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0521633451 - Barbarism and Religion: The Enlightenments of Edward Gibbon, 1737-1764 -
Volume One

J. G. A. Pocock

Excerpt

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Introduction

This volume, and its successor, are the first of a number of studies which I hope to publish with Edward Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* at their centre. At times (though not in this volume) my focus will be on the text of that great work, and at others on texts to which it makes allusion that supply contexts in which passages of the *Decline and Fall* may usefully be read. This widening of focus is intended to lead to a portrayal of the writing of history and other intellectual activities in the setting of the eighteenth century, in which larger context both Gibbon's history and his life as a historian may be situated, so that we understand the *Decline and Fall* as an artefact of its age and culture. At the end of the twentieth century, there are still specialists in some of the many fields which Gibbon studied who can examine and even evaluate his performances in them, treating him as a contemporary and equal who may be paid the compliment of criticism;¹ but the work I am presenting here has the different objective stated in the preceding sentence. *Barbarism and Religion* is not a contribution to the historiography of the Roman empire, but to that of European culture in the eighteenth century.

It has been a long time in the making, and I wish to summarise its history here, partly because to do so will enable me to begin discharging many debts of gratitude, but more because it may help the reader to understand the character of the work presented. It was in the Piazza Paganica at Rome, in the month of January 1976, that the idea of writing a book with the present title first started to my mind. I had been invited to a conference² sponsored by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and the Enciclopedia Italiana, to mark both the bicentennial of Gibbon's first volume – 1776 was a year of many bicentennials – and the sesquimillennial of the deposition of Romulus Augustulus, last

¹ McKitterick and Quinault, 1997.

² Its proceedings were published as Bowersock, Clive and Graubard, 1977; see also Rovigatti, 1980.

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Emperor of the western empire. We had begun our conference at the head of the Capitol steps, where Gibbon may or may not have sat musing on 15 October, 1764, and adjourned it to the Piazza Paganica and the offices of the Enciclopedia Italiana. I had recently published a book called *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition*,³ which is concerned with the survival into the early modern world of the ancient ideal of civic and military virtue, and its response to the challenge, in the eighteenth century, of the new ideals, and realities, of commercial and civil society; and it occurred to me, at one of the sessions of the 1976 conference, that a study of the *Decline and Fall* would make a valuable counterpiece. I could see, and made it part of the paper I then presented, that Gibbon accepted the thesis of the decline of ancient virtue as largely explaining the collapse of the ancient world, but denied that the process would repeat itself under the conditions of modern society (Rousseau, Raynal and Diderot were among many who by no means shared that confidence). This theme has figured in all that I have since written about the *Decline and Fall*, and will be found in the volume I am here introducing.

The title *Barbarism and Religion*, however, came into my mind at this moment of conception and has been that under which I have planned, re-planned and presented the succession or collection of volumes of which it is now the overall title. It indicates an awareness, dawning then and larger since, that there is far more to the *Decline and Fall* than the tensions between virtue and commerce, ancient and modern, or even, in a sense, than *Decline and Fall* itself. When Gibbon in his concluding pages remarks 'I have described the triumph of barbarism and religion,'⁴ he may be conceding that what set out as a history of the end of the Roman empire has become a great deal more than that. The Gothic, Lombard, Frankish and Saxon barbarians replaced the western empire with systems in whose barbarism may be found the seeds of European liberty; this is declared near the outset of the *Decline and Fall*, though by the end of the work Gibbon has turned away from the west to pursue the less rewarding question of with what (if anything) Slav and Turkish barbarians have replaced the empire in the east. Thus far the theme of barbarism; under the head of religion, we face as Gibbon did the knowledge that the replacement of empire by church as the governing principle of European civilisation is a far greater matter than the secondary question of how far Christianity was a cause of the Decline

³ Pocock, 1975.⁴ Womersley, III, p. 1068; Bury, VII, p. 321.

