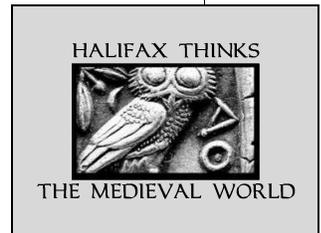


# A Summary of Antiquity: looking ahead



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Text in [blue](#) is a hyperlink. Text in **bold** suggests discussion topics. First mention of the names of key people (with dates) is in underlined italics. This Introductory Summary of Antiquity does not have accompanying recordings.

## I – What is the Ancient World?

The concept of the ancient world is not quite as simple as it seems. When it's used in relation to Western civilization it generally refers to the period between those first forms of city life which were developed around 3,500 BCE in Mesopotamia (as a starting-point), and the collapse of the Roman Empire. That collapse was a *fait accompli* by about 500 CE. Thus the 'ancient world' refers to a period of some 4,000 years. This seems simple enough.

The word "ancient" means "old" and it is clearly an appropriate name for the civilizations that began from the oldest forms of city life which were those in Mesopotamia. But we must not forget that none of the people who lived during these 4,000 years ever thought of themselves as living in the ancient world.

In fact the “ancient world”, as a name for that period, was first coined and applied to it only in the Renaissance.

Of course we now know that human beings who were anatomically identical to ourselves had existed for several hundred thousand years before the first cities. That enormous span of time has its own designation. In the broadest terms it is divided into the old and new stone ages – the Paleolithic and Neolithic. But the appearance of the patriarchal family less than 10,000 years ago (which developed into cities, civilization, and recorded human history) was such a radical departure from any of the many forms of human existence preceding these developments that we maintain a sharp distinction between the stone ages and their sequel. Before is prehistory. After, we find a new sequence leading to the beginning of recorded history – which also signals the start of what we now call antiquity. But if antiquity starts with the start of recorded history, and that’s still going on, then why isn’t antiquity still going on? Or is it?

By about 1,400 CE, at the dawn of the modern era, people in Western Europe had begun to recognize the tripartite division of history that we still use – ancient, medieval, and modern. Already there had been earlier ideas, somewhat along these lines, in the late Middle Ages, most notably in the thought of Joachim of Fiore (c1135–1202 CE). He theorized about the dawn of a new age on the basis of his interpretation of the Book of Revelation. He suggested that human history – on the

analogy of the Trinity – was divided into three ages or epochs: the age of the Father corresponded to the Old Testament period; the age of the Son corresponded to the era of the New Testament, stretching from the birth of Christ to Joachim’s own day. The expected age of the Spirit, which he calculated would begin in 1,260 CE, was going to usher in a new period of complete inner freedom, perfection, and love which would be the realization of the Christian ideal on earth. The millennial implications of this teaching would sweep away the hierarchical structures of Catholicism by placing each person in direct contact with God through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. They were anathema to the Church which condemned them as heretical a few years after his death. Nevertheless, Joachim’s story shows that a new feeling was emerging between 1,200 and 1,400 CE – a sense that that there were certain fundamental distinctions in human history which had not been noticed before but were now becoming apparent – differences between the ancients and the medievals on the one hand, and between the medievals and themselves on the other.



**II – How did the ancients define themselves?**

Let us start by considering the first of these distinctions. The difference between antiquity and the Middle Ages had been

clearly identified at least since the time of Augustine (354–430 CE) – although he did not use either of these terms. Augustine saw that the defining characteristic of all civilized life prior to his own day was that **every city and civilization was governed by the laws of some transcendent deity or deities.**

Through the whole of antiquity the only option was between life outside any city, which meant either a pre-family, family, or tribal existence largely cut off from contact or interaction with all other humans, or else it meant life within a particular city that united people across family lines. These options correspond to the two fundamental ways in which humans have been able to recognize their identity with one another. There is (i) the identity of common matter, which binds together individuals who share that matter but separates them from all other members of the species, and (ii) there is the identity of common thought which is able to unite members of the species across differences in family and tribe – and that is a city.

The first kind of bond is found in terms of a chain composed of whatever material substance is understood as connecting me to my parents and their other offspring. The most obvious way of establishing such a relationship was to observe who, quite literally, was connected to whom at birth. The ease and certainty of establishing relationships in this way, coupled with the fact that none other was available, meant that families formed the core of every human society throughout the

200,000 years of the stone ages. The family that we take to be the basic human unit – consisting of an adult female, an adult male, and the offspring of their union – could not have existed until males figured out a way to establish themselves as the actual fathers of particular offspring which is not as easy as one might think. Instead, the original female-centered groupings were most likely a loose structure called a fusion-fission society much like what we observe today as characteristic amongst chimpanzees,<sup>1</sup> our closest relatives in the animal kingdom. They live in loose communities varying in size from 15 to 150 individuals and ranging over a territory of 10 – 20 square miles. That is the size and extent of their world.

