

# ANCESTORS AND POSTERITY. The Religion of the Domus and its Message<sup>1</sup>

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*Abstract: Ancestor worship has attracted the attention of many scholars, of ethnologists and anthropologists more than of scholars studying western religions or theologians. Its sometimes odd expressions have been treated in the West – with some exceptions – rather as curiosities without asking about their deeper meaning. In the following article, I do not pretend to make a comparison between various highly developed religions, which is clearly beyond my competence. I shall merely try to bring together some traces left by the religion of the domus or home religion, whose various forms ethnologists have described in numerous cultures all around the world, and to show ancestor worship as a part of this larger system of customs and convictions. This simple yet ingenious system of mutual obligations between generations efficiently formed human behavior for millennia and probably shaped many of our present-day views and institutions, too. However evidently obsolete in some of its expressions, it perhaps contains some very fundamental ideas about humans and their relations to the past and to the future that went into oblivion in modern western societies. However modern societies cannot be organized in separate lineages; a deeper look at this ancient framework of human lives might remind us about things lacking and perhaps urgently needed in contemporary and future societies.*

**Keywords:** *ancestor worship; home religion; procreation; heritage; patri-linearity*

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The system of religious – or pre-religious – customs of the early settled farmers, which I shall call for brevity family or home religion, and in particular its most conspicuous part, ancestor worship, has been the subject of many a scholarly work from Fustel de Coulanges and Herbert Spencer up to contemporary authors.<sup>2</sup> Yet due to some of its rather queer expressions, it was often treated as a sort of ethnographic curiosity. Some of its modern revivals, as, e.g., the Chinese custom of afterlife marriage (Yao 2008), give the impression of something hopelessly alien, making no true appeal to our understanding. Moreover, the designation itself is a problematic one: was this “family religion” a religion at all? Lacking most of the commonly expected traits of religions – e.g., a separate institution of priesthood,<sup>3</sup> a creed, any sort of sacred text and even of a more or less clear idea of God or gods, – it is rather at the margin of interest of religious science.<sup>4</sup>

However, what I call family religion (and part of it, “ancestor worship”) seems to be of almost universal extension, at least among settled farming cultures. Its ritual is described in the “Laws of Manu” (*Manusmṛiti*); it appears throughout the whole of ancient Greek and Latin literature; it is a common living custom in China, in India and elsewhere and it is at least tacitly supposed by the Bible and other ancient texts. It was the typical form of “heathen” religion; Christian missionaries encountered all over Europe up to the high Middle Ages and some of its customs seem to be present – at least as a sort of “superstitious background” – in large parts of the contemporary world. As we shall see, it left remarkable traces both in Christian popular piety and in the surprisingly similar cemetery cultures in various parts of the world.<sup>5</sup>

In what follows, after a short summary of its typical traits and expressions, I shall try to get closer to its kernel and to show the intrinsic logic, which probably connected the seemingly *dissecta membra* of its customs, actions and sometimes merely supposed convictions. The very sharp polemic against ancestor worship in the Avesta, as well as the more or less implicit polemic remarks in the New Testament, will help us to discern what was important and

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<sup>2</sup> Among the most important: Fustel de Coulanges 1873; Spencer 1877; Freud 1913; Fortes 1959; Goody 1966; Wolf 1974. For a recent example, see Friesen 2001 and the rich bibliography therein.

<sup>3</sup> At least in its simple forms, best known from Africa, from the ancient Mediterranean area and from Europe, which are the focus of my attention.

<sup>4</sup> In contrast to the rich literature focusing on India or China, M. Eliade’s monumental *Encyclopedia of Religions* (1987) devotes to it two short articles, Ancestor worship (1: 263-267) and Home (6: 438-441).

<sup>5</sup> For popular piety, cf. Nilsson 1998.

what was peripheral in the eyes of their believers. Its visible traces in popular Christian piety and – as an example – in Roman Catholic liturgy will help us to reconstruct the partly forgotten sense of individual customs and perhaps allow us to appreciate more adequately its basic convictions.

