

*Edward Gibbon in History:  
Aspects of the Text in*  
The History of the Decline and Fall  
of the Roman Empire

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## I. REPUBLIC AND EMPIRE

Toward the end of his concluding chapter Gibbon remarks: "I have described the triumph of barbarism and religion"; and as I read the *Decline and Fall* these words are not a mere witticism but inform us that all six volumes are indeed organized around a recurrent treatment of these two themes, within the framework of the general concept of empire and its decline.<sup>1</sup> My major project has therefore become that of reading the authors more or less contemporary with Gibbon whom he read and cited when dealing with the themes of empire, barbarism, and religion, and of employing their texts to create a series of contexts in which to place Gibbon's text as he created the crucial chapters of the *Decline and Fall* in their order. In this way I hope to show his work taking shape and to examine its character as a creation of the eighteenth-century historical intelligence; I shall be more concerned with Enlightenment engagements with Rome and what replaced it than with the history of Rome itself. This approach is highly contextual but does not have the effect of dissolving the text or decon-

These lectures were delivered in an earlier version at the University of Canterbury in New Zealand during May and June 1988, when I held a Canterbury Fellowship during the celebrations of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the university's department of political science. They are based on a longer work on which I am engaged, to be entitled *Barbarism and Religion: Civil History in Gibbon's "Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire."* I am grateful to Dr. Mark Francis of the Political Science Department, and to Dr. Katherine Adshead of the Classics Department of the University of Canterbury for making these lectures possible. I have also drawn on a fourth lecture, "World History in the Enlightenment: The View from 1788," in which I attempted to relate Gibbon's history to the establishment of European settlement in Australia; this was delivered to various Australian universities and subsequently to audiences in London and Tokyo. Much of the research for these lectures was done while I held a fellowship at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in 1982.

<sup>1</sup> *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, ed. J. B. Bury (London, 1909; repr. New York: AMS Press, 1974), 7:308–9 (chap. 71). All references are to this edition.

structing its author; I allow Gibbon autonomy, and the contexts I construct are aimed at bringing into prominence the aspects of the text mentioned in the subtitle to these lectures.

The contexts themselves are not merely textual; by selecting and arranging statements about history to be found in eighteenth-century discourse, I intend to arrive at statements of historical position and predicament in which Gibbon and other enlightened writers saw themselves and their civilization as being involved, and I shall suggest that we continue to share and elaborate some of these perceptions and to find good reason for doing so. In each of these lectures, therefore, I shall discuss an eighteenth-century perception of historical process and its share in Gibbon's making of the *Decline and Fall*; but I shall also consider the effects of supposing that the process in question, or the implications of perceiving it, are still in some ways valid and operative in the history of our own times. In this way I hope to fulfill the requirement that the Tanner Lectures be lectures on human values. History, I was brought up to believe, ought not to be written under any requirement that it teach lessons to the present; it can be an important statement in human values that the past is a foreign country, with purposes and values of its own, and that its inhabitants were in no way obliged to produce us or communicate with us. This is a position to which I unhesitatingly subscribe. Nevertheless, once we begin recounting history in terms of processes going on in time, it is theoretically conceivable that we shall find that some of them are going on still and that history has a present tense. This will be my reason for applying some eighteenth-century perceptions of history, and some twentieth-century perceptions of those perceptions, to the history of the world as it may be now that the twentieth century is drawing to a close.

*The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* is less a work of ancient than of modern history as the eighteenth century understood those terms, and it was written by an author with a distinctly modern mind —though, as was usual then, the

measure of his modernity was the character and intensity of his concern with antiquity. Its first volume, indeed, is chiefly concerned with the collapse of the Augustan principate, and so with the world of Roman values in their last phase; but by the end of that volume, we have reached the establishment of the new monarchy by Diocletian and Constantine and have entered the world of late antiquity, or of church antiquity as the clerical writers of Gibbon's time understood it. The remaining five volumes are concerned with the erosion of late antique Rome by forces arising from barbarism and religion, and the transformation of that world first into medieval Europe, papal and Byzantine, and then into the enlightened modern Europe of which Gibbon himself was a citizen. Though he did not write the history of the emergence of modern Europe, it is Gibbon's starting point and he is elaborating its historical memory. I therefore find it necessary to begin these lectures by describing, or rather circumscribing, Gibbon's Europe in space and time; by saying something about, first, its geography and, second, its historicity.

Gibbon was born at Putney, and his life is divided into periods of residence in England and in Switzerland.<sup>2</sup> The volumes composing the *Decline and Fall* were written partly in Bentinck Street, Westminster, and partly at the Villa de La Grotte in Lausanne. He was Anglo-Swiss by culture and bilingual in French and English; several of his writings are in French and at one time he nearly forgot his English. These facts seem to emphasize that Gibbon was a cosmopolitan; and he was one, both in the sense that he was at home in two cultures and two languages and in the sense that a vision of Europe as a plurality of interacting states and cultures was at the heart of his understanding of history. But the multicultural space in which he lived was not very extensive. He moved between London and various places in southern and south-

<sup>2</sup> In all biographical matters, I follow the two volumes by Patricia B. Craddock: *Young Edward Gibbon: Gentleman of Letters* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982) and *Edward Gibbon: Luminous Historian* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988).

western England, both as a private gentleman and during his service as a militia officer and member of Parliament; but he was never in northern England, or in Edinburgh during its age of genius. He visited Ferney, Bern, and St. Gallen, and in the dawn of Swiss tourism was transported across the Alpine passes into Piedmont; but he never learned to speak German or visited lands where it was a language of culture. Apart from journeys to Paris, Turin, Florence, and on one crucial excursion to Rome, his travels from Lausanne, which were frequent and often quite intrepid, followed the Rhine valley to the North Sea and England; east of that path he never went.

Gibbon, then, was from western Europe —there are several Europes and it is important to keep this in mind —a Europe heir to the Latin-speaking provinces of the Roman Empire, and he was very much from the Anglo-French provinces of that Europe. There is a sharp distinction —I think there is a tension —between the relatively constricted Europe in which he lived and the almost global scale on which he came to write history; and to understand the tension we have to consider what vision of history it was that his Europe needed, used, and encouraged. This was the Europe of Enlightenment, brought into being by the Treaties of Westphalia in 1648 and Utrecht in 1713, and when it looked back to the decline of Rome it was to recount the following processes. German-speaking, or “Gothic,” peoples had settled in Roman provinces, changing Britain into England, Gaul into France, northern Italy into Lombardy; their social and political systems had become what was known as feudal. In the absence of imperial rule, there had developed alliances between their kingdoms and an ecclesiastical potentate, the bishop of Rome, who had been enabled to establish a species of monarchy over the Latin church and press demands upon the western kingdoms. He had frustrated any revival of imperial unity in the Latin world; and in this relatively decentralized Europe, barbaric societies had in due course become civilized, by a combination of ancient and modern cultural resources and by a

revival of trade. Religious dissent from the primacy of the popes had helped certain kingdoms to assert control over their ecclesiastical structures and challenge the papal monarchy itself; and on two occasions, attempts by Habsburg and Bourbon kings to establish European hegemonies so extensive as to incur the epithet of “universal monarchy” had been defeated by various combinations of secular and Protestant authority. The Treaties of Westphalia and Utrecht had confirmed the existence of a Europe of independent states, which might be termed a confederacy in the sense that it was held together by treaties, and even a republic in the sense that its member states, being sovereign, were independent of and equal with one another. The Swiss confederacy, in which Gibbon lived, and in its way the Holy Roman Empire, were smaller models of this system.

Gibbon’s Europe, then, was doubly or trebly the heir of the overthrow of empire: of the disruption of Rome, or the failure of the Hohenstaufen, and of the defeat of the Spanish Habsburgs and Louis XIV. It was overwhelmingly Latin and largely Protestant, though the Austrian emperors and other German princes had taken part in frustrating the hegemony of Louis XIV, and the “Germanic body” of the Holy Roman Empire could be seen as part of that Europe. But on its Bohemian, Hungarian, and Croatian eastern faces the Habsburg monarchy was a powerful military state with pretensions to imperial rule. Gibbon never visited Vienna or had contact with baroque and Counter-Reformation central Europe, in which it would have been useless to expound the causes of the decline and fall of the Roman Empire, since the ruling ideology denied that any such event had occurred.<sup>3</sup> Caesar was still kaiser. Gibbon was a provincial in respect of this Europe; he could see the Habsburg monarchy only on its western side, and even there was largely unconscious of what was going on in contemporary German culture. At Lausanne he shared his villa with Georges

<sup>3</sup> I have in mind the masterly study by R. J. W. Evans, *The Making of the Habsburg Monarchy, 1550–1700* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979).

Deyverdun, who translated *Der Junge Werther* into French; but he was untouched by Aufklärung as well as by Sturm and Drang, and knew little about the innovative historical scholarship of Göttingen. He was a highly advanced historical thinker, but the paths along which he was advancing were Scottish.

His was the Europe of the Treaties, whose history had been authoritatively set out along the lines that I have indicated by William Robertson, in his *View of the Progress of Society in Europe from the Subversion of the Roman Empire to the Beginning of the Sixteenth Century*, published in 1769 as the introduction to a history of the reign of Charles V.<sup>4</sup> It is of great importance to the structure of the *Decline and Fall* that, though Gibbon greatly admired Robertson's work and its statement of Western history is at the heart of his historical vision, he chose not to duplicate it and plunged into Byzantine and Eurasian history instead. The tension in the *Decline and Fall* of which I spoke a moment ago is that between the global scale on which Gibbon wrote and the sharply limited Latin and Protestant concerns with which he set out, and to which he returned.

I have called the Europe of the Treaties the Europe of Enlightenment, and one can think of this process as originating in the Latin and Protestant West, though it lost no time in spreading farther afield. I am going to argue, however, that it is unsafe to write and think of "the" Enlightenment as a single process following a single course, and better to suppose a number of Enlightenments arising in different places and converging subsequently, that Gibbon's Enlightenment was Protestant and conservative, Hume's rather than Voltaire's, or DiSerot's, or Rousseau's, or Holbach's. For the moment, however, I should like to use the term "Enlightenment" to characterize a certain series of historical developments: the ending of the Wars of Religion by the estab-

<sup>4</sup> William Robertson, *Works* (London, 1824), vol. 3. An edition introduced by Felix Gilbert was published by the University of Chicago Press in its Classic European Historians series in 1972.

lishment of a number of national sovereignties capable of checking the tendency of religious division to produce major wars which disrupted the state's capacity to protect civil existence.<sup>5</sup> As these sovereign states emerged from the Treaty of Utrecht, they were capable of regulating their relations by *raison d'état* and *jus gentium* and justifying their authority by appeal to natural law; but between Westphalia and Utrecht the anarchy of the Thirty Years' War (and in Britain the War of the Three Kingdoms) had been replaced by what was perceived as the attempt of Louis XIV to establish a universal monarchy and its frustration by the wars of the Grand Alliance. Europe was now a confederation of states linked by treaties and engaged in a commerce of goods and ideas, itself important in checking fanaticism and anarchy on the one hand, despotism and universal monarchy on the other.

In this Europe, and this Enlightenment, there was not much nostalgia for unified empire in its ancient or its modern form. Gibbon, we shall find, stressed the insecurity and despotism of the Roman empire no less than its security and prosperity. Behind the image of the empire, however, lay that of the Roman republic; and causes were at work in enlightened Europe to produce an ambivalence in this image which underlies the ambivalence of Gibbon's account of the empire. The Wars of Religion had been terminated, and the wars of the Grand Alliance brought to a negotiated conclusion, through the development in the various sovereign principalities of professional standing armies under the control of the state; they had rendered religious civil war impossible and replaced it by treaties and commerce, enlightenment and reason of state. But especially (though not exclusively) in England and Scotland, it was understood that these major gains for civiliza-

<sup>5</sup> For more on this, see J. G. A. Pocock, "Clergy and Commerce: The Conservative Enlightenment in England," in *L'Età dei Lumi: Studi storici sul settecento europeo in onore de Franco Venturi*, ed. R. Ajello and others (Naples: Jovene Editore, 1985), 1:523–62, and "Conservative Enlightenment and Democratic Revolutions," the Leonard Schapiro Lecture for 1988, *Government and Opposition: A Journal of Comparative Politics*, 24, no. 1 (1989): 81–105.

tion had been achieved through the individual's yielding up of his capacity for armed action into the hands of the sovereign; a process akin to that envisaged by Thomas Hobbes but exceeding the voluntary surrender of the sword he had described because it was perceived as founded in processes of economic and cultural change which rendered it irreversible. As the individual gave up his sword, he acquired a history in which he became a different sort of social being. He gave up his capacity to engage in civil war, and was very much better off without it; but at the same time he gave up his mastery of the means —the sword and the estate which sustained it —through which he had formerly served either the king or the commonwealth on terms which defined his relationship to authority as a free one. The termination of the Wars of Religion was therefore a crisis in the history of European freedom; it compelled a redefinition of that freedom and to that extent threatened a subversion of it.

What the individual was giving up was his opportunity of virtue, in at least one of the several meanings which that term could bear: the opportunity to assert in arms his capacity to act as a citizen and so to assert a relationship between his moral personality and the form of government in which he took part.<sup>6</sup> The ancient republic had been the form of government dedicated to the assertion of virtue, and it is this which accounts for the persistence and vitality of the republic as an ideal used in the self-criticism of an age rapidly moving away from it; but of course it is a corollary that the virtue of the armed citizen —warrior, smallholder, slave-master, pagan, and conqueror —must appear antiquated as well as ancient in the eyes of an Enlightenment deeply mistrustful of its own modernity. It was not necessarily desirable to be a Spartan or a Roman, and one might be profoundly moved by them without in the least desiring to return to them; as Gibbon wrote to his father

<sup>6</sup> For this see at length, J. G. A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975).

when approaching Rome in 1764, there had only once been such a nation in the history of the world and he hoped there would never be another.<sup>7</sup> Thankful as “the Enlightenment” was to have escaped antiquity, it nevertheless measured itself by the distance it had traveled from that benchmark and was not always reassured by what it saw. The tensions between ancient and modern were great enough to reveal radical contradictions in the ideas of both; indeed, this may have been the point at which the Western intellect discovered the contradictions of history.

The first step, then, is to understand the meanings which the two words “republic” and “empire” take on as soon as we begin to think about the title *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. “Empire,” used in that way, has really two meanings. It means the control by Rome of the entire Mediterranean basin, together with its European extensions into Gaul, Germany, and Britain, and its Asian and African extensions into Asia Minor, Mesopotamia, Libya, and Egypt; “empire,” then, as a system of rule over subject populations of a very wide extent, used as we use the word when we talk about “imperialism” in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. But we also use “the Roman empire” to denote a change in the political structure of Rome itself and the period which began with that change: the government of both Rome and its provinces by “emperors,” or *imperatores*, which lasted from Julius and Augustus Caesar to 476 A.D. in the western provinces, and to 1453 A.D. in the east. “Empire,” in short, has two meanings: the rule of provinces by Rome, and the rule of Rome by emperors; and these two meanings are intimately connected. It was because Rome acquired provinces on so vast a scale that it fell under the rule of emperors. The system of government by senate and people was not equal to the control of “empire” in the first sense; it was transformed into the system of government by *imperatores* who were also *principes*, and this system lasted for several hundred years —though the history of its decline and fall,

<sup>7</sup> J. E. Norton, ed., *The Letters of Edward Gibbon* (London, 1956), 1:184.

as recounted by Gibbon, begins about a century and a half after Augustus and could have begun even earlier. We tend to think of “the Roman empire” as if it never did anything but “decline and fall,” and this goes with the anti-imperialist terms we like to employ when writing about history. So too did Gibbon, though his feelings on the subject were ambiguous, and the nature of his anti-imperialism was very different from ours.

The government of Rome by its senate and people, consuls and tribunes, and so on, is what we mean in this context when we use the word “republic.” The republic, we say, was not equal to the control of empire, and so not only the subject provinces but the senate and people of Rome themselves fell under the rule of emperors. But the provinces which the republic could not control had been acquired by the republic itself; the republic had the energy to acquire an empire but not the stability to govern it and has lost itself, so to speak, in the control of its own provinces. Gibbon’s understanding of Roman history, and of history in general, was pervaded by the principle — a sort of law — laid down by Machiavelli and followed by Montesquieu: that republics tended to expand and acquire empires, and then prove unequal to the task of governing them.

The next point to grasp was that republics acquired empires because they were free; they consisted of communities of armed citizens, who bore political rights because they carried arms and vice versa and who defeated their enemies in war because they were patriots fighting for cities in which they were free. Machiavelli had laid it down that republics of this sort were “commonwealths for expansion” and that what made them expansive was simply the public virtue, as it was called, of the arms-bearing citizen, his capacity for free yet disciplined action in the army and the public assembly. The Latin words *libertas* and *imperium* were very frequently associated, and though both had many meanings, among them was the idea that it was free peoples rather than despots who acquired empires and exercised dominion over their

neighbors, Rome was the great example of the ancient city-state, or *polis*, capable of empire in this sense. But though *libertas* was the chief cause of *imperium*, it was a great paradox of Western history that empire had been fatal to the liberty which had acquired it. The institutions of the republic had not been able to bear the burden of controlling so many provinces, and as a result the legions had ceased to be citizens obeying public authority and exercising public freedom and had served and obeyed their generals instead. One of these generals, or *imperatores*, had made himself emperor, or *princeps*, and “the Roman Empire” was shorthand for the generalization that the empire which the republic had acquired needed an emperor to rule it, and that the emperor’s political authority had substituted itself for that of the senate and people. Republics acquired empires, but empires destroyed republics.

The public virtue which made republics victorious in war existed because in ancient societies citizen and soldier were the same man (this is of course a totally male-centered view of history). The legions had won wars and maintained the public freedom because they were armies of voting citizens. What required to be explained next was how this public virtue had decayed, when the legions ceased to obey the senate and people and instead followed the political ambitions of their commanders in the civil wars which had ended in the victory of Augustus and the subversion of the republic. There were two main explanations, both of which are to be found in the writings of Montesquieu, Gibbon, Adam Smith, Adam Ferguson, and other writers of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment as well as of antiquity. One was sheer size; the legions had become too numerous, had served too long in distant provinces, and had come to include too many non-Romans, to obey the republic any longer. Another, which could be included in the former but bore a rather different emphasis, focused on the supposed decline of the free peasantry or yeomanry of central Italy, who had formed the citizen armies of Rome. Because so many of

these served for long years in the legions, they lost control of their landholdings, which passed into the hands of great estate owners, who farmed them as a species of agrobusiness with slave labor. The legionaries thus became land-hungry and expected their commanders to find lands for them at demobilization; the civil wars of Marius and Sulla had followed, and the decline of the republic soon became irreversible.

What is common to these two explanations is that the fall of the republic was a consequence of the decline of public virtue, which could not survive in the empire which it had acquired. By public virtue was meant the union of military and political capacity, which disappeared when the legionaries ceased to be citizens freely obeying the republic and became the street fighters of ambitious generals instead; they were still soldiers, but they were not citizens. The second explanation is extremely important, because it makes the statement that public virtue requires a material foundation; to be soldier and citizen at the same time, you must own your own land and your own weapons. The republic had decayed because soldiers ceased to be citizens and citizens ceased to be soldiers, and this in turn had been the consequence of the decline of a class of free armed smallholders. Edward Gibbon, like his acquaintances Adam Smith and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, has his place in the development of that form of thought which we call historical materialism.