Recently some scholars have begun to characterize the entire stone ages as a matristic<sup>2</sup> era in which females and their offspring formed the basic social units and were the principal source of creativity. This latter suggestion is attributed to the females' concern for their children which gave them an interest (that males lacked) in something beyond the satisfaction of their bodily needs (i.e., for food, safety, and sex). Adult males by contrast, who lived in a perpetual uncertainty about whether they were actually the father of anyone in particular, likely banded together in male-bonded troupes. After securing food and safety they, they, like chimpanzees, probably used any extra energy to mate with more females – having, so far, no other goal in mind.

Until males finally became able to establish themselves as the fathers of particular children, it was not possible for human beings to form any larger, more coherent, or inclusive communities. Such loose structures formed what, for want of a better name, I have called the pre-family (as an analogue of the pre-history in which they occurred). Centered around mothers and their offspring,<sup>3</sup> our stone age ancestors nevertheless produced a long list of stunning achievements<sup>4</sup> which have no parallel in the rest of the animal kingdom. Through these accomplishments humans eventually became the undisputed masters of the planet as they slowly made their way out of Africa to every continent except Antarctica.

This long-lasting state of affairs was changed forever around 7-9000 years ago with the invention of the patriarchal family.<sup>5</sup> No one yet knows precisely where, when, or how patriarchy was discovered. The evidence we have suggests that this happened in the lands surrounding the eastern end of the Mediterranean for that is where city life subsequently made its first appearance. Cities could not have come into existence except where the logic of patriarchy was already well-established. When men eventually discovered a reasonably secure means of identifying themselves as the actual fathers of particular infants human society was finally able to organize itself in terms of a basic unit that brought into a coherent whole the three principal elements in reproduction: an adult female parent, an adult male parent, and the offspring of their union. This recent (in biological terms) discovery provided an

astonishingly powerful and creative new form of social organization. It swiftly changed everything from the slow-moving stone ages during which, for example, we find all over the world that the same tools were made in exactly the same ways, with stone from the same spot, for tens of thousands of years!

The identification of actual fathers and the formation of the patriarchal family could only be achieved by males ruling over the reproductive lives of some women in the context of a system of legal marriages. Legal marriage in a patriarchal family was thus the first form of the second kind of union that is possible between human beings – what I have called the union of common thought. It was a new kind of rational, stable, and enduring relationship – as opposed to the fleeting physical union between a male and a female that only existed for the few minutes of their copulation. This union was established by the freely given rational consent of both partners. This consent presupposes some form of language and it also had to be made in the presence of other witnesses at a wedding ceremony (in case either party changed their mind and later pretended that they had never given their consent).

But of course the first legal marriage did not abolish the far more primitive bond of common matter established in sex. Instead it simply added the new kind of rational union (based on the explicit expression of a common mind between the

partners) to the former. Conflict between the two kinds of union was avoided by simply switching the physical substance that mattered from the mother's body to the father's seed.<sup>6</sup> But either way – whether through a mother's body (in the matristic era) or a father's seed (once patriarchy had been invented) – the people to whom one belonged were determined by that physical connection. If you came from the body of this woman, or the seed of this man, and were made of her/his stuff you belonged to her/his group or family. If you didn't, you didn't. Obviously, the number of living people who can be connected in this way is extremely small, being limited to the offspring of a single woman – whether these are the children of unknown paternity born during the stone ages or those begotten, in patriarchal times, on the one woman to whom a father is legally married.

The evidence of human burial becomes well established towards the end of the stone ages (i.e., between 40–30,000 years ago). Burial suggests an awareness that the memory of such material connections extended backwards in time behind even the oldest living members of any such group. From this point on, the real core of every human society was not understood to be the few members who happened to be alive on earth in the present but was instead located in a vast reservoir of forebears from some original mother (or, later, father) – existing in the memories of the living, understood as spirits in the Underworld. These were the ancestors and they were, everywhere, worshipped as gods.<sup>7</sup>

The primary function of the living members of each family was to serve the needs of the dead – chiefly through the generation of children who would, in an unending chain, keep alive their memory by performing the sacrifices they needed. The living took great care to perform the sacrifices in precisely the ways that had first been specified by the dead – traditions which remained unchanged over the centuries. That is my family. Those are my people from whom I am derived and to whom I belong. In my turn, I will join them in the Underworld and be looked after by my children. And thus, insofar as I and the other members of my family think of ourselves as being human, then, by an impeccable logic, **the members of every other family on earth cannot, by definition, be human – or at least not fully human.** Our ways are not their ways, our sacred hearth-fires are not theirs, our gods are not their gods, our laws are not their laws, and they neither do, nor can, apply to them.