In the material I shall use, there is nothing new. Everything has been published and is readily available. My only claim is to bring together pieces of dispersed knowledge, let them illuminate each other and to try to draw from the conceptual scheme of “family religion” some instruction as to the nature and function of religious behavior in general. My main inspiration for this undertaking came from the classic work of Fustel de Coulanges, *The Ancient City*, first published in 1864.<sup>6</sup> In the first two parts of the book, Fustel brought together with unequalled diligence heaps of material on “family religion” out of Greek and Latin antiquity and worked out the basic traits of this simple system of acting and living.

To this first and most important inspiration, other materials from various sources acceded in the course of time, and out of their convergences a broader picture emerged which encouraged me to try to elaborate a more “sympathetic” insight in the somewhat surprising logic of our ancestors. Besides following a purely antiquarian interest, I shall do it in the hope of showing some tenets of family religion which perhaps do not deserve to be so completely abandoned and forgotten.

## Family Religion

Probably no one today would subscribe to the opinion of Herbert Spencer (1877), namely, that ancestor worship would have been the most ancient and original form of religious worship of all. Many authors have justly criticized the somewhat simplistic vision of 19th century evolutionism and we have no evidence as to the supposed originality of this unusual “religion.” On the other hand, its very impressive historical and geographical extension seems to recommend it as an object of deepened study.

As already mentioned, even the designation of this object presents some difficulties, as it does not fit most of the commonly expected features of

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<sup>6</sup> The most recent English edition: *The Ancient City*. Baltimore 1980. – It is the first part of the book which is in my opinion of actual interest, whereas the latter part about the social history of Rome, based mostly on Tacitus’ and Livy’s accounts, may be by now rather obsolete. Moreover, Fustel was wrong in believing “family religion” had been an exclusivity of “Aryan” cultures only.

a religion. First, it was a practice, not a belief or a conviction. This practice was performed at home, not in public, and by every single *pater familias*, the “father of the house”; this “house” means here the ancient *domus* or *oikos*, a large household, embracing people, domestic slaves, cattle and both landed and real property, all the *res mancipi* of Roman law. Family religion had no priests<sup>7</sup> and no expressed creed: its “cognitive” basis was obviously considered as evident, not requiring any further explanations. It was always merely oral with nothing in written form and was transmitted directly from father to the heir and did not need any sort of sacred text or even myth. In addition, perhaps most salient of all – it had no idea of any divinity, of gods or God, except for the dead ancestors or fathers of the individual “family” or lineage.

This fact led most of the modern scholars to concentrate their attention just upon these deceased and their graves, the place of some of the religious actions, and to overlook the other sides of domestic religion. For obvious reasons, burials are among the earliest unambiguous discerning signs of humans and human cultures (cf. Mithen 1999), but it does not seem that the simple fact of burial would be at the same time a sign of “family religion.” Rather, it seems that a distinctive feature of domestic religion is a close connection between the grave and the family house and lineage.<sup>8</sup> This is not the place to treat the extremely rich archeological and ethnological material on burial customs and rituals, but there is some evidence to burials in the house itself, as, e.g., in some early neolithic excavations in present-day Turkey. In earliest Greek antiquity, the dead were buried under or close to the threshold of the house and the permanent domestic fire was considered a visible sign of their living presence.

If there is a distinctively “religious” trait in family religion, it is the conviction of the participants that they live in the permanent presence of their dead ancestors, alive in the domestic fire and carefully observing whatever is happening in the house. There, around the domestic fire, which was by no means to become extinct during the whole year, most of the actions of “family religion” were performed.<sup>9</sup> As far as we know, these daily performances were not particularly conspicuous and consisted in regular libations, offerings of food

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<sup>7</sup> However, as we shall see, already in the Avesta the offerings are made by a (domestic) priest.

<sup>8</sup> For my purpose, it is not important whether the dead were buried as corpses, as ashes or as mere bones in a “two-phased” process. Already the *Laws of Manu* (e.g. 5.65; 10.50) mention a “burial-ground,” probably outside the settlement.

<sup>9</sup> Thus since Herodotus the family is sometimes called *epistion*, literally “those around the domestic fire” (e.g. *History* 1.176; 5.73).

and drink at the beginning of every family meal, most probably accompanied by ritualized prayers. Attendance to this “liturgy” was strictly obligatory for all the members of the household, but equally strictly excluded all other persons.

