

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-76072-0 - Barbarism and Religion, Volume Five - Religion: The First Triumph

J. G. A. Pocock

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

(I) THE FIELD OF THIS ENQUIRY

This volume, the fifth in its sequence, is focused initially on the last two chapters (numbers 15 and 16) of the first volume of the *Decline and Fall*, published by William Strahan for Edward Gibbon in February and August of 1776; subsequently on the controversy they occasioned during the following five years; finally on a selected chapter (number 21) of the second volume, published in 1781. Within this time-frame and frame of reference, the history Gibbon was studying and the historiography in which he was engaged underwent changes so profound that the *Decline and Fall* may be said to have taken on a new character; and as the reception of his work began in the early months of 1776 and has continued ever since, the *Decline and Fall* began to have a history, shaped by others besides its author and not necessarily that he intended for it. Questions of intention and performance, authorship and readership, come to demand attention; and the *Decline and Fall* begins to emerge from the contexts of eighteenth-century historiography, necessary to the understanding of what Gibbon was doing, to situate itself or be situated in others, necessary to the understanding of what he was taken to have done. The author ceases to be the sole master of his work, even while his mastery over its composition may have been increasing.

All these results follow from a single event or moment: that at which Gibbon's narrative moved into the conceptual universe of Christian history, and both the history he studied and the history he wrote became radically unlike what either had been previously. On one level, his narrative began to be dominated by the advent of a new culture – or system of manners, as he might have said – unlike that of the Rome-based pagan empire whose decline (but not yet fall) he had been relating. Christian empire was a different kind of empire, and its decline and fall must come about for different reasons and be a different process from those so far recounted. The

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-76072-0 - Barbarism and Religion, Volume Five - Religion: The First Triumph

J. G. A. Pocock

Excerpt

[More information](#)

neo-classical obsession with the loss of ancient virtue could not continue relating the history of actors practising virtue in an altogether different sense, and if Gibbon had had no more to say than that Christianity caused the decline of the empire, he would not have written five volumes of history to say so. The subject that begins to preoccupy him in chapter 15 is the origin and ascendancy of a new culture requiring a new kind of history. He does not have to invent that history or how to write it, however; the culture itself has written it and is still debating it. Whatever Gibbon's ultimate historical intentions regarding Christianity, he cannot escape, and probably did not wish or need to escape, being part of that debated history.

The history and the debate over it – for debatability, however much feared and resented, was its essential characteristic – was as old as the earliest Christian writings; it had a history of its own, which Gibbon was required to learn and which must be understood if we are to understand what Gibbon was doing. It may be seen as consisting of two interwoven strands: sacred history, meaning the history of God's actions in and upon the world, in which a monotheist God crucially intervened by covenant, incarnation or (later in civil history) the prophecy of Muhammad; and ecclesiastical history, meaning that of the human association charged with continuing and interpreting his intervention and his presence. In Judeo-Christian thought – meaning Jewish thought as annexed to Christian – this history is that of the first and second Israels; in Muslim thought it may be that of the *umma*; but the idea of a church (*ecclesia*) is in so many ways integrally Christian – and so variously and intensively debatable – that it is hard to use the term 'ecclesiastical history' in any but a Christian setting. The most powerful links between sacred and ecclesiastical history arose because the idea of a church was inseparable from that of God's presence, and the idea of his presence from that of his nature. The innumerable debates making up Christian ecclesiastical history therefore include, and are dependent on, the history of an unending debate over what had occurred at the Incarnation; though we are to deal with a project, both Protestant and Enlightened, of reducing that debate to the recognition of a simple message, and writing its history as a record of its departures from that recognition. It is this project which will supply us with the context in which Gibbon's chapters on the history of belief must be situated, if we are to understand either their argument or their reception. It need hardly be added that a project of reducing debate was itself debatable and likely to generate further debate.

Both sacred history – a term almost interchangeable with 'theology' – and ecclesiastical history were ancient and controversial disciplines, pursued

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-76072-0 - Barbarism and Religion, Volume Five - Religion: The First Triumph