Prior to the establishment of the first cities all the human groupings of the matristic era and all the patriarchal families on earth were, in this way, mutually repellent. This has been true at all times and in all places in the world. Each little group, or later each patriarchal family, had its own unique ancestral progenitor from whom all the rest of had issued by physical generation. She, or, later, he – now divinized – was the historical founder at the core of the domestic worship of each family.<sup>8</sup> Speaking of the earliest evidences of patriarchal

families Fustel de Coulanges, says in his classic, *The Ancient City*, (1864) :

The religion of these primitive ages was exclusively domestic [i.e., of the family]. Religion did not say to a man, showing him another man, "That is thy brother." It said to him, "That is a stranger; he cannot participate in the religious acts of thy hearth [i.e. the sacred fire at center of each family religion]; he cannot approach the tomb of thy family; he has other gods [i.e., divinized ancestors] than thine, and cannot unite with thee in a common prayer; thy gods reject his adoration, and regard him as their enemy; he is thy foe also." ... In this religion of the hearth man never supplicates the divinity in favor of other men; he invokes him only for himself and his. (76)

From all this we see that the family, in the earliest times, with its oldest branch and its younger branches, its servants and its clients, might comprise a very numerous body of men. A family that by its religion maintained its unity, by its private law rendered itself indivisible, and through the laws of clientship retained its servants, came to form, in the course of time, a very extensive organization, having its hereditary chief. The Aryan race appears to have been composed of an indefinite number of societies of this nature, during a long succession of ages. These thousands of little groups lived isolated,

having little to do with each other, having no need of one another, united by no bond religious or political, having each its domain, each its internal government, each its gods. (94–5)

Before the first cities, the largest human groupings that we know of are the late Neolithic communities of Jericho and Catal Hoyuk (in Anatolia). They grew to somewhere between 7,000 – 8,000 people. This represents the upper limit on the size of the group of living members of the most extended possible family or tribe plus its dependents (clients, captives, slaves). Some such condition was the original state of all human beings through the 200,000 years of the old and new stone ages. In other words, for the vast majority of the time our species has existed, humans have lived isolated lives in these innumerable little inward-looking groups that are not merely indifferent to one another but must, in fact, be mutually repellent. As long as the fundamental identity between the members of these societies derives from some kind of material connection – whether the body of a mother or the seed of a father – then those who lack that substance, while they may be similar in a general sort of way, cannot belong to the same group. Strangers are human enough for us to have sexual relations but they cannot be fully human.

No cities were formed anywhere on earth during the stone ages and when they do first appear (at the southern end of Mesopotamia a mere 5,500 years ago) they were never just a

larger version of an earlier grouping of human beings. A city is not a village with a lot more people, nor is it a certain kind, or quantity, of buildings, walls and other structures. At first cities were not even places where humans dwelt so much as they were the homes or estates of the gods and the location of their altars. There is evidence that when cities were first formed people still lived in the country and only came to the city to worship, trade, or – in times of danger – for the protection of its fortified citadel.

In the prehistory of human societies, villages, including even the largest like Jericho and Catalhoyuk, were kin-based, communities without writing whose organization was closely tied to agriculture. Cities, on the other hand, were so large (with at least 25,000 inhabitants) as to be composed of significant numbers of people who were (a) **not kin-related** and (b) who were **not directly employed in the production of food**. These two factors introduced a new dynamic into almost every aspect of life resulting in a far greater level of social complexity and produced relationships amongst humans that had not previously existed.

**Cities were a completely new and different form of human association from any that preceded them.** They can only come into being when humans manage to overcome the mutual suspicion and repulsion of each group or family in order to live together on a permanent basis. Everywhere that this happened **the primary condition for their formation was the recognition**

**of common deities and common stories about them** – stories which the uniting families acknowledged as true and authoritative. The reason why these transcendent gods were crucial to the formation of cities is clear. Such gods could not be thought of as having a human origin. In other words they had to be gods of an altogether different kind from the divinized progenitors (whether male or female) of the world's existing families. These transcendent, immaterial and essentially ideal beings were thought to live in an Upperworld in the sky (rather than being tied to matter and located in the Underworld). They were the particular gods of every city and **in every place on earth these gods were always seen as the source of the laws by which each city was governed.**

These transcendent gods were not material forbears, tied exclusively to particular families, but were understood to be intelligible realities that were recognizable by all members of the species. de Coulanges speaks of this development in this way:

When we sought the most ancient beliefs of ... men, we found a religion which had their dead ancestors for its object and for its principal symbol the sacred fire [of each family hearth]. It was this religion that founded the [patriarchal] family and established the first laws. But this race [referring to the Aryan forbears of the Greeks and Romans who are the subjects of his study] has also had in all its branches another religion – the one whose principal

figures were Zeus, Here, Athene, Juno, that of Hellenic Olympus, and of the Roman Capitol. ... These two orders of belief laid the foundation of two religions that lasted as long as Greek and Roman society. They did not make war upon each other; they even lived on very good terms, and shared the empire over man; but they never became confounded. Their dogmas were always entirely distinct, often contradictory; and their ceremonies and practices were absolutely different. (98–100)