But all this has to do with the decline and fall (or, as Adam Ferguson called it, the progress and termination) of the Roman republic;<sup>8</sup> Gibbon wrote about the decline and fall of the Roman Empire. We have next to understand how these two processes can be one and the same, and the key lies in the fact that the "empire," whose wealth and civilized happiness Gibbon describes in his first three chapters, is essentially the principate, established by Augustus behind the pretense that senate and people were continuing to

<sup>8</sup> Adam Ferguson, *History of the Progress and Termination of the Roman Republic* (Edinburgh, 1783; rev. ed., 1799).

rule, Gibbon follows his great predecessors in emphasizing that there was something profoundly false and unreal about this system; it was “neither hawk nor buzzard,” in the language of James Harrington, “*un gouvernement ambigu*,” in the more polished phrase of Montesquieu;<sup>9</sup> and the ambiguity lay not only in the fact that it was one form of government pretending to be something else — a military despotism masquerading as a constitutional monarchy — but in the separation between soldier and citizen which had brought the republic to its end, Augustus pretended to be its savior; but as *princeps*, or president of the senate, he was at the same time *imperator*, or commander of the armies, and the senate had no share in his authority over the legions. This was why it was false for him, and his successors, to pretend that they were magistrates of a free republic; but it was also why neither the imperial family, in their great house or “palace” on the Palatine hill, nor the legions in their camps on the frontiers, were subject to the authority of the senate and people on the Capitol, or to any discipline except their own. Therefore the first eighty years of the principate, from Augustus to Nero, had been a grisly history of palace intrigue, at the end of which a succession of commanders had marched their armies to Rome and fought like Marius and Sulla for the supreme authority; but the second eighty years, ending with Marcus Aurelius, had been a period of peace and happiness, for no other reason than that the emperors, from Nerva to Antoninus Pius, had had the wisdom to nominate their successors and open no door to the armies to march again. But when Marcus Aurelius nominated his son Commodus, the sequence of palace conspiracy and military anarchy was renewed.

The problem we must face will be that of explaining Gibbon’s distribution of emphasis between the positive and negative aspects of the principate’s history. On the negative side, all that Augustus

<sup>9</sup> *The Political Works of James Harrington* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), p. 190; Montesquieu, *Considerations sur les causes de la grandeur des Romains et leur decadence* (1739; ed. Lausanne, 1749, p. 151).

did was to arrest but not terminate the decay of public virtue, and the history of the principate was no more than a continuation of that of the decline of the republic. Augustus merely institutionalized the separation of citizen from soldier, political from military virtue, which was the central phenomenon of the republic's decline. It was because of this fundamental duality, not just because the emperor hypocritically pretended to be what he was not, that Gibbon joined Montesquieu in considering the rule of Augustus a *gouvernement ambigu*. But this system could last no longer than there were principes capable of playing Augustus's double part, and the flaw here was that the imperial family was no longer subject to the discipline of public office. There would be intrigues within the household; sinister women like Livia and Agrippina would have monstrous sons like Tiberius and Nero, whose personalities were altogether deformed by despotism; even Marcus Aurelius, the wisest and the best of the emperors, could not prevent this happening to his son Commodus.

If the emperor became a monster, it was because the senate had become servile. Tacitus's account of the reign of Tiberius made that evident in detail; but his account of events at the death of Nero made it equally clear that if neither the *imperator* nor the senate could discipline the armies, there were circumstances in which the latter would move of themselves. Gibbon once remarked that he should have begun the *Decline and Fall* from Tacitus's account of the Year of the Four Emperors.<sup>10</sup> We shall see that it is significant that he chose to begin eighty years later, with Commodus instead of Nero; but the Tacitean analysis is equally valid on the later occasion. It is because there is no longer a republic of which the soldiers are citizens that they follow their generals into civil war; it is because the principate has not fully trans-

<sup>10</sup> *The English Essays of Edward Gibbon*, ed. Patricia B. Craddock (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 338. See G. W. Bowersock, "Gibbon on Civil War and Rebellion in Rome," in G. W. Bowersock, John Clive, and Stephen R. Graubard, eds., *Edward Gibbon and the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1977).

formed the republic into a monarchy that it has become a despotism tempered by anarchy and assassination. Tacitus, Machiavelli, and Montesquieu are of one mind with Gibbon about this. And it is for the same reason —that the soldiers are no longer citizens —that they will in due course lose military virtue as well as civic. When Gibbon arrives at the first two emperors —Maximin the Thracian and Philip the Arab —who were barbarian soldiers risen through the ranks, he stops his narrative to study the cultures of the Persians, the Germans, and the Goths, who will soon be plundering provinces and defeating Roman armies. The barbarians en masse have suddenly become actors in history.

It could be said that the explanation of the Decline and Fall is over before the narrative of the Decline and Fall has fairly begun. If we want to know why the legions could not keep the barbarians out, we have the answer by the end of Gibbon's seventh chapter, and there are sixty-four to come. The history of the principate established by Augustus is over too; the next stage will be its transformation by Diocletian into a palace-centered sacred monarchy and the establishment of its alliance with the Christian church by Constantine. This imperial structure will persist with little internal change until the last Caesar, who is also the last Constantine, perishes at the taking of Constantinople in 1453. The huge and complex history of the eleven centuries from Constantine to Constantine is that of the increasing barbarization of a Roman world increasingly Christian. *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* is less what its title announces it is going to be than what its last chapter declares that it has been: a history of "the triumph of barbarism and religion."

But of course this is not the whole of the story regarding the Augustan principate, and we have to resume our inquiry into the meaning of "republic" and "empire" in order to understand Gibbon's writing it in the way that he did. His first three chapters are, after all, the survey of a golden age: the condition of the Roman Empire under the Antonine emperors, Antoninus Pius and Marcus

Aurelius. But Gibbon and his readers knew well enough that the happiness of the Antonines was not going to last, and he loses no opportunity of reminding us that the whole system was unreal and insecure. The good emperors really were good men, but they were only playing at being magistrates responsible to public authority. At any accession some degenerate youth might blow it in the palace and set the armies marching again; the system contained no constitutive element which could check this happening. It remained extraordinary, however, that there had been only one Year of the Four Emperors from Augustus to A.D. 180; this was more extraordinary than that, when the armies did march a second time, the system did not recover. It was almost true that the Antonine world was not a world in decay, but a world whose stability was both deep and precarious. All that need be added was that the Romans were becoming less able to cope with disorder whenever it might reappear.

What I think it important to stress now is that the problem faced by most thinkers of the eighteenth century was not that of returning to an ancient world of public virtue, but of counting and remedying the costs of having departed from it, and using its image to ask whether it was possible to rediscover virtue in some form unknown to the ancients but accessible to the moderns. A key concept in constructing these alternative values was something widely known as “manners,” and also as “politeness”; Gibbon, in a famous phrase to which I shall return, called it “taste and science.” What these terms denote is, first, the ability to handle, evaluate, and enjoy a cultural inheritance, and at the same time to enjoy culture in the form of goods —material, aesthetic, and even moral — which are being produced, imported, and exchanged. It is very much an ethics for a commercial society, and it is directed at a refined elite of consumers, not in any sense at the producers of culture. But the individual in such society must not be a mere consumer or a mere aesthete, since if he does he will become luxurious and effeminate. That word is gender-loaded and may well

sound offensive to women (as perhaps it did to Gibbon's friend and former beloved, Suzanne Necker).<sup>11</sup> Actually, the Enlightenment theorists held that women played a very positive role in the distribution and refinement of modern culture, which had been denied to their sisters in antiquity; but they also held that there existed a very strong differentiation of function between the sexes (as they called them), so that if men exhibited merely the female virtues these would be so far inadequate as to be degenerate, while women (insisted Gibbon) had no business being warriors. There was needed a more active moral virtue, which was of course defined in male terms, and if it was not the virtue of the warrior citizen of antiquity, what was it to be?

Here the notions of manners and politeness began to denote something more than a refined consumerism: to denote the individual's ability to manage himself, to move freely and sociably in a world where goods were constantly in circulation and being exchanged and individuals were constantly in contact with one another, rubbing up against and polishing one another — this is what the word “politeness” really means. There was an ethics and a morality which insisted that we were sociable beings, who existed both physically and morally in our contacts and interactions with one another, that we were what we could be in our contacts with one another, and even what others judged us to be and we appeared to be in one another's sight. If ancient virtue had been a means by which the individual knew who he was and what he could do, politeness was its only possible replacement in a modern society; and Adam Ferguson argued that the ancients had not been polite enough, that their freedom and virtue had made them harsh, arrogant, and bloody, so that where they were not more than men, like gods, they were necessarily less than men, like beasts.<sup>12</sup> The difference between ancient and modern society, insisted the En-

<sup>11</sup> For her exchange with Gibbon following the publication of the first volume of the *Decline and Fall*, see Craddock, *Luminous Historian*, pp. 84-86.

<sup>12</sup> *Progress and Termination* (1799), 5:418n.

lightenment philosophers, lay in the enormously increased trade, credit, and circulation of goods which made the latter capable of supporting a standing army and therefore no longer capable of ancient virtue, but at the same time capable of a sociable politeness the equal if not the superior of anything in ancient morality.

Gibbon's friends, David Hume and Adam Smith, took the lead in developing this critique of ancient society and its virtue.<sup>13</sup> They insisted that the freedom of the ancient citizen, resting on the possession of his own lands and his own arms, had been constantly threatened with debt, because there did not exist an adequate internal market mechanism by which he could exchange his produce for money. He had therefore been driven to join the legions and go out to seize other people's lands and appropriate their labor in the form of slavery. This explained his warrior capacity and his capacity for public discipline and public freedom; it also explained the expansiveness of ancient freedom, the reason why republics acquired empires. But the process could not go on forever; the slave-labor economy which lay at the root of it had taken over, and the legionary had found himself deprived of his land by the great slave-worked estates. The process of republican decay could now begin; the process which had transformed the legionary into a long-service paid professional. His equivalent in modern society, said Hume and Smith, was a military proletarian, an unskilled social outcast who could do no more than handle a musket and had never had any public virtue to lose; but the economics of antiquity explained both why the ancient smallholder had acquired public virtue and why he had lost it. These conditions need not recur; the modern soldier was the product of a system of wage labor, the ancient of a system of slave labor; and at the bottom of the whole edifice of the *Decline and Fall*, I think we can find Gibbon agreeing that while the decay of republican virtue provides

<sup>13</sup> See in particular Hume's essay "Of the Populousness of Ancient Nations," published in 1752, and Adam Smith's *Lectures on Jurisprudence*, delivered in 1762 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978).

a sufficient explanation for the decay of the ancient world, it does not define the problems (whatever they are) which confront the modern. But ancient and modern were not as easily separated and polarized as that. On the one hand, politeness was ancient as well as modern — Cicero was its great exponent; on the other, public virtue was modern as well as ancient. It simply could not be eliminated from eighteenth-century notions about liberty; one could not be free if one did not have a moral personality capable of sustaining one's freedom; and if our most dearly held notions about free personality were shown to rest upon a foundation of slave labor, the implications (as Edmund Morgan reminds us) remained very grave.<sup>14</sup> The ethos of polite sociability had a way to go before it could answer questions like these.

The problem of Gibbon's treatment of the Antonine empire comes in here, because it was necessary for Enlightenment historians and philosophers to decide whether there was any relationship between culture and liberty, or whether manners and politeness, taste and science, the free enjoyment of sociability, could not flourish just as well under an extensive and ultimately absolute monarchy, like that of Marcus Aurelius or Louis XIV. They were the product of commerce, and commerce required a wide area under a common peace. Montesquieu had made honor the principle of monarchies, and honor could very easily become a code of ceremonious politeness; the court had served as a focus for the exchange of favor for service, quite as efficiently as the market though within other limits. David Hume contended that if politeness was what one wanted, an extensive monarchy, organizing great territories with a courtly hierarchy at its center, would provide it more effectively than the rough-hewn equality of either a market or a republic; virtue was by no means the same thing as politeness. Gibbon's portrait of the Antonine empire, therefore, is that of a vast chain of provinces, within which the great roads

<sup>14</sup> *American Slavery / American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia* (New York: Norton, 1975).

built by the legions bring about a mercantile agriculture, a commerce of goods, a further commerce of gods, whose utter interchangeability is the source of a universal tolerance, and a circulation of manners, raising the level of culture to a point where all have become Greeks or Latins (with the major exceptions of the effeminate Syrians, the sullen Egyptians, and the unsociable Jews). It is this commerce in both economy and culture, ensured by a long and nearly unbroken peace, which renders the Antonine era uniquely happy in human history. It is a monarchy of an unusual kind, since at its center is no true court but the *gouvernement ambigu* of the Palatine and the Capitol; but it illustrates the point that an extensive monarchy can be an empire of manners and commerce.

However, Gibbon does not forget to remind us that it is a despotism, though the good manners and even the virtue of the emperors conceal the fact from view; a despotism because it is supported by military virtue divorced from civic virtue, and if the latter is extinct the former cannot last forever. And as Gibbon's analysis of the Antonines reaches its culmination, we discover that manners unsupported by civil and military virtue were not enough to sustain ancient civilization. A theme which recurs in eighteenth-century debate is that of the relation between liberty and the arts. For the ancient historian Tacitus, "the arts" meant poetry, history, and rhetoric; they could flourish only where public speech exercised positive freedom, and the decline of republican virtue meant the decay of the self and its expression. For the enlightened modern Voltaire, who perhaps was nearer seeing "the arts" as the manufacture and exchange of objects of taste, the four great ages in the history of art had been ages of monarchical patronage: those of Pericles, Augustus, Lorenzo de' Medici, and (the only king among them) Louis XIV. But Gibbon sides with Tacitus, and mounts a devastating critique at the end of his long eulogy of Augustan and Antonine culture. The arts decayed because there was no public speech, and the rhetoricians who practiced them

were only pretending to speak freely; because there was no public virtue, the polite and peaceable provincials must rely on the peasant legions to protect them, and these in the end failed for the same reason, Antonine civilization, he tells us quite unequivocally, did perish of a lack of public spirit; Romans and provincials “sank into the languid indifference of private life” and had become “a race of pygmies; when the fierce giants of the north broke in, and mended the puny breed. They restored a manly spirit of freedom; and after the revolution of ten centuries, freedom became the happy parent of taste and science.”<sup>15</sup> That marvelous sentence states the whole of the enlightened attitude toward the northern barbarians: you cannot have enlightenment without civilizing them, and you can’t have liberty by civilizing anybody else.

I shall explore the ramifications of that in my second lecture. For the present what needs emphasizing is that Gibbon is contrasting two systems of maintaining a civilization of manners: the unified military empire, in which manners stagnate and decay, with the plurality of confederate states, in which manners are perpetually reinforced by commerce and a certain amount of virtue. Looked at in this way, the *Decline and Fall* —like Robertson’s *View of the Progress of Society* before it— offers a historical justification for the concert of Europe in its pre-revolutionary condition, during yet another eighty-year period from 1713 to 1793. But while Gibbon was writing and just after he had finished, two great democratic revolutions broke out within and against the enlightened Europe of the Treaties, each of which raised the problem of republic and empire in a new form. The American Revolution is perhaps the more anomalous of the two, since neither the empire which it disrupted nor the republic which it erected conformed precisely to the ancient pattern. Parallels between the decline of the Roman Empire and the breakup of the British Atlantic dominion were and are easy to suggest, and they occur in Gibbon’s private —though not, I believe, in his historical — writings; but

<sup>15</sup> *Decline and Fall*, 1:63–64.

when all is said and done, Rome decayed because the institutions of provincial government dominated and absorbed those of Rome itself and then proved unable to sustain themselves, whereas the American Revolution occurred for the precisely opposite reason that the institutions of British self-government were not fully extended to the colonies, with the result that the latter claimed them for themselves.<sup>16</sup> No Roman province broke away claiming to take its just place among the nations of the earth. But for this reason, the American secession, though a disagreeable and discomfiting experience for the British political system, left its essential character unchanged and even unchallenged, and the language of decline and fall applied to Britain was without depth of meaning, in the eighteenth century. Parliamentary sovereignty did not fall when the Americans repudiated it, and as for empire, it was renewed in India, even as it was being lost in America, in a form much closer to the Roman than before. When Gibbon attended the trial of Warren Hastings, he might have heard it debated whether Hindus were naturally servile and British rule over them necessarily despotic. That was the problem of empire in its ancient, indeed in its pre-Roman, form.

The American confederacy of newly republican independent states evolved into a republic which was also an empire, and was so described in the second sentence of *The Federalist Papers*.<sup>17</sup> The expansive capacity of republics depended on their armed virtue, and it was early laid down as an American principle that a well-regulated militia was necessary to the security of a free state. But in all the heated debate among Federalists and Anti-Federalists

<sup>16</sup> Others have discerned the shadow of the American war in the text of the *Decline and Fall* more clearly than I can. See Bowerstock, "Gibbon on Civil War," p. 65; Frank E. Manuel, *The Changing of the Gods* (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1983), pp. 91–93.

<sup>17</sup> For more on this, see J. G. A. Pocock, "States, Republics, and Empires: The American Founding in Early Modern Perspective," *Social Science Quarterly* 68, no. 4 (1987):703–23; repr. in Terence Ball and J. G. A. Pocock, eds., *Conceptual Change and the Constitution* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1988), pp. 55–77; and Pocock, *The Politics of Extent and the Problems of Freedom*, Colorado College Studies, no. 25 (Colorado Springs: Colorado College, 1988).

about whether public virtue could be maintained in a republic of great size, the danger of a Caesarist or a Bonapartist subversion was not ignored but not much mentioned. On the North American continent, the new republic was not really taking its place among the nations of the earth; it had few powerful civilized or barbarian neighbors and could expand from sea to sea without needing thirty legions for the purpose. By the end of the eighteenth century, Americans could visualize the acquisition of empire on a continental scale as a process of appropriating a wilderness and creating a commerce; precisely the progress of society as visualized by the historians of the Enlightenment — as I shall show in the second lecture — which Adam Smith in 1776 had argued did not require a carapace of military empire to sustain it. There are senses in which Gibbon had been arguing the same thing.

The second democratic revolution, that in France, was a far more Roman and Machiavellian affair: a passionate crusade to recreate virtue in the citizen, which, for reasons Livy or Machiavelli could be used to describe, early became militant, armed, and expansive. We have constantly to remind ourselves how regressive and even reactionary the cry *Aux armes citoyens!* might sound in the ears of an Enlightenment which identified the progress of civilization, for good and for ill, with the citizen's surrender of his arms to the magistrate. Neither Gibbon nor Smith would have been at all surprised to learn that the soldiers of a republic imposing virtue on its neighbors had become the Old Guard of a new emperor; the only thing that might have astonished them was the speed with which the process was accomplished. The Europe of the Treaties gathered itself and after a long and bitter war cast down the empire of virtue and reimposed the public law of nations. Benjamin Constant, who had studied at Edinburgh; Germaine de Staël, the daughter of Suzanne Necker; and François Guizot, who had translated Gibbon, were among the *philosophes* of this process. If we can find in Gibbon's later volumes — and I think we can — a demonstration that neither Isaurian nor Hohen-

Staufen empire was necessary to the civilization of Europe, we can find in him the voice of that Enlightenment which would set itself to resist the Revolution; the Enlightenment which held that commerce and a plurality of sovereign states were preferable to universal monarchy, and more modern.