J. G. A. Pocock

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

3

by communities of scholars possessed of formidable skills of exegesis and dialectic, long before Gibbon came to engage in them, and it is not easy from the available data to determine the time at which he set himself to master them. A possible, perhaps probable, answer is that he did so by studying the great series of journals put out by the *république des lettres* – those edited by Pierre Bayle, Jean Le Clerc and the Jesuits – in which the output of the printing presses was summarised, excerpted and occasionally reviewed.¹ But these journals belonged to a time two generations before his, and reflect the period, c. 1680–1730, in which the Protestant and Enlightened project just mentioned took shape. At some risk of a hermeneutic circle, therefore, it is possible to suppose that Gibbon learned his Christian history from the sources that were to give it, and even his treatment of it, their controversial character. Certainly, it is not possible to understand the relevant chapters of the *Decline and Fall* without immersing ourselves in that literature. Gibbon sometimes derides it, but his derision is an output of the critical method it taught; and much Enlightened scholarship has been kept superficial by the Enlightened (and Voltairean) error of supposing that what is to be rejected need not be studied. Criticism is unintelligible if we do not know what is being criticised; and irreligion is unintelligible unless we know the possibly complex and sophisticated religion that is being disbelieved.

To understand chapters 15 and 16 of the *Decline and Fall* – their genesis, their intention and their reception – it is necessary to explore a climate of debate, known to Gibbon, to his authorities and to his readers, which had been prevalent in Protestant cultures including England for perhaps a century before these chapters were published. An initial account of that debate will follow. But there is a previous question: why did Gibbon inject himself into the debate, and why did he do so at the point in the writing and publishing of the *Decline and Fall* where we find it?

(II) THE PROBLEMS OF CHAPTERS 15 AND 16

By the end of his fourteenth chapter, Gibbon had carried the narrative of decline from the flawed golden age of the second-century principate, through the reorganisation of that office by Diocletian and the civil wars among the tetrarchs following his abdication, as far as the victory of Constantine over his competitors. He had done so without any mention of Christianity, which plays not even an invisible role in his history so far; but

¹ EEG, pp. 122, 126, 130; below, pp. 193–4.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-76072-0 - Barbarism and Religion, Volume Five - Religion: The First Triumph

J. G. A. Pocock

Excerpt

[More information](#)

he knew he had reached a turning point, and concluded chapter 14 with these words:

The foundation of Constantinople, and the establishment of the Christian religion, were the immediate and memorable consequences of this revolution.²

Standing first, ‘the foundation of Constantinople’ marks the culmination of that movement of empire to power-centres *alibi quam Romae* which Gibbon tells us had ‘started to his mind’ as a subject on the steps of the Capitol in 1764. The ancient city will recur in the narrative from time to time, notably when sacked by Alaric in 410 and when the pope proclaims Charlemagne emperor in 800; and after the fall of New Rome in 1453, Gibbon will carry out the intention, proclaimed in his preface of 1776, of returning to the history of medieval Rome. The concluding chapters of the *Decline and Fall* may be mainly picturesque, but they bring full circle the history of empire Gibbon set out to write. The empire governed from Constantinople, however, is culturally as well as geo-politically unlike that of the Antonines from which we set out. From ‘the establishment of the Christian religion’ it is an empire as well ecclesiastical as civil, whose history is, in whatever measure a historian chooses, that of a church entwined with the civil power and complicating its exercise with questions of belief and authority. We have reached the starting point of what earlier volumes of *Barbarism and Religion* termed ‘the Enlightened narrative’.

It is important to remember that histories of empire and histories of the Church were independent genres not coalesced into a single narrative. The events of the year 69–70 related by Tacitus and the events of the same year related by Josephus took place in distinct historical universes, and even Howel’s *History of the World* – studied by Gibbon as a schoolboy – had not brought church and empire together, though it had tried harder than most.³ In chapter 14 Gibbon related the wars of the tetrarchs without mentioning the alternating persecution and toleration of the Christians, even though Lactantius’s *De Mortibus Persecutorum* was one of his sources; in chapter 16 we shall find him obliged to narrate them again, this time as ecclesiastical history with persecution as a central issue. Sacred and ecclesiastical history can never be sidelined, and is about to take charge of Gibbon’s narrative, even if we think the narrative written in order to demolish belief in it. This possibility must be faced, but cannot be explored until we know what narrative Gibbon is supplying. This in turn we cannot know until we know

² Womersley, 1994, I, p. 445; FDF, pp. 494–6.

³ EEG, pp. 28–40.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-76072-0 - Barbarism and Religion, Volume Five - Religion: The First Triumph

J. G. A. Pocock

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

5

how he goes about injecting a history of the Christian Church into the narrative of the *Decline and Fall*, and for this we must know what history he had read and was using.

