BARBARISM AND RELIGION
Volume One

The Enlightenments of Edward Gibbon, 1737–1764

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THE GIBBON FAMILY AND THE CRISIS IN CHURCH AND STATE

The purpose of this volume will be to effect a series of contextualisations: to situate Gibbon's life in a succession of settings, in which his creation of the text of the *Decline and Fall* may be usefully understood. It will be observed that I take him to have been the author of that text, and believe the text to be intelligible as the product of his activity.[1] At the same time, that activity was carried on in a number of contexts, of some of which he may occasionally have been more aware than of others, while some may not have preoccupied his attention at any time at all; the possibility that some of the contexts which will be distinguished operated to form his text indirectly, subconsciously or unconsciously, is not ruled out before it occurs. Of these contexts some will be national, or regional, and cultural: English, since Gibbon was born in England, spent much of his life there, and wrote his greatest work in English; Lausannais, since he spent crucial years of his life and completed the *Decline and Fall* there, and first wrote history in the French which he acquired in the Pays de Vaud; and it will be necessary to pay attention to the intellectual climates of Amsterdam, Paris, and Edinburgh, where he did not reside but which were important to him. He must also be considered as a 'citizen', that is a reader and correspondent, of several *républiques des lettres* and scholarly connections; and we shall also be thinking of him as an associate of several 'enlightenments', since it is a premise of this book that we can no longer write satisfactorily of 'The Enlightenment' as a unified and universal intellectual movement. Finally, Gibbon and his book will be situated in contexts formed by a number of continuous patterns of discourse, humanist, philosophical, juridical, theological and controversial, which joined with the discourse of historiography proper to con-

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[1] A bibliography of the extensive literature by those who deny the reality of authors and the readability of texts will not be included in this book.

stitute the great personal discourse of the text and author of the *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, and offer – once again – a series of contexts in which it can be interpreted. For the duration at least of this chapter, however, that which is being contextualised will be the biography of the author,[2] as Gibbon's life moved towards the point at which composition of the *Decline and Fall* began.

Edward Gibbon was born on 27 April, 1737 – one-third of the way through the reign of George II of Great Britain and Hanover (1727–60), and towards the end of the ministry of Sir Robert Walpole (1721–42) – into a family then resident at Putney, with connections in both the City of London and the counties of Surrey and Hampshire. In later years Horace Walpole, who was not free from the snobbishness of a radical-chic aristocrat, wrote of him as 'the son of a foolish alderman',[3] but he was not sprung from the urban patriciates – not very common in England – to whom the term *bourgeoisie* is properly applied, and his paternal lineages move, in ways typical of the lesser English gentry, from land to commerce and back again to land. It is relevant, however, that his grandfather, to whom we may refer as Edward Gibbon I, had grown wealthy as a contractor supplying the armies of William III and Marlborough; that his father, Edward Gibbon II, attempted feverishly and without success to convert land into a source of personal income; and that the historian himself, Edward Gibbon III, in the clear knowledge that he would remain childless, did much better – with the advice of the well-informed man of business Lord Sheffield – at making landed property the source of an income off which he lived as an expatriate man of letters at Lausanne. None of these facts is irrelevant to the *Decline and Fall*, which is deeply preoccupied, from beginning to end, with the conversion of Europe into that leisured, polite, aristocratically governed commercial civilisation which we have chosen to call the *ancien régime*.[4]

It would be an error, nevertheless, to think of the England into which Gibbon was born as Augustan, stable and complacent, progressing

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[2] The authoritative biography, other than Gibbon's *Memoirs* themselves, is now to be found in the two volumes by Patricia B. Craddock, hereafter referred to as *YEG* and *EGLH*. See also Low, 1937. The major studies by Giarrizzo, 1954, and Baridon, 1975, to which extensive reference will be made, are intellectual histories of the formation of Gibbon's mind and work, not quite the same as biographies.

[3] Low, pp. 23, 250. Cf. Craddock, *EGLH*, p. 173, where Gibbon's aldermanic birth becomes Walpole's explanation of his willingness to serve North's government. For Gibbon's view of Walpole, 'that ingenious trifler', see *English Essays*, pp. 122–3.

[4] For the questions of how far Hanoverian Britain may be termed an *ancien régime*, and whether the term itself is currently being used coherently, compare, contrast and reconcile J. C. D. Clark, 1986, Brewer, 1989 and Langford, 1989.

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sedately towards liberty, prosperity and empire. It attained all three of these things, but it bought them at a high price in dynastic and religious instability, financial and political turmoil. The salient facts in Gibbon family history are that Edward Gibbon I had been a director of the South Sea Company, a Tory financial project set up to counter the Whig giants of the Bank of England and the East India Company, and on its collapse had been fined of most of his possessions by a vengeful parliament; that Edward Gibbon II had been a closet, a futile but not an inactive Jacobite at least as late as 1745;[5] that Edward Gibbon III grew up in a religiously divided ambience, and that the first crucial occurrence of his career was a conversion to Catholicism as an undergraduate of sixteen. These events are by no means unconnected, and the effects of the last of them can be traced to the closing pages of the *Decline and Fall*. They are all phenomena of the rapidly growing but deeply divided England into which Gibbon came to see that he had been born, and if he succeeded in writing history in a spirit of serene scepticism – which is by no means certain – the roads by which he came to it were not serene at all. We can trace Gibbon's initial progress towards the point at which he became a historian by viewing it in the context of English history after 1688.

