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

J. G. A. Pocock

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BARBARISM AND RELIGION

Volume Five

Religion: The First Triumph

This fifth volume in John Pocock's acclaimed sequence on *Barbarism and Religion* turns to religion and the controversy caused by Edward Gibbon's treatment of the early Christian Church. Examining this controversy in unprecedented depth, Pocock challenges the assumption that Gibbon wrote with the intention of destroying belief in the Christian revelation, and questions our understanding of the character of 'enlightenment'. Reconsidering the genesis, inception and reception of these crucial chapters of the *Decline and Fall*, Pocock explores the response of Gibbon's critics, affirming that his reputation as an unbeliever was established before his history of the Church had been written.

The magnitude of *Barbarism and Religion* is already apparent. *Religion: The First Triumph* will be read not just as a remarkable analysis of the making of the *Decline and Fall*, but also as a comment on the collision of belief and disbelief, a subject as pertinent now as it was to Gibbon's eighteenth-century readers.

J. G. A. POCOCK was born in London and brought up in Christchurch, New Zealand, and educated at the Universities of Canterbury and Cambridge. He is now Harry C. Black Professor of History Emeritus at the Johns Hopkins University and an Honorary Fellow of St John's College, Cambridge. His many seminal works on intellectual history include *The Ancient Constitution and the Feudal Law* (1957, second edition 1987), *Politics, Language and Time* (1971), *The Machiavellian Moment* (1975, second edition 2003), *Virtue, Commerce and History* (1985), *Political Thought and History* (2009) and five volumes in an ongoing sequence, initiated in 1999, on *Barbarism and Religion*. He has also edited *The Political Works of James Harrington* (1977) and *Burke's Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1987), as well as the collaborative study *The Varieties of British Political Thought* (1995). A Corresponding Fellow of the British Academy and of the Royal Historical Society, Professor Pocock is also a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and of the American Philosophical Society. He was appointed an Officer of the Order of New Zealand Merit in 2002.

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The progress of Christianity has been marked by two glorious and decisive victories: over the learned and luxurious citizens of the Roman empire; and over the warlike barbarians of Scythia and Germany, who subverted the empire and embraced the religion of the Romans.

Decline and Fall, chapter 37

To the memory of Richard H. Popkin (1923–2005) and
Joseph M. Levine (1931–2007)

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Preface

The problematics of this volume are set out in the Introduction. It enquires into Gibbon's intentions, and their consequences, in publishing chapters 15 and 16 of the *Decline and Fall* at the end of its first volume in 1776.¹ It raises the question, first asked by a contemporary, of how these chapters are related to his project as a historian, and goes so far as to ask whether he was as yet fully master of his intentions and the means by which he intended to pursue them. It will be a premise of this volume that he was from this point obliged to operate within a long-established context, that of ecclesiastical history, and the first six chapters consist of a study of the major historians in this field of whom he made use.

The primary question asked is what Gibbon intended by publishing two chapters on Christianity before Constantine, before proceeding to its establishment as the religion of empire. The second half of the volume is devoted to the context in which he published these chapters, what history he narrated and began to construct in them, and how his first readers understood and responded to them. This will be the history of a controversy – one which has never yet been studied in detail – and a further affirmation will be that Gibbon's reputation as an unbeliever was established before his history of the Church in the empire had been either written or published. By the time it appeared, his readers were able to assume, not only that he was an unbeliever, but that he was writing history with the intention of destroying Christian belief. This assumption remains current today. There is a history of the *Decline and Fall's* reception that could be written, recounting how the Christian belief that he was furthering a general 'deist' offensive – one which was indeed going on – mutated into an agnostic belief that he was taking part in just such an offensive, approved of by agnostics under the name of 'Enlightenment'. To this day it remains possible for publishers wishing to introduce their public

¹ For an earlier statement of this enquiry, see FDF, 'Epilogue', pp. 489–500.