Thus, the family house served daily as a “sanctuary” of this curious religion, as the permanent common dwelling of both the deceased and living family members and as the place of a simple, but daily repeated service. According to Fustel and his sources, this sacred character of the house was underlined by a vessel with “lustral water” at the entrance door, used by all the people to wash their hands upon returning home. This conjunction of grave, fire and water was probably so obvious and matter-of-fact that Aristotle can characterize an Athenian citizen as one who has the “community” of these three things, whereas those who are lacking it were – at least in theory – excluded from political life, from both *agora* and *búlé*.

This sacrificial side of family religion, the obligations towards deceased ancestors, is described in much detail in the Indian “Laws of Manu” (*manusmṛti*).<sup>10</sup> Here, ancestors are not buried in the house and their descendants have to bring them special food, honey and milk on certain occasions. The feeding of the deceased testifies to rather materialistic ideas about their “living” in the grave, as paste balls and milk had to be thrown and poured into holes in the earth. Thus, according to the Laws of Manu, family religion consists of the ritual of ancestor worship and of a strict duty of every *pater familias* to engender a male heir. “Immediately on the birth of his first-born a man is (...) freed from the debt to the manes. That son alone on whom he throws his debt and through whom he obtains immortality is begotten for (the fulfillment of) the law; they consider all the rest the offspring of desire.”<sup>11</sup>

This other side of family religion is clarified in an interesting way by the unexpectedly sharp polemic of the Persian Avesta against burial ceremonies in general. In Fargard 3, “The Earth,” Zarathushtra asks Ahura Mazda, “the Maker of the material world, the Holy one” about the worst places, causing the most acute grief to the Earth. The first of them is the “neck of Arezura,” the

<sup>10</sup> *The Laws of Manu*. Trans. W. Doniger and B. K. Smith. London, The Penguin Classics 1991, in particular 3.122 ff.

<sup>11</sup> *The Laws of Manu* 9.106 f.; “...a son delivers his father from hell,” 9.138. According to Plato the house whose owner “leaves no posterity, but dies unmarried, or married and childless” is considered “unfortunate, and stained with impiety” (*Laws* 877). – For a prohibition of celibacy see Cicero, *De leg.* 3.7. Plato in *Laws* (721b) proposes a yearly penalty and the bachelor Kant a particular tax for singles (*Metaphysik der Sitten*. In: *Werke in 6 Bänden*. Köln 1995. 5:392) ·

gate to hell, but the second most abhorrent place is "... the place wherein most corpses of dogs and of men lie buried,"... the place whereon stand most of those Dakhmas on which the corpses of men are deposited." To prevent any misunderstanding, he asked: "Who is the first that rejoices the Earth with greatest joy?" Ahura Mazda answered: "It is he who digs out of it the most corpses of dogs and men,"<sup>12</sup> and in the following verses he prescribes harsh punishments for those who would attempt a burial. A similar meaning might perhaps be expressed by the otherwise really dark fragment of Heraclitus: "Corpses are more fit to be thrown out than dung" (DK 22 B 96), rather unique in Greek literature.

These prohibitions and curses are obviously a polemic against "ancestor worship," the form of family religion which was completely turned towards the dead and their graves. Against this wrong and for the abhorrent Ahura Mazda version, the "positive" program of the home religion, the description of the ideal state of a place on the Earth according to Avesta runs as follows:

"It is the place whereon one of the faithful erects a house with a priest within,<sup>13</sup> with cattle, a wife, children, and good herds within; and wherein afterwards the cattle continue to thrive, virtue to thrive, fodder to thrive, the dog to thrive, the wife to thrive, the child to thrive, the fire to thrive, and every blessing of life to thrive."

It is of no surprise that such a radical rejection of burials had to meet an equally indignant opposition of other religions and evoked later persecution by the Moslems, but this is not our topic here. What seems to me of interest is a sort of discovery of the other side of family religion, which obviously exceeds the piety towards the deceased, but, at the same time, reveals a deeper sense or meaning of family religion as such.