The revolution (for so it was called)[6] of that and the following year had been undertaken in an England recently re-Anglicanised, where nobility, gentry and clergy were convinced that the restoration and maintenance of the authority of a royally governed church offered the only way to bury the memory of the calamitous breakdown of sovereignty and governing order in the years of civil war and interregnum. This conviction had not been quite enough to clarify the character of the restored Church of England, or to re-cement its relations with the crown that was its supreme governor; and James II had been overthrown in consequence of the perceived destabilisation of the church brought about by his determination to promote Catholics (with the support of Dissenters) to the high offices from which they were excluded by the Test and Corporation Acts. It had been part of this perception that James could only effect his ends by the exercise of authority known as 'arbitrary' and 'absolute', which would threaten the security of property (including office) under law, itself one of the principal

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[5] For his doings, such as they were, see Turnbull, 1987.
[6] For recent interpretations of that event, see Jones, 1973; Speck, 1989; Beddard, 1991; Israel, 1991; Schwoerer, 1992; Jones, 1992; Hoak and Feingold, 1996.

meanings evoked by the use of the word 'liberty';[7] but the Church of England, committed to the principle that kingly authority was divinely appointed and might not be resisted, believed itself to have done what was necessary to check James's policies with the passive resistance, and subsequent acquittal by the law, of the Seven Bishops in June and July of 1688. This Anglican triumph,[8] however, coincided with the birth of a male heir to James II and his queen, raising the threat that his policies would be kept up by a line of Catholic successors. His Protestant daughters, Mary of Orange and Anne of Denmark, were involved in the pretence which instantly grew up that the child's birth was an imposture, and Mary's husband, William, was invited to England in an expedition in preparation for which he had already fitted out a powerful armada. It was this Dutch and English initiative that placed on the church stresses which it found difficulty in bearing, and which may be found affecting the politics, and the religious and historical culture, of England during the next century.

William's intentions – whenever they came to be formed – were dynastic and military; he determined to make his wife and himself sovereigns of England, Scotland and Ireland, and to commit all three kingdoms to the 'grand alliance' he was building against the 'universal monarchy' of Louis XIV. He would have found much greater difficulty in attaining either objective if James II had stood and fought him, instead of escaping to France and placing himself under Louis's protection. By this action James removed the likelihood of civil war in England to the distance at which it remained[9] for the next sixty to seventy years, while at the same time he condemned England to a future of involvement in great European wars. The dynastic and ecclesiastical struggle in England became an issue which could only be settled by the outcome of the wars between France and the grand alliance. During the years (1688–97) of what is variously known as the War of the League of Augsburg, the War of the English Succession, King William's War (the American term) and the Nine Years War, English troops fought in Ireland and Flanders to ensure their own revolution, their position in Britain and the Atlantic archipelago, and the maintenance of William III's struggle against France; and during this war English military and financial organisation underwent the revolutionary changes known by

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[7] Nenner, 1991.   [8] Goldie, 1991.
[9] It is a matter of controversy among historians how great this distance was. For the recent literature on Jacobitism see Cruickshanks, 1979 and 1982; Lenman, 1980; Colley, 1982; Szechi, 1984; McLynn, 1985; Monod, 1989.

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the names of 'the standing army', 'the national debt' and 'public credit', which were to make Great Britain capable of acting as a major power in Europe and America, but at the same time to produce profound new tensions within English political society and transform the English and Scottish perception of history and the place of Britain within it. The tensions generated by this *novus ordo seclorum* were to interact in highly complex ways with those produced by the dynastic and ecclesiastical insecurities of the Revolution Settlement.

   This state of affairs lies behind the predicaments in which all three generations of Gibbons at different times found themselves. The Jac-obitism of Edward Gibbon II, in particular, can be understood if we address ourselves to the dynastic and ecclesiastical consequences of the Revolution. The replacement of James II by his daughters, Mary and then Anne, was a dynastic failure, since both died without progeny, with the result that even after the Act of Settlement in 1700, which enjoined a Protestant succession, and the enthronement of the Hanoverians in 1714, which supplied it, there was no reigning Stuart line to challenge the claims of the exiled branch to legitimacy. This claim was formidable because of the difficulty which the Church of England long felt in reconciling itself to the changes of dynasty imposed in 1688 and 1714; even after a majority of the clergy had taken the oaths to obey William and Mary as lawful sovereigns, and even after new appointments had rendered the episcopate and upper hierarchy increasingly whig and latitudinarian, there persisted a widespread sentiment that the Revol-utionary and Hanoverian monarchy was at best *de facto*, and that something remained to be done before there could be a regime truly *de jure*. The church knew well enough that James II had fallen because the unity of church and crown was defective, but it found difficulty, before and after the reign of Anne, in believing that that unity had been restored. The history of the period constantly persuades us that if the Stuart exiles had thought Westminster worth a Test – as Henri IV had legendarily decided that *Paris vaut bien une messe* – they would have been triumphantly restored; but they never conformed to the church of which they were by law supreme governors until it was too late (if even then).[10] Hanoverian insecurity, however, the result of imperfect legitimation, persisted – in the judgment of Edward Gibbon III – until the accession of George III in 1760; and historians have told us at what a price that

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[10] The allusion is to Prince Charles Edward's reported visit to London in disguise, and reception into the Church of England, in 1750.

prince bought the support of the country gentry to whom Gibbon belonged.