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to the *Decline and Fall* to select chapters 15 and 16 as the key to the work as a whole, stating the purpose for which it was written.²

This volume challenges that selection, largely by challenging the still prevalent assumption that a more or less unified ‘Enlightenment’ or ‘rationalism’ was conducting a unified offensive against a Christianity summarised, and too often dismissed, under the single heading of ‘orthodoxy’ or ‘tradition’. Such offensives were indeed going on; but a study of the contexts in which chapters 15 and 16 were written and read, and are to be understood historically, becomes that of a debate as much within Protestant and English Christianity as directed against it. From this we have to learn how Gibbon framed his intentions, whatever they may have been, and how they were read and interpreted, whether or not these interpretations were just.

This context may be termed an ‘Enlightenment’, though to do so is to accept the premise that this noun may be used in several ways, denoting processes arising from various historical situations, which it may or may not be possible to unite under a single heading. For the present it seems less important to pursue that possibility than to study the various ‘Enlightenments’ as movements occurred which induce us to call them by that name. In recent scholarship there has developed an interest in the interactions of theories of the origins of society based on natural philosophy with accounts of that process based on Old Testament accounts of the fall of man, the universal deluge and the confusion of tongues.³ The interaction between these two discourses is proving more complex and rewarding of study than was previously supposed. The origins of the Christian Church, however – the subject with which Gibbon went some way towards involving himself – were based less immediately on the Old Testament than the New. They recounted less the truths revealed to Moses concerning the origins of the world and the history of humanity, than the revelation of God in the person of Christ at a moment in the history of Rome, its empire and Israel after the Captivity concerning which there existed a great many written narratives recounting complex civil histories. The revelation according to Moses could be challenged by providing philosophic natural histories of human society; the revelation of God in Jesus Christ offered to transcend and transform a civil history, already known, which it did not deny. That history could be rewritten with the aid of philosophical concepts of human nature and society, but these did not do away with civil history and its problems. The question regarding Gibbon is whether the history he

² E.g. Gibbon, 2004.³ Robertson, 2005.

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offered in chapters 15 and 16 was to be understood as proceeding without reference to a revelation, and whether it offered to explain belief in the revelation of Jesus Christ as a phenomenon in the history of the human mind.

The English – indeed Church of England – Enlightenment in which Gibbon's two chapters were received and perhaps originated was initially a clerical and even conservative movement, in which the revelation and divinity of Jesus need not be denied and were for the most part affirmed and defended. It can be retained within a pattern of Enlightenment by pointing out that the overmastering English need to insist that Christian belief did not overturn civil order led to views of Christ's nature in which grace became subordinate to law, the divine to the human and the Son to the Father. Ancient Arian and modern Socinian doctrines were widely held, and liberal and tolerant attitudes towards the debate over them more widely still. Recoil towards the Trinitarianism still required by law was, however, the regular response to such doctrines, and it is of the greatest importance to remember that even, perhaps especially, those who thought Christ divine in mission rather than substance still considered his performance of miracles and fulfilment of prophecies necessary proofs of his mission. It was common to find unitarians who were also millenarians, and Gibbon's critics demanding that the spread of Christianity be due to its character as revelation were by no means all of the high Trinitarian persuasion.

There were a number of orthodox and less orthodox positions that could be adopted and by no means all of them implied a descent towards unbelief. Beyond them, however, there did lie several such dangers: a unitarianism that denied Christ's divinity altogether, a deism that implied a philosophical monotheism without revelation, an Epicurean or Spinozist merger of spirit with matter, or – probably closest to Gibbon's own position – a Humean scepticism which denied that the human intellect could know God while conceding that it could never be prevented from affirming him. Among all these possibilities the critical intellect might stop where it chose, but could never be free of the suspicion that it meant to go further and all the way. Conyers Middleton was and remains so accused, and so of course was Gibbon. All his critics demanded to know whether he thought the Christian religion had been revealed by God, and nearly all of them concluded, or assumed, that he did not. The debate was complicated, however, by the circumstance that several of them were content with 'evidences' – miracles and prophecies – sufficient to show that a revelation had occurred, without specifying its content or its revelatory force.