But the evolution of postrevolutionary France into a democratic state militarized by conscription is one among many preconditions of the European wars of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; and here there is an aspect of the problem of empire with which Gibbon did not deal, perhaps because it lacks any connection with the problems of republican virtue and Enlightenment. When he reached what he had described as “the term of my labours, the taking of Constantinople by the Turks,” Gibbon returned to western Europe to write three chapters on the history of the city of Rome under papal rule. In these chapters, it may be remarked, his attitude to the papacy is unexpectedly benign, almost as if his preference for a Europe of independent states had given his thinking a Guelphic cast.<sup>18</sup> The decision to write this conclusion had been taken long before, and we ought not to overdramatize the point that it might have gone otherwise. But Gibbon possessed materials which he could have used in writing a survey of the rise and decline of the Ottoman Empire, which had succeeded the Byzantine. Had he done so, however, he would have been obliged to recognize the presence of the powerful military systems now struggling for the succession to the Ottoman: Austria, Russia, and less immediately Prussia; the Holy Roman Empire modernized by its Kaiser, the Third Rome of Muscovy modernized by its Tsar. Caesar was not dead, and empire had not declined.

There are two radical limitations of Gibbon’s worldview as he completed the *Decline and Fall* in 1788. He did not know that revolution was about to break out in France; but perhaps that is less surprising than that he does not seem to know that the Seven

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Pocock, “Superstition and Enthusiasm in Gibbon’s History of Religion,” *Eighteenth-Century Life* 8, no. 1 (1982): 83-94.

Years' War and the partition of Poland had transformed politics east of the Elbe. There was a Europe beyond the almost Atlantic and Mediterranean Europe of the Treaties: a Europe of extensive military monarchies, with no interest in either the image of the ancient republic or the quasi-confederation of trading states to which the last phase of the *ancien régime* was a party. Under Napoleon the revolutionary empire of western Europe would briefly impose itself on the politics of empire in eastern Europe. After a century and a half of intermittent but titanic warfare, which has destroyed the capacity of Britain, France, and Germany to exercise imperial power beyond Europe or autonomous power within it, we have emerged with a confederation of formerly imperial trading states in the space previously occupied by the Europe of the Treaties, and east of it the decaying hulk of what may or may not be the last of the military–bureaucratic empires that Gibbon did not include in his geopolitics. On the moral and philosophical plane, we have a declenching confrontation between post-Leninist societies witnessing the extinction of the last sparks of revolutionary virtue, and neoliberal societies wondering whether they have adequately connected the moral personality of the individual to the conduct of political life. The problems raised in the Enlightenment have been transformed but not resolved.

At the end of his thirty-eighth chapter, where he inserts his “General Reflections on the Fall of the Roman Empire in the West” —probably written as early as 1774 —Gibbon does recognize the world-historical significance of Russian empire in Central Asia. In conquering the steppe and bringing it under cultivation, the Russians are destroying in its homelands the warlike nomadism which, as we shall see, has come to be what Gibbon principally means by “barbarism.” But he links this phenomenon with another, very much less military: the great voyages of English navigators to Polynesia, and “the introduction of useful plants and animals to the islands of the South Seas.” It would be easy, if inaccurate, for Gibbon or his readers to suppose that Polynesians,

neither herdsmen nor plowmen, belonged to that hunter-gatherer condition of culture for which the contemporary term was “savagery.” Gibbon does not use the word “empire” in this connection, and it has been my argument in this lecture that on the whole he thought of empire as an archaic phenomenon, the product of an economy not yet able to replace conquest by commerce. But when we speak of “empire” we think of “imperialism”; the domination of the planet by Europe, the use of power by the Western trading states to impose commerce on societies which had not carried it so far by themselves. It is possible to connect the *Decline and Fall* with these phenomena, and when I speak on “barbarism” in Gibbon’s historical vocabulary I shall explore the implications of doing so.

## II. BARBARISM AND CIVILIZATION

“I have described the triumph of barbarism and religion.” “The fierce giants of the north broke in and mended the puny breed. . . . freedom again became the happy parent of taste and science.” These are key sentences in the study I am constructing of Gibbon’s *Decline and Fall*, and what I shall attempt now is to explore the meaning, for Gibbon and to us, of his use of the terms “barbarism” and “barbarians.” As humanists and neoclassical scholars were accustomed to use it, “barbarism” was first and foremost a philological term, as it had been in classical antiquity. For Greeks, “barbarians” were simply those who did not speak Greek; for Romans, those who did not speak Greek or Latin; for Renaissance humanists, those who did not speak either with classical purity. The last, indeed, objected so strongly to patristic and scholastic as well as to partly German Latin that the equation of barbarism and religion had long been something of a humanist joke. When Gibbon wrote his survey of the Antonine empire, he used “barbarian” of those populations who did not become Hellenized: the “slothful” and “effeminate” Syrians, the “sullen” and “ferocious” Egyptians; he did not apply it, interestingly, to the “jeal-

ous” and “unsociable” Jews, But this is the most ancient usage of “barbarian”: to denote those who do not speak our language, and babble and burble unintelligibly instead, those on whom the Confusion of Tongues descended at the fall of the Tower of Babel.

The “barbarians” were the unintelligible foreigners; but ethnic thinking did not of course end there. As Greeks and, later, Latins looked out on the world surrounding them, they saw “barbarians” mainly in two very large categories. To the east and southeast there were Persians, Mesopotamians, and Egyptians, literate, civilized, and ancient, but speaking unknown tongues and living in cities under great kings who were supposed to be despotic. These were the “barbarians” spoken of by Herodotus in one of the seminal sentences of European historiography, when he says that both Greeks and “barbarians” have performed great and wonderful actions, and he is writing to make sure that these are not forgotten. The subjects of the Great King at least start off on a footing of heroic equality with the Dorians and Ionians. But as the imagination traveled north and then west, through Asia Minor, Scythia, Thrace, and for Romans the forest lands beyond the Danube and the Rhine, it encountered “barbarians” of a different kind, warlike, transhumant, nonliterate, and living in cultures so hard to understand that it was easy to place them low on a scale of development, once that momentous idea had been invented. Using the image of the Athenian *polis* to organize such a scale, Aristotle differentiated “barbarians” into the city and river dwellers of the east, who were civilized but lived under despotisms which made them servile, and the forest and plain dwellers of the north, who were free but wild, ferocious, and what was later called “savage.” This differentiation of barbarians into servile and savage has lasted ever since, and has even been used to justify making people slaves because they are savages.

Gibbon had to introduce “barbarians” of both descriptions into his history, because the Roman system had been transformed by the pressure both of Goths, Huns, and Vandals on the Danube

and the Rhine and of a renewed Persian Empire on the Euphrates. But Persia and Rome had both been destroyed in the end by Arabs and later by Turks, whose social structures originally fitted the stereotype of “northern” barbarism better than that of “eastern,” though it could be asserted that these peoples had closed the circle of savagery and servility by establishing despotic empires as soon as they had done conquering. Gibbon, at all events, was not a second Herodotus, recounting the victory of free cities over the Great King, except when he is thinking of the Europe of his own time. His Roman history began when the free city had already declined and no Great King had replaced it; and in that story the “barbarians” triumph, side by side with religion, though there is the seminal suggestion that the “fierce giants” become the parents of a culture both free and civilized, though it takes a thousand years to establish it. The “triumph of barbarism” is a necessary prelude to the triumph of enlightenment, though the role of the “triumph of religion” in the process remains to be discovered. The barbarians are not the heroes of the *Decline and Fall*, because it is written in a postheroic culture; but they are among two sets forming its central characters.

These barbarians are “the fierce giants of the north.” When Gibbon had completed seven chapters depicting the Augustan-Antonine principate in its happiness and its disintegration, he wrote two chapters surveying the barbarians who were coming to overthrow it, and who had not lost, because they had never had, the union of military and civic capacity which constituted ancient virtue. There is a chapter on the Persians and a chapter on the Germans; but Gibbon loses no time in stating that it is in the latter “barbarians” that his enlightened European readers are really interested. Our concern with the primitive Germans, he says, is “domestic”; in their “rude institutions” we recognize “the original principles of our present laws and manners.”<sup>19</sup> A new but primary definition has here been laid down. Who were the barbarians?

<sup>19</sup> *Decline and Fall*, 1:230.

Answer: they are ourselves; Europe is the result of the barbarian invasions of the western empire and of the long process of civilizing them which followed. The “freedom” of the “fierce giants” was primitive and savage, but enlightenment is the result of civilizing it and can have no other original principle. Civilization is neo-classical, but freedom is barbaric. The barbarians have ceased to be savages from the ends of the earth and have become a necessary component of domestic history.

We can see that this was a highly dangerous statement for a civilization to be making about itself, as when Gibbon remarks that “the Persians, long since civilised and corrupted,” had lost “that intrepid hardihood, both of mind and body, which have rendered the northern barbarians masters of the world.”<sup>20</sup> This is one of the very few sentences in the *Decline and Fall* which are imperialist in the sense that they justify Western domination of the planet. We are back with the problem of *libertas* and *imperium*, of which I spoke in my first lecture; it is because the Germans were free, in a sense in which the Persians were not, that their descendants are exercising world empire in 1776. Liberty and empire go together, and the Goths are renewing what the ancient Romans attempted; they did not renew the ancient virtue of the Romans, which empire corrupted into despotism, but their descendants have acquired enlightened civility instead, and a republic of interconnected states may acquire empire without losing its freedom to military despotism. Neither Gibbon nor Adam Smith lived to see Napoleon or to fear the empire of the tsars.

So the northern barbarians are at the center of Gibbon’s history and his understanding of what barbarism meant. Because they were at crucial points German, the possibility of a “Teutonic” racism must come to mind; but though not absent, it is not, I shall argue, a very important component of his thinking. The ethnocentric exclusiveness which we can certainly find there takes primarily the form of “orientalism”: the exclusion of Persians, Meso-

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:228.

potamians, and Egyptians from dynamic models of world history by the argument that they are incapable of any form of government but “oriental despotism,” and that this is uniform, sterile, and unchanging.<sup>21</sup> Gibbon certainly subscribed to this stereotype, and it limited his concern with the role of the Persians in bringing about Roman decline. Arabs and Turks, when they appear, conform better to the “barbarian” than the “oriental” stereotype.

The barbarians, then, are northern rather than eastern peoples who appear on the Rhine and Danube frontiers of the empire in numbers with which the increasingly degenerate Roman armies cannot cope. Their military technology is not much different from that of the legions, being iron age and muscle-powered; their lack of social as well as military discipline ought to render them hopelessly inferior to either citizen or professional armies; but something has gone wrong. That something is the decline of both freedom and discipline in Rome, of which the barbarians are not the cause; but it highlights the problem of the crude form of freedom which they do possess. At this point we encounter “barbarism” as a term denoting a lower and less civilized state of society; and in our postimperialist thinking, we have come to mistrust very strongly all language which suggests that some human societies are “lower” or “higher” on some universal scale than others. Words like “primitive,” “savage,” and “barbarian” itself share in this mistrust. Gibbon, however, used such words and accepted the premise that there were stages of development leading toward civilization, and indeed away from it. To understand how he thought, we need to understand how he came to be using such a model, and we need to fit his thinking about the northern barbarians into it.

In Gibbon’s Europe of trade, discovery, and empire, the term “barbarian” was not very generally in use to denote non-western

<sup>21</sup> See Melvin Richter, “The Concept of Despotism,” *Dictionary of the History of Ideas* (New York: Scribner’s, 1973), vol. 2, and Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).

peoples; it was becoming relegated to the classical vocabulary and employed chiefly in the study of antiquity, and it was being to some extent superseded by the more modern term "savage," derived from the Italian *selvaggio*, meaning "the wild man of the woods," which words form also a translation, rather ominously, of the Malaysian *oran outang*. The words "savage" and "barbarian" do, however, occur together, and are nearly but not quite interchangeable, in the text of the *Decline and Fall*; and we now reach a stage where Gibbon's use of the term "barbarian" is part of his employment of ideas of social evolution, of the development of human society through a series of lower and higher states on a scale of civilization, and of his acceptance (a cautiously limited one) of a doctrine of progress, which in our confused and pluralized world is now much out of favor.

Ideas of this sort had existed in classical antiquity.<sup>22</sup> Athenian theorists of the political life had imagined human society becoming increasingly complex as it passed from the condition of primitive wanderers to that of heroic warrior kingdoms and then to that condition of equality between arms-bearing citizens which was the kernel of liberty as the Athenians understood it, Athenian political theory contained a notion of evolution from a primitive state and in that way resembled the schemes later concocted by Greeks and Romans interested in the human inventions of production, distribution, and government. These had imagined human beings wandering on the earth after some general catastrophe like a flood and inventing or recovering by stages the means of gathering food, domesticating animals, growing crops, and exchanging goods for money, with all the social and political consequences that ensued. Such schemes, often invented by poets, had attracted the interest of jurists in the increasingly law-governed world of the Roman Empire, when law was said to be that which was approved by the prince and justice to be the practice of distributing to each that

<sup>22</sup> Ludwig Edelstein, *The Doctrine of Progress in Classical Antiquity* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1967).

which properly pertained to him. It is of tremendous and rather terrible importance that because justice was conceived as a matter of distribution and of property, and because the actors in the process of law were conceived as individuals, there came to be imagined a primitive state of mankind in which individuals as yet owned nothing, and the human condition was nevertheless one of individuality; so that human beings were assumed to be individuals by nature, the social or civilized individual was defined by his capacity to appropriate and distribute property, but the primitive individual was defined as an isolated being who as yet lacked all property.

The concept of the state of nature, as it was called, as a condition of social atomism in which individuals moved freely but had not yet cohered into society through the gravitational force of appropriation and distribution, was the result of a series of thought-experiments performed in ancient and early modern Europe, in which humans were imagined without property or law in order to imagine how these phenomena came into being. This meant that a world was imagined in which humans were both individual and social, but law and property, presumed by jurists to be the preconditions of human society, had not yet come into existence; with the result that the individual in the state of nature could be imagined as human, but not human yet. The hominid or anthropoid entered the Western imagination in this manner. He first appears in the figure of Polyphemus, the Cyclops in the *Odyssey*, who wanders freely but ferally about, solitary except (one suspects) for the satisfaction of his sexual needs, and so far from any relations with other humans that he satisfies his nutritional needs by eating them.<sup>23</sup> Polyphemus is the original giant, the original cannibal, and the original savage; he is a patriarch without a family, and the only remedy for his condition, or perhaps his existence, is the creation of human exchange groups larger than the family. As the

<sup>23</sup> Cf. the role of the Cyclopes generally in Aristotle, *Politics*, 1.2.7, and *Ethics*, 10.9.13.

jurists employed Polyphemus and other such figures in the thought-experiment of the state of nature, they became increasingly convinced that what he lacked was the capacity for exchange, and therefore for appropriation. The presocial individual was a device for selecting what humans needed in order to be civilized and human; when actual societies were encountered who seemed indeed to lack the preconditions which had been selected, it was very easy to conclude that their inhabitants were savages or even pre-humans, living in a state of nature.

In the two centuries preceding Gibbon's completion of the *Decline and Fall*, European theorists of natural law had made a number of remarkable assertions by means of this model. There had been the great Spanish debate as to why Amerindians should not be exterminated, and in what circumstances Africans might be justly enslaved; and this had been a debate about whether Amerindians—who were supposed to live “naturally” because they lived beyond the reach of reason and revelation as Europeans knew them, and practiced methods of social organization the Europeans were not at all equipped to understand—were rational and social beings.<sup>24</sup> It therefore became a debate about whether they understood the just distribution of goods among men and possessed any concepts translatable as justice, law, or property. But there had also been a great debate, domestic in the sense that it was altogether a product of Europeans' concern about themselves, as to the relations between authority and property.<sup>25</sup> Did the subject receive his property from his prince, or did the prince derive his authority from the rights his subjects had to protection in their property? This debate was notoriously not a simple one, but it has two con-

<sup>24</sup> Lewis Hanke, *Aristotle and the American Indians* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959); Anthony Pagden, *The Fall of Natural Man: The American Indians and the Origins of Comparative Ethnology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982); J. A. Fernandez-Santamaria, *The State, War, and Peace: Spanish Political Thought in the Renaissance, 1516-1559* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

<sup>25</sup> Richard Tuck, *Natural Rights Theories: Their Origin and Development* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980).

sequences which affect the history of the notions of savagery and barbarism. In the first place, it was the product of a European society postfeudal but still agricultural enough to make the question of how the subject had appropriated lands and acquired title to them absolutely central in the definition of what rights and property he enjoyed. It therefore rendered crucial the notion of an earth lying vacant as a “great common of mankind” and awaiting appropriation by human beings, since otherwise appropriation could take place only with the consent of some prince or government existing already. This notion lay ready to hand in the concept of “the state of nature.” But in the second place, since some theorists contended that God had eliminated the state of nature by granting the whole earth to Adam as its first prince and governor, after which all princes ruled and all subjects held property in virtue of the authority accorded to Adam, it became necessary for their opponents to find means, within the biblical text to which Filmer’s *Patriarcha* and Bossuet’s *Politique Tirée des Saintes Ecritures* had so effectively appealed, of breaking the chain of Adamic kingship and restoring the state of nature in which individuals had equal and original title to the lands they appropriated. It was found that this could be done by appealing to what had happened less at the expulsion of Adam and Eve from Eden than at the dispersion of the sons of Noah and their families from Ararat after the Flood and from Shinar after the Fall of the Tower of Babel. The Confusion of Tongues, after all, was the origin of barbarism in the linguistic sense.

We return by these means to the history of the northern barbarians. What renders the age of Enlightenment fascinating to the historian of today is that one constantly encounters modern minds working with and in premodern materials; and here it is that both the ethnic history of the barbarians —their formation into tribes and nations with patterns of common descent —and their social history —the formation of their laws and manners —were conducted within the framework provided by the chronology and gen-

ealogy set out in the Book of Genesis. It was assumed that Moses as its author was the first historian and that accounts of the origins of the world and mankind given in the mythographies of other literate peoples —Greek, Assyrian, Egyptian —must and could be reconciled with those given in Genesis. This assumption led to many results which we find laughable today —such as the notorious creation of the world in 4004 B.C. but we have to think ourselves back into a time when it was taken seriously by intellectuals of the stature of Sir Isaac Newton, and used in constructing conceptual schemes which were not archaic and ingenuous but modern and even sophisticated.<sup>26</sup> Gibbon was amused by the old chronology and was clearly coming to see human history as that of a species belonging to the animal kingdom; but he did not in fact have an alternative scheme which could replace it as a means of setting out the early history of human society, and many of the works he most relied on were written by authors who adhered to it.<sup>27</sup> The thesis of the common descent of all mankind, first from Adam and Eve and then from Ham, Shem, and Japheth after the Flood and the Dispersion from Shinar, was used in two ways: first, to provide a common Japhetic ancestry for the barbarians of northern Asia and Europe, from the Tartars in the far east to the Irish in the far west; second, to show the sons and descendants of Noah occupying an earth left vacant but fertile after the universal deluge and engaging in complex patterns of appropriation, distribution, and culture. It was this second fall of man which was used to reinstitute the state of nature.

John Locke, refuting the arguments of Filmer in the early 1680s, had shown the first men appropriating the “great common” of the earth and acquiring property in it, which was the foundation of law among them; but they had needed civil government only with the invention of money as a medium of exchange. Insofar as

<sup>26</sup> Frank Manuel, *Isaac Newton, Historian* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1963).