To speak of ‘the establishment of the Christian religion’ as an ‘immediate’ consequence of the victory of Constantine might, though it need not, lead a reader in 1776 to expect that Gibbon would proceed directly to relate Constantine’s actions constituting that establishment, and to consider their consequences. It is counterfactually important to imagine what might have happened had he done so. For hundreds of years before his time, imperialists and papalists in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, Protestants and Catholics in the sixteenth and seventeenth – to say nothing of philological critics such as Lorenzo Valla in the *quattrocento* – had debated the consequences of Constantine’s ‘establishment’, some praising him for grounding empire upon church, some for subjecting the priesthood to the empire, some blaming him for granting them too much power. Gibbon could have gone on from chapter 14 to relate Constantine’s actions and pronounce judgement on them, and what he said would have been controversial but predictable, and need not have been scandalous. He did just this in chapters 20 and 21, by which time his fiercest critics (all but one of them Protestants) were as we shall see affirming that if only he had withheld his strictures on the Christian clergy until the age after Constantine, he would have said nothing objectionable, since the drift towards priestcraft and papacy had by then begun. It is a central fact in the writing, the publication and the reception of the *Decline and Fall* that Gibbon did not proceed direct to ‘the immediate and memorable consequences’ of Constantine’s seizure of power, but instead chose to conclude his volume of 1776 with two chapters on the history of the Church before Constantine, with which the present volume is mainly concerned. The period in ecclesiastical history of which he chose to write – though without stating clearly where in Christian chronology his focus lay – was the age of the Fathers, occupying the interval between that of the Apostles and that of Constantine and the Councils. It is important to understand that criticisms of the formation of authority in this period could be read as retroactive, reflecting discredit on the Apostles and even the Gospels. The history Gibbon supplied or implied in chapters 15 and 16 was therefore scandalous, as he knew and at some level intended it would be, and many attacks on these chapters were written, both before and after his second volume appeared. It is also of the first importance in the history of Gibbon’s work that he did not arrive at the ‘immediate and memorable consequences’ of

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-76072-0 - Barbarism and Religion, Volume Five - Religion: The First Triumph

J. G. A. Pocock

Excerpt

[More information](#)

1776 until 1781, by which time his reputation as an unbeliever, who wrote the history of Christianity in order to undermine it as a faith, was irreversibly established. He had allowed this image five years in which to take shape before proceeding with the history of which chapter 14 is the prelude and chapters 15 and 16 a preface and postponement. Had he not written these – as perhaps he was not obliged to do – or (another counterfactual) had he reserved them as an introduction to his second volume,⁴ our image of him at the present day would have been other than it is. The portrait of Gibbon as irreligious scoffer, formed and condemned by his Christian and clerical readers in 1776–81, has been upheld and applauded by his Enlightened and agnostic readers from that day to this. It may well be correct; but how far does it describe his intentions or his performance?

The purpose of the present enquiry is not so much to challenge this portrait – though we must proceed to discover just what he wrote in the two chapters and just what it means and meant – as to examine the place of these chapters in the intention and reception of the *Decline and Fall*. We know that they were written during something of a hiatus or delay in Gibbon's completion of his first volume. In addition to what the conclusion of chapter 14 has to tell us, Gibbon wrote twice to his friend John Holroyd, later Lord Sheffield, on 20 July and 1 August 1775 – the *Decline and Fall* was first published in February 1776 – telling him (as Gibbon's letters rarely do) of the progress of his work. In the earlier letter he says:

from a natural impatience as you well know I have begun to print the head before the tail was quite finished, some parts must be composed, and as I proceed in the reviewing so many emendations and alterations occur,

and on 1 August:

As to the tail it is perfectly formed and digested (and were I so much given to self content and haste) it is almost all written. The ecclesiastical part for instance is written out in fourteen sheet, which I mean to refondre from beginning to end.⁵

These letters challenge our knowledge of eighteenth-century authorial practice;⁶ what for instance is the meaning of 'sheet(s)' where handwriting is

⁴ I must thank the participants in the Sussex workshop mentioned in 'Acknowledgements' for this suggestion.

⁵ *Letters*, II, pp. 80–1. Did he mean to write 'were I not'?

⁶ I am indebted to Richard Sher for correspondence on this subject. Gibbon says (A, p. 334) that he used to send his 'first rough manuscript' to the printer, and revise (apparently also to rewrite) it with the proofs before him. This may be why no manuscripts of the *Decline and Fall* have survived. See also A, p. 202n., for a note by Milman on Gibbon's writing practices, based on information supplied by J. B. Suard.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-76072-0 - Barbarism and Religion, Volume Five - Religion: The First Triumph

J. G. A. Pocock

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

7

concerned? ‘Refondre’ is also less than clear, but seems to support Gibbon’s recollection in his memoirs that

the fifteenth and sixteenth Chapters have been reduced, by three successive revisals, from a large Volume to their present size, and they might still be compressed without any loss of facts or sentiments.⁷