   The Hanoverian succession occurred after the kingdoms of Britain (brought to a closer union in 1707) had taken a leading part in two great wars – those of 1688 to 1697 and 1702 to 1713 – fought by a grand alliance against France. These wars had been marked by the victories of Marlborough and by the establishment of Britain as a significant power on the European mainland, but had altered the English and Scottish ruling structures in ways that were widely resented. They were seen as entailing the growth of new governing elites, made up of army officers, army contractors (even those as Jacobitically inclined as Edward Gibbon I may have been),[11] powerful speculators in the new structures of public credit – some of whom were Huguenot, Dutch and Sephardic aliens – and the mainly Whig and sometimes Dissenting politicians who built on their support. It has been much studied how new political ideologies took shape, first to denounce and then to defend this new system of rule, and we shall have to examine their growth if we are to understand the text of the *Decline and Fall*. For the present, however, it is important to stress how readily discontent with the regime of continental war and high finance became discontent with the imperfectly legitimised Revolution Settlement, and took a high-church and near-Jacobite form. Britain was withdrawn from the grand alliance and played a leading role in making peace at the compromise Treaty of Utrecht, as a result of the massive Tory political victories which ushered in the 'four last years of the Queen'[12] (1710–14); but this spectacular if temporary collapse of the Whig control of politics was in many ways a high Anglican backlash, which took a disconcertingly popular form.[13] The regime was disliked; the Whigs and Dissenters were blamed for it; a reunion of crown and church was hoped for, as a means of ending war, taxation and instability; a basic legitimism in popular culture declared itself.[14] As Anne's life neared its end, a Stuart restoration appeared likely, but the peril of civil war re-emerged as it had so often done in late-Stuart politics. The Tory leaders failed to confront it, fell as dramatically as they had risen and the Hanoverian line was brought in to

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[11] '. . . even his opinions were subordinate to his interest and I find him in Flanders cloathing King William's troops; while he would have contracted with more pleasure, though not perhaps at a cheaper rate, for the service of King James' (*Memoirs*, p. 12; *A*, pp. 10–11, Memoir F). Craddock (*YEG*, p. 4) points out that Edward Gibbon I – born in 1675, not as his grandson believed 1666 – was aged seventeen when his career as a contractor began, and we know nothing of his political sympathies at this time. Edward Gibbon III displays a certain ambivalence regarding this family tradition.   [12] Swift, 1758 (Davis, 1951).   [13] Holmes, 1973.   [14] Monod, 1989.

guarantee the Protestant succession. Given the visceral anti-Catholicism of the English masses, the best possible testimony to their equally visceral legitimism is the striking unpopularity of the only available Protestant line, which had to establish its power by a series of highly repressive measures – among them the Septennial Act of 1716, by which a sitting parliament prolonged its own life from three years to seven. This was the parliament confronted by the financial crisis of 1720, which fined Edward Gibbon I of much of his estate and fortune, and of this incident his grandson observed:

Such bold oppression can scarcely be shielded by the omnipotence of Parliament: and yet, it may be seriously questioned whether the Judges of the South Sea Directors were the true and legal representatives of their country. The first Parliament of George I had been chosen (1715) for three years: the term was elapsed: their trust was expired; and the four additional years (1718–1722) during which they continued to sit, were derived not from the people, but from themselves; from the strong measure of the septennial bill, which can only be paralleled by *il serrar di Consiglio* of the Venetian history. Yet candour will own that to the same Parliament every Englishman is deeply indebted: the septennial act, so vicious in its origin, has been sanctioned by time, experience and the national consent: its first operation secured the house of Hanover on the throne, and its permanent influence maintains the peace and stability of Government. As often as a repeal has been moved in the house of Commons, I have given in its defence a clear and conscientious vote.[15]

The historian is inserting his family history and his autobiography into the framework provided by the progress from illegitimacy to legitimacy of what he certainly saw as a Whig and Venetian oligarchy. In a later chapter we shall consider at what point he supposed that legitimation to have been consummated. What requires to be noted here is that discontent with the Hanoverian succession, like discontent with the Revolution Settlement before it, took not only a dynastic but an ecclesiological and theological form, and that this is crucial to the understanding of Gibbon's early life and its crisis, and of the structure of the *Decline and Fall.*

The inherited predicament[16] which the Church of England derived from the Henrician Reformation was the need to reconcile its status as an apostolic church and member of Christ's body with its acceptance of

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[15] *Memoirs*, p. 15; *A*, pp. 14–15, Memoir F. Jacob Sawbridge, also the grandfather of a historian – in this case the republican Catharine Macaulay – was another South Sea director who suffered at the same hands. His descendant was less tolerant of the Septennial Act. See Hill, 1992, pp. 5–7.

[16] A full-length history of Anglican political ecclesiology from the 1530s to the 1830s has not yet been attempted.

the sovereignty of the crown, whose wearer for the time being was its supreme head and governor. The political regime in which the crown was the sovereign found itself required to insist that the church must be a sacred and apostolic body, so that the crown might itself claim a sacred and indefeasible authority exercised *jure divino*; but must be on guard against any suggestion that the church's authority was itself of a divine origin that rendered it independent of the crown. This could carry with it the charge of a crypto-papalism in the Church of England, which had done much to bring about the Civil War of 1642 and conduct Archbishop Laud to the scaffold;[17] but the church restored between 1660 and 1662 had been obliged to assert both its sacred character and that of the crown, and had promoted the cult of Charles I as its king and martyr. Without a monarchy sacred, irresistible and even hereditary by divine right, it would be hard for the church to maintain its own sacred and apostolic character, or as we shall see the view of Christ's mission and person that such a church professed. But the ironies of history were such that, either side of the century from 1660 to 1760, the Church of England found only three supreme heads and governors – Charles I, Anne and George III – on whom it could feel that it relied. The sons of Charles I had been most unsatisfactory governors and professors of the church of which their father was held a martyr; both had issued Declarations of Indulgence which compromised the church's status in the kingdom, Charles II had been received into the Roman Catholic Church on his deathbed, and James II – whom the Church of England had accepted as its head despite his professed Catholicism – had pushed the policy of Indulgence so far as to place the church itself in danger.[18] For this reason the church had reluctantly accepted the Revolution aimed at his Catholic heir, and had welcomed the Act of Settlement which imposed the Protestant Succession; but both William III, a Dutch Calvinist by upbringing if not conviction, and the first two Hanoverians, German Lutherans by birth and baptism, owed their supreme governorship of the Church of England to dubiously legitimate parliamentary actions in which the church itself had been little consulted. Even under Anne, 'the Church of England's glory', the very being of the Anglican church-state had been formally if not actually terminated when 'England' had been merged in 'Britain', a single state with two national churches, and the supreme governor of the episcopal Church of

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[17] Lamont, 1963; Hibbard, 1983; Tyacke, 1987.   [18] J. Miller, 1973, 1989.