<sup>27</sup> *Decline and Fall*, 1:234.

we know, when Locke situated appropriation in recorded history and chronology, it would be after the Deluge and the Dispersion when the earth lay vacant; but only natural law and natural reason were needed to explain the processes occurring then, since the history of Adam's kingship had disappeared with the refutation of Filmer. No one of the sons of Noah enjoyed primacy over the others. Japheth had dwelt in the tents of Shem, and just as Adam's first-born Cain had been cursed by God for the murder of his brother, so Noah had cursed his youngest son Ham and made him and his line servants to his brethren. When Daniel Defoe, Locke's first defender against his first serious critic, Charles Leslie, repeated his argument, the crucial difference between master and follower is that Defoe is intent on vindicating the importance of merchants in the history of society, whereas Locke was under no controversial necessity to do so; if he was an ideological defender of early capitalism, as some think, it must have been at a different level of consciousness. And Defoe's emphasis may have had less to do with Leslie's reliance on Filmer than with his own recent argument with the Scottish theorist Andrew Fletcher, who was concerned lest the progress of commerce and enlightenment should tempt Western men to lose their ancient military virtue.<sup>28</sup> It was the debate of republic and empire again; Defoe was arguing the case for modern commercial men, who found it good to pay others to defend them in standing professional armies. The discourse concerning property in British thought was becoming increasingly concerned with specialization, as well as appropriation, and needed to show how men engrossed in commerce and exchange were able to maintain an underclass of military proletarians without falling under their rule.

Since Locke's *Treatises* the literature of natural law had been increased by the contribution of Samuel Pufendorf, who thought that both Hobbes and Locke underestimated the degree of social-

<sup>28</sup> Studies of Defoe in relation to Locke are much needed and eagerly expected from a number of scholars now at work on them. For the debate with Fletcher, see Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment*, pp. 427–36, and John Robertson, *The Scottish Enlightenment and the Militia Issue* (Edinburgh: John Donald, 1985).

ization necessary to maintain humans in a state of nature before there was civil government.<sup>29</sup> He had therefore revived the speculations of ancient writers concerning the discovery by early humans of the skills of hunting, pasturage, and agriculture, in that order, and had fed this process into an increasingly historical account of how law had developed under natural conditions. Pufendorf is therefore considered a main founder or refounder of the doctrine that human society naturally develops through a series of stages — the food-gathering (or savage), the pastoral-nomadic (or barbarous), the agricultural, and the commercial.

This is the famous theory of the four stages of society, so prominent in the great writers of eighteenth-century Scotland.<sup>30</sup> However, there is coming to light among authors read by Gibbon, and proving important in the history of the idea of barbarism, a somewhat earlier, and still biblically centered, scheme of human history which relied on two stages rather than four, and combined concepts which became separated only later on. Let me summarize this as it is stated by Antoine-Yves Goguet, whose *De L'origine des loix, arts et sciences* is much used by Gibbon.<sup>31</sup> As the peoples dispersed from the plain of Shinar, speaking mutually unintelligible languages which made them “barbarians” to one another, they became vagrants on the face of the earth and forgot the skills of settled life which they had learned before the Flood. Society itself disintegrated and they became wandering individuals, warring on each other like men in Hobbes’s state of nature and devouring each other like the Cyclops. If the loss of arts among vagrant people went all the way, they might lose the use of language itself and become *oran outang*. This term is not used by Goguet but is

<sup>29</sup> Istvan Hont, “Samuel Pufendorf and the Four Stages Theory,” in Anthony Pagden, ed., *The Languages of Political Theory in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

<sup>30</sup> R. L. Meek, *Social Science and the Ignoble Savage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975).

<sup>31</sup> Published in Paris, 1758; translated by Robert Henry, Edinburgh, 1761; facsimile reprint, New York: AMS Press, 1976.

now and then employed by Enlightenment theorists to denote, not an upwardly evolving ape, but a degenerate hominid who had almost lost his humanity. But providence or nature saw to it that the arts were not quite lost and could be rediscovered, so that an upward spiral could begin again. Gibbon, who certainly did not believe in the Mosaic chronology or the Noachic genealogy, nevertheless describes exactly this sequence —cannibalism included — at the end of his “General Reflections on the Fall of the Roman Empire in the West,” when he asks whether everything which has been learned can be lost after even the greatest imaginable human cataclysms; and holocaust fact and science fiction are still making us ask whether humans can be dehumanized altogether.<sup>32</sup>

As the recovering hominids recollected the antediluvian arts which had made them human and sociable, they rose once more above the condition of wandering hunters and food gatherers which had reduced them so near that of the Cyclops, the cannibal, and the *oran outang*. A step in this upward recovery was the developing ability first to follow and then to domesticate the herds of migratory mammals; but whereas in the later writers of the Scottish Enlightenment the nomad or shepherd stage was in some ways the most crucial of the four, marking the appearance of song, property, and warfare, Pufendorf, Goguet, and in many ways Gibbon himself, saw it as the last stage of savagery rather than the first stage of progress.<sup>33</sup> For them the crucial step must be the recovery of agriculture and the rediscovery of the plow; not merely because this was the precondition of appropriation and property, but because it transformed humans from a vagrant to a sedentary species, compelling them to settle and occupy fixed points defining a social space, across which goods could pass in exchange, and words, songs, laws, and ideas could pass in communication. Agriculture was the precondition of both commerce and civilization,

<sup>32</sup> *Decline and Fall*, 4:181.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. J. G. A. Pocock, “Gibbon and the Shepherds: The Stages of Society in the *Decline and Fall*,” *History of European Ideas* 2, no. 3 (1981): 193–202.

and all three had appeared in close association; compared with this the nomad herdsman was little removed from the Cyclops, the barbarian from the savage.

Herdsmen and nomads became crucial in the narrative of the *Decline and Fall* in two ways. In his ninth chapter Gibbon found it necessary to point out that the forest-dwelling Germans depicted by Tacitus were transhumants who did not plow or appropriate and therefore lacked any sense of the personality as sociable under natural law. In his twenty-sixth chapter he extended the portrait of nomadism to include all the warrior societies of the Eurasian steppe, and in particular the Huns who had forced the Goths to cross the Danube and precipitate the collapse of the empire, itself furthered when the Germans of the forests began crossing the Rhine. But the Goths and Germans were the “fierce giants of the north” who “became the happy parents of taste and science” and possessed “that intrepid hardihood of mind and body” which had made them “the masters of the world.” If the thrust of the older anthropology was that it reduced all preagricultural humans to fierce giants and wandering savages, what was it about these northern giants that made them so special? Are we in the presence of something like the Teutonic racialism of the nineteenth century? The answer is, I think, rather different. There were ways of pointing out that barbarians were free but not yet civilized, that freedom had itself something barbaric about it, and that the problem of civilization was that of reconciling this freedom with civil government, commerce and culture, taste and science, without corrupting its original virtue. Rousseau came to the conclusion that this was all but impossible; and the French Revolution was an attempt to do the impossible. Gibbon, writing earlier, thought that the problem was not far from being solved, even if the gap could never be closed entirely; and that the Goths and Germans had in the course of a thousand years been reconciled with classical civilization in its reborn, reformed, and enlightened western European and American form. To lay the foundations of any such

claim, it was necessary to look at Gothic freedom and determine what had become of it after its invasion of the western empire.

There was an answer, worked out by French and, later, English legal scholars in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. As the Goths and Germans settled in the western provinces, there had been laid down patterns of land tenure, first allodial and later feudal, which were capable of evolving into forms of inheritable property, protected by law. This was the foundation of Western freedom, which had made possible the growth of constitutional government and a plurality of free, enlightened, and commercial states. The equation of agriculture with commerce is once more apparent. Gibbon did not write this history, because it had been written already by William Robertson; he chose instead to pursue the history of the eastern empire to its fall in 1453. But the history of the West is always very much present in his text, and he had to suggest a solution to a problem which had vexed scholars since the sixteenth century: were the free tenures of the western kingdoms German in origin or were they Roman? If they were both, how had the mixture happened? The problem was an old one, but it had recently become overlaid by a new idea: that the Gothic invaders were nomadic pastoralists, belonging to the shepherd phase of society, who had settled as a conquering aristocracy among a subject peasantry and the remains of an urban civilization. This suggestion was new, but not so new that we cannot find it expressed by scholars still using the Mosaic genealogies, some of whom were interested in the Celtic rather than the Germanic phase of the history of European barbarism. The Jacobite Thomas Carte, whose *History of England* was known to Gibbon, is one of these.<sup>34</sup>

The sons of Japheth reappear ; Magog and his people had emigrated northeastward and become the ancestors of the Scythian

<sup>34</sup> *Thomas Carte, A General History of England . . . Containing an Account of the First Inhabitants of the Country, and the Transaction in It, from the Earliest Times to the Death of King John* (London, 1747), vol. 1.

shepherds of the Eurasian steppe, while Gomer and his sons were the patriarchs of the Celts who had cleared and settled the great European forests that grew up after the Flood. However, movements by Scythian peoples westward were needed in order to explain the presence of transhumant herdsmen side by side with plowing peasantries in northwestern Britain and Ireland. Even after Gibbon rejected Japheth, Magog, and Gomer altogether, he remained interested in the problems of British history; and he retained the dual scheme of pasture and agriculture, on a Eurasian and not merely a west European scale, as it passed from the older Enlightenment scholarship into the new. He was enormously interested by the great work of the Jesuit missions in Peking, who had made available texts by Chinese historians in which might be read the whole history of Eurasian nomadism as it had ranged from the Han and Sung borders to those of Persia and Rome. This information transformed the *Decline and Fall* into a history of the whole northern world and in that way transformed Gibbon's understanding of the history of barbarism.<sup>35</sup> But he did not adopt his friend Adam Smith's suggestion that the shepherd stage of society was dynamic and progressive, the first move out of the savage condition. He retained the suggestion of the older scholars that progress began only with the invention of agriculture, which led immediately to that of commerce. The introduction of the Chinese documents had been used by Voltaire to overthrow the primacy of the Mosaic chronology; Gibbon joined in that overthrow, but he retained a system of historical sociology which pre-Voltairean scholarship had elaborated.

The social imagination of Western civilization rests upon two myths, one of masculine equality between warrior citizens, the other of individual appropriation through the plow. Behind them we may discern two further mythologies, each of barbarian inva-

<sup>35</sup> See in particular his use of Joseph de Guignes, *Histoire generale des Huns, des Turcs, des Mogols, et des autres peuples tartares occidentaux*, 4 vols. (Paris, 1756–58, a work heavily reliant on Jesuit sources for Chinese history.

sion rather than imperial civility: the Greek epic records the adventures of sea peoples on one flank of late dynastic Egypt; the Hebrew epic, those of desert clansmen on the other. The barbarians are indeed ourselves, which is why we do not think like Chinese. But the myths of the city and the plow come together in such figures as Cincinnatus, a magistrate chosen by his equals because he plows his own land and carries his own spear. In Gibbon's Britain and Europe, the agrarian image of civic personality was struggling with a new world of trade, money, and paper credit and was proving obstinately hard to disconnect from the idea of public virtue. The idea of possessive individualism is much older and more deeply seated than the transition from feudal to capitalist values with which Marxist scholars seek to relate it; it has its ancient as well as its modern form and has much to do with the quarrel between ancient and modern itself. In the course of this quarrel two things happened. The myth of the citizen and his virtue, rooted in the memory of *polis* and *res publica* and kept alive by humanists, found contact with a myth propounded by jurists seeking to justify the authority of the early modern state: that of an original wasteland or state of nature, in which individuals had appropriated arable land, had become capable of observing natural law, and had discovered the necessity of government. It was only possible, and not at all necessary, that government should take the form of the republic of equal citizens; the discourse of jurists is imperial and monarchical rather than political. But, it was perceived in the second place, as the individual appropriated he became capable of autonomy and therefore of virtue, and at the same time capable of exchange and therefore of civility. The myth of appropriation accounted for both agriculture and commerce, republic and monarchy, citizenship and legality. The attempt to reconcile the two sets of concepts was difficult to the point of insolubility, and the schemes of social progress to which it gave rise were never free from irony; when Gibbon is complacent about the state of society in his own time he knows he is

being complacent and quite frequently says so. But the move from displaying the ancient individual in autonomy to displaying the modern individual in sociability was not an impossible one, and the attempt to establish modern as well as ancient forms of virtue seemed worth pursuing.

Western freedom, in its ancient, medieval, and modern forms it was already assumed that Western history was the history of freedom —rested in every case on the image of the plow, which in breaking up the primeval wasteland had appropriated *suum cuique*: had appropriated to the individual that which was his own, on the basis of which he might know himself for what he was and might enter into relations with others that assumed their possession of properties and capacities equivalent with his own. Even Gerrard Winstanley the Digger, who was anxious to break with this whole way of viewing moral reality, once found it necessary to insist that he and his companions on the Surrey commons had dug but had not plowed.<sup>36</sup> Freedom of tenure was the ultimate reason why Romans had become citizens and conquered the world; it was also the ultimate reason why Goths, unlike other conquering barbarians, had been able to enter into commerce, which had made them the happy parents of taste and science and was in process of making them the masters of the world through trade. This freedom might well prove self-destructive, but it was the only kind there was. When, therefore, the self-civilized barbarians of Europe came in contact with peoples who did not seem to practice codes of distributive jurisprudence, which were the foundations of their government, or did not seem to practice the appropriation of arable land, which was the foundation of law and personality, it was hard for them, even when they acted in good faith, to understand how these peoples could belong to history or be capable of freedom. And the more seriously we take

<sup>36</sup> Christopher Hill, ed., *Winstanley: "The Law of Freedom" and Other Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 169 (twice asserted); cf., however, p. 112.

the notion of freedom, the more intractable this problem can become; it is easier to demystify the Western concept of freedom than to find anything to take its place.

The inhabitants of extensive Asian monarchies seemed servile to Europeans in Gibbon's day because they did not seem to possess freedom of tenure or laws that guaranteed it; those like Anquetil-Duperron, or in his own way Edmund Burke, who wanted to establish that the government of Asian peoples was not necessarily despotic, were constrained to show that Islamic or Hindu culture did contain systems of law protective of property, and there were serious problems in cultural understanding to be overcome here.<sup>37</sup> The extreme limiting case was that of China, where there seemed to be little sense of jurisprudence but a very deep sense of manners and a social code. Gibbon does not enter into the question whether Confucian society is, as many contemporaries thought, a despotism of manners; he is a little more engaged with the British encounter with India, where he keenly admired the work of Sir William Jones, but even here his last word is to express his doubts whether the Sanskrit and Persian poets whom Jones was translating knew anything of civil liberty or the practice of the liberal arts.<sup>38</sup> The shadows of James Mill and Macaulay loom at the edge of the page, and the entanglements of Anglo-Indian history are about to begin.

If the inhabitants of the major Asian kingdoms were assumed to be servile, the peoples in hunter-gatherer or nonarable agrarian societies whom Europeans were encountering all over the world were held to be savage. When Goguet imagines Egyptian and Phoenician colonists encountering the primitive Cyclopes of Greece, or Carte imagines Belgic agriculturalists encountering the swineherds and cattleherds of primitive Britain, they compare them with European settlers in the Americas persuading the *selvaggi* to come

<sup>37</sup> Anquetil-Duperron's views in Richter, "The Concept of Despotism," p. 13; the theme is recurrent in Burke's speeches against Warren Hastings.

<sup>38</sup> *Decline and Fall*, 6:34–35.

out of the bush and live on the fringes of the colonists' estates, and we know that the expropriation of the Irish and the Cherokee and the Maori has begun;<sup>39</sup> similarly when Gibbon connects the conversion of the steppe to cultivation with the introduction of European plantation to Polynesia. The assumption that hunters, fishermen, and people with digging sticks and hoes are savages without society, law, or culture has furthered the destruction of many human groups and ways of life, and in the Amazon basin it is still doing so; and the belief that only settled agricultural proprietors are civilized rests on an enlightened theory of individuality which of course precludes everything we try to mean by the immensely complex structures of kinship and affinity, and the no less complex languages of myth, symbol, and ritual which connect such societies with a sacred and undifferentiated universe. Even the singers of the *Odyssey* have much to answer for, in the invention of Polyphemus, though whether they created him to justify the subjugation of some high-country shepherd culture somewhere I do not know.

There is a paradox in the history of social thought to be observed here. Western anthropologists began the laborious rediscovery of such systems in the nineteenth century; but only then did it begin to be said that the progress of society was from status to contract, or that the enlightenment of the individual was achieved through detaching him or her from socially induced belief systems. The writers of the High Enlightenment, of whom Gibbon was certainly one, had something altogether different in mind. They believed that humans were by nature so radically individual that in the state of nature alone they were savage, solitary, and speechless, and that the progress of society consisted in humanizing them by the steady encoding of systems of exchange, commerce, and conversation that would socialize them and render them members of one another. It is difficult for us to think ourselves back into a world in which appropriation and exchange were supposed to take

<sup>39</sup> Goguet, *De l'origine des loix*, 1:59-61; Carte, *History of England*, 1:23.

humans beyond *gesellschaft* and into *gemeinschaft*, but that is what the enlightened historical theorists believed themselves to be advocating. The foundations of their *gemeinschaft* were in the *gesellschaft* of exchange between individuals, but to suppose that they saw nothing to human society but the observance of contracts between atomized agents is to miss the point of their theory of culture. The philistines came later, and so did the revolutionaries.

These assumptions from the brief but globally revolutionary age of European imperialism have done great damage in the world, and a *revanche* is now taking place. In my own country of New Zealand, where I gave an earlier version of these lectures last year, the Maori people —who were unjustly dispossessed of their lands in the nineteenth century and suffered a devastating disruption of their culture —are now asserting themselves under the name of the *tangata whenua*, the people of the land or the birthplace; *whenua* can mean either land or placenta. They assert a claim to compensation for lost rights, but this right or property in land is based on neither appropriation nor cultivation but on a mythic, poetic, and communal identity which their ancestors had with the land, or *whenua*; it may be claimed on behalf of such ancestors that they lived in a timeless communion or dreamtime, from which they were unjustly ejected into history. They reject the individualist and appropriative vision of social reality which has been the foundation of Western thinking since Adam and Eve were ejected from the dreamtime, and assert against it everything which we can see the Enlightenment theory of savagery left out; but on this foundation they erect Western legalist claims to right and compensation, and even —as the historic circumstances of New Zealand happen to permit —to a renegotiated share in sovereignty. When the student of the seventeenth century finds himself in the presence of two competing claims to Lockean sovereignty, of which one is based on a Lockean theory of property and society and the other on its negation, he recognizes a situation at which —as Gibbon remarked in another context —both the priest

and the magistrate may tremble. The overwhelming majority of modern New Zealanders are of Western settler descent and are no more likely than Americans to abandon the classical individualist reading of their property, history, and identity; but —and again the analogy holds —they are pressed to do just that by a vocal minority of religious and social dissent within their own culture.

