**Western culture and Judeo-Christian judgement**

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**Abstract**

Judeo-Christian Western culture recognizes a legislating, judging and punishing God. The view that a judge separate from man indeed exists, constitutes, among other things, cultural motivation for the pursuit of success, on the one hand, and fear of failure, guilt, etc., on the other. Man fears the consequences of judgement, especially those entailing punishment, and attempts with all his might to succeed in the eyes of the judge. This study’s underlying assumption is that judgement constitutes a deep structure in Western culture and that its religious origins are in the culture’s Jewish and Christian sources. Although religious judgement undergoes processes of secularization throughout the culture’s history, it remains a deep cultural construct; while worldviews are deeply embedded in the religious experience, as Jung (1987) contends, they have a latent capacity for preservation in the secular experience. A genealogical methodology will be applied to examine the concept of judgement. While genealogy deals with the past, its aim is to understand and critique the present reality. The genealogy will scrutinize Jewish judgement (as portrayed in the biblical doctrine of rewards), Catholic judgement and Calvinist judgement, while calling attention to their similarities and differences.

Keywords: Catholic judgement, Bible, New Testament, doctrine of rewards, Protestant judgement

**Introduction**

In this paper, we attempt to examine a deep structure embedded in Western culture – Judeo-Christian judgement – and its contribution to values such as striving for success, and the avoidance of failure, guilt, conscience, etc. This deep cultural structure still exists in Western culture even though its roots are religious and ancient. According to Freud, a culture in which a supreme court with immeasurable power exists, is a culture that bolsters the belief in eventual reward for all those who do good, and punishment for those who do evil (Freud 2000, 23). Also, in modern culture, man aims his actions toward success in accordance with cultural and social criteria of judgement – external criteria that has become normative. In capitalist society, in which success is an important value, many fail to meet this cultural criterion and struggle with the burden of social judgement. In a culture in which success is a supreme value, failure is unbearable. Sandage (2005), who studied the history of those who failed in America from the beginning of the nineteenth–century, argues that American culture viewed success as a product of ambition. In this culture, failure is discomforting, and those who fail tend to blame themselves given their subjection to social judgement. In Western capitalist society, success is the only acceptable criterion for judgement, although society cannot determine what exactly constitutes success (Lyotard 2006, 35). The origins of this external judgment, we will argue, is in religious judgement.

Western Judeo-Christian culture recognizes a legislating, judging and punishing god – God is positioned as an authoritative entity separate from man who determines what is right and wrong; a supreme judge who rewards or punishes human beings for their actions. The idea that a meticulous and strict supreme judge exists separate from man, constitutes, among other things, cultural motivation for the pursuit of success in terms of exterior criteria, and for the avoidance of failure according to the culture and spirit of the times. Man fears the consequences of judgement, especially when they entail punishment, and endeavours with all his might to succeed in the eyes of the judge. Motivation for success is indeed religious, but in time it undergoes processes of secularization. Following Jung (1987), we accept as a basic supposition that when worldviews are deeply rooted in religious experience they have a latent capacity to act as cultural forces and predispositions which, while constantly transforming, are preserved in the secular experience as an identical construct with new forms of expression. Jung opines that our modern–oriented consciousnesses is infused with Christianity (Jung 1987, 66).

This paper presents a preliminary genealogy aimed at understanding the deep roots of judgement in Western culture. Genealogy deals with the past, but its objective is to understand and critique contemporary reality: by exposing the past, genealogy not only challenges all that we assume is necessary for our lives, but also enables us to re-examine the underlying historical values and principles that shape them (Foucault 1977, 152).

Adopting the genealogical methodology as a critical practice leads to Nietzsche’s and Foucault’s ideas; Nietzsche is considered the father of genealogy as a critical methodology, while Foucault elaborated on, and implemented Nietzsche’s methods (Deleuze 2006, 2). The genealogical approach will be applied to a corpus of canonical religious texts in Western culture, focusing on the Old and New Testaments. Religion is the essential mark of cultural identity. Thought systems and cultural values are reflected in the religious doctrines of any given culture. Christian religion and culture were based on the sacred writings of the Jews that were distributed throughout various regions of the Roman empire (Malkin 2003, 44). In Judaism and Christianity, the Hebrew Bible is perceived as a sacred text – as an absolute truth, a product of divine revelation (Hacohen 2006, 23). The genealogy will examine biblical judgement, Catholic judgement and Calvinist judgement, while focusing on their similarities and differences.