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and Fall. It was already a historiographic commonplace that the end of empire led to the rise of the papacy; Gibbon explored it in depth, but recognised that this theme, however great, was limited to the Latin west and that the challenge of councils, bishops and patriarchs to imperial authority was a history to be told in Greek and led to the world-altering displacement of Greek and Syrian culture by Arabic and Islamic. From this perception he went on to the strangest of his decisions, one perplexing even to him: the decision to leave the history of the medieval and modern Latin west to those who had written it already, and pursue instead the history of Byzantium and its Islamic, barbaric and Latin invaders. It was a decision which he was to find extremely challenging, and how far he met the challenge is still debated.

The *Decline and Fall*, then, is a great deal more than its first volume, that of 1776; a great deal more than the account of ancient civilisation in its last flowering, capped by two famously disrespectful chapters about Christian culture at its first appearance, which it is taken to be in textbook history and cultural tradition. If the first volume recounts the decline and fall of the Antonine monarchy in the second and third centuries of the Christian era, the remaining five recount the full history – ending in decline and fall after eleven centuries of continuous existence – of the Constantinean and Christian monarchy that replaced it, from the foundation of a new Rome by the first Constantine to the death of the last in the taking of his city by the Turks. Far from being a history of the ancient world and its coming to an end, the work as a whole is a history of late antiquity and the middle ages, carried out on a scale unlike anything else in the eighteenth century. We have to consider what led Gibbon to plan and execute such a project, and there is evidence suggesting both that he intended it from the beginning and that he did not quite know in what difficulties his undertaking would involve him. During the twelve or more years in which he wrote six volumes with a span of thirteen centuries, ‘decline and fall’ became ‘the triumph of barbarism and religion’, and the *Decline and Fall* became many things both within and exceeding his original intentions.

What had once been intended as a history of the city of Rome became a history of its empire, invaded by barbarians and transformed by the church. Under the heading ‘barbarism’, Gibbon’s initial concern with the Gothic and Germanic invaders who sacked the city and settled the western provinces expanded to become a history of the nomadic and pastoral peoples of Europe’s steppe frontier, and a history of Eurasia as far as China, whose relations with Turkic and Mongol peoples he saw to

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be crucial to what was happening in the Roman and post-Roman west of the continent. Here he drew on Jesuit and Russian scholarship, and on the conjectural history constructed by European jurists, notably those of the Scottish Enlightenment, to explain how human society had passed through a sequence of stages including the pastoral. The *Decline and Fall* grew until it became a world history written on a Eurasian though not on a Euro-American scale, one of a number of such histories characterising the period of Enlightenment. But the jurists' history of human society was more than a means of explaining the role of nomad invaders in the history of the Eurasian civilisations, or the prevalence of hunter-gatherer 'savagery' in the American and Antipodean worlds being conquered and settled by Europeans (a history of which Gibbon took notice when it came his way). It was intended as a deep background to the central theme of Enlightened history. The history of civil society and its morality underlay the history of the system of states through which Europeans had recaptured control of their civil affairs after the long night of 'barbarism and religion', a phrase as old as the renaissance of letters and used to denote the 'Christian millennium' of feudal and ecclesiastical control of a submerged civilisation, which could be dated from Constantine to Charles V or from Charlemagne to Louis XIV. Gibbon once remarked that ancient history was a history of civil authority, modern that of ecclesiastical;⁵ and though he was now living in and writing a history 'modern' in the further sense that it had overcome the ecclesiastical and restored the primacy of civil society, one thing which made him a 'modern' as that term was used in the eighteenth century was his command of a critical scholarship that made it possible to return to the ancients and claim to understand them better than they had themselves. It joined with the techniques of historical understanding developed by the great jurists of the age – German, French and Scottish – to form a systematised civil morality meant to enable Europeans to live in their own world, if not without religion then without ecclesiastical disturbance or domination. Enlightened historiography is, almost without exception, the execution of this purpose.

The Enlightened historians – Voltaire, Hume, Robertson – are concerned with the exit from the Christian millennium into a Europe of state power and civil society; the *Decline and Fall* is exceptional in confining itself to the way into that millennium. If we consider Gibbon as sharing the intentions of this historiography – of which there is every

⁵ Womersley, III, p. 109; Bury, v, p. 286.