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England had found herself obliged to uphold a presbyterian and finally disestablish an episcopal Kirk of Scotland.

Unsure of its head and of its identity with the realm of which it was supposed to be the ecclesiastical aspect, the Church of England could not but experience uncertainty regarding its character as a church of Christ.[19] When five bishops and a number of other clergy had accepted deprivation of their benefices rather than subscribe the oaths of obedience to William and Mary, the hierarchy which replaced these 'non-jurors' had been drawn largely from those known as 'latitudinarians' – a term none too exactly denoting, at its first appearance, those who had held ecclesiastical offices and benefices under the Protectorate and had conformed to the episcopal church after its restoration. Suspected of affinities with the Nonconformists or dissenters who had left their benefices in 1662, these conformists and their successors were often strong upholders of the authority of church and state both before and after the Revolution; but it was open to them to hold, or to be suspected of holding, views of the church's nature which emphasised its social, practical and moral rather than its consecrated and spiritual character – views which could entail revaluations of what consecration itself was, and what Christ's actions, mission and even person had been. At the other end of the spectrum, the non-jurors had to choose between regarding themselves as a scrupulous minority accepting sufferings rather than compromise their tender consciences, or as a true church in exile from a church rendered false by its subjection to an illegitimate head and governor – a choice not unlike that which had faced Nonconformists in 1662, except that the latter, less irrevocably committed to the unity of church and state, had been better placed to regard the governing power as itself indifferent to salvation and so not rendered illegitimate by its support of the church they had left. The non-jurors, less exposed to institutionalised persecution than the Nonconformists (for whom the Toleration Act of 1689 had been followed by the Schism Act of 1714), were attracted both by Jacobitism – since a Stuart restoration was the obvious solution to their difficulties – and by schism, or regarding the official church as itself schismatic or apostate; an option some of them adopted when they consecrated their own successors without royal or hierarchical authorisation.

Accusations both of schism and of heresy therefore went back and forth after both the Revolution and the Hanoverian succession, and the

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[19] G. V. Bennett, 1975; Kenyon, 1977; J. C. D. Clark, 1986.

politics of the period put strains upon the formulation of Christian belief. Some non-jurors, as we have seen, moved from a strong doctrine of the unity of church and king to declaring that the church retained its apostolic character even under a false king and therefore enjoyed it independently of any king at all. This predictably aroused the slumbering wrath of English Erastianism, which was sometimes turned against the pretensions of even the conformist clergy to authorise the regime as legitimate.[20] Those who denied that the Church of England possessed authority to do this sometimes denied that it was an apostolic communion deriving spiritual authority from Christ himself; it was no more than a voluntary, or a lawfully imposed, association of those professing common opinions and beliefs about him. From this point it was possible to proceed to the discussion of Christ's person, and to find oneself denying that he had been a divine being capable of founding a church which was a mystical extension of his person. There was a politics of Christology in Stuart and post-Stuart England, and beliefs both ancient and modern which modified or subverted the orthodox understanding of Trinity and Incarnation were much discussed and sometimes professed; the *Decline and Fall* itself is largely a study of their history. An extreme form came to be known as deism, which affirmed the being of a God but denied that Christ was part of his substance or any religion a uniquely valid expression of his nature; there were several kinds of deism, displaying their own rationalism and their own mysticism, since they included both philosophical reductions of theistic doctrine to rational theology, and expressions of the belief that the whole universe was pervaded by spirit.

Heterodoxies of several kinds were therefore scattered across the face of an England dynastically and ecclesiastically divided. Even Tories and Jacobites, if they came to hold that the Church of England had in some real sense been disestablished after 1688, might now and then lapse from their ingrained high-churchmanship into positions radical in both church and state. At the height of its aggressive and intolerant power in the last years of Queen Anne, the Tory party was led by an ex-presbyterian, Robert Harley Earl of Oxford, and an acknowledged deist, Henry St John, Viscount Bolingbroke.[21] At microcosmic level, the Gibbon family's circle at Putney reflected this pattern of religious

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[20] Stephens, 1696, pp. 10 ff. The attack is mainly against those churchmen willing to recognise William III's authority *de facto*, and Stephens is both joining in the attack himself and explaining the attractions which deism may exert over those who launch it.

[21] MacInnes, 1970; Dickinson, 1970.

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ambivalence, since it included both the formidable non-juror and pietist mystic William Law[22] – spiritual director of the historian's aunt Hester, a circumstance which later deepened Gibbon's Protestant and *philosophe* mistrust of the influence of confessors over women – and as neighbours the outspoken deists David and Lucy Mallet,[23] soon to be notorious for their posthumous publication (1754) of Bolingbroke's more flagrantly anti-Christian writings. Edward Gibbon III became an infant prodigy of learning among family libraries – though he remembered best that of his mother's father – formed in a none too simple religious environment, and the chronological studies which absorbed his childhood ('the dynasties of Assyria and Egypt were my top and cricket ball')[24] reflected clerical as well as gentlemanly learning.

   But the event of his youth which in its small yet momentous way most clearly displays the background of a divided England is of course his undergraduate conversion to Catholicism, and to understand how this came about, and what enduring meanings it had for him, we must revert to the basic dilemmas confronting the Church of England. As we have seen, these arose from the central difficulties of maintaining both its apostolic and its statutory foundations, of reconciling the spirit with the law, grace with works, revelation with social reason. A church independent of the crown threatened papalism; a church wholly subordinate to the crown threatened desacralisation; church and crown alike were deeply averse to both; but the formulae of reconciliation were hard to articulate and perpetually at risk (as is the fate of orthodoxy itself). From the great crises of the civil wars and interregnum, when the Church of England had been disestablished, had nearly disappeared and had been swiftly and unexpectedly restored, the Anglican communion had

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[22] Gibbon's account of Law may be found in *Memoirs*, pp. 20–3 (*A*, pp. 23–7, Memoir F); a modern one in Rupp, 1986, pp. 218–42. See also Baridon, 1975, I, pp. 24–7, who holds that both Law and Hester Gibbon broke with the family at Putney because the spirit of Bolingbroke had come to dominate the lifestyle of Edward Gibbon II. Low, p. 45, gives evidence suggesting a later date for their withdrawal.

