern works on the ancient city'.[2] Yet Fustel himself distrusted much modern writing about antiquity, apparently considering that terms like 'rationality' and 'private property' can introduce anachronism and prevent us from entering minds and institutions so different from our own. 'If we desire to understand antiquity, our first rule should be to support ourselves upon the evidence that comes from the ancients.'[3] It is that determination that gives Fustel's work its great value.

Fustel draws not only on the first law codes, but also on the earliest historians, philosophers and playwrights in order to recapture the meaning of the beliefs that shaped the ancient family and city. He may at times exaggerate the symmetry and reach of those beliefs, when tracing the emergence of the Greek and Roman polis from a prehistoric society of families. Other causes were at work. The reality was at times more messy than Fustel suggests. For the way humans understand themselves never captures the whole truth. It selects, simplifies and at times distorts. Nonetheless, Fustel's ability to trace the roots of institutions from language itself and early law is remarkable. Thus, his account remains close to the understanding which ancient thinkers – not least Aristotle – had of their own social development.[4] Their beliefs about themselves were Fustel's central concern. They will also be ours.

For Fustel, at its origin the ancient family was both the focus and the medium of religious belief. It was an instrument of immortality, at once a metaphysic and a cult. The practices of the ancient family met the needs of self-conscious creatures seeking to overcome the fact of death. Around the family hearth – with the father tending its sacred fire, offering sacrifices, libations and incantations learned from his father – members of the family achieved union with their ancestors and prepared their future. The fire on the family hearth could not be allowed to die out, for it was deemed to be alive. Its flickering, immaterial flame did not just represent the family's ancestors. It *was* their

ancestors, who were thought to live underground and who had to be provided with food and drink, if they were not to become malevolent spirits. Tending the fire therefore became an overarching obligation. The eldest son would succeed his father as custodian of the rites of the family hearth, that is, as its high priest. And his eldest son would follow him.

The circle established by religious belief was exclusively domestic. Gods could not be shared. Only deceased males related by blood could be worshipped as family gods. And it was believed that dead ancestors would only accept offerings from members of the family. Strangers were therefore excluded from the worship of the dead, for fear of gross impropriety or sacrilege. 'The ancient Greek language has a very significant word to designate a family. It is . . . 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.'[5] If the hearth was not properly protected and tended, the ancestors ('gods of the interior') who 'rested' beneath it would become dissatisfied and wandering, as demons making trouble for the living rather than as gods.

These beliefs in the sacred fire and divine ancestors, revealed by study of the roots of the Greek and Latin languages (which Fustel supplemented with other Indo-European sources such as the Vedas), should not be dismissed as mere anthropological curiosities. For practices established by these beliefs survived, even if modified, into historical times as the domestic practices of Greece and Rome. Indeed, they established the framework of everyday life until the advent of Christianity.

> In the house of every Greek and Roman was an altar; on this altar there had always to be a small quantity of ashes, and a few lighted coals. It was a sacred obligation for the master of every house to keep the fire up night and day. Woe to the house where it was extinguished. Every evening they covered the coal with ashes to prevent them from being entirely consumed. In the morning the first care was to revive this fire with a few twigs. The fire ceased to glow upon the altar only when the entire family had perished; an extinguished hearth, an extinguished family, were synonymous expressions among the ancients.[6]

The absolute authority of the eldest male, keeper of the sacred fire and preserver of the family cult, later found expression as paterfamilias. His authority was a direct consequence of religious belief. And for any son to remain single was deemed to be a dereliction of duty, because it was a threat to the immortality of the family.

Other domestic practices in Greece and Rome – the subordinate role of women, the nature of marriage, property rights and inheritance rules – were also direct consequences of religious belief. Let us take the role of women first. Women could participate in the worship of the dead only through their father or husband. For descent was traced exclusively through the male line. But even then religion governed the definition of relationships so entirely that an adopted son, once he was admitted to the family worship, shared its ancestors, while a son who abandoned the family worship ceased altogether to be a relation, becoming unknown.

If we return to the example of a bride being carried across the threshold of her new home, we can now begin to understand the origins of the practice. In a world where the family was the only social institution, and the family worship the source of personal identity, the move from one family to another was a truly momentous step for a young woman, a step that changed her identity completely. So what had to happen for a marriage to take place? First, the daughter had to be separated for ever from her own family, in a formal ceremony before its sacred fire. But in renouncing her family worship, she lost all identity. She became, temporarily, a non-person. That is why her future husband had to carry her across the threshold of his family house. Only when she had been received into the worship of her new family, in another solemn ceremony before their sacred fire, did she acquire a new identity – an identity that enabled her to enter and leave the house of her own accord. Now, once again, she had ancestors and a future.

Clearly, the family – past, present and future – was the basic unit of social reality. It was necessarily the building block of any larger social units. Nothing could legitimately violate its domain. Fustel argues that this reflected a prehistoric period when the family, more or less extended, was the only social institution, long before the growth of cities and governments. Beating the bounds of the family domain was

understood as establishing not just a physical but also a moral frontier. Outside that frontier were strangers and enemies. Nor were these two sharply distinguished. Initially at least, those outside the family circle were not deemed to share any attributes with those within. No common humanity was acknowledged, an attitude confirmed by the practice of enslavement.