**The Bible and the doctrine of rewards**

The traditional doctrine of rewards provides the most common explanation for human suffering – suffering represents punishment for sins committed by man *or* the people, while biblical sin is perceived as the failure of man *and* the people. Man and the people determine their destinies by their actions (Jacobson 2010). Judgement of the individual’s and community’s actions in the present will determine whether the individual or the community will succeed in the future.

Judgement is a principal element in the biblical narrative. Judaism presents a testing and trying god, and the Bible challenges the biblical Jew at every moment. The Jew ‘may be called upon to face a test in which he may succeed or fail to fulfil God’s will’ (Rauch 1978, 10–11). From the Jew’s viewpoint, God sets the rules of justice; but he is beholden by a covenant with the chosen people that includes distinct, comprehensible rules obligating him to act according to the rules of justice he set. Judaism recognizes the limitations of human ability and views God as one who does not command that which the chosen people cannot fulfil.

The election and destiny of the people of Israel imposes upon them the obligation to serve as a paragon and therefore, they are severely punished for every sin–failure; ‘You only have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities’ (Amos3.2).[[1]](#footnote-1) The nation’s and its leaders’ failures and successes determine if they can expect reward or punishment. Those who govern and rule are constantly subject to the sceptre of criticism, and their deeds toward the creator of the universe tested at every moment. In the heavenly court man is remembered and indebted not only for his deeds, but also for his ancestors’ deeds: ‘But the Lord afflicted Pharaoh and his house with great plagues’ (Genesis12.17); not only is the limited family unit a domain of reward and punishment: ‘my wrath will burn, and I will kill you with the sword, and your wives shall become widows and your children orphans’ (Exodus 22.23), but also society at large. Only three thousand people participated in the making of the Golden Calf (Exodus32.28), but the entire nation was judged and punished: ‘Then the Lord sent a plague on the people, because they made the calf – the one that Aaron made’ (Exodus32.35).

There are two parallel doctrines of divine rewards in the bible, the collective doctrine of rewards and the individual doctrine of rewards. The individual doctrine of rewards pertains to the individual’s sin and punishment. According to the collective doctrine of rewards, the individual assumes the people’s destiny, and vice-versa – the individual’s actions may determine the public’s destiny, particularly if the individual is a dignitary, but also if he is one of the people (Weiss 1987).

From a Hebrew perspective, as explained by Mowinckel, the blessing bestowed upon man is no other than a life force manifest as happiness and success, while curse empties life of all goodness (Mowinckel quoted in Weiss 1987, 468). The deed leads to the reward, and the deed and reward are combined in a relationship like causative relationships in natural law. The deed’s value is determined according to the judge’s laws, and to succeed, man adjusts his actions according to the judgement criteria. The divine creator of the universe governs it by way of judgement of, and justice for, the collective and individual. Alongside the collective judgement, in every generation, the individual perceived his responsibility before God as personal and believed that God’s divine providence is personal. Because God’s power is to judge and punish, ‘His Divine Attribute of Strict Justice’ (*Middat HaDin*) is one of the two principal facets of divine nature, it is comprehended as complementing divine grace and mercy, ‘His Divine Attribute of Mercy’ (*Middat HaRachamim*) (Shalom 1992, 168).

Among the appellations for God in the Bible is ‘the judge of all the earth’ – ‘Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?’ (Genesis18.25). The jurisdiction puts man to a test that he may pass or fail. The historical narratives of humankind and Israel are portrayed in the Bible within a framework of judgement. The failures in the histories of humanity and the nation are described in the biblical narrative in terms of reprimand and punishment. That is, the Bible recounts the history of the world from the first generation onward in light of the doctrine of rewards: the original sin and its consequences – the story of the flood, Tower of Babel, Sodom and Gomora, the afflictions of Elimelech, the plagues of Egypt and the desert narratives, followed by the ‘peaks and valleys’ in the chronicles of Israel and other nations. Throughout the narrative sequence, it seems that both individuals and whole generations are punished for their transgressions: ‘for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents’ (Deuteronomy5.9); ‘and I accuse your children’s children’ (Jeremiah2.9). The divine order bestowed upon the universe, the Bible teaches us, is an order of justice and judgement.