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reason to think that he was aware—we must suppose him intent on conquering by its methods the world of late antiquity, in which the system it was formed to overcome had taken shape: on studying, in depth and detail, ‘the triumph of barbarism and religion’. It took him time to form this intention and to realise its implications for his work. What had set out to be a history of the fall of the empire became a history of the rise of the church, and alone among the great Enlightened historians Gibbon became an ecclesiastical historian—the best, in the regretful judgment of Cardinal Newman, who had ever practised in England—a historian of theology, and a historian of the philosophy that underlay it: of the Platonic, neo-Platonic and scholastic philosophy which it had long been an aim of Enlightenment to expel from the European mind. Gibbon wrote its history with that end in view; but unlike Voltaire, he wrote its history as that of an active self-understanding force, not of a mere darkness and absurdity which rendered historical thought impossible. Though an unbeliever, he wrote like a great clerical historian, and to understand this aspect of his life and thought we must travel back into a world where Enlightenment was a product of religious debate and not merely a rebellion against it.

Here we have reached the point from which the present volume takes its rise. I have depicted the *Decline and Fall* as involving Gibbon in various historiographic enterprises to which the adjective ‘Enlightened’ may be applied, and I have used the noun ‘Enlightenment’ as denoting a process at work in European culture. We have to remember, however, that the terms ‘Enlightenment’, and still more ‘The Enlightenment’, entered anglophone usage at a time later than that of the phenomena they are employed to present, and we have to consider the historiographic effects of using them as we do. They are not mere fictions; there were intellectual enterprises at work from the later seventeenth century which they have long been used to isolate and identify. Those engaged in these enterprises were aware in their own terms of what they and their colleagues and competitors were doing—aware even of their historical significance, to a degree itself new in European culture—and the metaphor of light (*lumière*, *lume*, *Aufklärung*) is strongly present in their writings. There was something, or a number of things, going on, and there is a good case for employing the words ‘Enlightened’ and ‘Enlightenment’ in attempting to write about it. But the active intellectuals of the period did not use the term ‘The Enlightenment’, or employ it as we do to unify and reify their activities, isolating them in history by means of a definition which includes those whom it should include and excludes those

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whom it should not. It is at this point that I enter into debate with the shade of the great historian to whose memory this book is dedicated. Franco Venturi, delivering the Trevelyan Lectures at Cambridge in 1969, spoke of Gibbon as ‘the English giant of the Enlightenment’, but went on to say that as England, unlike Scotland, could not be seen as taking part in the phenomenon of ‘Enlightenment’ as the term was used, Gibbon must be thought of as an exile from Enlightenment and a solitary figure in his own country.⁶ It was a reading to which Gibbon’s bilingualism, and the division of his life and loyalties between England and the Pays de Vaud, lent a certain support; but there remained something unsatisfactory about it. Gibbon ceased to write in French, and developed a powerful and unique style of English prose, in order to write the *Decline and Fall*; he became a member of parliament, involved if not active in the major crisis of the American Revolution, while he was writing it; and at many points in its text he can be seen carrying out enterprises of an English resonance and susceptible of an English explanation. The proposition that he must be either not English or not Enlightened will not quite do; I suspect that Venturi was in search of a way past it, though I will not attempt to determine whether he ever found one.

How the problem arose may be seen from the pages of his *Utopia and Reform in the Enlightenment*, read as a prelude to the volumes of his *Settecento Riformatore*.⁷ Venturi was defining ‘The Enlightenment’ by the presence or absence of *philosophes* (alternatively, *gens de lettres*): self-appointed secular intellectuals, offering a criticism of society and putting themselves forward as its guides towards modernity and reform. He rightly saw that such *philosophes* were not to be met with in England – at least before the untypical advent of Bentham and the Philosophic Radicals – and on that ground excluded England from ‘The Enlightenment’; though he thought that Scotland might be included in it, by supposing that Smith, Ferguson and Millar were the equivalents of Genovesi and Filangieri, the *philosophes* of a major provincial culture guiding Scotland, as they had guided Naples, towards membership of the European *settecento riformatore*. Venturi did not mean by this to consign England to outer darkness; ‘in England’, he observed, ‘the rhythm was different’; but just what this meant it may be that he never fully explored.