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Gibbon disturbed his critics by acknowledging revelation in language so minimal as to leave room for the suspicion that he did not believe what he was saying. He obstinately and maliciously observed silence on this matter, and the more he observed it the more his readers assumed that it conveyed, and was intended to convey, an absolute and destructive scepticism on all points of Christian belief. He distinguished between a 'primary' cause for the spread of Christianity – either a revelation or the conviction that one had occurred – and 'secondary' causes, of which some encouraged that conviction while others gave it dynamic force in particular ways, and his critics suspected that they were designed either to replace the primary cause or to explain it away. He adopted a tone which his Christian readers denounced as a 'sneer' and his agnostic admirers have applauded as 'irony'. In both cases – the argument differs very little – the tone is held to operate against all beliefs without significant limits; a consequence of Gibbon's refusal to argue against central beliefs, whatever he might say against the peripheral. The question whether a revelation had occurred was not examined in Gibbon's two chapters.

The reception of these chapters is examined in a chapter of the present work which explores in some detail what his critics in fact said, argued and believed. This study has not, as far as I know, been undertaken in this degree of fullness until now, and it has been rightly pointed out that the tradition of Gibbon scholarship has assumed that these writers, being orthodox, are not to be taken seriously. This volume accords them parity of esteem and studies them in detail because this is how history is supposed to be written. We live at a time when militant theism and atheism are once more in conflict, in which the relevant chapter will no doubt be read as participant; the reader is desired to read it as history. He or she is also reminded that this volume is a study of eighteenth-century discourse on ecclesiastical history. The vast weight and brilliant light of modern scholarship on late antiquity and primitive Christianity does not appear in it because it has other purposes.

The *Rezeptionsgeschichte* of the *Decline and Fall* naturally raises the question whether Gibbon's readers interpreted his intentions correctly. Here we encounter the circumstance that his intentions as regards religion were interpreted before his history of the Church had begun, since it is not immediately apparent what his account of the Church before Constantine had to do with his still unwritten history of the Church after him. Several of his critics thought he had merely antedated a slide into corruption and popery which had begun later, and that much of what he said was wholly applicable to a later period. It is therefore a question why he wrote and

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published chapters 15 and 16 when and as he did; and this leads into the larger question (first raised by Hugh Blair in April 1776) what his apparent disbelief in Christianity has to do with the history of church and empire he was now beginning to write. The treatment of that question in this volume suggests that it was only in chapter 21, published five years later, that he discovered means of presenting the belief in revelation as historical fact, and that chapter 15 with its separation of primary from secondary causes was a false beginning. The further implication is that it is an error to regard the two chapters of 1776 as the key to the *Decline and Fall* or its central assertion. By chapter 21 he had begun shaping a history of the Christian Church along lines owing much to David Hume, whose unbelief he shared but did not write history to promote. This chapter takes Christian belief seriously without asserting it or its contrary. If he had found ways of adopting that tone in chapter 15, a great deal of critical literature might have remained unwritten.

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Acknowledgements

(I)

In writing this book, I have received help of many kinds from many friends and sources. I wish to begin by thanking my graduate assistants, Katherine Moran and Kenneth Sheppard, for their hard work, reliability and generosity in completing the typescript. The History Department of the Johns Hopkins University continued to support this enterprise and make it possible.

The reading and research necessary were carried out in the Special Collections Section of the Milton S. Eisenhower Library of the Johns Hopkins University; the Folger Shakespeare Library and the Library of Congress, in Washington, DC; and the William Andrews Clark Memorial Library of the University of California at Los Angeles. The last-named university appointed me to a Clark Visiting Professorship in the spring of 2002.

I have at different times been able to discuss aspects of this project at the Heyman Center of Columbia University, Harvard University and the University of Chicago, as well as at Johns Hopkins. I owe a special debt to the Provost and Fellows of King's College, Cambridge – in particular Istvan Hont – and to the participants in a work-in-progress seminar I was privileged to conduct for three days in May 2008; and similarly to the Sussex Centre for Intellectual History – in particular Knud Haakonssen and Richard Whatmore – for a workshop at the University of Sussex in the same month. The participants in both made invaluable comments and I thank them for their help and support.

At other times than these I have been able to discuss particular topics and receive criticism and support from many colleagues. They are of course not responsible for what I have done with their counsel. A special place belongs to David Womersley and Brian Young. With them I wish to name Clifford Ando, Christopher Celenza, Jonathan Clark, Patricia

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Craddock, Robert Mankin, John Marshall, James Moore, Nicholas Phillipson, Orest Ranum, John Robertson, Andrew Sharp, Patricia Springborg, Mack Walker, Richard Whatmore and Martha Zebrowski.