Sefer Ha’Toledot scrutinizes the founding fathers, while judging their actions as constituting progress or regression, success or failure, in terms of fulfilling the mission God commanded human beings to fulfil. ‘Like Isaac’s and Jacob’s missions, Joseph and Judah […] their successes and failures in promoting the great promise are bound to their mission to the people propagated from their seed’ (Shavid 2004, 78). To strengthen the hearts of his chosen-beloved, God promises them corporeal success and happiness in the future, once they have fulfilled their mission. As a testing and judging God, he warns them that the promises will be kept in the far future only if the judged fulfil their commitment to follow his path and obey his commandments (*mitzvot*). From a Jewish worldview, man and the community influence future success, and history’s purpose is clearly defined – ‘for there is a reward for your work, says the Lord: they shall come back from the land of the enemy; there is hope for your future, says the Lord: your children shall come back to their own country’ (Jeremiah 31.16–17). Judaism views corporeal success as a sign of God’s grace, while failing in the world obligates man to examine his deeds and where he has sinned, because failure constitutes punishment for his sin.

The Bible’s conception of punishment is established in the first chapters of Genesis. Despite differences between biblical stories dealing with punishment and judgement, a unified concept underlies most biblical narratives, because a direct and contingent linkage exists between the sin-failure and the punishment (Shalom, 1992). The most prominent representation of this in the Bible is in Genesis, chapters 2–12; to date, this depiction remains a myth of punishment that Jewish and Christian theologians endeavour to understand. The chapters presenting humanity’s primordial history depict all of humanity’s hardships as penalty for alienating God, for failing by disobeying the legislating God and the supreme judge. The punishment effects events on both natural and historical levels.

Adam and Eve violate God’s prohibition and enjoy fruit of the Tree of Knowledge. This is the first and most profound transgression; the Jewish reading of this myth does not accept the original sin as signifying the destruction of man’s moral nature, an eradication that Christian dogma attempts to comprehend from this story. Following Adam’s and Eve’s sin, other deeds appear as failings in the eyes of the judge, but in these cases the penalty immediately follows the transgression: as in the first case of murder, followed by the flood as punishment for humanity’s deteriorating morality, and later in the Tower of Babel story.

The Bible describes humanity’s primordial history in a comprehensive framework of judgement, while in the description of history of the People of Israel, the linkage between sin-failing and punishment is depicted in greater detail. Potent myths are the sin of the Golden Calf and its consequences, and the People of Israel’s rebellion in the desert for which punishment is wandering. In all these cases, the connection between transgression and punishment is direct, although it may extend over a long period of time. A substantial ‘onslaught of punishment’ appears throughout the history of Israel’s sins:

But if you will not obey the Lord your God by diligently observing all his commandments and decrees […] Cursed shall you be in the city, and cursed shall you be in the field [...] Cursed shall be the fruit of your womb […] You shall build a house, but not live in it […]Your sons and daughters shall be given to another people, while you look on […]and driven mad by the sight that your eyes shall see. (Deuteronomy28.15–34)

The traditional doctrine of rewards does not illuminate that which Jeremiah complains about, ‘Why does the way of the guilty prosper?’ (Jeremiah12.1). One possible answer is that the evil man’s success is temporary and transient (Jacobson 2010, 13). Job, for instance, does not accept the argument that suffering indicates sin; indeed, he is certain that he has not sinned; he seeks out the causal relationship between his failing and suffering and cannot find it. He feels that he is being punished for no apparent reason. ‘I will say to God, do not condemn me; let me know why you contend against me’ (Job10.2). Job sees what is happening around him as chaos arbitrarily perpetrated by God, as a situation in which God inflicts incessant suffering for no obvious reason. Job demands that God show him the truth, and God presents him with an illogical, disharmonious, immoral and superficial world (Weiss 1987, 390). In the doctrine of rewards, this approach does not associate suffering with sin; rather, it contends that God tries the righteous (e.g. Abraham, Job) by causing them to suffer and not as punishment for their sins. God’s response to Job includes the idea that man’s intelligence is limited and therefore, he is incapable of understanding how the world is ruled; providence does not operate according to man’s moral criteria.