In many parts of the world, former *selvaggi* are arising to announce that they were never the presocial hominids the Europeans said they were; but as they necessarily say so within the context of postmodern politics, one has to ask how far their discourse arises from the *whenua* and the dreamtime, how far it expresses and exploits a long-standing Western discontent with modernity itself. The debate over virtue and commerce, which posed the problem of modernity quite early in the eighteenth century, is by no means dead and buried in the twentieth. It has left open all answers to the question of how far the moral and civic personality can be founded in the processes of commerce and sociability, when these are reduced to processes of appropriation and exchange among individuals, or — in a more contemporary perception — when they are reduced to the incessant flow of often unwanted and meaningless information and images that characterizes a society in which communication has replaced conversation. In the postsocialist era that appears to be upon us, the criticism and self-doubt of a society based on the unchecked flow of goods, ideas, and images predictably takes the form of a longing for the community supposed to have existed before appropriation, exchange, and the invention of “money and letters” (to use a phrase employed and emphasized by Gibbon in one of his chapters on savage society).<sup>40</sup> Sectarian and dissenting voices arise, which enjoin a surrender if not a return to the world of the *tangata whenua* and their dreamtime, though it is easier to see that their claims have right on their side than it is to articulate them in good faith. And this language, from whatever source it arises, soon takes on a

<sup>40</sup> *Decline and Fall*. 1:237–38.

spiritual dimension. We have to do with cultures which believe that the Word has been made Flesh, that the spirit has embodied itself in matter, and we have long seen both property and production as among the ways in which this has happened. As we enter postindustrial economies, and our productivity wanes and our labor and skills seem to become superfluous, we turn away from appropriation, production, and individuality toward spiritual and pseudo-spiritual foundations of personal being, which offer us communion with other humans and the nonhuman universe. It can be shown, I believe, that this kind of spirituality was a perceived characteristic of religion in the thinking of the Enlightenment, and has much to do with the structure of Gibbon's *Decline and Fall*.

### III. RELIGION AND PHILOSOPHY

“I have described the triumph of barbarism and religion.” It should be becoming clear by now that barbarism and religion are by no means simply associated and that the Christian religion which Gibbon had in his eye was not archaic, antique, or even barbaric, but a complex phenomenon which had displaced the ancient world and was to that extent modern. In this lecture I shall explore the relations between religion and philosophy in the textual edifice of the *Decline and Fall*, and I shall try to show two things: first, that Christianity as Gibbon saw it was not a primitive or barbaric superstition but a religion modern in the sense that it was associated with a philosophy deeply at odds with ancient polytheism; second, that this philosophy was nevertheless ancient in the strict sense that it was older than Christianity by about half a millennium, though it had never been barbaric at all. I shall contend that the *Decline and Fall* is organized around a series of episodes in the encounter between Christianity and ancient philosophy in the late form of Neo-Platonism, and that the polemical thrust of Gibbon's writing is aimed more at the elimination of Platonist thinking from enlightened culture than at that of those elements

of the Christian message which can be distinguished from it. The *Decline and Fall* attacks metaphysics at least as resolutely as it attacks revelation or superstition, and arguably more so.

But in proceeding in this way I face a difficulty. The interactions between Christian belief and Hellenist philosophy do not become active and crucial in Gibbon's narrative until the controversy between Arius and Athanasius and the Council of Nicaea; that is, they postdate the accession of Constantine and do not occur in Gibbon's text until the earlier chapters of volume 2, published in 1781. But five years earlier, in 1776, he had concluded his first published volume with the famous fifteenth and sixteenth chapters, on the rise of Christianity and its condition in the Roman Empire before its establishment by Constantine; and these chapters had aroused so much controversy that they have come to be considered independently as the foundation of the treatment of religion in the *Decline and Fall* as a whole.<sup>41</sup> I am committing myself to the view that they are preliminary to Gibbon's main historical argument and that the controversy about them was in a sense premature; and this is a large dose which I am inviting you to swallow. Furthermore, I am proceeding to challenge, at least by implication, a reading of chapters 15 and 16, and of the *Decline and Fall* in general, which treats them as part of a Europe-wide movement of irreligion and skepticism known as the Enlightenment and having Voltaire as its central figure. There are scholars prepared to offer a "Voltairean" reading of these chapters, both in the sense that they can be said to share Voltaire's attitudes and opinions and in the sense that they may exhibit specific textual relations with Voltaire's writings, though it may also be argued that Gibbon's attitude toward Christianity became less "Voltairean" in his later volumes. I am prepared to offer a reading in which Voltaire is not a necessary figure, and Gibbon's skepticism is shown

<sup>41</sup> Shelby T. McCloy, *Gibbon's Antagonism to Christianity* (1933; repr., New York, Burt Franklin, n.d.). See further Patricia B. Craddock, *Edward Gibbon: A Reference Guide* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1987).

to arise from debates within Anglican and Continental Protestant theology and church history. This does not preclude a “Voltairean” reading of chapters 15 and 16; but as well as permitting us to advance from these chapters toward the history of religion and philosophy in the subsequent volumes of the *Decline and Fall*, it entails the argument that we should be wary of proposing “the Enlightenment” as a single European movement with a common history, and should think instead of two, three, many “Enlightenments” with histories that interacted without having the same origins.<sup>42</sup>

As I read the last two chapters of Gibbon’s first volume, then, I am not obliged to recognize Voltaire as a central figure either in the text or in the footnotes; but I do find explicit in both the presence of three other authors, two of them skeptical and one orthodox: Dr. Conyers Middleton of Cambridge, Professor Johann Lorenz von Mosheim of Göttingen, and the cosmopolitan Scot David Hume. The connecting threads between them, I shall argue, delineate an Enlightenment very different from Voltaire’s. There is biographical evidence to explain the presence of Middleton. Gibbon was of a Jacobite and Tory family, and grew up in a milieu which included on the one hand William Law, the nonjuring mystic, and on the other David Mallett, the literary executor of the deist Lord Bolingbroke.<sup>43</sup> Arriving in Oxford as an undergraduate of sixteen, he found in progress an ecclesiological scandal resulting from the publication by Middleton of *A Free Enquiry into the Evidence of Miracles in the Christian Church*, which argued that no miracles had been performed after the time of the apostles themselves. The issue was less that of the authenticity of miracles than whether the church derived spiritual power and authority from Christ or was a mere association of believers in his mission and teachings. Gibbon says he found himself poised between Mid-

<sup>42</sup> Cf. Pocock, “Clergy and Commerce,” and “Conservative Enlightenment and Democratic Revolutions.”

<sup>43</sup> I follow here Gibbon’s own account in his *Memoirs*.

dleton and Bossuet, for whom the Church of Rome possessed the full panoply of spiritual power, so that miracles might still occur, and possessed it still. He reacted as nervous young men at Oxford through the centuries have reacted to this dilemma; in search of authority he opted for the church which claimed it all over the church which disclaimed some of it, and underwent a conversion to Catholicism. His family intervened but made little attempt to reclaim him for the church of his fathers, packing him off to Lausanne instead, where he was exposed to Swiss Protestant thinking at a time when rigid Calvinist doctrine was giving way to a belief in rational and studious piety as the road to salvation. He returned after some years to England, impressed, so he tells us, by two exemplary figures: William Chillingworth and Pierre Bayle. Both had undergone temporary conversions to Catholicism and had emerged deeply skeptical of human power to understand the mysteries of theology and ecclesiology, but deeply submissive in matters of faith if not authority. They were in fact fideist skeptics or skeptical fideists; Gibbon's skepticism had nothing of faith about it but like theirs a profound commitment to scholarship.

Now this is an Anglican and Protestant story, to understand which there is not much need to go in search of the origins of the French Enlightenment. The roots of Gibbon's unbelief were in his own religion and his own culture, and the discourse of what I shall call Protestant Enlightenment offers key after key to the structure of the *Decline and Fall*. Though I will not say that all the evidence is in regarding Voltaire's unacknowledged importance in Gibbon's thinking, I will proceed from this point to examine him in the context of the milieu in which he grew up.<sup>44</sup>

From about the time of the Restoration of 1660 the Church of England found itself obliged to wage doctrinal war on two fronts. On the one hand it must defend itself against the incessant claims of the Church of Rome to represent Christ as his body upon earth,

<sup>44</sup> For an earlier account, see Pocock, "Superstition and Enthusiasm," pp. 83–94.

as the vehicle through which he became physically present to the communicant in the sacraments. The doctrine of transubstantiation therefore became to Anglicans, as to nearly all Protestants, the ultimate superstition, the ultimate anti-Christian device of priestcraft; superstitious because it made the presence of the Word in the Flesh literal and local, priestcraft because it placed that presence under the control of the celebrant. On the other hand it must defend itself against the vividly remembered claims of the radical sects to an immediate presence of the Spirit in the congregation or the inner light of the individual worshiper; a substitution of experience for authority which had led to so many terrifyingly anti-nomian conclusions, from ranting to regicide. The restored church therefore paired superstition and priestcraft on the one hand with enthusiasm and fanaticism on the other; by enthusiasm was meant, first, the false claim to personal or congregational inspiration, and, second, the psychopathological error of taking the mind's ideas or fancies about God for the action or presence of God in the mind.

It is possible to trace how the churchmen of this period came to decide that a common philosophical error lay behind the theological mistakes of their adversaries to right and left. The error in each case was the error of real presences: the presence of Christ in the bread and wine, the presence of the Spirit in the congregation or the individual; and behind it lay the philosophical error of real essences, the error of supposing that a single substance pervaded the whole universe and was present in every one of the phenomena composing it. Whether the universal essence were conceived in ideal or material terms was a question of secondary importance; even Hobbes, who had so destructively mocked "the kingdom of the fairies" which was a consequence of the Greek error of real essences and led to the Romish error of the real presence, did not altogether escape the imputation of enthusiasm when his materialism led him to suggest that God was an infinitely subtle material being and that there could be no vacuum because

an ether both spiritual and material pervaded the universe.<sup>45</sup> In Ralph Cudworth's *True Intellectual System of the Universe*,<sup>46</sup> one of the crucial texts in the Protestant philosophical discourse which was known to Gibbon, a distinction is drawn between an atomistic atheism which denies that mind is present in matter, and a hylozoistic atheism which affirms that mind and matter are one, God and the universe indistinguishable from one another. Hobbes is the modern representative of the former, Spinoza of the latter; but the distinction could not always be maintained, and as the implications of Spinoza's writings were more widely interpreted, he came almost to outrank Hobbes as the preacher of an atheism or pantheism which was also an enthusiasm. To William Warburton, writing *The Divine Legation of Moses* in the middle of the next century, it was an axiom that the English deists from Toland to Bolingbroke had been Spinozists and that Spinozism was the modern form of the false teachings of the Greek philosophers, "knaves in practice and fools in theory."<sup>47</sup>

Cudworth had sought to demonstrate that Plato had avoided the errors of the ancient exponents of both kinds of atheism, and could be shown to have taught that the movements of the atoms were directed by the mind of an intelligent creator. But a decade and more before Cudworth's book, we can see Samuel Parker determining that Plato was the true author of both priestcraft and enthusiasm, because his doctrine of ideas had supplied the error of real essences which lay behind both, and because his idealist view of allegory had supplied the protocabbalistic error of thinking the sign to be actually present in the thing signified.<sup>48</sup> Parker wel-

<sup>45</sup> Steven Shapin and Simon Shaffer, *Leviathan and the Airpump* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985); James R. Jacob, *Robert Boyle and the English Revolution* (New York: Burt Franklin, 1977).

<sup>46</sup> First published 1679.

<sup>47</sup> William Warburton, *Words, vol. 3: The Divine Legation of Moses* (London, 1811), p. 201.

<sup>48</sup> Samuel Parker, *A True and Impartial Account of the Platonick Philosoph* (Oxford, 1666).

comed the Royal Society's teaching that the behavior of natural phenomena could be narrated and experimentally verified but their essential characters (if they had any) never apprehended by the mind. Much of what we call Enlightenment in England, as Margaret Jacob has effectively demonstrated, was a clerical strategy for maintaining a *via media*, and the illuminist pantheism she terms the Radical Enlightenment was part of what it attacked under the names of Spinozism and enthusiasm.<sup>49</sup> The strategy entailed a persistent anti-Platonism, which is one of the keys to the *Decline and Fall*.

I have begun delineating a complex Anglican milieu and strategy, to which terms such as "latitudinarian" and "Newtonian" have become valuably if debatably attached. To this milieu Gibbon in a sense belonged; both the text and the footnotes to the *Decline and Fall* clearly show that Anglican writers from Cudworth to Warburton constitute a context within which he was writing, and the presence of a phalanx of learned bishops among his authorities helps explain why his debate with Richard Watson of Llandaff could be courteous and even friendly. But it was Watson who published in 1785 the observation, "we live in a dissolute but enlightened age," and though he need not have had Gibbon in mind, the words reveal an awareness that enlightened Protestant thinking contained a potentiality for unbelief.<sup>50</sup> To study how ideas took shape in the mind was a valuable defense against enthusiasm, but it was never likely to explain how the Word had become Flesh and dwelt among us. It was not going to be easy on these grounds to maintain the divinity of Christ, and the "Socinianism," as it was loosely called, that did or might result could be stigmatized —it is extremely important to note—in two ways. On the one hand it might result in a benign and humane skepticism, in which Jesus appeared as a moral teacher who had perhaps suc-

<sup>49</sup> M. C. Jacob, *The Newtonians and the English Revolution* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978), and *The Radical Enlightenment: Pantheists, Freemasons, and Republicans* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1981).

<sup>50</sup> Richard Watson, *A Collection of Theological Tracts in Six Volumes* (Cambridge, 1785), 1:xiii.

cumbed to illusions in his agony on the cross but had taught a charitable and humble ethics which had survived him to transform the manners of Europe. On the other it might result in a rational fanaticism, as Gibbon and the bishops agreed it had in William Whiston or Joseph Priestley, when the rationalist interpretation of Christ's nature became a statement about the nature of divinity itself, and God became the universal reason by which his unitarian worshippers understood and apprehended him. Here, once again, was enthusiasm; the mind taking its ideas about God from the operations of a God in the world and the mind. The diagnosis of reason as potentially fanatic is a constant theme from beginning to end of the *Decline und Fall*.

To understand the structure of Gibbon's work as a history of religion, it is next necessary to understand how the Anglican milieu which shaped his thinking can be enlarged into a milieu of enlightened post-Calvinist Protestantism, which he encountered as a youth in Lausanne. However, its center was not here but in Amsterdam and Rotterdam, the printing centers of that republic of letters which was formed by the correspondence and publishing activities of Dutch Remonstrants like Philip van Limborch, emigrant Genevans like Jean Le Clerc, and refugee Huguenots like Pierre Bayle, Jacques Basnage, and Isaac de Beausobre —the last of whom moved on to Berlin, where his work interacted with that of the great German historian of philosophy Johann Jakob Brucker and the great ecclesiastical historian Johann Lorenz von Mosheim. If the orthodox Jansenist Tillemont was Gibbon's primary source for the facts of ecclesiastical history, the scholars of the *république des lettres* recur again and again in his notes and references and may be grouped together as forming his fundamental understanding of what religion was as a force in history. They merged in his mind as "the Arminians of Holland," who together with "the latitudemen of Cambridge" had carried on the rational study of theology of which Erasmus had been the founder.<sup>51</sup>

<sup>51</sup> *Decline and Fall*, 6:133 n. 45.

Their thinking merged with the anti-Platonism of Samuel Parker — whom Gibbon did not mention but both Brucker and Mosheim held in high esteem — in the following way. The Huguenot emigration rejected in Pierre Jurieu the apocalyptic enthusiasm which would have made them a chosen people witnessing to God's word and acting as the vehicle of his Spirit, and adopted instead an Arminian strategy of employing reasonable and sociable religion against the priestcraft of their persecutors; a rhetoric which attacked both superstition and enthusiasm therefore became part of their arsenal of arguments. In the Netherlands, Huguenots and Genevans joined with Remonstrants and Arminians in shaking off the specter of Spinoza, who was held to have revived the errors of ancient philosophy in teaching that God was indistinguishable from the world, and to have substituted the worship of an *anima mundi* and a pantheism simultaneously indistinguishable from atheism and enthusiasm. It is a fact of history that Spinoza was so interpreted; whether he ought to have been I will not consider. In these ways the concerns of the Protestant *république des lettres* merged with those of the Lutheran churches as well; many arguments we can justly think of as enlightened and skeptical were at the same time normally employed by the Protestant established churches.

These arguments, we have seen, had a strongly anti-Platonist bent, and at this point they found touch with the discourse of orthodox and Catholic exponents of a church tradition reaching back to the Fathers. Since the age of the councils it had been apparent that the great debates with heresy had been produced by the encounter with an Athenian and Alexandrian philosophy which found difficulty in apprehending that God had made the world and then become incarnate in it. The theologians and historians of philosophy and theology who constituted the Protestant Enlightenment from London to Berlin therefore debated the character of the Gnosticism and Neo-Platonism with which the Fathers had contended: were these philosophies to be derived from Plato direct,

or from that larger and less specific antiquity known as “oriental philosophy” or the *prisca theologia*?<sup>52</sup> Cudworth, as we have seen, thought that Plato could be made the author of a theism proleptically compatible with Christian ideas of the creation; but there had always been vehement dissent from this interpretation. If we now draw a line, as it were, from Parker in the 1660s to Brucker and Mosheim in the 1730s and 1740s, and disregard many divagations from the path it will trace, it is possible to put together a synthetic account of the history of religion and philosophy in the ancient world as enlightened Protestants perceived it.<sup>53</sup> Some remnants of the true religion were handed down from the antediluvian patriarchs and were renewed by God’s covenant with Abraham. These apart, it was left for the dispersed peoples reconstituting themselves in different quarters of the earth to renew religion and philosophy by the exercise of their own reason; and though it was natural to men to arrive in this way at a knowledge of God and the laws of morality, this natural religion was very easily corrupted. Dispersed peoples wandering in a state of savagery fell to worshipping idols and deified ancestors; and when there arose great heathen sages, lawgivers, and poets, these tended to systematize the superstition and polytheism by which they were surrounded by supposing a single underlying truth and a universal immanent godhead or divine principle, of which the innumerable cults were merely the local symbolizations or emanations.

<sup>52</sup> D. P. Walker, *The Ancient Theology: Studies in Christian Platonism from the Fifteenth to the Eighteenth Century* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1972), recounts its history more from the viewpoint of those who thought it compatible with Christian belief than from the post-Spinozist and anti-Platonist viewpoint emphasized here. See p. 1, n. 1, for Walker’s doubts as to the term *prisca theologia*.

<sup>53</sup> This synthesis relies especially on Isaac de Beausobre, *Histoire critique de Manichée et du Manichéisme* (Amsterdam, 1734), Johann Jakob Brucker, *Historia critica philosophiae* (Leipzig, 1742), and William Warburton, *The Divine Legation of Moses* (London, 1765). As a synthesis, it claims to be neither an account of the performances intended by the authors of these several texts nor a history of their doctrine as formed by a shared development but a statement of what a reader of these works in retrospect (such as Gibbon himself) might have understood them to be asserting.