It is towards dead ancestors that the living are obliged by gratitude for almost everything they appreciate most of all. It is from them that they received their life; from them they inherited the house and the land, their livelihood and so on.<sup>14</sup> Woe to those who did not have such good luck. Thus, it is to them they have their sacrificial duties, but this is the less important part of the whole. According to Fustel, the principal obligation consists in ensuring the contin-

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<sup>12</sup> Avesta, *Fargard* 3, verses 8 and 9. Translated by J. H. Peterson. At: <http://www.avesta.org/venida/vd3sbe.htm>

<sup>13</sup> Zoroathrism is a monotheistic religion with an elaborate hierarchy of divine beings, not a simple domestic religion. Thus, in Avesta domestic priests are supposed, but the framework of religious life is still the family house.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Plato, *Laws* 717

uation of this service and thus of the family. As the afterlife of the ancestors depends on the services of the living, the living in their turn shall one day depend on the services of their descendants. Thus, however obliged towards the ancestors, it is by caring for legitimate posterity that the *pater familias* fulfills the most substantial part of this obligation.<sup>15</sup> At the same time, this permanent posterity is equally important for himself as the condition of his own afterlife.

This simple and yet ingenious sort of interwoven duties is an early form of “transcendence,” linking together the following generations and ensuring the stability of households, so much stressed even by the classical authors.<sup>16</sup> According to Fustel, home religion kept firmly together the individual households, supported their cohesion and stability and at the same time separated the households and their land properties with sacred borders. In classical times, a particular deity, the Greek *theos herkeios*, whom the *pater familias* had to honor once in the year by offering flour and honey, protected the balks and boundary-marks.<sup>17</sup>

## Beyond the Family House

According to Fustel, the idea of strictly delimited land property protected by the dead ancestors buried there is at the beginning of the idea of private – i.e., family – property. Whether we accept this hypothesis or not,<sup>18</sup> it is obvious that the overall scheme of household religion sustained a clear view of such a division and supplied convincing arguments in its favor. This almost complete separation of neighboring households, on the other hand, presented non-negligible difficulties on the only occasion when the households were not allowed to be autonomous, that is at marriage. The household was a strictly exoga-

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<sup>15</sup> According to the Bhagavad gítá, “the sin caused by destruction of family” destroys its “immemorial holy laws” and thus “lawlessness” prevails (I. 39-41). Fustel further cites Dionysius Halic. IX. 22, Lycurgos, Pollux and Cicero, *De legibus*.

<sup>16</sup> E.g., Plato in *Laws* IV., 721f. According to the *Laws of Manu*, an infertile woman was to be replaced after eight years (9.81), but under certain conditions an adoptive son was a valid solution as well (9.10).

<sup>17</sup> A Czech folk tale, registered in the 19th century, mentions a similar ceremony connected with Christmas night. K. J. Erben, “Štědrý večer” in: Kytice (1853).

<sup>18</sup> According to Cicero, the house with the altar, fire and ancestor worship is the most sacred of all places (*Pro domo* 41). The surprisingly exalted attribute of “untouchable” property, in many languages still common today, seems to support it: it was the grave of the other’s ancestors which was considered dangerous even to touch. This is – among others – a possible explanation why graves in many European countries have their metallic fences.

mous group and young people had to look for partners in any case outside of it, sometimes even in another settlement or village. How to bridge the otherwise prohibitive frontier of the household?

The traditional wedding customs shed interesting light on the nature of family religion and their surprising tenacity is a testimony to the depth of these traditions. According to Fustel's material, variously supported by ethnologists, the wedding is a typical transition ritual or *rite de passage*.<sup>19</sup> First, the bride has to be released from the bonds of her home religion; from now on, she does not belong to it and in her home, she becomes strictly speaking an alien. This step, on the other hand, has not to be seen by her ancestors as a sign of irreverence; thus, the bridegroom's friends have to mimic a kidnapping. Even in neolithic cultures where nobody ever thought about traveling in a cart, the bride is "kidnapped" in a covered wagon and veiled. The critical point is the entrance of the husband's house, more precisely its threshold: here the protecting spirits might well take the bride for an alien intruder – and kill her. Thus, it is up to the groom to take the bride in his arms, carry her over the dangerous threshold and present her first to the domestic fire. The act of marriage is then realized by the couple eating together small round cakes of white barley flour; its name, *farina*, gave the name to the traditional Roman wedding ceremony, *confarreatio*. Surprisingly enough, many of these customs survive until today and are meticulously observed in many regions of Europe, in China etc.