In Judaism, man is not perceived as innately sinful (Weiss 1987). In the Bible, there are no expressions of primordial sin, hereditary sin or a unique, natural inclination to sin[[2]](#footnote-2), but judgement of cumulative sins-failings may entail communal punishment.

Sin as failure and God’s challenging of man are key motifs in the Bible. As noted, man is tried for every sin-failure, and reward and punishment are expected in accordance with the balance between successes and transgressions. ‘Judaism’s religious viewpoint expresses this principle as obvious in that man stands before God’s seat of judgement, that God is man’s magistrate and not only his creator. Man may be forgiven; however, forgiveness does not expropriate the link between man and his deeds’ (Rosenstreich 1972, 71).

The Bible may be viewed as a fundamental document in which definitive and influential ideas on the concept of sin-failure and punishment were crystalized. Although these ideas developed from various parts of the Bible, and surely in vastly different eras, indeed – as paradoxical as it may seem – they functioned as a homogeneous system of ideas in Judaism’s religious and theological history (Shalom 1992, 162).

Judaism presents a testing and judgmental God, and this concept is significantly reinforced in Christianity. The biblical punishment myth constitutes a cornerstone in Western culture, particularly given that Christianity’s concept of sin and punishment is based on the biblical text.

**Christian Catholic judgement**

Judgement in the Bible and the biblical doctrine of rewards focus on the sins and failings of the individual, of the nation and of its leaders. The individual and collective are evaluated for their actions and punished for every transgression. Christianity takes the concept of judgement further. In Christianity, one is judged not only for the deed, but also for the intent; that is, thoughts and emotions (Schimmel 1997, 15).

‘You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, “You shall not murder”; and “whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.” But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister,[[a](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew+5.+21-22&version=NRSV#fen-NRSV-23257a)] you will be liable to judgment’. (Matthew5.21–22)

‘You have heard that it was said, “You shall not commit adultery.” But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart’. (Matthew5.27–28)

In Christianity, God does not judge according to appearance or false impression (*Ma’rit* *Ayin*). In Christianity, God sees the invisible, while in Judaism judgement ensues in retrospect, after a visibly manifest deed is performed. Judgement in Christianity applies also to intent, before the action is executed. There is no need to appear observant of the commands (*mitzvot*), internal purpose is what is significant.

And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites […] But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret. (Matthew6.16–18)

In our view, the Bible is a significant source in the West for the relationship between judgement and visibly manifest success measured in terms of external criteria. Biblical reward is earthly – biblical judgement is carried out in this world, and so are punishments; whereas Christianity transfers judgement to the World to Come. In the Christian world, the great judgement will take place on Judgement Day, at the end of history.

Christians view the Jewish past, which is marked by failings, as preparation for the Christian present. ‘For if that first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no need to look for a second one’ (Hebrews8.7). According to Christian doctrine, the old covenant with the Jews was a covenant with:

stiff–necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you are forever opposing the Holy Spirit, just as your ancestors used to do. Which of the prophets did your ancestors not persecute? They killed those who foretold the coming of the Righteous One, and now you have become his betrayers and murderers’. (Acts7.51–52)

The humanlike description of God, and the many reports of the harsh treatment he inflicted on his people and other nations appeared contradictory to the conception of Christian justice. Christian thinkers deliberated as to how to grant respectability to the new religion, while encountering in the Bible a straying God who instructs a father to sacrifice his son, demands punishment and does not forgive. It was necessary for the biblical past to accommodate the revised Christin doctrine (Osment 1999, 194). Attacking the biblical God, Markion proposed a radical solution – break the link between the two covenants. Influenced by gnostic doctrine, he identified the biblical divinity as an inferior and malevolent God who created the world. Markion argued that the Old Testament is unsuitable for Christians because it was written at a time preceding knowledge of the true God (Limor and Hen 2003, 64).

According to the Christian myth, two kingdoms were created; in one – God and the loyal angels, which Augustine refers to as ‘City of God’ (Augustine 2003, 561–62), and in the second – Satan and his angels. ‘And the angels who did not keep their own position, but left their proper dwelling, he has kept in eternal chains in deepest darkness for the judgment of the great day’ (Jude1.6).