Prophets and lawgivers had feigned or believed that they had access to a hidden truth which was the ground or principle of all being and had sometimes mystically contemplated or worshiped this, under a variety of names from the Greek Chaos to the Chinese *ch'i*, as that which was before all being and from which being itself was merely a separation. It was this which was the origin of one fundamental error of ancient metaphysics; instead of seeing the world as brought into being by an intelligent and benevolent creator, the ancient sages had supposed it as merely emanating from an original principle of being or nonbeing, from which it could never become entirely distinct. Instead of philosophies, therefore, which were rational accounts of being and its attributes, they had constructed what were called theogonies, quasi-mystical or allegorical accounts of how being emanated in a variety of ways from the primal underlying principle. Because only a few illumined sages or adepts could comprehend the emergence of being from nonbeing, it had remained an esoteric doctrine or secret wisdom, which could be explained to the vulgar only in terms of allegories drawn from the fables, poetic tales and polytheist myths with which they were already familiar. The superstition of the many was manipulated by the wisdom of the few, who thus appeared in the role of priests; but these same few, meeting together as secret brotherhoods to worship the indwelling or underlying principle of which they claimed an esoteric knowledge, thus appeared in the role of enthusiasts, since what they worshiped was believed to have entered into them and become the groundwork of their own being. Here was the explanation of the historical origins of superstition on the one hand, enthusiasm on the other; they were products of an ancient substitution of theogony for natural religion —theogonies being, once again, accounts of the origin of the universe in which tales of the genealogy of the gods were concealed allegories of the emergence or emanation of being from nonbeing. Finally, these systems had taken a crucial turn with the discovery of evil; some sages had held creation itself to be the

source of all evil, others had bifurcated it into a good principle which sought to restore existence to its origins and an evil principle which thrust it on and away from them.

There had been two decisive breaks with the errors of this ancient philosophy. One had been God's covenant with his chosen people, who had been made to recognize the primary distinction between the creator and his creation; it was because the latter had been made after God's image, instead of emanating from his being, that God could love the world and send his only begotten son to give it life everlasting. The other, profoundly important and tragically frustrated, had been Socrates' attempt to break away from the whole project of knowing the true nature of being—from which theogony and esoteric mysticism were all that could arise—and focus instead upon a practical morality, from which the laws of nature and nature's god could in the end be inferred. But Socrates had horrified both the superstitious and the mystics of his own time; and after his execution the greatest of his disciples had gone upon his travels, and in an ill hour, for philosophy had fallen among Pythagoreans in Italy, and in Egypt, among the priests of an ancient esoteric cult which employed hieroglyphics to represent the hidden meaning of the beast fables that deceived the vulgar. Plato, to all these Protestant and enlightened writers of ancient history, was the grand betrayer of Greek philosophy; his ideas and essences had thrust it back toward the apprehension of primal reality, which was the source of all theogony, and his myths and allegories had once more confounded philosophy with poetry and permitted metaphysics to embark on the reinvention of polytheism.

Such was the Protestant and enlightened account of the history of religion and philosophy on which Gibbon drew at many points in the building of the *Decline and Fall*. It is worth remarking that it is as much Christian as it is deist, and a great deal more theist than it is atheist. It obliges us to distinguish carefully between the skepticism which concludes that mysteries the mind cannot pene-

trate are probably fictitious, and the skepticism which affirms that mystery is to be contemplated and embraced as the ground of all being. Gibbon employs this account of “oriental” religion in his eighth chapter on the religion of Persia, and it occurs in sections of chapter 15, but only when he is following Mosheim into an examination of the second-century Gnostics and their account of Jesus’s life, death, and nature. The Gnostics took him for an emanation of the primal godhead, the Ebionites for a man sent from God to be the Jewish Messiah and something more. But this section of Gibbon’s most scandalous chapter was no more shocking to Christian susceptibilities than anything else drawn from the candid but pious and impeccably orthodox professor and chancellor of Göttingen University.<sup>54</sup> To discover what was shocking about chapters 15 and 16, we must attempt to go further; and as I am by no means sure that these chapters state the program to be followed in the *Decline und Fall’s* treatment of the history of religion, I am by no means sure that I want to join the company of scholars who have made this attempt. It cannot have been the proposition that the history of the church is the history of its corruption in a world of human imperfection, for that is explicitly laid down by Mosheim and there is nothing un-Protestant about it. Nor can it have been Mosheim’s or Gibbon’s account of the Greek and Persian origins of Gnosticism, for that was not challenging at all; nor the savage account of the Jews as a people false to their divine election from the time of Moses to that of Christ, though that may be the point where the presence of Voltaire and the *Essai sur les Moeurs* is most clearly to be felt. Nor can it have been the account of the Christians forming themselves into a republic at the heart of the Roman world, a republic endowed with its own species of virtue but doomed like other republics to tread the cycle of corruption from democracy to aristocracy to monarchy. All that is

<sup>54</sup> Gibbon employed Mosheim’s *De rebus Christianorum ante Constantinum Magnum rommentarii* (Helmstadt, 1753) and his *Institutionum historiae ecclesias-ticae libri quattuor* (Helmstadt, 1764).

in Mosheim too and is a perfectly sound, if not very Episcopalian, statement of humanist Protestantism. There appear to remain two candidates for the role of irritant: the note of sustained and teasing irony on which Gibbon writes, and the way in which he sets about the contrast between Christian values and those of the decaying Roman world. To explore this last theme will tell us something about both the nature of Gibbon's neoclassicism and his treatment of the history of religion and philosophy.

Gibbon's explanation in chapter 16 of how and why the Christians came to be persecuted differs little, in essentials, from that already given by Bishop Warburton in *The Divine Legation of Moses*. Warburton had emphasized that the willingness of polytheists to sacrifice to one another's gods went beyond tolerance to a species of intercommunion, and that in refusing this the Christians convicted themselves of an unsociability dangerous in a civilization founded upon manners.<sup>55</sup> It is important to reiterate that the Enlightenment, in the view of it which I have been putting forward, saw civilization as resting upon manners — Gibbon's "taste and science" — which it substituted rather hesitantly for ancient virtue and much more confidently for the theology of grace. It substituted for both the practice of a natural sociability embodied in the systems of natural jurisprudence expounded by Pufendorf and Barbeyrac, which it based on an epistemology of methodical skepticism, preferring the study of human nature to that of an ungraspable metaphysics; exactly what Brucker and those like him ascribed to Socrates. In Brucker's six-volume history of philosophy, the end arrived at is the triumph of Grotius, Pufendorf, and Newton over Scholasticism; the moment when a reasonable Christianity shakes free from the metaphysics which have bedeviled it since antiquity.

But there is a crucial moment in the history of Scottish enlightenment when David Hume writes to Francis Hutcheson to inform him that Hume would rather get his ethics from Cicero's *De officiis*

<sup>55</sup> Warburton, *Works*, 2:267-315. His term is "intercommunity."

than from *The Whole Duty of Man*; faced with calls for a reasonable Christianity, Hume saw no need for reasonableness to be Christian at all. The ethos of practical sociability, politeness, and manners could be identified with the less metaphysically inclined among the Stoics and Epicureans, who appear in Gibbon's chapters on the age of the Antonines as regarding all polytheist cults as equally false and equally useful, practicing them in public as magistrates while despising them in private as philosophers. But it was philosophy in precisely this sense which Hume had shown, in a work which Gibbon used and cited, to be no longer available to Romans in the age of their confrontation with Christianity. The work was *The Natural History of Religion*, in which Hume had dismissed all the work done by scholars on the history of the *prisca theologia* with the lighthearted remark: "until about seventeen hundred years ago, the generality of mankind were polytheists." Hume's purpose in performing this rather reckless move was, among others, to make it clear that the attitude in Roman magistrates which Gibbon admired enough to call it "philosophy" had been feasible only in an age of polytheism and what Varro had called "poetical theology." The gods of the ancients had been myths, not propositions; the worshiper of one had objected not in the slightest to the worship of another, because it did not enter his head that statements about one god possessed a truth-status incompatible with the truth of statements made about another. It was the Christians, as Gibbon point out, who claimed that their god made all other gods false; this was why the Christians had been persecuted, and it was why they had in the end triumphed. Hume's aim was to establish that monotheism and philosophy had come into the world together, in a relation as close as that of chicken and egg; the statement that there was one god only was not identical with but it entailed and was entailed by the statement that propositions might be true whose subject was the nature of the universe as a whole. From that moment Varro's distinctions between poetical, political, and philosophical theology collapsed;

statements about God laid claim to a truth-status incompatible with the truth of other statements, and the philosopher could no longer regard all religions as equally false and equally useful. He found himself, whether as philosopher or as magistrate, committed to making theological statements which claimed to be true and obligated to persecute those which were false. The search for truth was the author of intolerance.

Gibbon pushed the matter further, by charting the decline of philosophy in the Stoic and Epicurean sense. In his account of the persecutions of the church before the time of Diocletian, he had emphasized that the persecutors were often reasonable and humane men — Pliny, Trajan, Marcus Aurelius — whose philosophy entailed skepticism about the gods who were the objects of cults left them free to police the cults in a relaxed and benevolent manner, until they were faced with one that asserted the falsity of all cults but its own. Behind Pliny writing to Trajan it is not hard to discern the figure of Gallio, or even Pontius Pilate, and it is to this strain in Roman values — that of Cicero in *De natura deorum*, the practitioner of a philosophy that is really politeness — that Gibbon was enduringly loyal. But in citing Hume's *Natural History of Religion*, he had implicitly admitted that philosophy in the Roman sense could not survive the advent of Christianity; and at the end of chapter 13, in which he traced the establishment of a hieratic palace government by Diocletian, he had paused to remark the rise among Romans of a new turn in philosophy. Where liberty declined, arts and polite learning ceased to be possible; and when the Roman governing classes ceased to be even imitations of the magistrates of a republic, and became instead the celebrants in complex ceremonies of their ruler's divinity, they took up the new, or rather the very old, philosophy of Neo-Platonism, which erroneously propounded metaphysical statements about the nature of being and elaborated them by means of fancy, magic, and allegory.<sup>56</sup> The *prisca theologia* had returned, and its innate capacity

<sup>56</sup> *Decline and Fall*, 1:422–24.

for persecution was exacerbated by the intolerance of the Christians themselves. Metaphysics and monotheism had begun their long and terrible coexistence, in which the concept of a personal God was to be so much more dynamic and destructive than that of undifferentiated Being.

The long history of ancient “oriental” philosophy is deep background for Gibbon. He seldom mobilizes it in full, because his narrative begins from its last rebirth in the form of Neo-Platonism and the triumph of Alexandrian philosophy over Athenian. This is why I am finding it necessary to say that the history of religion in the *Decline and Fall* begins less with the fifteenth and sixteenth chapters than with the twenty-first, when Constantine is obliged to call the Council of Nicaea, Athanasius comes upon the stage, and the reign of Constantine is soon followed by that of Julian. It is made clear to the reader that the great debates over Christ’s nature were produced by the interaction of Christian theology with Neo-Platonic metaphysics, and since Gibbon regarded that philosophy as profoundly mistaken — not only in its reasoning and conclusions, but in its notion of the philosophic enterprise itself — he loses no opportunity of indicating that the debates were unnecessary. It was a commonplace of Christian theology that the Platonist intellect was incapable of comprehending that the Logos had been made Flesh; but Gibbon goes further. In language which indicates that his intellectual history of Christianity begins with the composition of the Johannine Gospel, he poses the devastating question whether any but a Platonist intellect could have been so deeply committed to the concept of the Logos as to propose that it had been made Flesh.<sup>57</sup> If we are in search of the depth of Gibbon’s unbelief, we find it here; but when we have discovered that he considered the entire debate between Trinitarian and less than Trinitarian positions unnecessary and even meaningless, we still have to explain why he continued to write its history. The volumes of the *Decline and Fall* succeeding the first must be seen, though

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:355–75.

this is not the only way of seeing them, as organized around a series of major episodes or moments in the history of religion. I shall not be able here to follow up the thematic organization of the sequence they form; but I shall attempt some answers to the questions why Gibbon thought this history worth writing and what kind of history he wrote of them, and I should like to begin by examining the Humean dimensions of his thought.

When Gibbon incorporated Hume's *Natural History of Religion* into his analysis, he joined a trend in which the analysis of superstition and enthusiasm broke away from the clerical and ecclesiastical milieus in which it had been formed. There exists a series of writings by Hume, designed to furnish religion with a natural rather than a civil or a sacred history, in which the human mind, having conceived ideas either of a divinity or of a universal nature or principle in all things, is shown to alternate between perceiving divinity or principle in material objects apparent to the senses and perceiving it in the ideas apparent to the mind itself.<sup>58</sup> The first of these is superstition, the second enthusiasm. Against the first may be said that it opens the way to the rule of priests, who manipulate the mind by manipulating the objects and phenomena in which the divine is supposed to be manifest; in its favor may be said that it anchors the mind in sense perception, and in material and social reality, and makes possible a civil order in which human beings may be ruled and consent to being ruled. Against enthusiasm, but also for it, there is much more to be said. Because it displays the mind's worship as God of the ideas it has formed concerning God, it displays the mind's worship of itself; something without limit or control, and therefore far more dynamic and destructive than superstition. While it lasts — wrote Hume, with the English civil wars in mind — the ordinary laws governing human conduct are suspended, and hu-

<sup>58</sup> David Hume, *The Natural History of Religion*; "Of Superstition and Enthusiasm," in *Essays Moral, Political, and Literary*; and the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century volumes of the *History of England*.

mans become capable of anything. In its favor, however, may be observed that, since it is by nature iconoclastic, it burns out the objects and the practice of superstition and destroys the rule of priests; and since it is destructive, it may in the end burn itself out and leave the mind possessed of no more than the spectacle of its own workings, which can no longer be mistaken for the workings of God.<sup>59</sup> Hume used the example of the Quakers, who had passed quite rapidly from fanaticism to sobriety and illustrated the point that the mind left alone with itself might begin at last to form opinions and test them against social experience, which was all it was fitted to do.

There was something to be said for both superstition and enthusiasm, then; and Hume carried this detachment further by leaving it to be inferred that the human mind was so constituted that it must continue to alternate between these propensities, and that all Enlightenment could do was teach the mind to observe its own behavior. There is a classic example of the oscillation between superstition and enthusiasm in the twenty-eighth chapter of the *Decline and Fall*.<sup>60</sup> In the age of Theodosius, the cults of polytheism, the most ancient expression of superstition existing in its pure and prephilosophical form, are systematically destroyed by soldiers of the emperor and crowds of Christians actuated by the belief in the absolute power of a single, triune, and invisible god: the latest expression of the mind's worship of a pure idea, which is what we have learned to term enthusiasm. But the destruction of the pagan shrines is instantly followed by the erection of Christian, and by the institution of the cults of saints, relics, pilgrimages, and so on. The cultic seems to answer to a demand innate in the workings of the human mind, which cannot be restrained from

<sup>59</sup> The secret history of the Muggletonian sect, recently brought to light by Christopher Hill, Barry Reay, and William M. Lamont in *The World of the Muggletonians* (London: Temple Smith, 1983), would have struck Hume as perfectly fulfilling this prediction.

<sup>60</sup> "Final Destruction of Paganism —Introduction of the Worship of Saints and Relics among the Christians."

objectifying its beliefs; nor is it necessarily desirable that it should be. The springs of enthusiasm and superstition lie close together. In chapter 28 we are close to the final extinction of the empire in the West, but we are still nine chapters away from that on “the origin, progress and effects of the monastic life,” in which the monk, whose retirement from the world of sense to pursue pure contemplation might seem to convict him of enthusiasm, is repeatedly condemned for the opposite fallacy of superstition. The reason appears to be that his denial to himself of every form of action, production, or satisfaction, whether material, social, or sexual, leaves him alone with those attributes of the mind that would produce superstition if he had not starved them, so that he entertains visions and fantasies and worships them as divine. It is superstition arising at a level below that of the sensual.

The power of the papacy, as it arose in the West, was based on superstition of the more ordinary kinds; and in general, superstition was encouraged more by the doctrine that the Logos had become Flesh than by the Eastern metaphysics which held it back from full incarnation. But we shall mistake the nature of the Protestant Enlightenment altogether if we suppose that Gibbon felt any sympathy for the opponents of the Trinity and the incarnation of Christ as perfect God and perfect man. Such sympathies had been common enough in the Socinians and deists of the generation before him; Toland, Whiston, and, in private, Newton had labored to convict Athanasius of every kind of intellectual felony. Gibbon, however, deeply admired Athanasius, and though there is irony in his portrait of him there is not much. One reason is that he pairs him in contrast with Julian the Apostate, the most ambiguous and deeply flawed figure in all Gibbon’s narrative. He found Julian enormously attractive as a person and was fascinated by his challenge to Christianity; but Julian was not a practical and reflective Stoic reborn from the age of Marcus Aurelius. He was a Neo-Platonist mystagogue and magician who had himself initiated at Eleusis; as superstitious, as enthusiastic, and as inclined

to split the empire along credal lines as any of the Christians whom he opposed. Gibbon goes out of his way to insist that Athanasius was a better statesman than the emperor.<sup>61</sup> Many chapters later in the *Decline and Fall*, he encounters the figure of Pope Gregory VII, who, as author of clerical celibacy, humiliator of the emperor at Canossa, and patron of the Norman conquest of England, played a demon role in nearly all Protestant and philosophic historiography; and Gibbon pauses to remark in a footnote: "That Pope was undoubtedly a great man, a second Athanasius in a more fortunate age of the church," and to inform his reader that of all the portraits in his earlier volumes it is that of Athanasius with which he is least dissatisfied.<sup>62</sup> He is telling us something here, and it is something about both the papacy and Catholic theology.

This theme is renewed when Gibbon comes to consider the Iconoclastic movement in a Latin and papal perspective. The denial that the Godhead could or should be depicted in a visual form was a denial of one implication of the doctrine of the Word made Flesh, however it might be reconciled with the essential catholicity of Byzantine religion; Gibbon, by this point in his history, does not much care about that. The attack on images is an attack on the power of superstition by which churches rule, and the Emperor Leo endeavors to extend it to Italy, where the pope is not wholly under his control. But Pope Gregory II appeals to the independent kingdoms and cities of the peninsula, and the Italians, "trembling for their domestic deities,"<sup>63</sup> the saints, shrines, and images, respond to his call and overthrow Greek authority. The way is now open to the papal alliance first with Lombards and then with Franks, which Gibbon tells us is the beginning of the "modern" history of Europe that he saw no need to write, since

<sup>61</sup> *Decline and Fall*, 2:383–84, 499–502.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 6:212 n. 101.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 5 :277–82. Gibbon's account should be compared with Pietro Giannone's, whose *Istoria Civile del Regno di Napoli* (Naples, 1723) he generally follows.

Robertson had written it already. If enthusiasm can be the ally of despotism, superstition can be the ally of liberty. This reversal of Humean positions is possible because both superstition (as defined by Hume) and property are ways in which the mind appropriates the real world and finds foundations for the self to defend.

Whatever may be said of the church's usurpation of powers which should be exercised by civil authority, the papal resistance to empire, whether Isaurian or Hohenstaufen, helps to further the growth of Latin Europe as a community of independent states. We can see here why Gibbon's account of the papal role in the history of Rome as a medieval city, when he turns away from the themes of empire in his last three chapters, is a relatively benign one, and we may remember that the *Decline and Fall* was completed in that happy interval between the dissolution of the Jesuit order and the revolution in France, when it was possible for the Enlightenment to believe that *aggiornamento* and *glasnost*, progress, liberalism, and modern civilization, were overtaking the papacy at last. We can also understand something about the last and perhaps the strangest of Gibbon's chapters on the history of religion: the fifty-fourth, which devotes itself to the origins of the Protestant Reformation and offers to trace them back through the Waldensians, Albigensians, and other medieval heretics, to the Paulicians, a Greek sect and popular movement which had started with a rational desire to reform the text of the Scriptures and ended by embracing dualism and other familiar tenets of Eastern philosophy.<sup>64</sup> It was enthusiasm again, the self-worship to which the mind was prone when it applied itself critically in a context of theology, and what mattered here was not Manichean dualism but the perception of the Reformation as launched by "a crowd of daring fanatics," who had initiated in western Europe the history of enthusiasm as told by Hume.<sup>65</sup> The restless Greek intellect had not done with Europe yet, and this is the point at which Gibbon

<sup>64</sup> *Decline and Fall*, vol. 6, chap. 54 generally.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:148.

declares his allegiance by saying that the Reformation was saved from fanaticism by Erasmus and the scholars of Cambridge and Amsterdam. He was still escaping from the “noble hand” of Bossuet, which had driven him from Oxford to Lausanne.