The ancestors, heroes, and *manes*<sup>9</sup> were gods, who by their very nature could be adored by only a very small number of men, and who thus established a perpetual and impassible line of demarcation between families. The religion of the gods of nature [the Olympic pantheon] was more comprehensive. No rigorous laws opposed the propagation of the worship of any of these gods. There was nothing in their nature that required them to be adored by one family only, and to repel the stranger. Finally, men must have come insensibly to perceive that the Jupiter [adored in the worship] of one family was really the same conception as the Jupiter of another, which they could never believe of two *lares* two ancestors, or two sacred fires. Let us add that the morality of this new religion was different. It was not confined to teaching men family duties. Jupiter was the god of hospitality; in his name came strangers, suppliants, ‘the

venerable poor', those who were to be treated 'as brothers.' (103)

de Coulanges describes a kind of progression between family, tribe, and the city. He writes:

The domestic religion forbade two families to mingle and unite; but it was possible for several families, without sacrificing anything of their special religions, to join, at least, for the celebration of another worship which might have been common to all of them. And this is what happened. ... At the moment when they united, these families conceived the idea of a divinity superior to that of the household, one who was common to all, and watched over the entire group. (118)

The first such unions – which may have come together only infrequently for this common worship – comprised a group which the Greeks called a *phratría* (a word related to the Latin *frater*, English, “brother”) – meaning a clan of kindred race. Several phratries might associate as an even larger tribe.

The god of the tribe was generally of the same nature as that of the phratry, or that of the family. It was a man deified – a *hero*. From him the tribe took its name. The Greeks called him the *eponymous hero*. (98)

The crucial distinction came at the next step – where we find several tribes uniting or associating. The day on which this alliance took place the first city came into being.

“Family, phratry, tribe, city were ... societies exactly similar to each other, which were formed one after another by a series of federations ... [in which] none of them lost its individuality, or its independence. Although several families were united in a phratry, each one of them remained constituted just as it had been when separate. Nothing was changed in it, neither worship nor priesthood, nor property nor internal justice. ... From the tribe men passed to the city; but the tribe was not dissolved on that account, and each of them continued to form a body very much as if the city had not existed. In religion there subsisted a multitude of subordinate worships, above which was established one common to all; in politics, numerous little governments continued to act, while above them a common government was founded.

The city was a confederation. Hence it was obliged, at least for several centuries, to respect the religious and civil independence of the tribes, phratries and families, and had not the right, at first, to interfere in the private affairs of each of these little bodies. It had nothing to do in the interior of a family; it was not the judge of what

passed there; it left to the father the right and duty of judging his wife, his son, and his client.” (105–105)

What makes the alliance or confederation that formed the city so radically different from any of the others – even while preserving these formal similarities – is that its gods were not the deified ancestors of present humans ... gods who were, in nature and principle, both solitary and mutually exclusive, and whose abode was in the Underworld. Instead, the gods of the city were these wonderful, intelligible beings, the members of the Olympian pantheon – a kind of society of difference – each of whom welcomed the recognition and worship of as much of humanity as possible. They are the gods from whom humans were thought to derive – not by physical generation, not by the passing on of some kind of matter, but in an absolute, ultimate, and ideal sense – **as having been created rather than procreated.**

Deities and the stories about them that could be commonly accepted could not be involved in the physical matter that separated each family from all the others on earth. This meant that they had to refer back to a time before those men who were recognized as the progenitors of the different families and tribes. This necessity accounts for the stories of creation we begin to find in the public religions of every city. They tell about what happened before the creation of any human and about the creation (rather than the procreation) of the first humans. The earliest of these is stories that we so far possess

is the *Akkadian Creation Epic*, accepted amongst the cities of Mesopotamia. It was followed by the later, and much more sophisticated and thoughtful, account in *Genesis*. Among the Greeks, we find similar tales in Hesiod's *Theogony* which tells of the formation of the Olympic pantheon. All of these insist on the common origin of all humanity in some sort of transcendent deity who is not involved in the matter that distinguishes one family from another. As a corollary these immaterial gods began to bring out the common shared nature that is found amongst all human beings.

The formation of cities was the next significant step after the invention of the patriarchal family in what turns out to have been an ongoing quest in which humans have continuously sought an ever more perfect and complete union of all the members of their species. The consistent goal of this quest was for a union capable of bringing together all the scattered forms of humanity, not merely here and now, but across all space and time.

There is a wonderful consistency throughout the whole of Antiquity. All ancient cities were thought to be created by these transcendent, universal gods who dwell on high, in the heavens. Everywhere it was understood that it is such gods who instructed men to set up cities – according to their design and for purposes which they determine. And everywhere these gods were understood to have revealed to humans the laws by which their cities were to be governed so that humans would

know how to behave in conformity with the will of these complete and perfect beings.