In conclusion I once again thank Richard Fisher and his staff at the Cambridge University Press for their help and encouragement over the years; and as always my wife, Felicity Pocock, for reading the proofs as well as for more than words can describe.

(II)

This volume is dedicated to the memory of two historians whose lives ended while it was in preparation. Richard Popkin opened up the history of scepticism both Jewish and Christian from Erasmus to Spinoza; Joseph Levine that of humanist scholarship and the relation of ancients to moderns from Erasmus to Gibbon. The presence of each in the text of this volume is so great that references have hardly been necessary and could not have done them justice. I cannot release it to the public without saluting them both.

(III)

Preliminary studies for this volume have appeared from time to time: 'Superstition and enthusiasm in Gibbon's history of religion', *Eighteenth-Century Life*, 8, 1 (1982), pp. 83–94; 'Edward Gibbon in history: aspects of the text, in *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, vol. III: religion and philosophy', *The Tanner Lectures on Human Values*, xi (Salt Lake City, University of Utah Press, 1990), pp. 338–64; 'Il linguaggio della teologia moderata e il *Decline and Fall* di Gibbon', in Marco Geuna and Maria Luisa Pesante (eds.), *Passioni, interessi, convenzioni: discussioni settecenteschi su virtù e civiltà* (Turin, Franco Angeli, 1992), pp. 245–66; 'Within the margins: the definitions of orthodoxy', in Roger D. Lund (ed.), *The Margins of Orthodoxy: Heterodox Writing and Cultural Response, 1660–1750* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 33–53; 'Enthusiasm: the antiself of Enlightenment', in Lawrence E. Klein and Anthony J. La Vopa (eds.), 'Enthusiasm and Enlightenment in Europe, 1650–1800', *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 60, 1–2 (1998), pp. 7–28; 'Gibbon and the primitive church', in Stefan Collini, Richard Whatmore and Brian Young (eds.), *History, Religion, and Culture: British Intellectual History, 1750–1950* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 48–68; 'Gibbon and the history of heresy', in John Christian Laursen (ed.), *Histories of Heresy in*

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Early Modern Europe: For, Against and Beyond Persecution and Toleration (New York and Basingstoke, Palgrave, 2002), pp. 205–20; ‘Perceptions of modernity in early modern historical thinking’, *Intellectual History Review*, 17, 1 (2007), pp. 55–63; ‘Historiography and Enlightenment: a view of their history’, *Modern Intellectual History*, 5, 1 (2008), pp. 83–96; ‘Gibbon and the invention of Gibbon: chapters 15 and 16 reconsidered’, *History of European Ideas*, 35, 2 (2009), pp. 209–16.

I wish to thank the editors of these volumes and journals for the opportunity to develop the theses I here put forward.

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Advice to readers

This book is a study of the history of eighteenth-century thinking about the history of the early Christian Church. It does not attempt to make, though it may not escape implying, statements about the latter history or its recent historiography. Readers, Christian or non-believing, who may find themselves involved in analyses of thought they consider obsolete or false, are asked to remember that they are studying the history of a time when such thinking was offered and read seriously. In our time, when theism and atheism are again in direct collision, this warning seems necessary.

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- A *The Autobiographies of Edward Gibbon, Printed Verbatim from Hitherto Unpublished MSS, with an Introduction by the Earl of Sheffield.* Edited by John Murray. Second edition. London, John Murray, 1897.
- BAM *Bibliothèque ancienne et moderne. En XXIV Volumes. . . Par Jean Le Clerc.* Amsterdam, 1718–. Geneva, Slatkine Reprints, 1968.
- BSE J. G. A. Pocock: *Barbarism and Religion*, volume IV: *Barbarians, Savages, and Empires.* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2005.
- BUH Jean Le Clerc: *Bibliothèque universelle et historique. Réimpression de l'édition d'Amsterdam, 1686–1693.* Geneva, Slatkine Reprints, 1968.
- DF Edward Gibbon: *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire.* Cited by volume, chapter and notes.
- DNB *The Dictionary of National Biography.* Edited by Sir Leslie Stephen and Sir Sidney Lee. London, George Smith 1883–; Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1917–.
- De Rebus* J. L. Mosheim: *De Rebus Christianorum ante Constantinum Magnum Commentarii.* Helmstedt, 1753.
- EE Patricia Craddock (ed.): *The English Essays of Edward Gibbon.* Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1972.
- EEG J. G. A. Pocock: *Barbarism and Religion*, volume I: *The Enlightenments of Edward Gibbon.* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999.

