

Introduction

There has never been much doubt about the Christian faith of Edward Gibbon. As soon as the first volume of his *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* appeared in 1776, reviewers cast Gibbon among “our modern infidels.” “The whole bent of his soul appears to be set against Christianity,” wrote Smyth Loftus, an Irish vicar. “He sees nothing in it, but with that jaundiced eye which turns everything to its own blackness and horror.”² Reaction to the *Decline and Fall*'s second and third volumes, published in 1781, and the concluding volumes of 1788 was perhaps more muted, but the key had not changed.³ By the time of his death in 1794 Gibbon's reputation as “the infidel historian” seemed secure.⁴

Where Gibbon, so understood, fit among the writers of his own time seemed similarly unproblematic to his early critics. Richard Watson, then the chair of divinity at Cambridge, placed Gibbon among a “set of men . . . who having picked up in their travels, or the writings of the deists, a few flimsy objections, infect with their ignorant and irreverent ridicule, the ingenuous minds of the rising generations.”⁵ Both sources of these “flimsy objections” were suggestive. Gibbon had indeed traveled widely on the Continent and at one point thought more in French than in English; like Bolingbroke and David Hume (with whom he was often linked), Gibbon could be thought to have contracted a peculiarly continental strain of infidelity.⁶ But he fit also among the more homegrown “deists,” men like Thomas Morgan and Matthew

Tindal, who had attempted in the early part of the eighteenth century to strip Christianity of its mysteries—revelation and miracles among them—in order to expose the “natural religion” at its core.

The continental and English milieux Watson selected for Gibbon shared a psychology of religious belief rooted in fear and ignorance and a narrative of Christianity's worldly success rooted in priestly manipulation of the same. Gibbon's first critics also placed the historian in a context that reached back to the epochs described in his history. Watson considered “the Gnostics of modern times” to be “miserable copiers of their brethren of antiquity.”⁷ Henry Edwards Davis followed suit: “The same set of men have been alone distinguished by different names and appellations, from Porphyry, Celsus, or Julian, in the first ages of Christianity; down to Voltaire, Hume, or Gibbon in the present.”⁸ For all of their apparent variety, the infidels hailed from a coherent tradition. So did the defenders of the faith, in their own judgment. As the Oxford-trained cleric James Chelsum wrote in 1776, “Repeated attacks require repeated answers.”⁹

What was novel in the “infidel historian” was not the infidelity but the history. The seventeenth-century forerunners of deism had suggested how sacred history might be rendered secular. Thomas Hobbes, for instance, had claimed that all religion had a “natural seed,” and he had hinted that critique of pagan religion (which could be safely dissected) might apply to Christianity (which could not be).¹⁰ Baruch Spinoza asserted more boldly that the Bible attributed actions to God not because nature had ceased to follow its course but in order to encourage devotion among the ignorant: “If Scripture related the destruction of an empire in the way political historians do, it would not appeal to the common people; but it is very appealing to them when everything is narrated poetically and all things are ascribed to God, as the Bible normally does.”¹¹ Gibbon, however, did not attack biblical accounts of God's actions in history directly. Picking up where Acts of the Apostles left off, Gibbon insinuated that Christianity's spread, the rapidity and extent of which had long been taken to suggest supernatural intervention, could be attributed to natural causes. This was something less than a refutation of revelation. But it offered readers inclined toward skepticism an imaginative space—a narrative of their past and a conception of their present—rather different from the one offered by Christian churches.

The belief that this was no small matter united Gibbon's first readers. Gibbon intended to eradicate Christianity “out of the minds of men,” they

wrote. He aspired to see “the cross trampled upon, Christianity everywhere proscribed, and the religion of nature once more become the religion of Europe.”¹² Much like his hero Julian, the author of the *Decline and Fall* intended “to destroy Christianity entirely.”¹³

That Gibbon’s early critics were right to view his personal faith as some variety of heresy—Arianism, deism, skepticism, perhaps even atheism—cannot be doubted.¹⁴ That Voltaire and the English deists constitute the right context for Gibbon’s treatment of Christianity in the *Decline and Fall* is less certain.¹⁵

When Gibbon wrote, personal skepticism had long been consistent with a view of Christianity considerably more nuanced than Gibbon’s critics granted him. Machiavelli, whom Gibbon studied as a young man and whose work he revisited throughout his life, lamented the “weakness into which the present religion has led the world,” while holding that “only [ecclesiastical principalities] are secure and happy” and adapting techniques from the Church to strengthen this-worldly states.¹⁶ Montesquieu seemed to many of his own first critics either a Spinozist or a deist; he could write that since Julian “there has been no prince more worthy of governing men,” while at the same time praising Christianity for softening mores and grounding religion not only in human fear but in hope, admiration, and love.¹⁷ Rousseau mimicked Machiavelli’s condemnation of Christian weakness—“True Christians are made to be slaves; they know it and are hardly moved by it; this brief life has too little value in their eyes”—while championing the “religion of humanity” and, especially in the *Emile*, rivaling Pascal as an analyst of religious sentiment.¹⁸ The list could be extended, but the point is clear. Personal skepticism, to the extent we can safely assign such a view to these authors, did not require that one adopt a reductive view of the phenomenon of religion. In the eighteenth century, as before and since, one could approach Christianity from the outside without reducing it to the strictures of Epicurus and Hobbes.