The circle might seem to be complete, but there was one battle to fight still: a bitter confrontation with Joseph Priestley, whose *History of the Corruptions of Christianity*, published in Birmingham in 1782, had traced the history of Christian theology in terms almost identical with Gibbon’s own, showing the Platonic inventions of the Logos and the soul at the root of every mutation which had carried Christ’s teaching away from the simple unitarianism with which it began. Gibbon accepted all this, yet he attacked Priestley for denying the immortality of the soul—in which we know Gibbon did not believe himself—and more than once recommended him to the attention of the civil magistrate.<sup>66</sup> The explanation is quite clear. Priestley held Jesus to be a man only, but a man sent from God, and at the end of the *History of the Corruptions* revealed himself a materialist, a millennialist, and an apocalyptic revolutionary who believed that the Christian must await and expect “the fall of the civil power,” “calamitous, no doubt, (though) that time will be”<sup>67</sup> to bring an end of the false churches and religious establishments based on the pretended incarnation of spirit in matter. Gibbon knew enthusiasm when he saw it; Priestley’s materialism was another version of the *anima mundi*, his denial of the soul was fraudulent, and once again the mind was worshiping itself under the false pretense that matter and mind were one. Though Priestley was as committed an anti-Platonist as Gibbon himself, he was a proponent of the *prisca theologia* in his own way; Ebionites and Gnostics were brethren in fanaticism.

<sup>66</sup> At the end of chap. 54 (*Decline and Fall*, 6:134 n. 49) and in *Memoirs*, p. 172.

<sup>67</sup> *History of the Corruptions of Christianity* (Birmingham, 1782), 2:484. These are the words at which Gibbon says the magistrate may tremble, and gives him the reference.

Though Gibbon was an unbeliever with no sense of God whatever, he mistrusted atheism as a species of religiosity; Voltaire and Holbach were as fanatical as any monk, and the attempt to say what there was in the universe in place of God led rapidly to enthusiasm. It is easy to say that Gibbon's Enlightenment stopped at a point where the government of the superstitious by the skeptical seemed to him best for both ancient and modern society and to associate this with the circumstance that the *Decline and Fall* was completed between the Gordon Riots and the French Revolution. But I believe that we should carry the analysis deeper. I have tried to show that the Enlightenment in which the *Decline and Fall* took shape was conservative from its beginnings, in the sense that it was directed not simply against orthodoxy and ecclesiastical tradition but against illuminism and populist spirituality at the same time; and since the enthusiasm which it denounced was rationalist as well as mystical, materialist as well as spiritual, the denunciation was well placed to carry on into the age of revolution and redefine enthusiasm, as Burke did, as the energies of the mind directed against everything which gave society meaning. The concluding volumes of the *Decline and Fall* appeared in May 1788, at the last possible moment before the great transmutation of the ecclesiastical and philosophe criticism of enthusiasm into the conservative and liberal criticism of what a modern scholar has called "the fire in the minds of men."<sup>68</sup>

This is not the place to begin recounting the long struggle between enlightenment and revolution, a late stage of which preoccupied the mind of my generation for much of my lifetime. I would like instead to conclude these lectures in the way that I proposed at the beginning, by exploring the present which the

<sup>68</sup> James H. Billington, *Fire in the Minds of Men: The Origins of the Revolutionary Tradition* (New York: Basic Books, 1980), a study of the illuminist components in the making of a revolutionary mentality. It is well known that Burke, Barruel, and Robison feared an underground conspiracy of illuminati; worth remembering that Shelley wanted to see one. See Seumas Deane, *The French Revolution and Enlightenment in England, 1789–1832* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988).

pasts we have examined would seem to indicate; and what I want to say might bear the Gibbonian subtitle of "General Reflections on the Decline of Production and Revolution in the Western Economies." It has become clear in how many ways the enlightened account of civilization, and Western accounts of liberty, law, and citizenship before it, rested on the equation of humanity with appropriation. It was only as human beings established themselves in the earth, and began to produce and exchange with one another, that they became capable of ideas and individuality, of sociability in place of a hominid condition. As ideology, this premise relegated the hunter-gatherer to the borderlands known as savagery and justified the appropriation of his hunting grounds under pretense of turning him into an appropriator and cultivator. It offered at the same time a complex and sophisticated history of religion. Superstition and enthusiasm originated together in the animism of the hunter-gatherer. As agriculture and urbanization developed, gods could be manufactured and exchanged, and priests arose to exploit them; but animisms were coordinated into theogonies by the primeval sages, and metaphysics and enthusiasm became possible at the same time. The history of philosophy was the history of the slow mutation of metaphysics into methodical enlightenment, brought about as the increasing exchange of goods made possible the exchange and criticism of ideas, known to Gibbon as "taste and science."

I want to examine this scheme as analysis rather than ideology, and I suggest that we can usefully employ it in saying something about our present condition. The appropriative animal employs his labor to process his environment in production (I am employing masculine pronouns because this has been so much a masculine vision). After Gibbon's time, and after the first great wave of postreligious enthusiasm, there arises a revolutionary socialist program whereby labor is to employ itself. But for reasons not here to be gone into, we seem to find ourselves at a moment when the socialist impulse is altogether exhausted, whether in its parlia-

mentary or in its Leninist form, while at the same time industrial productivity seems to be moving away from the homelands of Enlightenment which have based their ideas of human individuality itself on appropriation and production, and settling for the moment among the great civilizations of eastern Asia, whose notions of humanity have not historically been based on so radical a relationship between environment and individuality.

It is not surprising that postindustrial societies should display movement toward postappropriative philosophies of individuality and society, and even toward postindividualist philosophies of humanity itself; though whether you can sacrifice individualism and retain individuality, or individuality and retain humanity, continues to be a question. What is worth noticing here is that such philosophies or ideologies are in some cases taking a religious form, strong enough to call the future of enlightenment in question, yet capable of being explained in some measure by those enlightened histories of religion I have been describing. As the human person finds his or her labor and skills superfluous, his or her needs unsatisfied until the market can reconstruct them to suit itself, and his or her development of higher capacities actively discriminated against or denied employment by an economy devoted to pure accountancy —all of which things are happening to varying extents —one loses the capacity to define oneself by making and doing, on which the self has rested for a long time; and instead of appropriating oneself from the universe, one tries to recover oneself by merging with it. This impulse is enormously reinforced by the wholly rational perception that it is more than time we stopped transforming our immediate environment and gave it a chance to exist in symbiosis with us.

Quests for harmony and community thus arise, which presuppose the failure or exhaustion of the enlightened, the industrial, and the revolutionary individual; and some of these not only take the form of religion in ways that the eighteenth-century Enlightenment could predict, but appear in religious forms with which that

Enlightenment was familiar. I am not thinking so much of the scriptural fundamentalisms which have been reviving in all three of the great monotheist religions —though these would have caused Hume or Gibbon no surprise —as of the revival of enthusiasm as their predecessors analyzed it in terms of the great theogonies of emanation. From Iran to the Bible Belt there is a return to the God of Abraham and his warfare with the Great Satan; but alongside it— and above all in the United States, so many of whose foundations are in the enthusiasm of the eighteenth century —one sees signs of a posttheistic and postatheistic religiosity which desires to affirm the holiness of earth and heaven, without the separation of God on the one hand or individual on the other. It is the return to the Uncarved Block, to the primal substance, to undifferentiated being. And when I enter an environmentalist or New Age bookshop and am surrounded by the literature of the Book of Changes, the Tarot Cards, the Twofold Truth, the Eightfold Path, and the works of the late Joseph Campbell, I know that once again the primal substance is supposed to be expressing itself in signs which disclose the mysteries of being and nonbeing. There are good materialist reasons why there may be a lot of this coming to us; the universe of hidden signs is a highly acceptable alternative to a universe in which there may be no signs at all and we are not able to make our own. The scholars of that Enlightenment which lies behind the *Decline and Fall* knew something about the generation of religious systems in history. It remains a question whether a historical phase may be ending and some archaizing phenomena asserting themselves; or whether David Hume was right and the human mind has been working in this way all the time. It is a long way back to the history which Hume and Gibbon founded on the unchanging propensities of human nature; yet, paradoxically, they offer us some salutary warnings against taking Enlightenment for granted. It presupposed certain historical and economic preconditions; it may survive, or it may not.

RESPONSE TO "EDWARD GIBBON IN HISTORY,"  
BY J. G. A. POCOCK

*Patricia B. Craddock*

I. REPUBLIC AND EMPIRE

I expect many of you will share my first reaction to J. G. A. Pocock's exciting lecture —that he has given us so much to think about there is almost nothing left to say! But silence does not long trouble anyone who has Gibbon's words to turn to, and with his help, I can select several points from this interesting and persuasive analysis that I should like to see carried further: for instance, Gibbon's version of the relationship of the citizen-soldier to civilization. An apparent modern solution to the problem, especially popular in Gibbon's day among those who resisted the support of standing armies, was, after all, the militia; and in Gibbon's view, notoriously, the captain of the Hampshire militia had not been useless to the historian of the Decline and Fall.

Perhaps he had learned by experience that owning one's land and one's gun was not enough to generate the ancient civic virtue, among persons who were not convinced of the desirability of territorial expansion and who desired to devote their time to producing works of "taste and science" instead of those of death and usurpation. Gibbon criticized Tacitus, we remember, for his sneer at Augustus's advice to his successors to "confine the empire within those limits, which Nature seemed to have placed as its permanent bulwarks and boundaries." Says Gibbon, "Why must rational

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advice be imputed to a base or foolish motive?"<sup>1</sup> Gibbon's criticisms of the Republic itself, as well as of the admirable but ultimately futile efforts of the five good emperors to play at restoring it, are important to his theme as Professor Pocock has so well described it.

I think Gibbon even has some vague perception of the dangers of cultural imperialism, in our sense of that term, though he discusses it as a danger to the conqueror rather than the conquered — the “provinces rose to the same level as the capital, and the vanquished nations acquired the name and privileges without imbibing the partial affections, of Romans” (chapter 13). But he notices also that “the provincials of Rome, trained by a uniform artificial foreign education” could not compete as creative users of language with those who “express[ed] their genuine feelings in their native tongue” (chapter 2). In both the *Decline and Fall* and the unfinished “Antiquities of the House of Brunswick” he speaks approvingly of respect for differing systems of law. And of course he recognizes that the diversity of modern states, however inconvenient to commerce, “is productive of the most beneficial consequences to the liberty of mankind” (chapter 3). In short, I think we should emphasize and even extend Pocock's vital point that Gibbon does not discuss the Decline and Fall of the empire because of nostalgia for a restoration of “an ancient world of public virtue,” republican or imperial, but in order to “count and remedy the costs of having departed from it” and also to identify and exploit the virtues of having departed from it.

Here and elsewhere, Pocock has drawn attention to an original and neglected aspect of Gibbon's theme, the replacement of expansionist military or ideological definitions of virtue with a cooperative and economic one. In so doing, incidentally, he points to a way in which Gibbon was a feminist *avant la lettre* and (as Madame Necker pointed out) in spite of himself. If human beings

<sup>1</sup> Manuscript revision of chapter 1, in *The English Essays of Edward Gibbon*, ed. Patricia B. Craddock (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), p. 338.

cannot be virtuous without being inspired and indeed judged by their will to military conquest, women, for whom physical courage is, Gibbon thought, an artificial virtue, are indeed denied access to civic virtue. But women can be and in Gibbon's own experience were, models of both mercantile and cultural success. They even, in the society he admired most, enjoyed intellectual and personal freedom. In their way they too were civilized barbarians, complementing politeness with honor, energy, and independence.

This theme (though not with any particular reference to women), I suggest, can help to explain the structural peculiarity to which Pocock referred, the way that the "explanation of the Decline and Fall is over before the narrative of the Decline and Fall has fairly begun." As writer, as readers, our principal concern is ultimately with our own citizenship, whether it is to be instructed by positive and negative analogues of our own experiences, or to be broadened by understanding of what is utterly foreign to us. At first glance, the history portrays forces far beyond individual control, in which the only individuals who have even temporary effect are extraordinary either by situation or by talents or both. But in portraying the limitations of the four or more systems that contend in the *Decline and Fall* to define "virtue" — including the republic, the empire, the barbarians, and Christianity — Gibbon stresses that each rests on a different effect of individual imaginations. Thus each of us is included in the history, both in and as we stretch our imaginations to include these different visions, and as we are represented by frequent characters whose vices are open to all and by occasional characters whose virtue is not that of military hero or religious zealot.

Such a character is the "senator" Boethius, author of the *Consolations of Philosophy* and citizen of the Gothic kingdom of Italy after the fall of Rome in the West. I will close with Gibbon's summary of this model citizen:

For the benefit of his Latin readers, his genius submitted to teach the first elements of the arts and science of Greece. The

geometry of Euclid, the music of Pythagoras, the arithmetic of Nicomachus, the mechanics of Archimedes, the astronomy of Ptolemy, the theology of Plato, and the logic of Aristotle, with the commentary of Porphyry, were translated and illustrated by the indefatigable pen of the Roman senator. . . . From these speculations Boethius stooped —or to speak more truly, he rose —to the social duties of public and private life; the indigent were relieved by his liberality, and his eloquence . . . was uniformly exerted in the cause of innocence and humanity.

After a great career he was condemned as a traitor without a trial. “While Boethius, oppressed with fetters, expected each moment the sentence or the stroke of death, he composed the *Consolation of Philosophy*, a golden volume not unworthy of the leisure of Plato or Tully, but which claims incomparable merit from the barbarism of the times and the situation of the author” (chapter 39).

## II. BARBARISM AND CIVILIZATION

This rich lecture again suggests many points of further inquiry, among which it is hard to select. Perhaps most people will wish to discuss Gibbon’s version of the stages of society as Pocock has analyzed it here and elsewhere. To my mind, also, that important discovery about Gibbon’s views is particularly significant in what Pocock calls this “confused and pluralized world,” since it allows for his having a sociological view of history which is neither merely taxonomic nor naively linear. In particular, it invites us to see that Gibbon attempts to discriminate what, in each society he describes, is worthy of admiration and emulation and what is to be avoided and discarded. Gibbon’s view of what literacy itself offers to civilization —he calls it the “philosophic spirit” in his first book —is exactly parallel to Pocock’s view of the function of history in the first of these lectures.

Surely what deserves the name of “cultural imperialism” is to assume a priori the superiority of a particular culture. Gibbon

never reaches the stage of pure cultural relativism, in which every culture is assumed to be equally valuable in every respect. Nor does he entirely escape the trap of unexamined axioms taken to be "nature." But from the beginning of his career, he should be given credit for trying to give credit to what is of value in alien cultures, as well as his own.

In a recent book it is claimed that Gibbon saw unlearned peasants as a "lesser breed."<sup>2</sup> The only evidence for that claim is his deep conviction that literacy and the plurality of cultural perspectives it makes possible are a universal good: "by reading and reflection, the man of learning multiplies his own experience, and lives in distant ages and remote countries"; the illiterate peasant, "rooted to a single spot, and confined to few years of existence, surpasses but very little his fellow-labourer the ox in the exercise of his mental facilities" (chapter 7). Such a statement implies precisely that the peasants *is* of the same "breed" —possesses the same potential — as the learned man.

As Pocock has so absorbingly demonstrated, Gibbon assumes that money —an arbitrary medium of exchange of goods —is equally beneficial to all cultures and therefore that cultures possessing letters and money were better developed than those without. In this context we might consider the specific test that makes Gibbon find Western civilization superior to its rivals, which I will call, for short, the "two blades of grass" test. The main reason agriculture is demonstrably superior to nomadism, in Gibbon's view, is not, ostensibly, that it defines property but that it makes the same territory capable of feeding and sustaining more people. In theory, I think, he tests both social and technological "progress" by the quantity and quality of human life they permit —quality in the elementary sense of freedom from cold, pain, hunger, and the like, and freedom for as much polite culture and intellectual inquiry as the individual is capable of. In practice he highly values appropriative economies and societies that permit a talented elite

<sup>2</sup> W. B. Carnochan, *Gibbon's Solitude* (1987).

to exercise their talents for each other, albeit presumably for the benefit of humankind as a whole. His attitude toward the imperial attitude toward slavery is something we might profitably discuss, for it certainly shows the subtlety of his analysis of “progress”; we might also remember his comparison of the “barbarous” law of trial by combat to the present system: “the law, which now favors the rich, then yielded to the strong” (chapter 38). Gibbon strongly condemns the barbarian’s injustice, but he hardly praises the justice of the modern system.

One interesting case study of the relationship between barbarism and civilization is Gibbon’s portrayal of Theodoric, the great Gothic king of Italy. Theodoric was brought up as a hostage at the Byzantine court, but Gibbon makes very clear how literally he remains “barbarous”: he never learns to read, and he begins his career with an emblematic crime against civilization: leading his men on an “adventure,” he cuts off the right hands of some peasants who oppose them, that is, the hand that wields the plow. Significantly, the “free” barbarians cannot feed themselves; they depend on wages or bribes from the civilized “Romans.” But Theodoric conceives and executes the idea of liberating Italy from other barbarians and reestablishing Roman civilization there. In Gibbon’s view, he succeeds remarkably, and indeed, “The union of the Goths and Romans might have fixed for ages the transient happiness of Italy” (chapter 39). His fault, oddly, is that he is too civilized; he “servilely copied the institutions and even the abuses of the political system which had been framed by Constantine and his successors.” Nevertheless, the “people still preserved their dress and language, their laws and customs, their personal freedom, and two-thirds of their landed property. It had been the object of Augustus to conceal the introduction of monarchy; it was the policy of Theodoric to disguise the reign of a barbarian. . . . Theodoric loved the virtues which he possessed, and the talents of which he was destitute.” And Gibbon’s portrayal of him continues in this vein. Theodoric was even the patron of reli-

gious toleration, until forced into intolerance by the "bigotry of his subjects and enemies." His story is placed at the beginning of the last section of the *Decline and Fall*, volumes 4–6, as the Age of the Antonines was placed at the beginning of the whole history, and the account of Constantine and Constantinople at the beginning of volumes 2 and 3. It provides an instructive example of the potential alliance of barbarism and civilization.

### III. RELIGION AND PHILOSOPHY

Naturally I am particularly pleased with Pocock's convictions that the center of Gibbon's religious history comes long after the two controversial chapters and that his opinions differ significantly from Voltaire's, since I share them both. I might qualify slightly one or two of Pocock's passing observations—for instance, it is not logical that Gibbon's opponents should attack him for positions he held in common with such orthodox Protestant predecessors as Johann Lorenz von Mosheim; but in fact they managed to do so. But I would prefer simply to admire what seems to me an irrefutable demonstration that Gibbon was attacking metaphysics, especially of a Neo-Platonic or quasimystical nature, more than dogma or even dogmatism. I would add that Gibbon buttresses these objections with two allied ones, one to asceticism for its own sake, never justifiable, of course, except on metaphysical or mystical grounds, and the other to expansionism, an objection similar to Gibbon's objection to the Republic and to the destructive cultural and linguistic imperialism of the Empire.