The first cities – which appeared in Mesopotamia around 3,500 BCE – were certainly thought to have been established by such deities. Each city was the earthly estate of its particular god. It was powered, as it were, by the humans whom the gods had created to be their slaves. As the Sumerians understood things, the sole purpose of the creation of humans was to work these estates – these city-states – each of which was to be run according to the directions of its particular god in order to provide him, or her, with food and a life of leisure. In this the Sumerians clearly recognized the concept of an ideal life and were moved by it. But they understood that such a thing could only belong to the gods ... who had attained it for themselves by their creation of human beings as what we now might think of as “smart tools” for them to use. This stroke of genius freed the gods from the external necessity of working for their food and allowed them to enjoy themselves in the wide universe as they pleased. That was the ideal life.

The Sumerian gods were imaginatively pictured as being like us in having particular strengths and weaknesses, in suffering love and anger, in eating and getting drunk, in sometimes making foolish decisions, and in generating by sexual reproduction. But all the same they were essentially different from humanity. Unlike humans, the gods did not die or have material bodies. They had made everything in the ordered

cosmos, including humans, for their purposes. In their eternity, in their immateriality, in their ordering power over the primeval chaos, and in their purposes they were, fundamentally, intelligible entities.

The Sumerians confronted these gods in nature – in the storm, in the reed, in the sun, in water – but what they encountered there they recognized as gods – i.e., as intelligible realities whose real existence was on a different plane from the physical world. Such beings, and the myths and stories about them, were only accessible to thought. They reached across the differences between family and family and between city and city. This meant that humans shared a common identity in the powers of thought possessed by everyone who recognized such beings. This recognition was in no way limited to the members of one's family or tribe. Such (ideal) gods were the basis on which the first city could be built and they were, in fact, the basis on which all the cities of antiquity were actually built. It is in this sense that we say that the origin of cities has nothing to do with their material nature but everything to do with thought.

A hardline version of modern science would claim that such intangible things are matters determined by custom and convention which can, and obviously do, change. They belong to the realm of opinion and constitute a world of belief, or faith, rather than of knowledge. Over and again we find that what constituted knowledge and science for the ancient world

was just the opposite of what it means in the modern world. We restrict the meaning of 'science' to our understanding of the matter and energy that occur in space and time. They restricted it to their understanding of incorporeal spiritual entities that are not in space and time – ideal realities. Our inclination is, perhaps, to retort, “Yes, sure, and the material things that modern science deals with are real – whereas the spiritual things ancient science imagined it was dealing with are unreal.” “After all,” we might say, “just look at what modern science has accomplished with the things the ancients considered to be of limited value and of little interest and you can see that they were totally wrong in their assessment of the possibilities of the knowledge of nature.” But the very fact that the ancient and modern ideas of science are opposed to one another in this way should give us pause. For it could just as well be the case that we are as wrong in our assessment of the things they claimed to know – things about ultimate principles like the gods which we think are, at best, of only limited interest – and at worst, a delusion<sup>10</sup> – as they were about the knowledge of matter and energy in time and space which our science has discovered.

Strange as it may seem, there is no doubt that the first goal of civilization was to come to whatever certainty was possible in respect to **the nature and capabilities of both human thought and its objects**. This seems counterintuitive because we imagine that the first goal of humanity was to ensure an individual's bodily security and well-being – food, clothing,

shelter, and so on. In a sense that actually was the first goal of mankind, as it is the goal of all other living creatures. But by the time civilizations began those goals had long been achieved through the 200,000 year history of stone ages and humans were the undisputed masters of the planet. As such they were living in a kind of paradise where all of their material needs were for the most part easily and surely satisfied and their days a kind of uninterrupted leisure.

What happened at this point was the discovery that, in their common powers of thought, humans have far more that unites them than the material realities that separate them. This only came to be understood less than 10,000 years ago when, for the first time human beings began to think of themselves and began to identify themselves primarily in terms of their mental rather than their physical powers – of their minds rather than their bodies. That moment, when it occurred, changed everything. We have identified that moment with the invention of patriarchy. The road from the new more complete union that was the patriarchal family led swiftly to the invention of the even more complete and more stable union of human beings that was the city. The logic of each is the same inasmuch as both seek to satisfy the mysterious desire of human beings to search out an ever more perfect union of all members of the species through the exercise of their powers of thought and reason.

Speaking in the most general way we can say that the first aim of civilization was to come to whatever certainty was possible in respect to the nature and capabilities of both human thought and its objects which were immaterial realities, (like, say, the definition of a tree – as distinguished from any particular tree composed of matter). By a kind of continuous process of trial and error in which there were occasional flashes of insight and discovery a consensus about the definition of words was finally arrived at.

It principally concerned four things. Our forefathers needed to figure out (i) how words and languages worked and the laws of grammar that governed their use. We take their meaning for granted (being the inheritors of what was first worked out in antiquity) but we need to bear in mind how difficult it must have been to come to grasp something as seemingly simple as the distinction between a tree and a bush, or the identity between a leafy example of either in summer and a leafless example in winter. More difficult things like, say, the meaning of the totality implied in “all” or of the hypothetical contained in “if” or something like the definition of “justice” did not get settled until near the end of antiquity. Plato wrote his *Republic* to answer this latter question about 3000 years after the first city – and yet we know that the concept was present in every city from its beginning although always in a less clear, certain and compelling form.