For all of Gibbon’s skepticism regarding the central doctrines of Christianity, he was an astute psychologist of religion. Like Machiavelli, Montesquieu, and Rousseau, he had a keen desire to understand Christianity’s historical role as the conqueror of ancient paganism and the midwife of modernity.¹⁹ Gibbon was concerned not merely to oppose Christianity but to confront it as a philosophical and historical problem.

My intent in this work is to tally the results and conditions of that confrontation. The primary result was an account of Christianity more sophisticated and sympathetic than is normally understood. Gibbon adapted explanations

of the Roman Republic's rise to a new spiritual republic. Christianity's priests took the role of Rome's legions; Roman polytheism, weakened by skepticism resembling that of Voltaire and the deists, played the part of the decadent empires that enabled Rome's rapid expansion. Gibbon's account of Christianity's rise was secular and skeptical, to be sure, but it was not at bottom contemptuous. The conditions for Gibbon's confrontation with Christianity were, by the same token, more complex than is commonly thought. The pieties of Gibbon's childhood home, his conversion to Catholicism at sixteen, and his Tour of the Continent as a young man left Gibbon with something richer than the longing for revenge on Christianity that Richard Porson and other readers attributed to him.²⁰ What remained of these encounters was an author attentive, even in the narration of his own life, to the psychological phenomena that Christianity highlighted and deepened. We shall see, in short, that what is most compelling and least dismissive in Gibbon's treatment of religion appears when we approach the *Decline and Fall* from the historical context surrounding the conception of that great work.

The relevant context of a historian as widely and deeply read as Gibbon can be difficult to delimit, however. By the time Gibbon had completed the *Decline and Fall*, his personal library included some "six or seven thousand volumes."²¹ These works stretched from remote antiquity to the latest polemics. In 1776 and again in 1789 Gibbon pestered booksellers for pamphlets just off the presses.²² While working on the *Decline and Fall*, we find him writing his stepmother with an urgent request for his Strabo: "It is Greek, but don't be frightened."²³ Gibbon's reading extended geographically as well as chronologically, and it included works acquired during his years on the Continent and in England. If it is correct to consider a writer's library the image of his mind and his intellectual desire, Gibbon's seems to suggest an omniscience that evades efforts to confine it to any finite set of influences.²⁴ The nature of the intellectual desire that produced such a collection is suggested by Gibbon's description of a return to his study: "My Seraglio was ample, my choice was free, my appetite was keen."²⁵

How could one hope to contextualize a mind as promiscuous as Gibbon's? Even in making the attempt, there is considerable risk of imposing one's own preferences and thereby foreclosing an opportunity to learn something new or unanticipated. One might try to mitigate the risk by replicating the author's experience: reading what he read; knowing what he knew; thinking, as much as one can, what he thought. A reader inhabiting Gibbon's mind in

this way would close his eyes in his present and reopen them on May 8, 1737. Growing old alongside Gibbon, dipping in and out of the same intellectual currents, this reader attempts to chart the ocean into which Gibbon launched the *Decline and Fall*.

Even so ambitious an agenda as this, however, risks diminishing the work and the author under consideration. As the relevant context expands, the work being interpreted—the profundity and originality of which recommended the interpretive effort in the first place—can become harder to discern. Taken to the extreme, the attempt simply to replicate a writer’s intellectual world resembles the pathology of Borges’s Funes, who remembered all exactly as it was and found himself surrounded by an endless array of equally vivid data, not a human world always-already structured by desire, sorted into salient and nonsalient, worth remembering and properly forgotten. Far better to take an author as the best-informed (though interested, to be sure) guide to the world surrounding his work.²⁶

In attempting to contextualize Gibbon without losing sight of his work’s greatness and the influences Gibbon himself considered most significant, scholars are both blessed and cursed. They have an extraordinary wealth of materials from Gibbon’s own hand, ancillary to the *Decline and Fall*. A rich correspondence includes Gibbon’s candid exchanges with the luminaries of his age; private journals trace his path from captaincy in the Hampshire Grenadiers to epiphany on his Grand Tour to Rome; and his *Memoirs*, repeatedly drafted but never completed, amount to variations on the theme of the historian’s genesis and success. All of these sources afford intimate access to Gibbon’s context as he experienced it, and all will feature prominently in this study.