Family religion separated the individual households, but on the other hand, as shown by the example of Avesta, it allowed for various symbioses with more developed religious systems. Not only in daily practice, but even in religious texts, it was able to combine with the later monotheistic religions and form various syncretisms with them. Thus, the Old Testament accepts in fact that the importance of posterity<sup>20</sup> refers to the deceased as having "joined their fathers" and mentions their graves. Though by no means places of actual worship, they are nevertheless kept in reverent memory and visited by their descendents. Similarly, the family house is not completely profane: a new one had to be "dedicated" (Deut 20:5) and a blessing be written on the doorposts (Deut 6:9; 11:20).

The Fifth commandment,<sup>21</sup> placed between the duties toward the Lord and towards fellow humans, differs from the other commandments of the Decalogue

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<sup>19</sup> The Greek called the three phases of it *enyésis (ekdosis) – pompé – telos*.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. the promises to Abraham, Genesis 13:16, 17:20 etc.

<sup>21</sup> "Honour your father and your mother, that you may live long in the land which the Lord your God is giving you." Exodus 20:12 (*New English Bible*).

by bringing a characteristic justification: a long life in the land. The levirate marriage (Deut 25:5-10) pursues the same goal as home religion, namely, to ensure the continuity of the family and of the “name.” The guilt of Onan consists in preventing the conception of a child for his childless and deceased brother Er, which qualifies as non-fulfillment of his duty (Genesis 38:8).

In the New Testament, there are some critical remarks by Jesus as to burial practices<sup>22</sup> and in the earliest Christian literature, graves and burials don’t seem to have played any religious role.<sup>23</sup> The graves of the martyrs in Rome and elsewhere are not connected to their families and there seems to be no idea of a permanent posterity. On the other hand, Christian and in particular Roman liturgy took over many of the features of the transformed “family religion.” As Fustel documents from ancient literary sources, the emergence of the *poleis* or cities led to an interesting adaptation of home religion to the new coalescence of households. What the Greeks called *synoikismos* has obviously had to overcome similar obstacles we observed at the wedding.<sup>24</sup> As any individual *oikos* or house, the *polis* had its common house, the later *prytaneion*, with similar religious functions and furnishings. Up to the classical period, the Athenian *tholos*<sup>25</sup> had its permanent sacred fire of Hestia, in Rome served by the Vestals. There was lustral water, too, and the “founding fathers” were remembered here as common ancestors of the city.

Several features of this public house as an expression of a common *pietas erga parentes* entered into the traditional shape and functions of Christian church buildings. In a Catholic church building, there is still holy water at the door and the altar was erected above the grave of a saint (or was at least to contain some relics). In front of it, there is an eternal light, since the high Middle Ages interpreted as a sign of the presence of the Holy Sacrament, but stemming from the tradition of the ancient family and city house. The saint, to whom the church is usually dedicated, plays the role of the “founding father” of the local Christian community<sup>26</sup> and all around his grave or later around the church, there is a churchyard, the common burial ground of the deceased part of the local church or Christian family. Until very recently, in many parts of Europe,

<sup>22</sup> “Let the dead bury their own dead,” Matthew 8:22, Luke 9:60.

<sup>23</sup> The tradition of the graves of Jesus himself, of his mother and of the Apostles is surprisingly late and unsure, not having been fixed until Constantine’s times.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Aristotle, *Politics* 1319b, on the need to limit private cults and to introduce a common one.

<sup>25</sup> A round building at the *agora*, office of the city council.

<sup>26</sup> In France and in Italy it is often indeed the first local bishop who is buried beneath the altar.

the names of these deceased have been read and explicitly remembered at every Sunday mass. On their graves, the most common inscription has been for millennia the same formula *Hic iacet* or *Hic requiescit*, "Here rests ...," hardly acceptable in the framework of either Jewish, Christian or Moslem orthodoxy.