In the present volume I shall attempt to show that Gibbon cannot be fitted into the paradigm of an Enlightenment defined as the activity of

⁶ Venturi, 1971, pp. 132–3; below, pp. 293–4. ⁷ Venturi, 1969, 1976, 1979, 1984.

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philosophes (whether the Moderate literati of Edinburgh and Glasgow are to be accounted *philosophes* is a further question, to be considered elsewhere). Gibbon is not a *philosophe* in exile, for the reason that from his first and very early encounter with the *gens de lettres* of Paris and their *Encyclopédie* he rejected their enterprise, and continued to do so in terms that were to lead him to Burkean conclusions. However, this is not to be accounted a rejection of Enlightenment; I argue that Burke himself was an Enlightened figure, who saw himself defending Enlightened Europe against the *gens de lettres* and their revolutionary successors, and that he stands for Counter-Enlightenment, in Isaiah Berlin's phrase, only in the sense that his is one kind of Enlightenment in conflict with another. Applied to Gibbon, the programme this implies – that of pluralising Enlightenment into a number of movements in both harmony and conflict with each other – will lead me to argue that there were aspects of Enlightenment which neither required nor produced the presence of *philosophes*, and that this presence, though a widely distributed and deeply important phenomenon, occurs within a context larger than itself. I intend to argue that Enlightenment may be characterised in two ways:⁸ first, as the emergence of a system of states, founded in civil and commercial society and culture, which might enable Europe to escape from the wars of religion without falling under the hegemony of a single monarchy; second, as a series of programmes for reducing the power of either churches or congregations to disturb the peace of civil society by challenging its authority. Enlightenment in the latter sense was a programme in which ecclesiastics of many confessions might and did join, but it was capable of leading to a general assault on the central traditions of Christian theology as conveying the notion that divine spirit was present in the world and exercising authority in it; and at this point *philosophes* might appear and conduct anti-Christian and anti-religious programmes of many kinds, linked often but not necessarily with programmes of modernisation and reform. The fifteenth and sixteenth chapters of the *Decline and Fall* earned Gibbon the name of a *philosophe* of the irreligious sort; but these chapters need to be considered in the setting of the *Decline and Fall* as a whole. They offer one among several keys to the question of how Enlightenment led Gibbon to write a great and extraordinary history.

In close but extremely various relations with an indictment of Nicene theology – and ultimately of the central doctrines of the Incarnation, the

⁸ For earlier statements of this view, see Pocock, 1985b and 1989a.

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Atonement and the Trinity – as encouraging the belief that a kingdom not of this world might nevertheless be exercised in it, there went a series of programmes for developing a culture of the mind, founded on method and manners, letters and law, and the critical capacity of reading the texts of European civilisation, which should enable it to function independently of Christian theology and anchor the life of the mind in the life of civil society. This repudiation of theology is, however, intimately related with the theology it repudiates and varies in character as it appears in, and attempts to substitute itself for, cultures enduringly Catholic or Protestant, Anglican, Calvinist or Lutheran. Since Enlightenment cannot be understood apart from theology, it sometimes appears – even in its most viciously anti-Christian expressions – as a tissue of theological statements; and this may help to explain the character of the *Decline and Fall* as a great Enlightened history of Christian theology. By studying Gibbon's early adult life in both its English and its Swiss settings, there can be made to appear a number of ways in which he had occasion to be Enlightened, to find himself involved in conflicts which were those of Enlightenment, and to proceed towards the writing of the *Decline and Fall* as a major work of Enlightened historiography; ways which did not necessitate the presence of *philosophes*, and were compatible with his partial yet real rejection of the Parisian *philosophes* at the time of his first becoming aware of them. Out of the life of the mind in civil society there arose a history of mind and society together.