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- EGLH Patricia Craddock: *Edward Gibbon, Luminous Historian, 1772–1794*. Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989.
- Empereurs* Sebastien Le Nain de Tillemont: *Histoire des empereurs et des autres princes qui ont régné durant les six premiers siècles de l'église, de leurs guerres avec les juifs, des écrivains profanes et des personnes illustres des leurs tems*. Second edition, in 3 volumes. Brussels, 1732.
- FDF J. G. A. Pocock: *Barbarism and Religion*, volume III: *The First Decline and Fall*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003.
- HE *Historia Ecclesiastica duorum primorum a Christo nato saeculorum a veteribus monumentis depromta a Joanne Clerico*. Amsterdam, 1716.
- HMM Isaac de Beausobre: *Histoire critique de Manichée et du Manichéisme: où l'on trouve aussi l'Histoire de Basilide, de Marcion, de Bardesanes, etc., et de leurs sentimens, et où on découvre l'origine de plusieurs cultes, cérémonies, etc., qui sont introduits dans le christianisme*. 2 volumes: Amsterdam, 1734–9. Facsimile edition, Leipzig, Zentralantiquariat der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik, 1970.
- Institutiones* J. L. Mosheim: *Institutionum historiae ecclesiasticae antiquae et recentioris libri quattuor ex ipsis fontibus insigniter emendati, plurimis accessionibus locupletati variis observationibus illustrati*. Helmstedt, 1755.
- Journal A* D. M. Low (ed.): *Gibbon's Journal to January 28th, 1763: My Journal I, II, and III, and Ephemerides. With Introductory Essays*. London, Chatto and Windus; New York, W. W. Norton, 1929.
- Journal B* Georges A. Bonnard (ed.): *Le journal de Gibbon à Lausanne, 17 août 1763–19 avril 1764*. Lausanne, Librairie de l'Université, 1945.
- Letters* J. E. Norton (ed.): *The Letters of Edward Gibbon*. 3 volumes. London, Cassell, 1956.
- Library* Geoffrey Keynes (ed.): *The Library of Edward Gibbon*. Second edition. [Godalming], St Paul's Bibliographies, 1980.

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- Maclaine, 1826 *An Ecclesiastical History, Ancient and Modern: In which the Rise, Progress, and Variations of Church-Power, are Considered in their Connexion with the State of Learning and Philosophy, and the Political History of Europe during that Period: by the Late Learned John Laurence Mosheim, D. D. Chancellor of the University of Göttingen: Translated from the Original Latin . . . by Archibald Maclaine, D. D. A New Edition in Six volumes . . . by Charles Coote, LL.D. . . .* London, Cadell, Rivington et al., 1826.
- Mémoires* Sebastien Le Nain de Tillemont: *Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire ecclésiastique des six premiers siècles . . .* 16 volumes. Paris, 1693–1712.
- MW Lord Sheffield (ed.): *The Miscellaneous Works of Edward Gibbon, Esq., with Memoirs of his Life and Writings, Composed by Himself: Illustrated from his Letters, with Occasional Notes and Narrative. A New Edition, with Considerable Additions.* 5 volumes. London, John Murray, 1814.
- NCG J. G. A. Pocock: *Barbarism and Religion*, volume II: *Narratives of Civil Government*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999.
- ODNB *The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. Edited by H. C. G. Matthew and Brian Harrison. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2008– .
- Womersley, 1994 David Womersley (ed.): *Edward Gibbon: The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. 3 volumes. Harmondsworth, Allen Lane, Penguin Press, 1994.