The two chapters were surely never intended to form a separate bound volume of the *Decline and Fall*; but it seems clear that Gibbon was working to revise and reduce them at least six months before the first edition of his first volume appeared. Are we to suppose that they were written under pressure self-imposed or otherwise? We have a contemporary witness who thought that they, or parts of them, fitted badly into what Gibbon was writing. On 3 April 1776, Hugh Blair in Edinburgh wrote to his friend Adam Smith (who was a friend of Gibbon) to congratulate him on the publication of the *Wealth of Nations*. Having done so he continued:

This has been a fortunate season. Gibbon has given us an Elegant and Masterly Book. But what the Deuce had he to do with Attacking Religion? It will both Clog his Work, and it is itself Unhistorical and out of place. I heartily wish him to go on; but for God’s sake let him for the future keep off that ground as much as possible.⁸

Here we have the first judgement that Gibbon was ‘attacking Religion’, in some sense so broad, and evident to its author, as to be unspecified. It comes, not from some angry and ambitious clergyman of the Church of England – as do several attacks on Gibbon’s first volume – but from a leading member of the Moderate party who have become almost synonymous with ‘the Scottish Enlightenment’. We shall need to consider what this and other responses may have meant. But Blair, a specialist in rhetoric and an acute critic, is of the opinion that to ‘attack religion’, whatever that meant – his language does not suggest that Gibbon has gravely shocked him – formed no part of the history Gibbon was writing and impeded its development. Did he think Gibbon’s historical purposes were ‘clogged’ by the two chapters as a whole – there is reason to ask what was their part in winding up the first volume – or only by those parts he thought were ‘attacking religion’? We may never know; but Blair’s words impel us to discover both what made him and others think Gibbon was attacking religion, and separately, what if any historical purposes he thought, or we may think, were being carried out in chapters 15 and 16, or by the *Decline and Fall* as it began taking shape.

⁷ A, p. 308 (Memoir E). ⁸ Mossner and Ross, 1987, p. 189.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-76072-0 - Barbarism and Religion, Volume Five - Religion: The First Triumph

J. G. A. Pocock

Excerpt

[More information](#)

(III) GIBBON AND THE ORTHODOX HISTORY

Whatever Hugh Blair had in mind, there is a series of Gibbon interpretations, running back to his first critics, from which we can tell with some certainty what words there were in the *Decline and Fall* that made his readers believe that he was ‘attacking religion’. They occur in the third paragraph of chapter 15 and introduce it.

Our curiosity is naturally prompted to inquire by what means the Christian religion obtained so remarkable a victory over the established religions of the earth. To this inquiry, an obvious but satisfactory answer may be returned; that it was owing to the convincing evidence of the doctrine itself, and to the ruling providence of its great Author. But as truth and reason seldom find so favourable a reception in the world, and as the wisdom of Providence frequently condescends to use the passions of the human heart, and the general circumstances of mankind, as instruments to execute its purpose; we may still be permitted, though with becoming submission, to ask, not indeed what were the first, but what were the secondary causes of the rapid growth of the Christian Church. It will, perhaps, appear, that it was most effectively favoured and assisted by the five following causes:⁹

which Gibbon proceeds to enumerate and develop in the chapter which follows. Chapter 16 is a study of persecution and, like its predecessor, of the impact of Christianity on Roman culture. But the five causes failed to satisfy his Christian readers, and indeed convinced them that he meant to attack religion by introducing them. Such readers were not seeking to satisfy their ‘curiosity’ – to them not a virtue but a possibly pagan vice – but to sustain conviction. To them the truth of the Christian revelation was not merely ‘obvious’, ‘satisfactory’ and ‘convincing’, but a living force, a divine word that had been and to some still was incarnate in the world and had made its way in history through its inherent and continuously revealed power. They expected to be told, and to be edified by being told, that their religion had been spread, not merely by the ‘evidence’ for it, but by itself and its power over the human spirit (a term for which the Enlightened use of *l’esprit humain* was not an equivalent but a substitution). They also wished to assign a special role to ‘Providence’, a divine power operating when direct inspiration had ceased. They thought that Gibbon was not acknowledging but implicitly denying the spiritual history of the Word, and they suspected that his five secondary causes offered as many secular processes intelligible to the historian, which he intended to substitute for it. Whether this is what he was doing in chapter 15 is a question deferred

⁹ Womersley, 1994, I, p. 447.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-76072-0 - Barbarism and Religion, Volume Five - Religion: The First Triumph

J. G. A. Pocock

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

9

until that chapter is analysed; but we can already see that his critics were offended less by what he said than by what he did not say, and by the tone and sentence structure of the passages in which he omitted saying it. There is a story to be told in which Gibbon's tone and style come to be seen as the main vehicle of his 'attack on religion', and the main evidence for it.