[23] *Dictionary of National Biography* (hereafter *DNB*), *sub nomine*. It was Mrs Mallet who approached David Hume at a party with the declaration 'we deists should know one another better', to be crushed by the reply, 'Madam, I am no deist; I disclaim the title.' Her identity may also be suspected in the couplet from Dr Johnson's *London: A Poem*: 'Here falling houses thunder on your head/And there a female atheist talks you dead.'

[24] *Memoirs*, p. 43 (*A*, p. 59, Memoir F). On pp. 36–7 (*A*, pp. 48–9, Memoir F), Gibbon recalls the year spent in the library left behind at Putney by his grandfather James Porten, when he fled his creditors in 1748 (after Judith Gibbon's death), and the encouragement given by his aunt Catherine, 'who indulged herself in moral and religious speculation' (its nature unrecorded). At pp. 96–7 (*A*, p. 164, Memoir B), he remarks on Law's contribution to the high-church component of Edward Gibbon II's library at Buriton, where he began to read on his return to England in 1758.

emerged with the perception of a double threat: on the one hand, that of
Rome, interpreting Christ's consecration of the bread and wine at the
Last Supper so as to make the church which administered the transsub-
stantiated elements an authority independent of any earthly ruler; on
the other, that of the independent and sometimes revolutionary sects –
whose brief military dictatorship after 1647 was remembered with
peculiar vividness – interpreting the gift of tongues on the Day of Pen-
tecost so as to invest the congregations in whom the Holy Spirit moved
with independence from all governing authority and sometimes all
social and even moral discipline. Claims on behalf of both the Second
and the Third persons of the Trinity were being advanced along lines
fatal to the Church of England's always imperilled position, and must be
met without compromising the doctrine of the Trinity itself; this proved
difficult and for some not possible.[25] From the perception of a dual
threat to established English Protestantism there arose a two-edged
polemic against the 'superstition' of Rome, which held Christ to be
physically present in the sacraments, and the 'enthusiasm' of the sects,
which held the Spirit to be immediately present in the congregation or
even the individual. Because this was a polemic about the ways in which
spirit could be present in matter, it came to be crucial in the formation of
English and Enlightened philosophy; because it was concerned with the
Spirit's action in human society and in respect of human authority, it
came to be crucial in the writing of history and the construction of the
Decline and Fall.[26] Future chapters of this book will deal with Gibbon's
philosophical and historical development; for the moment we are con-
cerned only with his undergraduate crisis as an expression of the
Anglican[27] predicament.

   The Church of England that took shape after the Restoration of 1660
was a not always easy alliance between so-called 'high churchmen' and
so-called 'latitudinarians', who had found it possible to conform both
before and after 1660. The former had insisted that a sacred monarchy
was necessary to the being of the Church as by law established; the latter
appeared inclined to the belief that forms of government were indif-
ferent to religious experience, which was consequently capable of or-

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[25] It is valuable here to contrast and reconcile J. C. D. Clark, 1986, who stresses the continued
hegemony of Trinitarian doctrine, with Gascoigne, 1990, who stresses the continued existence of
a Socinian minority within the church – itself acknowledged by Clark, pp. 311–15, 317–20. See
further Champion, 1992.   [26] Pocock, 1982, 1995.

[27] Tyacke, 1987, p. vii, remarks that the term 'Anglican(ism)' does not appear before the nineteenth
century and warns against its over-specific use. It is here employed adjectivally, or as a term of
convenience, where the words 'Church of England' fit awkwardly into the sentence.

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ganising itself in subordination to any of them. But it is not possible to reconstruct the two streams of opinion as sharply opposed alternatives. The 'high churchmen' saw their king and supreme governor as a sacred but not a priestly figure, holy because the natural and social order were holy, possessing divine right but not special spiritual gifts; the roots of their thinking were in Hooker, Erasmus and remotely Aquinas. When they looked back to the 'Laudian' and 'Arminian' milieux in which most of them had been formed, they could see the liberation of human sociability and natural authority from the absolute decrees of Calvinist grace, quite as clearly as the swing towards baroque ritualism and ecumenical respect for even the Pope's authority which had briefly characterised 'Arminianism' in England more than elsewhere. Their veneration for apostolic origins drew them towards a history of the primitive church which did not emphasise the Petrine supremacy and presented the rise of the papacy as a late development, and they could follow Erasmus, Grotius and their own ecclesiastical historians in reconciling apostolical Christianity with a historical context. There was nothing here which need set 'high' and 'latitudinarian' churchmen at odds, while on the level of philosophy – where the intellect confronted the problems of the presence of spirit in matter – both groups were equally responsive to Cambridge Platonism, which considered a divinely implanted reason the proper antidote to self-deluded enthusiasm,[28] and to the Baconianism found with other positions in the Royal Society, which, while sharply critical of Platonism as itself enthusiastic, was working its way towards a view of God as creating matter and giving it laws, while remaining distinct from and in no way immanent in it.[29] The distinction between high-church and latitudinarian Anglicanism, therefore, does not itself impede the argument that the origins of Enlightenment in England lie in the maintenance by the church of its Erasmian, Arminian and Grotian traditions.[30]