There was an intimate connection between these beliefs about the nature of the family and the origin of the idea of property rights. The family hearth or altar, and with it the divine ancestors or gods of the family, provided the focus of a sedentary life, of a fixed relationship with the soil.

> There are three things which, from the most ancient times, we find founded and solidly established in these Greek and Roman societies: the domestic religion; the family; and the right of property – three things which had in the beginning a manifest relation, and which appear to have been inseparable. The idea of private property existed in the religion itself. Every family had its hearth and its ancestors. These gods could be adored only by this family, and protected it alone. They were its property.[7]

The boundaries of the family property were also the boundaries of a sacred domain. Just as two sacred fires and the gods they embodied could not be merged, even through intermarriage, so family enclosures had to remain distinct.

This primitive belief survived in practices centuries later, when the Greeks and Romans first built cities. For while urban houses had to be much closer together, they could not be contiguous or joined – some space, however slight, had to separate them. 'At Rome the law fixed two feet and a half as the width of the free space, which was always to separate two houses, and this space was consecrated to "the god of the enclosure".'[8] No doubt the building of tenements later compromised this prohibition. But it shaped Roman property law at the outset.

Today when we see other humans, we see them first of all as individuals with rights, rather than family members, each with an assigned status. That is, we now see humans as rational agents whose ability to reason and choose makes it right to attribute to them an underlying

equality of status, a moral equality. We are even inclined to see this moral equality as a fact of perception rather than a social valuation, so ingrained is our assumption that rational agency demands equal concern and respect.

Yet as we can already see it was not always so. In recapturing the prehistoric religious beliefs and practices that gave rise to the Greek and Roman city, the roots of their domestic institutions, we find ourselves entering a world of, so to speak, small family churches. No one was allowed to worship at more than one hearth or sacrifice to more than one series of divine ancestors – for each series constituted a perpetual divinity, joining past, present and future family members and protecting them exclusively. To be involved in sacrifices at more than one sacred hearth would have been seen as monstrous, an impiety likely to bring disaster to both families.

As each family had its own gods, from whom it sought protection and to whom it offered sacrifices, separation from the family worship involved losing all personal identity. That is why Fustel de Coulanges was right to insist that the ancient family was founded, not on birth, affection or physical force, but rather on religion. Powerful religious beliefs that antedated belief in the gods surrounding Zeus or Jupiter shaped the domestic institutions of the Greeks and Romans. These beliefs reflected a period when there were only families, more or less extended – that is, a period before the creation of cities.

Larger associations did, however, gradually develop. And the emergence of polytheism was a symptom of the development of such associations. If, originally, the only unit of lasting human association was the family, and the basis of that association was religious belief, then certain conditions had to be satisfied before wider associations became possible. Before cities could emerge, new associations of families had to develop – first the *gens* or extended family, then clans (called phratries in Greek and *curiae* in Latin), and finally tribes. Fustel did not claim that there was always a tie of family within these larger associations. But when they were formed, their beliefs obliged them to find a common divinity. Each extension of human association required the establishment of a new worship, recognition of a divinity superior to the domestic divinities.

Vestiges of these intermediate associations long survived amid the

institutions of the Greek and Roman city. In so far as each step forward in human association required an extension of religious belief – the acknowledgement of shared divinities – the original model of the domestic religion continued to impose itself. Its tenacity still strikes ancient historians.[9]

Evidently we are a long way from the Enlightenment's vision of a free, secular spirit dominating antiquity, a world untrammelled by religious authority or priesthood. Driven by anti-clerical convictions, these eighteenth-century thinkers failed to notice something important about the Graeco-Roman world. They failed to notice that the ancient family began as a veritable church. It was a church which constrained its members to an extent that can scarcely be exaggerated. The father, representing all his ancestors, was himself a god in preparation. His wife counted only as part of her husband, having ancestors and descendants only through him. The authority of the father as priest and magistrate initially extended even to the right to repudiate or kill his wife as well as his children. Celibacy and adultery were accounted serious crimes, for they threatened, in different ways, the family worship.

Yet the father exercised his authority on the basis of beliefs shared by the family. His was not an arbitrary power. The overwhelming imperative was to preserve the family worship, and so to prevent his ancestors, untended, being cast into oblivion. This restriction of affection to the family circle gave it an extraordinary intensity. Charity, concern for humans as such, was not deemed a virtue, and would probably have been unintelligible. But fulfilling obligations attached to a role in the family was everything. 'The sense of duty, natural affection, the religious idea – all these were confounded, were considered as one, and were expressed by the same word.'[10] That word was piety (*pietas*).