This is a history of reception as well as of intentions, and we need to situate the latter in the context provided by the former. As recent scholarship has made clear, Gibbon knew that he was about to give offence, and between the first and second editions of volume 1 made emendations intended to refine the ways in which he would do so.¹⁰ But in order to understand the reception he received, and indeed what he wrote in the offending chapters, we need to go in sufficient depth into what was in his and his readers' minds; and it is a question whether the simple opposition between sacred and secular history is enough to account for the texts before us. The context is one of sacred and ecclesiastical history. In the chapters to follow, we shall explore in some detail – following the practice of these volumes – the major texts of history to which Gibbon made reference; but by way of introduction, it is necessary to make an initial statement of the ways in which canonical Christianity took the form of a history, to which ecclesiastical historians contributed, and which was being radically affected by changes in ecclesiastical historiography, as something in the nature of a Protestant Enlightenment took shape in the century preceding the *Decline and Fall*.¹¹ Gibbon's reading, and arguably his thinking, were shaped by texts belonging to the first half of that century.

There was a history, catholic, orthodox and up to a rather early point canonical, in which a divine being identified as the Son of God had appeared in Roman-controlled Judea at the time when Augustus and Tiberius were establishing the principate. He had appeared in fulfilment of the prophecies uttered at and before the time of the Babylonian captivity of the Jews, but as he offered universal redemption rather than national liberation, the Jews of the Second Temple had failed to recognise him as the prophesied Messiah, and had incurred expulsion from sacred and secular history by putting him unjustly to death – a measure taken by Roman authorities at Jewish instigation. During his life on earth he had worked miracles as a sign of his divine authority, in addition to preaching a morality which was part of his offer of redemption. After his crucifixion he rose from the dead – an act far beyond a miracle, since it offered all men

¹⁰ Womersley, 2002, ch. 1, pp. 13–42.

¹¹ For a proposal concerning the nature of this Enlightenment, see Pocock, 2008.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-76072-0 - Barbarism and Religion, Volume Five - Religion: The First Triumph

J. G. A. Pocock

Excerpt

[More information](#)

the resurrection of the body – and ascended to heaven, leaving his Apostles to form a church charged with continuing his mission and in some sense his presence. Ecclesiastical history could be said to begin either from that moment, or from his earlier gathering of the disciples about him and his charge to them.

On the day of Pentecost the Apostles had been endowed by God's Spirit with powers miraculous in the broad sense that they were more than natural, and in the specific sense that they included the authority to work signs and wonders displaying their divine mission. A special revelation had increased their number by the addition of Paul, an Apostle unlike them in being versed in Greek as well as Jewish learning, under whose leadership, and Peter's, the apostolic mission had been extended to the Gentiles: primarily Greeks as recorded in the Acts and Epistles, but also Latins if one followed (as Protestants did not) the tradition that Peter had moved to Rome, where he exercised a supremacy given him by Christ in person. The literature later recognised as canonical broke off at the moment when Paul undertook a journey to Rome, where tradition but not canon said he met with Peter and both suffered death in a persecution under Nero.

By steps which seem to have been of limited concern to Gibbon, the canon forming the New Testament came to consist of the Four Gospels,¹² the truncated and perhaps misnamed Acts of the Apostles, a number of epistles mostly attributed to Paul, and in a class of its own – to which alone Gibbon pays attention in what he has to say about the formation of the canon – the Apocalypse or Revelation. It is of central importance to the history of ecclesiastical history that these do not form a canonical narrative of the apostolic period as a whole, so that the history of the Church had to be composed from evidence part of which stood in need of construction and interpretation. Marginal to the canonical narrative of Christ's words, actions and sufferings, contained in the four recognised Gospels, there began to appear statements as to his nature, in which he was not only the Son of God but his incarnate Word, in a sense uttered by the Apostles and after them. These statements were to be found in certain of the Epistles of Paul and even more crucially in the opening words of the Fourth Gospel, said to have been composed by the Apostle John at Ephesus years later. They therefore appear late in the narrative of Christian history both sacred and ecclesiastical, and it comes to be a question how far the canon presents these statements of Christ's nature as the redemptive Word revealed in him

¹² I give this word an initial capital where the four canonical books are intended, using the lower case to refer to the message of Christ in general.