But the religious and political tensions of Restoration England, rendered acute if seldom edifying by the unstable relations of the crown with the church, gave rise to a new and militant kind of low churchmanship, sometimes brutal and sometimes philosophically subtle, originating in the determination that spiritual authority must never

[28] The best selection and account is Patrides, 1969. See also Cragg, 1968; Ealy, 1997.
[29] For the alliance between Anglicanism and natural philosophy, see M. C. Jacob, 1976; J. R. Jacob, 1978; Gascoigne, 1990.
[30] Trevor-Roper, 1968, 1988, 1992. Concerning the concept of 'latitudinarian(ism)' and the role of 'latitude-men' in English intellectual history see Kroll, Ashcraft and Zagorin, 1992.

again be allowed to challenge the supremacy of magistracy and the social order, from doing which it was in any case precluded by its nature. This determination could be directed against papalism, rigorous Anglicanism or presbyterianism as occasion required, while even the libertinism of Buckingham and the materialism of Hobbes[31] were suspected of preparing the way for a return of spiritual claims under the pretence of exiling spirit from the universe – an enterprise of course disastrous in itself. There arose a systematic and resolute identification of the religious with the social, equally compatible with liberal and with absolutist views of the political authority by which society was governed; the distinction was of secondary importance compared with the paramount need to maintain that the spirit manifested itself, and even became incarnate, only through social channels, reasonable, humane, and obedient to authority, and never in ways subversive of the human and sociable order.[32] Christ as saviour had been king as well as priest and prophet, and the Christian was enjoined to an unconditional subjection to the higher powers; Christ's role as saviour had been to add supernatural sanction to the natural authority of common social morality, through which, rather than through any mystery of atonement, the individual was to be saved.[33] Doctrines of this kind were advanced in ecclesiastical as well as secular circles, but might reach a point at which the central tradition of Christianity began to be challenged. For if Christ came only to reinforce the law, in what ways did the function and the person of the Son differ from those of the Father? And if that law were the universal law of nature rather than a Mosaic covenant, what became of the Father's special relationship with either the first Israel or the second which was the church? The former query reached to the verge of Socinianism[34] or Unitarianism, the latter to that of deism; but an orthodox Anglican concerned with defining his Church's position might find himself framing either. The suspicion of doing so rested particularly on 'latitudinarians', but there were grounds for suspicion irrespective of nomenclature. Anglicans as well as Noncon-

[31] Tuck, 1988; Shapin and Schaffer, 1985; J. R. Jacob, 1983; Pocock, 1990b; Mintz, 1962.
[32] Diamond, 1982; Murray, 1986.
[33] Marshall, 1990, 1994, studies this development in its relation to Locke.
[34] A 'Socinian' in the precise sense meant one who affirmed that Christ was a being divine in mission but not in nature; or, under pressure, that he was not co-eternal with the godhead. The term seems often to have been used loosely, to designate anyone who seemed to diminish Christ's divinity or to leave it discussable, but not to denote any specific heresy regarding his nature; these would be known by their controversial names. See further MacLachlan, 1951; Marshall, forthcoming. It is important, if difficult, to distinguish between the technically correct and the colloquial uses of the term 'Socinian'.

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formists moved in a 'Socinian' direction, and while the benefits of the Toleration Act of 1689 were expressly withheld from those who denied the Trinity, from this time we have to recognise those who remained within the Church of England while privately holding, or at least privately discussing, opinions which were certainly not Trinitarian.[35] John Locke was one such, and Isaac Newton was another.[36] The fact that their anti-Trinitarianism arose as much from a desire to maintain, as to destabilise, the authority of the civil magistrate no doubt helped them to avoid critical confrontation; but the civil magistrate would never accept support offered him on terms such as those of Thomas Hobbes. What manner of person was Leviathan to be, and what manner of person Christ?

Problems of this order were in the making before the revolution of 1688, but were aggravated by the implications of that event and all that followed. There came to be an explicit, if only an occasional, association between strong support of the Revolution and Hanoverian succession, an ecclesiology which reduced the Church of England to a civil association, an epistemology which reduced the knowledge of God to the holding of opinions, and a theology which reduced Christ to something less than a co-equal and co-eternal person of the Trinity. From time to time there emanated from low-church ecclesiastical circles accounts of the Christian communion which deprived it of spiritual as well as civil authority and reduced it to a voluntary association of like-minded believers, to which the civil power might or might not require subscription as a matter of civil policy. One such was the widespread 'Bangorian controversy' of 1716, named for its initiator Benjamin Hoadly, Bishop of Bangor; there were the Trinitarian controversies arising when Arian and Socinian doctrines invaded the Anglican (1690, 1712)[37] and Presbyterian (1719) communions; and the young Gibbon at Oxford found himself dismayed by the repercussions of another, in character significantly historical: that is to say, Conyers Middleton's account of the primitive church. The culture in which he grew up was clerical, no doubt pious, but less devout than historical; engaged in debate over the sources of authority.

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[35] Their history is pursued through the eighteenth century by Gascoigne, 1990.
[36] Marshall, 1990, 1994; Manuel, 1963, 1974.   [37] Rupp, 1986, pp. 88–101, 253–6.