## Legacy of Home Religion

Though repeatedly criticized by Episcopal synods in the early Middle Ages, the culture of graves showed a remarkable persistence in Christianized countries, as well as during the recent secularization: in many parts of Europe, visits to family graves on All Souls day are the most conspicuous expression of religious behavior. Besides this rather episodic legacy, it probably marked many other aspects of social life and culture, in the West as well as elsewhere.

According to Fustel de Coulanges, home religion shaped the most important traits of social life of settled societies: the structure of the patriarchal family, the role of *pater familias* and the rules of heritage, the far-reaching separation of the neighboring family houses, the ideas of property and of the individual obligations both among the living as towards the deceased and to the yet unborn members of the lineage. The idea of a self-sustaining and permanent family house, the *oikos* of the ancients, on the one hand protected by the deceased ancestors and on the other ensuring their afterlife, established some characteristic views and customs of the family, on its property and its relations toward both the social and the natural environment. This thesis inspired Fustel's pupil, the French sociologist Émile Durkheim, to describe this type of society and social relations as "segmentary," as it replaced or at least complemented the synchronous relations among the living members of a tribe by diachronous relations and obligations among the following generations of each of its separated segments.

Fustel's original thesis about the role of home religion in shaping the social life of settled and in particular farming societies has been criticized for its obvious one-sidedness, e.g., by E. E. Evans-Pritchard (1965: 49 f.). However, as Evans-Pritchard treats Fustel along with Durkheim and other "evolutionists," his criticism seems to me only partly justified. In contrast to Durkheim and his followers, Fustel did not try to explain religious forms by a sort of "social fact" (*fait social*), but just the opposite: to explain social forms by religion. In doing this, he obviously neglected such other important factors as, e.g., the prevailing type of "technology" by which people procured their sustenance. Farming

and plough farming in particular seems to be connected with such social traits as patriarchy, appropriation of land or the rules of inheritance.

Contemporary social science would be thus rather suspicious about any monocausal explanation of complex social or religious facts (cf. e.g., Clarke – Byrne 1993). On the other hand, this cautiousness should not lead us to overlook the impressive extension of home religion, both in space and in time, as well as its perfect harmony with the way of life of farming cultures. In establishing a sort of religious autonomy of each household, it supported the idea of property and its limits, important in restraining mutual conflicts. The ideas of home inviolability, privacy and responsibility for inherited family property probably originated from here. State boundaries, however much less important in prosperous modern societies, nevertheless remain “the boundaries between order and chaos,” as Plato put it.

Some of the characteristics of family religion – e.g., its patriarchal absolutism or its rigid segregation of households – are obviously obsolete. What home religion established was an extremely “closed” society, to use the Bergsonian distinction, in which there was no place for incoming strangers. However tempered by the obligatory hospitality, it continued the generally xenophobic nature of ancient societies.<sup>27</sup> On the other hand, it seems to me that the idea of heritage and some of its consequences far from being mere ethnographic curiosities are of more than an antiquarian interest. Compared with the modern conception of rather unlimited private property as it developed in European cities from late antiquity until early modern times, the ancient idea of heritage established very different social structures, efficiently supported by family religion.

First, family heritage was inseparably tied up with the people who earned their livelihood from it. Even if unable to pay – according to Fustel – the debtor was not expropriated and if confiscated, he became a *servus* of his creditor.<sup>28</sup> Second, although in the hands of the actual *pater familias*, it did not belong to him, but rather to the line of ancestors; thus, he had not the right to sell it, but

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<sup>27</sup> “I think one should do with regard to human beings as we do with certain animals: one should, according to ancestral law, kill an enemy in every ordered society, unless a law forbids it.” Democritus, frg. DK 68 B 259. – For other sincere expressions of ancient xenophobia, see, e.g., Plato’s *Laws* or the colorful expression *en borboró barbarikó*, “in the barbarian mud”; Plato, *Republic* 533d.

<sup>28</sup> Fustel’s argument is based on a statement of the *Law of 12 tables*, Table III., according to which the debtor, if he wishes, may live “on his own”, *si volet suo vivito*. However, there is no mention of confiscation in the *12 Tables*. Rather, their strategy of punishment seems to aim at his own person and life.

was obliged to pass it to the heir. In modern terms, he would be better described as a temporary custodian or trustee of the family property than a full-fledged owner. There, the role of family religion has been to establish a diachronous link of mutual obligations between the following generations.