God created Adam and Eve faultless, but even they failed and committed the sin of pride. The desire to succeed and the aspiration to resemble God brought calamity upon humankind. ‘Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned’ (Romans5.12). The Christian myth goes on to describe Adam and Eve’s entire progeny as bearing the ‘great failure’, the primordial sin, and therefore, inherently doomed to hell. ‘[Both] Jews and Greeks, are under the power of sin’ (Romans3.9).

Since then, the earth was rendered man’s adversary. ‘Death, diseases, natural catastrophes, belligerence and quarrels came to the world […] the harmony that existed between man and his body, and within his soul is undermined’ (Kleinberg 1995, 13) and suffering, misery and sin came upon the world. Human beings are inherently inclined to sin, they are all offspring of the first sinful couple; because, the spirit craves sin. ‘For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do’ (Romans4.13).

Despite the transgressions, God chose Abraham with whom he made a covenant, thereby rendering Abraham’s offspring the chosen people. ‘For the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith’ (Romans4.13). Like the rest of humankind, the ancestors and prophets failed and went to hell, and thus hell was gradually filled; for every sin-transgression there was punishment. Humankind was in Satan’s claws; to extract them, an innocent sacrifice was required – a pure man who had never failed, a man who would suffer and die through no fault of his own. According to Christian tradition, only if Satan claims what he does not deserve, can God save humankind (Kleinberg, 1995). Because all human beings sin and fail, it was necessary for God to become a man and fulfil the role of sacrifice; only the perfect God does not fail. ‘For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life’ (John3.9).

On the final Day of Judgement, the end of history, the Great Judgement will occur, God will judge the living and the dead and give each what they deserve: the righteous will go to heaven, and the evil, to hell. The path to salvation is full of obstacles, and the church navigates its way through crises of sin-failure, and offers believers support and guidance (Kleinberg, 1995). According to this theological viewpoint, sinners-failures are punished; as opposed to proponents of the New Testament, the remnant of Israel (*She’erit Israel*) who inherit comprehensive salvation. ‘Very truly I tell you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be judged but has crossed over from death to life’ (John 5.24).

With the invalidation of the Old Testament, the message to believers was that God’s desire was not manifested in external deeds, in the mechanical success of observing the commandments ‘according to the flesh’ (Romans 8.4–5), but rather observance based on inner significance. With the abolition of the commandments, Christianity became a religion very different from Judaism, one that, in contrast to Judaism, does not focus on the daily observance of obligatory and prohibitive commandments (*mitzvot aseh ve al ta’ase*) (Ploser 1960, 75–98). The theological basis for the commandments’ annulment was the doctrine of grace developed by Paul:

The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); because[[a](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Romans+10.8-10&version=NRSV#fen-NRSV-28183a)] if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved. (Romans10.8–10)

In the Old Testament, the motif of a tried people and a judging God is repeated. But while in the Old Testament, there is a meaningful dialogue between God and his people, and amongst members of his community (‘All Jews are responsible for one another’), in the New Testament, the message is individual, the bond between the believer and his God is personal and judgment is private. Every human being is responsible for his redemption, there is neither communal redemption, nor collective punishment for a sinning-failing community. Each believer’s success is personal. The conception of a judging God that originated in the Bible is significantly reinforced in Christianity through belief in the World to Come; still, for Christianity judgement is personal.

The Catholic Christian is engaged in his private salvation and is incapable of effecting the community’s destiny. In Christianity, history evolves in terms of God’s will without affording significance to man’s endeavours whether righteous or sinful. History is a divine decree that does not consider shifts in humans’ deeds, their successes and failings. This is the fundamental apocalyptic feature that distinguishes between Judaism and Christianity; the Jew, as mentioned, exists *in* time, continuously tried for success and failing throughout history. The Jewish Bible, in our view, is the origin of the culture that believes in daily action as conducive to future success. The apocalyptic view, on the other hand, tends to disregard the human element, and strives for absolute verdicts.

There are however, other apocalyptic views that ascribe historical development to mortals’ transgressions and successes.