To support these ideas, it is useful to recollect briefly the other monotheistic religions Gibbon discusses in the *Decline and Fall*. Like the Romans, he makes a distinction between the Jews, who despise all other gods but do not attempt to seduce their worshipers, and the proselytizing and innovating Christians. One of the ways in which the early church is a "republic" is that it seeks to extend its territory, and of course it suffers the same fate as

other republics in the history: it is destroyed as a republic by its own success. In this one respect, even the Jews will do as a stick to beat the Christians; we might remember that Gibbon regards the Jewish defection to the Arabs in Spain as caused and justified by the Christian persecution of them, itself simply the result (he believed) of a passion for persecution that no longer enjoyed a powerful heresy to attack. Spiritual weapons, like swords, would be exercised somehow where they defined virtue.

But the more extensive and interesting comparisons are those with Islam and with Zoroastrianism. Gibbon's portrayal of the former is so familiar that I will turn instead to the latter (chapter 8), which in fact occupied much of his own attention when he looked back at his history to revise it, both in a memorandum labeled "Materials for corrections and improvements for the 1rst Vol. of my History,"<sup>3</sup> where he mentions "a fine passage of Zoroaster" in Eusebius and "a sublime idea of the Persian theology in Dion Chrysostom," and in the unpublished marginalia in a recently discovered copy of the history now in the British Library. The Zoroastrian religion was useful to him both as an anticipation of and as a reproach to the faults, as Gibbon saw them, of Christianity. The Great King of Persia in A.D. 226, Artaxerxes, decided to purify Zoroastrianism from foreign idolatries. He —but by all means let us let Gibbon tell it:

To suppress the idolaters, reunite the schismatics, and confute the unbelievers, by the infallible decision of a general council, the pious Artaxerxes summoned the Magi from all parts of his dominions. On the appointed day about eighty thousand priests appeared. But as the debates of so tumultuous an assembly could not have been directed by the authority of reason, or influenced by the art of policy, the Persian synod was reduced by successive operations . . . at last to seven Magi, the most respected for their learning and piety. One of these, Erdaviraph, a young but holy prelate, received from the hands of his brethren three cups of soporiferous wine. He drank

<sup>3</sup> Craddock, *English Essays*, p. 227.

them off, and instantly fell into a long and profound sleep. . . . Every doubt was silenced by this supernatural evidence. . . . The great and fundamental article of the system was the celebrated doctrine of the two principles; a bold and injudicious attempt of Eastern philosophy to reconcile the existence of moral and physical evil with the attributes of a beneficent Creator and Governor of the world.

So far Gibbon's version of the Magian religion resembles his treatment of Christianity, with perhaps a slight philosophical edge to the latter.

Gibbon continues, "The theology of Zoroaster was darkly comprehended by foreigners, and even by the far greater number of his disciples, but the most careless observers were struck with the philosophic simplicity of the Persian worship." Yet "every mode of religion," Gibbon opines, "to make a deep and lasting impression upon the human mind, must exercise our obedience by enjoining practices of devotion; and must acquire our esteem, by inculcating moral duties analogous to the dictates of our own hearts. The religion of Zoroaster was abundantly provided with the former, and possessed a sufficient portion of the latter." Indeed, "there are some remarkable instances in which Zoroaster lays aside the prophet, assumes the legislator, and discovers a liberal concern for private and public happiness, seldom to be found among the grovelling or visionary schemes of superstition. The saint, in the Magian religion, is obliged to beget children, to plant useful trees, to destroy noxious animals, to convey water to the dry lands of Persia, and to work out his salvation by pursuing all the labours of agriculture." Useless asceticism was not merely not enjoined, it was regarded as sinful. "Had Zoroaster in all his institutions invariably supported this exalted character, his name would deserve a place with those of Numa and Confucius, and his system would be justly entitled to all the applause which it has pleased some of our divines, and even some of our philosophers to bestow upon it." But on the contrary, it suffered many of the faults Gib-

bon was planning to portray in the Christian church-superstition, priestcraft, intolerant zeal, persecution of outsiders and heretics. Gibbon's last point is morally ambiguous, particularly in view of his outrage over the religious wars of Europe. The persecution of heretics and infidels was extremely successful; at its conclusion, "the schismatics within the vast empire were soon reduced to the inconsiderable number of eighty thousand. This spirit of persecution reflects dishonour on the religion of Zoroaster; but as it was not productive of any civil commotion, it served to strengthen the new monarchy." In our discussion, we might consider what light this cool judgment might throw on our understanding of Gibbon's treatment of the Christian religion.

RESPONSE TO "EDWARD GIBBON IN HISTORY,"  
BY J. G. A. POCOCK

G. W. Bowersock

I. REPUBLIC AND EMPIRE

In a footnote to be found in chapter 50 of the *Decline and Fall*, Edward Gibbon himself pays tribute to the "profound erudition" of Pocke. It seems appropriate to recall those words in expressing appreciation to a homonym of the great orientalist known to Gibbon, I should willingly have traveled much farther than I have to hear the lectures of J. G. A. Pocock on an author he understands supremely well. To participate in this occasion not only with him but with Patricia Craddock, the finest biographer of Gibbon the world has yet seen, is a rare privilege and pleasure.

After this first lecture on Republic and Empire, in the allotted space of minutes, I offer a few reflections on two points raised by the speaker. First, let us consider Gibbon's orientation toward western and meridional Europe despite the global schemes of his work and the importance he assigns to northerners, Byzantines, Persians, Muslims. Rome is the center of his history but hardly its circumference. There can be no doubt that Gibbon's background of independent, western European states has conditioned his perspective. We have only to think of his observation in chapter 3: "The division of Europe into a number of independent states, connected, however, with each other, by the general resemblance of

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religion, language, and manners, is productive of the most beneficial consequences to the liberty of mankind.” And yet Gibbon was by no means confined to this perspective any more than he was confined to the western empire in his history.

Pocock has emphasized the role of commerce as a civilizing force in the rise of fierce peoples up from barbarism and the freedom of primeval savagery. At the end of his lecture he extends this notion of gentle commerce, or *doux commerce*, to serve as a replacement for conquest in the progress of civilization. Empire, for Gibbon, according to Pocock, is “the product of an economy not yet able to replace conquest by commerce” —an “archaic phenomenon.” Yet when Gibbon turned to the rise of Islam he confronted—and confronted explicitly—the simultaneous phenomena of primitive warfare *and* commerce, and he was well aware that commerce served to smooth out the harshness of tribal life. Of the Quraish and the family of the Prophet, he wrote, “The noblest of her sons united the love of arms with the profession of merchandise.” Of the tribal raids that made the Saracens famous Gibbon could observe, “But the spirit of rapine and revenge was attempered by the milder influence of trade and literature. The solitary peninsula is encompassed by the most civilised nations of the ancient world; the merchant is the friend of mankind; and the annual caravans imported the first seeds of knowledge and politeness into the cities and even the camps of the desert.” So I suggest that Gibbon shows us here a conflation of the traditional Western stages of civilization: nomadic-pastoral barbarism miraculously conjoined with commerce and with, better still, “politeness.” This conjunction then goes on promptly to build an empire.

I raise now a second point from Pocock’s lecture. This is the problem of the growth of empire as necessarily undermining the constitutional and administrative system that made it possible. Thus we see the Roman Republic become an Empire in the sense of having provincial dependencies before it is an empire in the administrative or institutional sense. (Pocock rightly distinguishes

these two senses of "empire.") And the appearance of the Empire —the monarchic Principate —is seen to follow from what happened in the Republic. In other words, the decline had already set in before the Republic (and Julius Caesar) were dead. We have therefore to wonder, as Pocock does, about Gibbon's decision to launch his narrative in the second century A.D., in the age he defines as that between the death of Domitian and the accession of Commodus (i.e., A.D. 96-180).

It would have been no surprise had Gibbon started with the *pax Augusta*, the Augustan peace that was widely perceived — thanks to Augustus's own propaganda — to have made the whole world happy, a period Voltaire numbered among the four golden ages of culture. But the second century is quite another matter, and Gibbon had good reason to have some doubts about his choice in his last years. The peace, happiness, and good government he ascribes to that era are now commonplace to us precisely because of Gibbon. But there is very little to justify this optimistic portrait. Although Tacitus wrote of the *felicitas temporam* after Domitian's death, he was describing a felicity like that of a prisoner finally seeing the daylight. And soon afterward the emperor Trajan went on a disastrous war in an effort to add several more provinces to the Empire. Gibbon knew all this. He also knew that Julian the Apostate thought Antoninus Pius rather immoral and that Marcus Aurelius presided over great wars on the northern and eastern frontiers as well as a devastating plague.

To be sure, Gibbon wrote about that "slow and secret poison" in the vitals of the Empire, and he held a scandalously low opinion of Antonine literature. He was an honest historian, and so we must still ask why he started when he did. I believe that his great classical master, Tacitus, provides the answer. Gibbon accepted Tacitus's unfavorable view of Augustus, and therefore he clearly could not open with the Augustan Age. Nor would he have wanted to tell again the history of the first century A.D. in direct competition with Tacitus. He chose to begin precisely where we know

that Tacitus stopped. Picking up the Tacitean phrases about the new felicity, Gibbon invented the Antonine Age as we know it.

## II. BARBARISM AND CIVILIZATION

Not long ago I had a conversation in Princeton with a group of colleagues about the need of states and societies to define themselves in terms of opposition to alien peoples who constitute, in some perceptible way, another style of life. These peoples serve as “the other,” *l'autre* as the French would say, “barbarians” as the ancients put it. We need to have barbarians to understand ourselves, even if we have no desire to denigrate the achievements and culture of those barbarians. Pocock has reminded us that Herodotus could speak of the deeds of barbarians as no less memorable than those of the Greeks. As our conversation in Princeton warmed to the subject of a need for barbarians, a distinguished German colleague, born in 1926, remarked wryly of himself, “I am my own barbarian.”

We learned from Pocock’s second lecture that Gibbon’s barbarians, or at any rate the northern barbarians, are similarly ourselves. This arresting opinion, characterized by Pocock as “a highly dangerous statement for a civilization to be making about itself,” highlights Gibbon’s complex and far from unfavorable attitude toward those whose individualism and freedom had to be harnessed by agriculture and commerce to make civilization and its arts possible. Rome (and Byzantium too) needed barbarians not only for self-definition and national pride, but for rebirth and renewal. Admirers of the modern Greek poet Cavafy will recall the final line of his poem “Waiting for the Barbarians” —that is the barbarian hordes massed for invasion on the frontiers of Greece —“Those barbarians are a kind of solution.”

It is good to be reminded by Pocock that Gibbon’s frequent use of the word “barbarian” is an importation from classical antiquity at a time when “savage” and “savagery” were the prevalent

terms for primitive peoples. In taking over the word, Gibbon has also taken over its descriptive sense of "the other" (*l'autre*) from classical sources, so that it functions in English without an exclusively prejudicial tone and equally without any sense of ennoblement (as in the case of "noble savage"). The word served Gibbon well in expounding his dangerous statement about civilization.

But, as Pocock has shown us, when the barbarians are servile rather than free, a potential for becoming civilized in the western European sense is absent, even though servile barbarians may have a degree of literary and artistic culture. Hence Persians, Mesopotamians, and Egyptians are excluded from dynamic models of world history on the grounds of "oriental despotism." So far, so good in verifying Gibbon's western European perspective. Nonetheless, as Pocock observed, when Arabs and Turks appear in the *Decline and Fall*, they "conform better to the barbarian than the oriental stereotype." And by oriental I presume he means here a subcategory of servile barbarians, as defined by Persians and the like. Now it would be interesting to test the breadth of Gibbon's vision by asking whether he tried to appreciate, by an effort of historical imagination, the confrontation of those nonservile Eastern barbarians (that is, those more like the ancestral northern ones) with *their* own "other." Who, in short, were barbarians to the barbarians?

Let us look a little closer for a moment at the Arabs and the Turks according to the *Decline and Fall*. One of the great ironies of language is that when the Arabs met the primitives of North Africa, they called them, as Ibn Khaldûn tells us, Berbers because their language seemed to consist of a babble that seemed like saying "berber," —a perfect analogue to the fundamental Greek depiction of *barbaros* as referring to someone whose language sounded like the syllables *barbar*. When the Arabs reached the Atlas Mountains in Morocco, they met the Berbers, whom Gibbon describes as "the last of the Moors, a race of savages, without laws or discipline or religion." Here then are the Arabs' own barbarians,

defined by the absence of what they had — laws, discipline, and religion. Gibbon then makes his point even clearer by comparing these savages to nomads of the desert: “the wandering Moors resembled the Bedowens of the desert.” But subsequently they became at least partly assimilated and from this emerges, in Gibbonian terms, a nation: “With the religion they were proud to adopt the language, name, and origin of Arabs: the blood of the strangers and natives was insensibly mingled; and from the Euphrates to the Atlantic the same nation might seem to be diffused over the sandy plains of Asia and Africa.” This would appear to be a kind of Arabian “triumph of barbarism and religion.”

As for the Turks, they *had* once been servile barbarians, “the most despised portion of the slaves of the great khan” (as Gibbon described them), But a great leader put an end to their servitude. They acquired freedom and victory, and for a while an empire in central Asia. The Chinese then became the Turks’ “other,” whose gentle piety and massive numbers they quickly learned to respect. Gibbon’s positive assessment of free barbarians became still clearer when, centuries later, the Seljuks built up a new Turkish empire. Of the ruler Malek Shah, Gibbon wrote, “This barbarian, by his personal merit and the extent of his empire, was the greatest prince of his age.” With the arrival of the Ottomans, Gibbon found much to admire and even recorded “the reluctant praise of their Christian enemies.”

Gibbon deserves no small measure of credit for extending and nuancing his concept of the barbarian, so meaningfully developed for an explanation of the late Roman Empire. His interest in explaining European civilization did not deter him from applying his historical tools to non-European cultures in an uncommonly bold and, I think, successful exercise in comparative history. The European barbarians, from whom sprang the very civilization that Gibbon cherished, stand quite properly alongside those other nonservile barbarians, the Arabs and the Turks.

## III. RELIGION AND PHILOSOPHY

In his final and perhaps most audacious lecture Pocock invites us to reassess the entire program of Gibbon's handling of religion in the *Decline and Fall*, in particular the treatment of the religion that triumphed. His proposal that the notorious fifteenth and sixteenth chapters are merely preliminary to the main historical argument of Gibbon's history is, as Pocock says, a large dose he asks us to swallow. I for one must report that I not only swallow it but feel much improved in doing so. I have always found those chapters singularly unsurprising, even banal in their substance, as if Gibbon were laying out his homework for us before he proceeded to his own original contribution. The storm of controversy, fanned in part by Gibbon's own decision to reply to certain criticism by composing the *Vindication*, has distracted attention from those chapters as simple background. And indeed what Gibbon chose to reply to were essentially charges that he had *not* done his homework properly — misuse, misrepresentation, and plagiarism of sources.

Accordingly I gladly subscribe to the view that the really significant Gibbonian account of the triumph of religion begins with the Council of Nicaea. In this context Pocock has subtly deployed the arsenal of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century metaphysical debate to illuminate a strain of anti-Platonism in Gibbon's work, an anti-Platonism which he calls "one of the keys to the *Decline and Fall*." Philosophy becomes by this means an instrument of rational fanaticism in promoting the claims of monotheism, whether pagan or Christian. Having relegated chapters 15 and 16 to the status of prolegomena, Pocock is able to argue that the triumphant rebirth of Platonism in late antiquity marks the real beginning of his account of the victory of Christianity. The heresies and debates on the nature of Christ are seen as the product of an interaction of Christian theology with Neo-Platonic metaphysics.

Let me suggest a few nuances in this interpretation of Gibbon and, insofar as it is pertinent, in the history of the period itself (as we can understand it today). For understanding Gibbon and understanding history are not easily separable. First, the end of chapter 13 of the *Decline and Fall* leaves us in no doubt of Gibbon's hostility to those whom he calls the "new Platonists." They "exhausted their strength in the verbal disputes of metaphysics," and they exercised their reason in "deep but unsubstantial meditations." But —and I think this is important —Gibbon did *not* consider this philosophy to be the Platonism of old. He knew that Plato had been completely transformed by Plotinus, Porphyry, Iamblichus, and others, and he had no hesitation in saying explicitly that Plato "would have blushed to acknowledge" the so-called Platonists of late antiquity. These Neo-Platonists combined metaphysics with miracles, converting (in Gibbon's words) "the study of philosophy into that of magic." By magic Gibbon refers to the famous *theurgy* —or getting the gods to work for you. And there was not only magic: the Neo-Platonists practiced superstition as well by encouraging pagan cults. On top of all this, the Neo-Platonic leaders were a breed of pagan holy men, like Proclus himself who could converse with Pan and Asclepius. He was divine, *enthous* in Greek. Thus transparently Neo-Platonism fostered enthusiasm in addition to magic and superstition. In fact, Neo-Platonism was the nearest paganism ever came to a unified religion, with church and theology.

Alexandrian philosophy did not triumph over Athenian. It flourished alongside it for just under two centuries, and in the days of Proclus and Isidore, Athens eclipsed Alexandria, as Gibbon shows in chapter 40. In other words, the Neo-Platonism to which Gibbon so strenuously objects is a product largely of the Christian empire. It was utterly unlike the fragmented, disparate, and non-soteriological paganism of the earlier Empire, on which Ramsay MacMullen has written so well. It is certainly removed from the Platonism of that period, which we know as Middle Platonism.

So I think one cannot speak of an interaction of Neo-Platonism with Christian theology in the sense that it affected Christian thought, Christianity was the precondition for Neo-Platonism. Gibbon seems to me to have recognized this fully, and I believe that that is why he is so acute in his analysis of Julian's apostasy from Christianity. In his description of Julian's lapse, Gibbon wrote, "It may appear a subject of surprise and scandal that the philosophers themselves should have contributed to abuse the superstitious credulity of mankind, and that the Grecian mysteries should have been supported by the magic or theurgy of the modern Platonists."

Early Christianity, of course, was full of Platonism, and the nature and acceptability of Platonic Christian theology was a subject of lively debate from the second century right down to Gibbon's own time. But this interaction of Platonism with Christian thought has nothing to do with the Neo-Platonism of which Gibbon had so understandably low an opinion. In other words I think that neither the *Decline and Fall* nor Christianity can be properly interpreted if anti-Platonism and anti-Neo-Platonism are thought to be the same thing. What really mattered for the triumph of Christianity was authentic Platonism and, to some extent, Middle Platonism. These philosophies provide more than enough grist for Hume's mill when it comes to the conjunction of monotheism and metaphysics, but I cannot see that Gibbon blamed Plato. In fact, near the end of the *Decline and Fall* he expresses a remarkably positive opinion of authentic Platonism when it was revived in Italy in the fifteenth century. "While the synod of Florence was involved in theological debate, some beneficial consequences might flow from the study of his elegant philosophy."

Gibbon therefore could distinguish Plato from the abuse of his name by later disciples. As we have learned today, he could tell superstition and enthusiasm when he saw it. Among the early Christian heretics he would actually have seen much more of it than he did, if he had lived to have access to the extraordinary

Gnostic library discovered at Nag Hammadi not so many decades ago. Imagine Gibbon confronted with a text in which the divine voice is heard proclaiming, “I the Lord am the only Lord, and there is no God but me” —after which another voice comes from Heaven, saying, “You are wrong.”