(ii) It was just as important to determine how numbers worked as well as the laws of mathematics and geometry that

governed their use. Numbers themselves and the relationships of points, lines, planes cubes and spheres were clearly determined by rules which had been made by no man. Nobody had decreed that the square on the hypotenuse of a right angle triangle must be equal to the sum of the squares on its other two sides and yet it was impossible to think or draw a right angle triangle in which this was not the case. None of this was easy to discover and, when discovered, the astounding properties of *numbers raised* even more difficult questions – like whether numbers themselves were the ultimate principles of all things.<sup>11</sup>

(iii) Towards the end of antiquity, with the development of Greek philosophy, people began to realize that they must also understand the nature of their thinking itself and the rules that govern its activities. They asked about the fundamental principle of all human thinking which was eventually laid down by Aristotle as the law of non-contradiction.<sup>12</sup>

And, finally, (iv) they needed to discover the nature of the principles of the intelligible universe which, it turned out, was full of all these immaterial, and so to speak, ideal, realities – words, definitions, numbers, thoughts and the laws by which they interacted with one another. The ultimate principles they recognized as immaterial gods. It took about half of the 4000 years of the ancient world to realize that the ultimate principle of the universe could not possibly be many, nor even as few as two, (say, a principle of matter and a principle of thought or, a

principle of evil and a principle of good), but had to be one. The Hebrews were the first people to come to this realization (with Abraham, around 1500 BCE). By the end of the antiquity this view had come to be shared by thinking people all over the ancient world.<sup>13</sup>

Of course all of this went on in the background behind the more conventional history of the rise and fall of cities and states which go hand in hand with the accepted stories of the gods and goddesses who founded them – from the *Epic of Gilgamesh* at the beginning of the ancient world to the *Aeneid* near its end. Nonetheless, behind all those amazing deeds and the glittering tales that grab our attention – which are like a melody played by the right hand – I maintain that the major accomplishment of all the civilizations of the ancient world was in fact in the underlying ‘ground’ notes played by the left hand through which, over the millennia, these people, collectively, worked out the fundamental structure of the intelligible universe and then informed the government of mankind by it, at first, quite unstably, in Rome, and then, in a more enduring form, in Islam.

### **III – How did the medievals distinguish between themselves and the ancient world?**

What we now call the Middle Ages was, for Augustine, distinguished from the ancient world in that, alongside the laws of such transcendent deities another parallel and

complimentary, but subtly different, law had recently begun to be recognized. The source of that law was found in the world, in history, in an immanent deity. That is to say it was found in the words and deeds of the man Jesus Christ who came to be understood by his followers as the incarnation (= “being made as flesh”) of the eternal Word of God the Father. This Eternal Word of God was understood as the divine agency by whom the whole universe had been created – as when, in *Genesis*, God speaks and the world comes into being: (1:3) “And God said, ‘let there be light’; and there was light.” In all the places where this astounding belief about Jesus of Nazareth became well established there were now two separate and distinct, but equally divine, sources and versions of the law of the same one God governing the lives of a single people – i.e., there was the ancient law that came from the eternal Word of God (which was, most notably, given to Moses as the Ten Commandments) and then there was the new interpretation of that old law by the incarnation of the eternal Word of God who was the man, Jesus.

By Augustine’s time it was widely recognized (by those philosophers and religious leaders who considered such questions) that the God of the Christians was the same reality as Yahweh was for the Jews, as Jupiter was for Rome, as the Good was for Plato, and as the Unmoved Mover was for Aristotle and so on. These were just different names for the same supreme reality that all people had come to speak of as God the Father. These intellectual leaders, were the scientists,

the Albert Einsteins, of their day. The difference was that their interest did not lie, like his, in discovering the structure of matter and the *physical* universe but in discerning the rules which governed the *intelligible* universe of those immaterial realities, rules and laws that inform our words, numbers and thoughts and relationships. Working independently these prophets and philosophers had all seen that there must be an aspect of God the Father which, so to speak, communicated with His creation by creating it in the first place and by governing it thereafter. This aspect Christians called the eternal Word (or the eternal Son) of God the Father. The Romans had called the divine law, in whose name they had been able to unite and rule the known world, *fatum*. This means literally “the thing said”. It was understood as the eternal Word of God that imparted, through the Roman state, the rules by which He wants mankind to be governed.

By late antiquity it was accepted that God had earlier communicated a simpler form of these same universal laws to other peoples through prophets and wise men of His choosing – starting with the most succinct version which was the one God gave to Moses and the Hebrew people in the Ten Commandments. What was revealed to Moses was subsequently worked out as a matter of knowledge by the Greek philosophers Plato and Aristotle. Similar laws were eventually applied to all people in Rome’s universal empire. But for Christians there was now also a new and subtly different interpretation of that ancient law. This was revealed in the words and deeds the man Jesus.