By this point we shall have established the presence in England of a species of Enlightenment, and shall have escaped from the English exceptionalism imposed by a rigid application of the *philosophe* paradigm. Enlightenment in England was of course intimately bound up with the special, indeed unique character of the Church of England, the key as I see it to early modern English history; but this church (and the young Gibbon with it) became involved in a process of Protestant Enlightenment which appears crucial to the understanding of both the *Decline and Fall* and its author. Here I follow H. R. Trevor-Roper, who in a series of essays⁹ contended that the origins of Enlightenment in the Netherlands, England and western Protestantism generally were Grotian, Arminian and Erasmian; the Church of England became involved in this Enlightenment on its Calvinist face, the other remaining Catholic. The concept of a Protestant Enlightenment is crucial to the understanding of Gibbon in both his English and his Lausannais ex-

⁹ Trevor-Roper, 1968, 1988, 1992.

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perience, since his intellectual allegiances remained heavily focused on that *république des lettres* which had flourished in the Netherlands, among Dutch Remonstrants, Huguenot exiles and Genevan and Lausannais refugees from strict Calvinism, in the generation preceding his own birth; we shall see that it was his defence of an erudition very largely theirs, against the philosophic criticism of d'Alembert in the *Discours Préliminaire à l'Encyclopédie*, that led towards the construction of his historiography.

The volume I am here presenting may therefore be considered as an attempt to reshape the geography and definition of Enlightenment, in such a way as to find a place in it for Venturi's 'English giant of the Enlightenment'. Gibbon is at its centre only in the sense that its definitions constantly recur to his position in it; there are of course many aspects of Enlightenment not considered here, for the reason that they are not relevant to him nor he to them, but their absence carries no message that they are not important. If there is a single target of my criticism it is the concept of 'The Enlightenment', as a unified phenomenon with a single history and definition, but the criticism is directed more against the article than against the noun. I have no quarrel with the concept of Enlightenment; I merely contend that it occurred in too many forms to be comprised within a single definition and history, and that we do better to think of a family of Enlightenments, displaying both family resemblances and family quarrels (some of them bitter and even bloody). To insist on bringing them all within a single formula – which excludes those it cannot be made to fit – is, I think, more the expression of one's loyalties than of one's historical insight. Since we are all liberal agnostics, we write whig histories of liberal agnosticism; Gibbon, however, did not write history like that.

This volume, then, traces *The Enlightenments of Edward Gibbon*, following the trajectory of his earlier life through a series of contexts to which the term 'Enlightenment' can in various ways be applied, until we reach his return from Rome to England in the early months of 1765. By that time – though his full encounter with Scottish Enlightenment had still to occur – he was well on the way towards the formation of a concept of historiography as he intended to practise it, and he would have us believe that the conception of the *Decline and Fall* had already occurred, though its gestation was to take another ten years – a proposition by no means unproblematic. We can say, however, that the formation of Gibbon's historiography – even, perhaps, his philosophy of history – was intimately connected with his responses to the various

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Enlightenments he had encountered: English, Arminian and Parisian, with Scottish to come. It was connected also with the place he desired to find for himself in European literary and critical scholarship, which is a larger question; but scholarship, we may say, was his Enlightenment.

A second volume will present the grand historiography of Enlightenment as it stood when Gibbon published his first volume in 1776, and will consider the character of the *Decline and Fall* as it appears in this great company. Other volumes may follow under the series title of *Barbarism and Religion*, but their reading should not be subordinated to their place in the series. Each, that is to say, will be designed, as this is, to be read as a single study, rounded out to the point where its contribution to Gibbon studies is defined and delimited; the reader is desired only to remember that others will come. They will provide a series of contexts in which Gibbon's life and the *Decline and Fall* may be situated; I intend neither an intellectual biography nor in the narrative sense an intellectual history, so much as the depiction of a historical world – a *peinture*, as it would have been put in the eighteenth century, rather than a *récit*. Of these contexts, some will be aspects of the intellectual history of the times, while others will be formed by major texts with which Gibbon's writings interacted. I shall study some of these in greater depth than is dictated by their direct relation with the *Decline and Fall*; the latter is a great text inhabiting a world of great texts which existed independently of it as well as in relation to it. It has been put to me that I am attempting an ecology rather than an etiology of the *Decline and Fall*; a study of the world in which it existed, not confined to its genesis in that world. An enquiry of that order begins in the volume which I here deliver to the curiosity and candour of the public.