THE VISIT TO STOURHEAD AND THE VENTURE INTO ANGLICAN
HISTORIOGRAPHY

Before we further consider Gibbon's juvenile progress towards a religious crisis, then, we must inspect how at the same time he moved towards becoming a historian. We are the more obliged to consider the latter progress because Gibbon in his *Memoirs* leaves us a detailed account of this vocation and dates it from his childhood. These reminiscences, however, have not the status of direct evidence. They were composed, and left unfinished, long afterwards, on either side of the year 1789,[38] when the revolution in France and the vehement English reaction against it were bringing Gibbon's scepticism and unbelief under intensified attack, and he found himself classed with Voltaire as an author of the revolutionary crisis. In these circumstances he might have represented himself as having been closer to religious conformity, and his scepticism as of a kind less dangerous to orthodox belief, than had in fact been the case; and there exists the possibility that the *Memoirs* convey a representation of his early life, to be read as an artefact of 1789. The statements such a reading contained would need to be supported by further evidence; but even if we do not regard the *Memoirs* as representation, they cannot in themselves be other than recollection, and an ageing man's recollections of his early life are more likely to be interpretations than assemblages of verifiable data. Where we cannot – as we sometimes can – check Gibbon's statements in these texts against evidence existing independently of them, we have to decide how to treat them; and a possible interpretative strategy is to say that they constitute attempts by a major historian to present his own life as history and situate it in history as he understood it. On this reading it is possible for us, where we cannot test the veracity of his statements, to consider the hypothetical effects of accepting them: to consider to what interpretations of his life they will lead us if we adopt them, and in what ways we may integrate them with interpretations of our own.

According to the recollections of his older self, then, the fifteen-year-old Gibbon 'arrived at Oxford', in 1752, 'with a stock of erudition that might have puzzled a Doctor, and a degree of ignorance of which a school boy would have been ashamed'.[39] By the latter statement he means that ill health had kept him from regular school attendance, and so from a normal grammar-school training in Latin, let alone Greek – a

[38] Craddock, *EGLH*, pp. 272–91, dates the various drafts between 1788 and 1791. Cf. *Memoirs*, pp. xv–xxxi.   [39] *Memoirs*, p. 43 (*A*, p. 59, Memoir F).

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training whose range, depth and severity defy the modern imagination, and which Gibbon was always to miss to some extent.[40] But if he never became 'a well-flogged Critic', he grew at home into a prodigy of uncontrolled reading; and he says:

My indiscriminate appetite subsided by degrees in the *Historic* line: and, since Philosophy has exploded all innate ideas and natural propensities –

Gibbon was not sure he believed this –[41]

I must ascribe this choice to the assiduous perusal of the Universal history as the octavo Volumes successively appeared.[42]

He details the readings in ancient and modern history to which the *Universal History* led him, and which made him, so he tells us, an object of astonishment to his father's friends. But:

My first introduction to the Historic scenes, which have since engaged so many years of my life, must be ascribed to an accident. In the summer of 1751 I accompanied my father on a visit to Mr. Hoare's in Wiltshire: but I was less delighted with the beauties of Stourhead, than with discovering in the library a common book, the continuation of Echard's Roman history which is indeed executed with more skill and taste than the praevious work: to me the reigns of the successors of Constantine were absolutely new; and I was immersed in the passage of the Goths over the Danube when the summons of the dinner-bell reluctantly dragged me from my intellectual feast. This transient glance served rather to irritate than to appease my curiosity, and no sooner was I returned to Bath, than I procured the second and third volumes of Howell's history of the World, which exhibit the Byzantine period on a larger scale. Mahomet and his Saracens soon fixed my attention: and some instinct of criticism directed me to the genuine sources. Simon Ockley, an original in every sense, first opened my eyes, and I was led from one book to another till I had ranged round the circle of Oriental history. Before I was sixteen I had exhausted all that could be learned in English, of the Arabs and Persians, the Tartars and the Turks, and the same ardour urged me to guess at the French of d'Herbelot, and to construe the barbarous Latin of Pocock's *Abulpharagius*.[43]

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[40] For Gibbon's views on school life and learning, see *Memoirs*, pp. 32–3, 38–9, 39–40, 43–5 (*A*, pp. 43–4, 51–3, 59–61; all Memoir F).   [41] *Memoirs*, p. 119 (*A*, p. 193, Memoir B).
[42] *An Universal History from the Earliest Account of Time to the Present, compiled from Original Authors* appeared in folio at London between 1736 and 1744, in octavo between 1747 and 1748. This became *The Ancient Part* when *The Modern Part of an Universal History . . .* appeared in both folio and octavo between 1759 and 1766. See Ricuperati, 1981; Abbatista, 1981. In his journal of 1763–4 Gibbon recollected reading the *Ancient Part* on Macedonian history when aged fourteen in 1751; *Journal B*, p. 166, reference cited in *YEG*, p. 43 and n. The *Universal History* does not occur in the catalogue of Gibbon's own library. He can have read only *The Ancient Part* and is unlikely to have read its volumes on their first appearance in octavo.   [43] *Memoirs*, pp. 42–3 (*A*, pp. 57–8, Memoir F).

Here we embark upon the first of many excursions into contexts furnished by texts other than Gibbon's but indicated by him. The memoirist in his fifties is describing how his fourteen-year-old self encountered reading which was to be crucial to the *Decline and Fall*; and whether or not the experience occurred as described, the recollection of the works listed tells us something about Gibbon's relation to his own work. There is a certain amount of corroborative evidence. In his journal of 1763 Gibbon recalled a passage from the *Universal History* as one which he had read in Bath in 1751, when he was fourteen.[44] It is reported that he bought Barthélemy d'Herbelot's *Bibliothèque orientale* on credit soon after matriculating at Oxford in the following year,[45] and there are letters which indicate that he left his copy in England when sent to Lausanne in 1753, and was trying to recover it three years later.[46] Echard alone excepted, all the works mentioned in the passage quoted are catalogued in his library in early editions,[47] though we may question whether the fourteen-year-old was able to buy folios and octavos or persuade others to buy them for him; perhaps these too are purchases by the gentleman-commoner of Magdalen. We may proceed to conflate what he says of these texts with what they say in themselves, and the first thing we learn is that they were readings in late antiquity, 'the successors of Constantine', 'the Byzantine period' and 'the circle of Oriental history'. More than five-sixths of the *Decline and Fall* was to be devoted to these matters, and we are never to think of Gibbon as a single-minded classical humanist with his mind fixed on the glory that was Greece, the grandeur that was Rome and the elegiacs of the ancient world. At Stourhead in 1751, so he tells us, he discovered an unknown universe, that of late antiquity and Byzantine history, and if we study the works he names as its sources we find that he also discovered a historiography that had treated of this universe.