In the first lecture we will look at the surprisingly simple steps by which this extraordinary belief came to be established all over the Roman Empire. These were taken slowly, by trial and error, over period of three hundred years between the death of Christ and Augustine's day. For now, however, we need only see that wherever it was believed that the man Jesus was the actual incarnation of the eternal Word of God the Father and was thus God in the flesh, then, in those places, there would have to be two distinct forms of a universal human community, each of which had, as it were, the approval of the same supreme God. The first of these communities was the ancient state – from its earliest and most imperfect embodiment in the little cities of Mesopotamia right up to the Roman Empire which had incorporated all earlier states into itself.

In more or less adequate ways each of these ancient states sought to provide the conditions for establishing an ongoing society of rational animals – which is to say a society in which each individual member had potentially infinite desires. All states achieved this union by enforcing those laws which everyone recognized as divine. The rules were simple – basically the last six of the Ten Commandments. These lay out our duties to our family (“Honor thy father and mother”) and to our fellow citizens in relation (i) to the lives of others (“Thou shall not kill”), (ii) to the wives/husbands of others, (“Thou shall not commit adultery”), (iii) to the property of others (“Thou shall not steal”), (iv) to our sworn testimony about others (“Thou shall not bear false witness”), and, finally (v), to

our desires about others and their property (“Thou shall not covet thy neighbor’s ox nor his ass nor his maidservant nor his manservant nor anything that is his”). This imposition of divine law allowed human beings with potentially infinite desires to live together in peace and concord rather than in mutual ignorance, indifference and conflict. To a large extent this was realized on a universal scale during the *Pax Romana*.<sup>14</sup>

For Christians, however, there was both this ancient divine law as well as Jesus’ new interpretation of it – who, in his own words, in the *Gospel of Matthew*, (5:17), did not “come to destroy the law (i.e., of Moses) but to fulfill it.” To give just one example of the new direction in which Jesus was to turn to old law we cite his teaching a few verses on where he says:

You have heard that it was said of old [i.e., in the Ten Commandments] ‘Thou shall not commit adultery’. But I say to you that every man who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.”  
(5:28)

Christians defined themselves by their claim that **obedience to the laws of God, as Jesus Christ had formulated them, would bring into existence something new.** It would create a different and better human community than any that had, or could have, existed before because this one aimed to provide everything that a universal community of human beings required if they were not merely to live together in spite of the infinite desires of each but on the assumption that every

person would be enabled to fulfill his or her infinite but innocent hopes – both here on earth and in the hereafter. This community called itself the Church.

The Greek word which we translate as ‘church’ is *ekklesia*. It means, “those called forth”. This seems elitist because it has the sense of those called out for a special benefit from some wider grouping. In this case the wider pool was the universal community of all human beings that was the Roman Empire – from which some were called into the Church for the purpose of achieving humanity’s most desired, and most impossible, aspirations. But the seeming elitism was not really there because the Church insisted that this community and its benefits were open to anyone who wanted them – the key to admission lay in the will of each individual. No one could be made to belong who did not want to be admitted, but no one would be excluded who really wanted to be included. As St. Paul puts it in one of the earliest Christian writings “There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (*Gal. 3:28*). In these three things Paul is listing the conditions that neither the potentially universal community (which was Israel) nor the actually universal community (which was Rome), were able to include. Gentiles were excluded from the former and slaves and women could not be citizens of the latter. Perhaps, you can sense that the *complexity* of any community that recognizes two different versions of the law of the same God is going to be vastly greater than anything in the ancient world

and that the range of human possibilities, both for good and ill, had just been vastly enlarged.

This Church was a new kind of completely voluntary and fully universal community. It welcomed all who wanted to belong, including even gentiles, slaves and females but, unlike the ancient city, it did not start from the presumption of an unbridgeable difference between man and man such that they needed the imposition of divine law to overcome their mutual repulsion in order to live together in their families, cities and, eventually, in a world empire. The church was a community founded instead on the assumption of a deeper unity amongst men made possible through the mysterious action of God in the person of Jesus Christ. Taken together these two communities (the ancient state and the new church) were seen as complementary aspects of a single whole which eventually came to speak of itself as *Christendom*. This was the goal, said the Christians, at which Rome, and Israel, and Greece had all been aiming but had been unable to achieve.

The formation of this amazing project and the relation between these two streams of divine law, and the corresponding communities of the state and the church, constitutes the history of the Middle Ages. They were to last just as long as these two communities were actively trying to work out this very complicated relationship which they were in fact able to do for about 1000 year after the death of Augustine (in 430CE). In 1453 CE the Greek-speaking half of

the Christendom with its capital in Constantinople collapsed from without when it finally fell to the forces of Islam under the Ottoman Turks. During the same half-century in the Latin-speaking West the medieval era had collapsed from within as by then it had become apparent that there was no way on earth in which the pope and the emperor could ever work together in common purpose. By 1500 the Middle Ages were over throughout Christendom.