Jesus said to them, “Truly I tell you, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man is seated on the throne of his glory, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields, for my name’s sake, will receive a hundredfold,[[a](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew+19.28-29&version=NRSV#fen-NRSV-23790a)] and will inherit eternal life. (Matthew 19.28–29)

Believers in this world, as well as those whose deeds are based on faith, will be granted eternal life. The Book of John that concludes the New Testament, contains rich apocalyptic prophecies; nearly every verse in each becoming the subject of many interpretations, paintings, poems and apocalyptic images. The significance of private success is highlighted in this worldview even though it is reserved for the World to Come. The believer’s objective is to be saved and to sit upon the kingdom throne and to live an eternal life in a great city made of sapphire with pearly gates (Lawrence 2003, 21).

Catholic Christianity views competition, pride, greed and the pursuit of earthly success as sins and transgressions, and preaches for a humble life. Christian judgement regards proper life as a life of abstention from pleasures. However, while the church demands of its believers to abstain from corporeal success and to practice humility, the institution of the church does not spurn wealth and corporeal accomplishment. In terms of success, the church suffers from a chronic case of ‘double standards’: on the one hand, it is unrelenting in its own aspirations to succeed in the world, to govern and supervise it, and gain wealth; on the other hand, many in the congregation are extremely critical of its leadership, criticism based on the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5.1–15; Luke 6.20–23), which is clearly opposed to worldly success.

Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust[[a](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew+6.19-21&version=NRSV#fen-NRSV-23302a)] consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust[[b](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew+6.19-21&version=NRSV#fen-NRSV-23303b)]consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. (Matthew 6.19–21)

The dissonance between the dawn of Christianity, the religion of a poor and suffering messiah, and the Christianity of success – the wealthy church and crusades – has been the cause of constant tribulations within the faith. Critics, including among others, Dante[[3]](#footnote-3), Luther[[4]](#footnote-4), Machiavelli[[5]](#footnote-5) and even Nietzsche, accused leaders of the church as being motivated by shameless egoism and the pursuit of self-benefit. According to Nietzsche, the church was constructed out of the opposition to Evangeline (Nietzsche 1996, 287).

In our opinion, the message pertaining to success is concealed as well in the Christian myth in that success is indeed significant, however it is postponed and reserved for the World to Come. Religious worship in this life assures reward for the efficacious diligent who attain the goal. As written in the New Testament:

Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own […] I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call […] our citizenship is in heaven […] the Lord Jesus Christ. He will transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory. (Philippians 3.12–21)

Here, Feuerbach’s (1957) remarks on the round-about way in which religion achieves the very same goal that man hurries to reach directly, are particularly interesting. The essence of religion is to live through dreamlike imagery: religion sacrifices reality for the projected dream, faith in the World to Come is in fact faith in life in the ‘here and now’ (Feuerbach 1957, 47–49). Faith in the future life is not faith in an unknown life: the ‘transition’ is actually the ‘here’. The desire to succeed in the World to Come reflects a strong desire for success in the present.

Out of an acute desire to succeed in the world, the church created a version of Christianity with a simple message based on judgement. This world is no other than a corridor to the World to Come, which is divided into paradise and hell; those who are good Christians will succeed in reaching heaven, all the rest – those who failed – will reach hell. The baptismal basin is the ticket to immortality. Catholic Christianity attempts to dissuade earthly hope; the denial of the hope to realize the pursuit ‘here and now’ prepares man for the transcendental leap of faith (Shoham 2002, 202).

Jesus’s Sermon on the Mount constitutes one of the most influential texts in Western culture. Jesus presents a revolutionary message, substantially different from the biblical narrative. Judaism viewed success in the world as a sign of divine grace, and failure in this world requires that man evaluate his actions, examine where he has sinned, because failing constitutes punishment for his sin. In contrast, Jesus views suffering in the world as the righteous man’s normal course; it is precisely the satisfied and successful who need to examine themselves, the way of this world is that the good are persecuted. Those granted the kingdom of heaven live in this world as strangers and are not swayed by its delights. Jesus views possessions and material success as a hindrance to salvation (Luke 6.27–35; Matthew 19.21–26; Mark 10.17–31; Luke 18.18–30).