Let us have a look at this curious set of relations from the point of view of an actual family head, of a *pater familias*. He was obviously indebted to his ancestors, who gave him his physical life, but from whom he also inherited the means to support it, the livelihood of the present family. He had to acknowledge this obligation with the prescribed rituals of “ancestor worship,” but at the same time taking into account that his own afterlife would depend on a similar service rendered to him by his posterity. In contrast to common debts and obligations which are to be repaid to the creditor, in this case the relations were more complicated. Though “indebted” to his dead ancestors, it was in his own, as well as in their vital interest to compensate this debt by caring for a permanent posterity. Though he was obliged to perform the actual offerings on their graves, it was only by ensuring the continuation of this service that he could have acquitted himself of his debt.<sup>29</sup>

## Conclusions

In contemporary societies, most people do not live out of an inherited livelihood and thus the idea of an inborn debt is no doubt rather strange if not absurd to us. It was most probably so in city societies since classical antiquity and in Europe in particular since the emergence of individual piety in the cities of the high Middle Ages. As early as in the Bible man is seen as indebted not to his ancestors, but to God the Creator, from whom he receives his life and all the other precious gifts of existence.

Whereas the Gospels still reflect the conditions of living in the countryside, where the character of life as a gift was obvious enough,<sup>30</sup> the further development of Christianity took place mostly in the cities. A typical city-dweller does not depend for his livelihood on inherited land property but makes his living in exchanges with other – mostly alien – people. It is up to him to seek and to build up such relations and his success is much more in his own hands. Thus, a city dweller is naturally inclined to think of himself as an autonomous indivi-

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<sup>29</sup> Cf. *The Laws of Manu* 9.106 and 9.138 cited above.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Matthew 5:45; Mark 4:27.

dual and to attribute his success (or failure) to himself or to his contemporaries, not to his ancestors.

As life in a city does much less depend on the achievements of the preceding generations and as there is no actual need of children as a working force, it is present relations which become of prime interest. However, as each individual's success has to be built up more or less by himself, a typical city dweller is much more inclined to believe that his future can be improved. Whereas the best thing a farmer could have dreamed about was a stable continuation of the present conditions, Eliade's "eternal return," (see Eliade 2005) a city dweller might have experienced periods of rapid growth and blossoming of a city and learned to hope for a better future.

This change has been paralleled – or perhaps anticipated – by the Jewish discovery of the hope for a great future and of a faith based on God's promises. This "Abrahamic" faith, first formulated as a tribal hope,<sup>31</sup> became gradually more individual and in the Christian revelation, it has been individualized as the hope for an individual future, which exceeds any human imagination.<sup>32</sup> This momentous turn to the faith and hope and thus towards the future prepared the way for the modern idea of progress and at least partly eclipsed the idea of balanced obligations between past and future, typical for family religion.

We should gratefully acknowledge that it was this deep change in our understanding of our own place in the world and in society which gave us individual freedom, liberated us from the bonds of lineage and inherited property and opened the way to all the achievements of modern societies. On the other hand, a growing number of our contemporaries have a feeling that something got lost. Even if we do not live on inherited land and cannot be organized in fixed lineages, we have inherited a great number of other valuable things which we should perhaps view not as much as our property but rather as a sort of entrusted heritage. It is, first of all, our life as such and of course the earth and cultivated nature, out of which we get all we need. It is our language, our culture, including the arts and sciences, institutions and social customs that we have been given free, but which our ancestors, our teachers and others did not intend to be for our consumption alone.

For Jews, Christians and Moslems, the idea of our common task and responsibility for the human heritage has been clearly formulated in the Book

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<sup>31</sup> E.g. Genesis 12:2: "I will make you into a great nation."

<sup>32</sup> E.g. 1 Corinthians 2:9: "Things beyond our seeing, things beyond our hearing, things beyond our imagination, all prepared by God to those who love him."

of Genesis. The rigid structures of family religion are not a viable way for us, but could perhaps be a useful reminder of our responsibility for the Creation, which we have inadvertently forgotten. As Paul Ricoeur (1991: 216) wrote, “the Yes to being, spontaneously pronounced by every life, becomes on the human level an obligation.”

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