Nor should we suppose that the claims of family piety were much weakened in later, historical times, when families were joined in larger associations. Observing those claims continued, for example, to shape the daily routine of the Roman citizen. 'Morning and evening he invokes his fire . . . and his ancestors; in leaving and entering his house, he addresses a prayer to them,' Fustel notices. 'Every meal is a religious act, which he shares with his domestic divinities; birth, initiation,

the taking of the toga, marriage, and the anniversaries of all these events, are the solemn acts of his worship.'[11]

Virgil's great epic, the *Aeneid*, written when the Roman republic was giving way to the empire, is a testament to the claims of piety in circumstances of distress. Bernini's statue of Aeneas, Anchises and Ascanius – kept today at the Villa Borghese in Rome – embodies those claims. It shows Aeneas, after the fall of Troy, carrying away his father Anchises and the household gods, while his son Ascanius carries the household fire. Father and son are carrying away what mattered most to them. It is a powerful visual representation of the idea of piety.

On close inspection, then, the domestic institutions of the Greeks and Romans – institutions that provided the foundation for their public law and political institutions – were shaped by beliefs about the claims of sacred ancestors. Nowhere is this clearer than in the idea of property rights that resulted. In the earliest Greek and Roman law, the sale of property was virtually forbidden. And even in later, historical ages such a sale was surrounded by prohibitions and penalties. The reason is clear. Family property was integral to the family worship. 'Religion required that the hearth should be fixed to the soil, so that the tomb should neither be destroyed nor displaced. Suppress the right of property and the sacred fire would be without a fixed place, the families would become confounded and the dead would be abandoned and without worship.'[12] It followed that property belonged not to an individual man, but to the family. The eldest male possessed the land as a trust. The rule of succession made this clear. For property followed the same rule as family worship. It devolved upon the eldest son, or, in the absence of male children, it went to the nearest male relative. Daughters could not inherit. In Athens if the deceased had only a daughter, she was required to marry the heir – even if the heir or she was already married!

The disposal of property was not a matter of contract or individual choice. In the earliest period the Greeks and Romans understood property primarily as a means of perpetuating the family worship. In Athens, the will or right of testament was unknown until Solon's time (sixth century BC), and his innovations only permitted it for the childless. It later made headway only against very strong religious scruples. Fustel de Coulanges has no difficulty finding examples of the survival

of such scruples even in Athens' greatest period. Plato, in his *Laws*, treats contemptuously the wish of a man on his deathbed to dispose of his property as he pleases: 'Thou who art only a pilgrim here below, does it belong to thee to decide such affairs? Thou art the master neither of thy property nor of thyself; thou and thy estate, all these things, belong to thy family; that is to say, to thy ancestors and to thy posterity.'[13]

It is tempting for a moment to adopt the idiom of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment and call these beliefs 'prejudices'. These prejudices founded a hierarchical conception of society in antiquity, and they long survived the earliest, undiluted forms of ancestor worship. It is true that many legal arrangements founded on these prejudices were modified in historical times: the disposal of property was made easier and paternal authority came to be somewhat restricted. Changes occurred which prepared the ground for a moral revolution.

Yet the Greeks and Romans continued to understand 'society' as an association of families, each with its own cult – and not as an association of individuals. Hence justice within the family remained basically a matter for the paterfamilias, not for the city. Paternal authority deriving from the domestic religion entailed the subordination of women.

> The Greek laws and those of Rome are to the same effect. As a girl, she is under her father's control; if her father dies, she is governed by her brothers; married, she is under the guardianship of her husband; if the husband dies, she does not return to her own family, for she has renounced that forever by the sacred marriage; the widow remains subject to the guardianship of her husband's agnates – that is to say, of her own sons, if she has any, or, in default of sons, of the nearest kindred.[14]

Thus, the inviolability of the domestic sphere and the exclusive character of family worship were intimately joined together. They established a moral boundary that the ancient city, as it developed, was obliged to respect. The domain of legislation stopped at the property of the family. Interfering with property was interfering with a domestic religion, that is, with the most sacred obligations. The treatment of debtors confirms this. For while a debtor lost control of his own labour, his property could not be touched.

We are now in a better position to understand the chief consequence of Greek and Roman religious beliefs for the ordering of their society and government. It is a consequence which even Fustel does not identify clearly enough. In order to understand it, we must abandon the modern distinction between public and private spheres, the distinction that underpins our notions of civil society and individual liberty.

For the Greeks and Romans, the crucial distinction was not between the public and private spheres. It was between the public and domestic spheres. And the domestic sphere was understood as the sphere of the family, rather than as that of individuals endowed with rights. The domestic sphere was a sphere of inequality. Inequality of roles was fundamental to the worship of the ancient family. Little wonder, then, that when the ancient city was created citizenship was available only to the paterfamilias and, later, his sons. Women, slaves and the foreign-born (who had no hearth or worship of their own, no recognized ancestors) were categorically excluded. Family piety ruled them out. Piety raised a barrier that could not be scaled.

There was an intensity of feeling within the ancient family unknown to us. But this intensity came at the price of moral transparency – of what we could call the claims of humanity.