Christian judgement occurs in the World to Come and the greatest judgement of all appears in Christianity’s apocalyptic divinations. Apocalyptic thought is a comprehensive view of reality in mythological proportions, while all paths lead to the dramatic, devastating and yet redeeming end. It is of great significance in terms of the apocalyptical personal present: Satan is unruly in the present, but salvation is near, there is hope. ‘And the devil who had deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulphur, where the beast and the false prophet were, and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever’ (Revelation 20.10). When Satan is defeated and God is triumphant, the judgement will commence:

And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Also another book was opened, the book of life. And the dead were judged according to their works, as recorded in the books […] and anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life was thrown into the lake of fire. (Revelation 10.12–15)

Judgement in the World to Come is a trial of success and failure; in Christianity, life is a corridor at the end of which man is destined to reach the true test, he must pass over the bridge of judgement successfully – there all his deeds are evaluated, both achievements and transgressions. Kempis warns the Catholic Christian that nothing is hidden from the scrutinizing eyes of the severe judge. This is a meticulous judge who will not accept bribes and excuses (Kampis 2002, 29).

Unlike biblical judgement delivered in retrospect for behaviour not in accord with God’s laws in this world, Catholic judgement radicalizes and evaluates according to conviction, thought or desire and transfers the great judgement to the World to Come.

**Protestant Calvinist judgement**

The most extreme in this conception of sin and failure are Protestantism and Calvinism that posit judgement before birth. This extremism is manifest in the principle of predestination, although it is not a new idea in Christianity. Arguments supporting predestined judgement appear in Paul’s writings, especially in Romans. Prominent theologians, from St. Augustin to Thomas Aquinas, also believed in the principle of preordained judgement, a stance that the Catholic church did not hold (Russell 2001, 244). Protestantism underscores ideas from two sources – Jewish and Catholic – radicalizing the Catholic idea of preordained judgement, and the Bible’s demand of corporeal life. The Protestant revolution is aligned mainly with the means by which these ideas were disseminated, including the advent of print (Eliav-Fadlon 2000).

Although Luther was not the first to criticize the way the church operated, resonances of his Ninety-Five Theses managed to undercut the Catholic church’s government over spiritual life in Europe for more than a thousand years (Eliav-Fadlon 2001). The theological dilemma between man’s free will and God’s omnipotence underlines all monotheistic religions, however Luther chose the idea that seemingly relieves man from his free will, and deepened the faith in primordial decree as a cornerstone of his doctrine (Eliav-Fadlon 1977). Regarding judgement, the ‘accountant’ God who balances sins and adherence to commands, disappears; in his place is the unimpressionable, absolute, transcendental, omnipotent, omnipresent, omniscient God.

The tradition of purchasing Indulgences, which fulfilled an important role at the height of the Middle Ages, and against which Luther steered one of his objections, was related to free will and to the advantages of man’s endeavours. The medieval church stressed the resemblance between man and God (Heer 1965); as a result, the motivation to aspire and succeed in this world developed – a biblical concept in origin. As is well known, Luther objected to the Indulgences as providing an immediate entrance to heaven. According to Luther, man’s sinful nature is deeper than a list of transgressions – transgressions that can be counted, confessed to and atoned for. Man, in Luther’s view, is inherently corrupt (Baynton 1971).

As to sin and judgement, Calvinism, which evolved in the sixteenth century and developed the faith in primordial judgment and the belief that man is innately evil, is especially notable. Calvinism radicalized Lutheran doctrine and was influential also in terms of the striving for success, and determinism, according to which people are born as part of a Satanic force, and therefore fail even before they are born (Rothenburg 1994). The Protestant churches, albeit their varying emphases, draw on Luther’s conception as it appears in his three treatises of 1520. Luther’s approach is based on the terms of human sin and divine grace (Dillenberger 1962). As opposed to Judaism, which judges retrospectively, and Catholic Christianity, which judges in accordance to conviction in this world, Protestantism and Calvinism present judgement that is not linked to deed and failure, but is rather the product of God’s arbitrary decision, a decision that man cannot understand or rationalize. God decrees each man’s destiny before birth (Shalom 2000). He lengthens and shortens lives as he wills, this one to heaven, that to hell; man must surrender and accept God’s decision (Calvin 1962, 240–241).