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This little sketch of the differences between the ancient and the medieval world is only intended to give us a first glimpse of the kind of things we should be looking for. The details and something of the incredible richness and variety of the period will follow in the lectures and readings. From the very first, the Christian mission was the complex goal of preserving and including within itself the best of the ancient world (taking this chiefly from Judaism and Rome) – even as it aimed to move beyond their limitations and failures.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Chimpanzees frequently come together to sleep in one place (fusion) but spend most of their time in small, temporary, groups (fission) composed of a few individuals which can be all males, all females and their offspring, a single female and her offspring or “a mixture of any combination of age and sex classes”. (Van Lawick–Goodall, Jane (1968). “The Behaviour of Free–Living Chimpanzees in the Gombe Stream Reserve”. *Animal Behaviour Monographs* (Rutgers University) 1 (3): 167.

<sup>2</sup> The term (invented by the anthropologist, Marja Gimbutas, in the mid–20<sup>th</sup> c) is intended to be distinguished from matriarchy or the rule of women which would be the polar opposite of patriarchy. “Matristic” points instead to the kind of society in which woman’s concerns define the group and where kinship across generations is established through females but without those females having any need or desire to rule over males.

<sup>3</sup> The closest modern version of this kind of society is likely found in the Mosuo people of Yunnan and Sichuan provinces in China. Yang Erche Namu and Christine Mathieu, *Leaving Mother Lake: A Girlhood at the Edge of the World*, (2003), provides a non–technical description by a woman raised in this tiny society.

<sup>4</sup> See below, note 5.

<sup>5</sup> My account of the invention of the patriarchal family is found in the Introductory Lecture to the HalifaxThinks course on the Ancient World. It is called ‘Before Civilization’ and can be downloaded (free) from the home page of the [HALIFAXTHINKS.ca](http://HALIFAXTHINKS.ca) website (in the Announcements box under Sample Course Lectures). A list of the unparalleled achievements of our Stone Age ancestors is found in § 11.

<sup>6</sup> The classic text on the earliest stages of the patriarchal family is *The Ancient City* (1864) by Fustel de Coulanges. Written in inimitable style it is also an easy read. A copy can be downloaded [here](#): all references are to this edition by Batoche Books, Kitchener, 2001. De Coulanges writes that: “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.” (29).

<sup>7</sup> *The Ancient City*, p. 16. “The Hindu, like the Greek, regarded the dead as divine beings, who enjoyed a happy existence; but their happiness depended on the condition

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that the offerings made by the living should be carried to them regularly.” “All antiquity was persuaded that without burial the soul was miserable, and that by burial it became forever happy.” (p.11) “This religion of the dead appears to be the oldest that has existed among this race of men [i.e., the Aryan peoples of whom de Coulanges was speaking]. Before men had any notion of Indra or of Zeus, they adored the dead; they feared them, and addressed them prayers. It seems that the religious sentiment commenced in this way.” (p. 17).

<sup>8</sup> *The Ancient City*, p. 27. “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.”

<sup>9</sup> The *manes* and *lares* of this paragraph are the Latin names of the guardian deities of the domestic religion and hearth thought to represent the souls of deceased ancestors.

<sup>10</sup> The current high priest of this view is the scientist, Richard Dawkins, whose *The God Delusion*, (2006), states the one-sided modern view most passionately.

<sup>11</sup> Aristotle, in *Metaphysics*, 1,5 remarks that Pythagoreans “fancied that the principles of numbers were the principles of all things.’

<sup>12</sup> In *Metaphysics*, 3.3 Aristotle says of this law “ A principle which everyone must have who understands anything that is, is not a hypothesis; and that which every one must know who knows anything, he must already have when he comes to a special study. Evidently then such a principle is the most certain of all; which principle this is, let us proceed to say. It is, that the same attribute cannot at the same time belong and not belong to the same subject and in the same respect.”

<sup>13</sup> This view is explicitly developed in the neo-Platonist philosopher, Plotinus (205–270 CE). He wove together the thought of the other two great philosophers of antiquity and spoke of the ultimate principle not as Plato’s “Good”, nor as Aristotle’s “Unmoved Mover”, but simply as “the One”. By his day the essential teachings of Jewish revelation, Greek philosophy and Roman religion had come to be seen as identical – as expressed

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in the oft-quoted tag from Numenius of Apamea (in Syria) in the latter half of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE, “What is Plato but Moses speaking Attic Greek?”

<sup>14</sup> The “Roman Peace” (*Pax Romana*) refers to a period of about 200 years at the beginning of the Roman Empire (from 27BCE to about 180CE) when all the known empire was at peace within the newly established Roman Empire.

The image on p.3 is from Wikimedia Commons.