Echard, he tells us, led him to Howell, and there is a point at which the later work acknowledges its debt to the earlier.[48] Laurence Echard was a country archdeacon who made an income out of works on both Roman and English history, 'common' in the sense that he acknowledged being neither a university scholar nor a statesman writing at his

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[44] *Journal B*, p. 166.   [45] *Letters*, I, pp. 13, 25.   [46] *Letters*, I, pp. 13, 25.

[47] *Library*, pp. 63 ('Bar Hebraeus', i.e. Pococke, 1663), 148 (d'Herbelot), 155 (Howell, 1680–5), 209 (Ockley, 1708).

[48] Echard, 1713, III, 'the Author's Preface', sig. A4c: 'Nor must I omit the great Helps I receiv'd from Monsieur *Le Seur* and Doctor *Howell*, who at least directed me in my Enquiries, and often help'd me out in my Method and Observation.' Howel[l] had died in 1683.

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leisure.[49] The third, fourth and fifth volumes of his *Roman History*, first published in 1695, appeared in 1713; they are as Gibbon says by another hand, allegedly unknown to Echard himself; the latter had reached the reign of Constantine and decided to go no further.[50] That reign, with the adoption of Christianity as the imperial religion and the removal of the capital to the new city on the Bosphorus, was generally held to mark the end of Roman history as classically conceived: the end of republic and principate, of pagan philosophy and literature. It is the point reached by the fourteenth chapter, and before the end of the first volume, of the *Decline and Fall*, and Gibbon like his predecessors faced the problem of continuing past this turning-point a history which must still be called Roman. The predecessors identified in the *Memoirs* are neither Renaissance humanists like Biondo or Machiavelli, nor Enlightened philosophers like Montesquieu, but English churchmen, concerned with ecclesiastical history as Gibbon was to be. The continuator of Echard gives his reasons for carrying the story past Constantine.

To leave it with the Second Volume look'd, in my Opinion, like a Ceremony too much in practice amongst some Men, who stick fast to their Friends in their Prosperity, but drop 'em with the first Opportunity, when once Fortune has forsaken 'em. The Roman Greatness appear'd too Majestick, even in its Ruins, not to require our Attention; for Great Men, as whilst living they are gaz'd upon with Admiration, so when dead are they usually attended with a solemn Reverence to their Graves:

the language is humanist, but at the same time that which a client uses of his patron. Gibbon does not write in quite this tone.

But another more prevailing Motive made me wish a Continuation of this History. The Enemies of Christianity have imputed the Downfall of the *Roman* Empire to the Principles of our Religion, as if it choak'd in its Professors the Courage, Vigour and Generosity of their Fore-fathers, and taught 'em to be sluggish, unactive, and no otherwise than passively Valiant; that it was inconsistent with that Greatness of Mind, which so eminently distinguish'd the ancient *Romans* from the rest of their Cotemporaries, and introduc'd a Poorness of Spirit, that made 'em careless and insensible of their ancient Glory.

   This was not only glanc'd at by the Heathen Writers of those Times, but is too frequently insisted on in common Discourse by some Men of this Age, who think themselves wiser than the rest of Mankind, and assume a Privilege of condemning the sense of all those whose Reason won't suffer 'em to concur with them in their airy Fancies and ill-grounded Imaginations. The Reader, on

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[49] There are notices of Echard, mainly in his character as English historian, in Stephan, 1989; Okie, 1991, pp. 32–40; Hicks, 1996, pp. 102–9.
[50] Echard, 1713, III, sig. A3: 'Mr Echard's Preface.'

a Perusal of the following Sheets, will find the Fallacy of these Insinuations, and that the Downfall of the *Roman* Empire was owing to other Causes than what has been suggested by these Men; and that both Principles and practices, very opposite to those enjoin'd by the Gospel, occasion'd its Ruin.[51]

Gibbon was to be accused of this kind of infidelity, and certainly needed to consider whether the Decline and Fall was the result of the decay of ancient virtue or of its replacement by a Christian ethos. The tension between the ancient citizen and warrior, and the Christian confessor and martyr, was ineradicably ingrained in European culture, and the charge outlined by the continuator may be traced back to Machiavelli. He does not identify his contemporary adversaries, but they may well have been deists of a republican inclination, like Toland or Molesworth.[52] In these passages, he signals the central fact that Gibbon in the *Memoirs* does not mention: that from Constantine onwards Roman history was that of the church as well as the empire. This was the turning-point in all civil history written by Christians: the moment at which the history of the Spirit became joined with that of the civil order. The continuator of Echard was not committed to sacred but to civil history; a history of Rome, now organised around the sacred monarchy created by Constantine. He therefore produced three volumes, subtitled respectively

from the Removal of the Imperial Seat by *Constantine* the Great, to the Total Failure of THE WESTERN EMPIRE in AUGUSTULUS, Containing the Space of 146 Years,

from the Total Failure of the WESTERN EMPIRE in AUGUSTULUS, to the restitution of the same by CHARLES the Great, Containing the Space of 324 Years,

and

from the Restitution of the EMPIRE by Charles the Great, to the Taking of *Constantinople* by the *Turks*, Containing the Space of 653 Years.[53]

The young Gibbon – if we follow the *Memoirs* – was being led by this reading not only into late antique and Byzantine history, but into the 'space' the *Decline and Fall* was to occupy. Like him, the continuator of the *Roman History* pressed on as far as 1453, and had difficulty in periodising and organising his material. His fourth and fifth volumes are

[51] Echard, 1713, III, sig. A4–A4b.   [52] For these figures see Venturi, 1971 and M. C. Jacob, 1981.
[53] Echard, 1713, the title pages of volumes III, IV, V.

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