Luther’s doctrine and its circulation are widely effective in Western culture (Eliav-Fedlon 2001). Numerous studies point to a cultural distinction between Catholics and Protestants in the US regarding attitudes toward money and diligence, based on Max Weber’s seminal work ‘The Protestant Ethics and the Spirit of Capitalism’ (McClelland 1961). Weber refers to Calvin’s doctrine as ‘this horrifying inhuman doctrine’ (Weber 1984, 49). Weber argues that this is not a new performance on the stage of history , but rather a revival of the primordial sentencing doctrine. This doctrine argues that most people are born cursed and damned, a predicament ungiven to change; neither by ritual, nor by sacrament – there is no way to purchase salvation. Judgement is arbitrary, and man can only inquire as to whether he one of the chosen or not. For believers to frequently possess signs of success, so they can say they are indeed God’s chosen, they must work hard and save. Weber stresses that in Calvin’s doctrine, perhaps for the first time in the history of religions, material success becomes identical to religious success (Rotenberg 1994). Calvin taught believers that their wealth and success in life are proof of God’s love and of the fact that they are his chosen (Rotenberg 2008). Those who fail in life, those who do not possess signs of success, were judged to a life of failure before they were born and they have no way of changing this difficult reality (Rotenberg 1978, 9).

The linkage between religious success and material prosperity does not originally appear in Luther and Calvin. The basis for this idea, as we have seen, is in the biblical text that links desired behaviour in the eyes God with worldly, economic success. Many motifs of material success are interwoven in the books of the Bible as proof of choice; Psalms’ opening lines epitomize this idea:

Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked  
[…] but their delight is in the law of the Lord […] They are like trees  
planted by streams of water […] In all that they do, they prosper.

The wicked are not so […] for the Lord watches over the way of the righteous,  
but the way of the wicked will perish. (Psalms 1.1–6)

The righteous man, he who has chosen to worship God, to study the Torah and obey the commandments, is guaranteed worldly success. In contrast, the evil man will lose his way. Judaism links success in this world with moral religious behaviour; success is God’s gift to his chosen people, his believers and those who follow his Torah. According to Jewish doctrine, God does not act out of arbitrary judgement, (as opposed to Calvinist doctrine), however, it does largely associate success in the world with God’s choice. Therefore, the basis for Protestant ethics that links material success with ‘chosenness’ can conceptually be traced to the Bible, but without the element of God’s arbitrariness. The Jew is given the right to do good in the eyes of the judge and be awarded, while in Luther and Calvin the believer is denied this right. In Calvin’s extremist view this is destiny; and there is a dichotomy between the chosen and damned in the world and one can clearly distinguish between the successful and the failing.

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As we have seen, Western culture is based on foundations that recognize a legislating, judging and punishing God. One who fears religious judgment, especially that which entails punishment, strives with all his might to succeed in the eyes of the judge and is afraid of failing in his eyes.

Exposing this religious worldview enables us to see its cognitive foundation. The deep structures in the culture’s roots have a latent ability to operate as forces and tendencies which, while constantly changing, are preserved in the cultural secular experience of social judgment that sets criteria for success and in turn, engenders fear of failing, guilt, conscientiousness etc. Still, when we investigate the religious foundations of this culture we need to be cautious because generalized arguments about religion are problematic (Biederman 2003, 36–37). Therefore, this article has explored only religious foundations common to Western culture that constitute an ‘umbrella’ under which a wide variety of beliefs and values operate. One can only trace general trajectories and say that following the Old Testament, Christianity (in all its sectorial manifestations) established a culture with moral laws that govern all that occurs in the world.

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1. All quotes from the New and Old Testaments are from New Revised Standard Version. <https://www.biblegateway.com> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The only place in the Bible in which there is an affiliation between sin and human nature, like the Christian conception of the primordial sin, is in Psalms: ‘Surely I was sinful at birth,  
   sinful from the time my mother conceived me’ (Psalms 51.7). Usually man generates the sin as a consequence of the free choice given him. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. In the 13th century, Dante attacks the heads of the church who exploit the poor, and waste the church’s wealth. ‘O SIMON MAGUS, O forlorn disciples, Ye who the things of God, which ought to be The brides of holiness, rapaciously/For silver and for gold do prostitute’ (Dante, *The Divine Comedy*, Canto 19.1-4).  [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Where in Luther? I need to exact reference for quotes [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Where in Machiavelli? [↑](#footnote-ref-5)