Readers of these seemingly candid writings must nevertheless account for Gibbon’s notorious irony. Like Socrates, Gibbon was known not always to say just what he meant—that is, he presented his meaning in ways that were (and are) rather different from those one uses with confidantes.²⁷ Gibbon’s reader had to earn his confidence. And this was particularly so on the topic that most concerned Gibbon’s clerical critics, his more skeptical friends, and the readers of *Gibbon’s Christianity*. Gibbon is commonly thought to have related the rise of Christianity with a “sneer” and to have blamed it, without ever quite saying so, for the decline and fall of a civilization he admired.²⁸ But not saying so means something different for a master of irony and indirection than it does for a more forthcoming author.

Although we cannot simply assume Gibbon dropped his mask in his diaries, letters to friends, or the drafts of the *Memoirs* he intended for posthumous publication, we can nevertheless use his speech in these discordant contexts as foils for the perhaps more guarded, because more immediately public, pronouncements in the *Decline and Fall*.

This book is divided into two parts. I begin, in the first two chapters, by considering Gibbon's context as he conceived of his great work. In the concluding three chapters I turn to Gibbon's texts.

Famously, Gibbon traced his conception of his *Decline and Fall* to a single moment in time: the evening of October 15, 1764, as he sat "musing amidst the ruins of the Capitol."²⁹ A historian as attuned as Gibbon was to *les plus longues durées* and the most profound "general causes" might be expected to look skeptically on the very notion of a momentary transformation.³⁰ Yet Gibbon chose to narrate his great work's genesis as a conversion experience. What was the significance of that choice? This book's first chapter addresses this question by tracing the trajectory of two literary genres—the travelogue and the religious autobiography—that informed Gibbon's account of his epiphany. Early literary portrayals of the Grand Tour as a confessionally charged capstone, most notably in Richard Lassels's *An Italian Voyage* of 1670, developed into more polite accounts of aesthetic formation exemplified by Addison's *Remarks on Several Parts of Italy* of 1705. By Gibbon's time, several innovative and irreverent tracts had engaged and recast that tradition. Gibbon's conversion story contributed to the history of the travelogue—and to the history of religious autobiography. The development of that genre stretched from Paul's conversion in the Acts of the Apostles, through Augustine's conversion in the *Confessions*, to John Wesley's account of his encounter with Paul (via Luther) at Aldersgate. By framing his great work's conception as a sudden transformation, we shall see, Gibbon evoked these antecedents and broke with the autobiographers he in other respects considered his "masters," Jacques-Auguste de Thou and David Hume, both of whom narrated lives unmarked by conversion.³¹ In making this break, Gibbon demonstrated how one might embed conversion in a secular history without denying or dismissing the significance of the phenomenon.

Having considered Gibbon's conversion against the backdrop of some broad trends in eighteenth-century England, I turn in the second chapter to consider how Gibbon fit this experience within his own personal history. Gibbon's correspondence, journals, and *Memoirs* will allow us to set three

scenes along the road to Rome: the England of Gibbon's youth; Lausanne, Switzerland, where Gibbon studied as a young man; and, finally, the Continent he encountered during his own Grand Tour. In the *Memoirs*, Gibbon presented himself as the unwitting heir to a long line of enlightening conservatives—unwitting, owing to the disruptive influence of his grandfather, a notable captain of commerce who directed the South Sea Company during the bubble. On Gibbon's telling, his grandfather allowed convention rather than family tradition to form his own son (Gibbon's father), who in turn abandoned Gibbon himself to one ill-considered tutor after another before hastily and prematurely depositing him at Oxford. Gibbon's subsequent conversion to Catholicism—the first of several conversions—amounted to a rejection of both his family and English society.³² His father sent the young apostate to Lausanne, where Gibbon encountered a moderate strain of Enlightenment under the guidance of the minister and tutor Daniel Pavillard, returned to the faith of his father, and discovered the scholarly calling that led to his first book, *Essai sur l'étude de la littérature*. After several years in England, Gibbon disembarked for his Grand Tour of the Continent. We shall follow him through Paris, back to Lausanne, and finally to Rome. Religious influences in each of these contexts, we shall see, shaped a historian concerned to understand the central phenomena of Christian religious experience and, when possible, reappropriate them. One such reappropriation was his conversion on October 15, 1764.

Gibbon's public encounter with Christianity began in his first book, the *Essai sur l'étude de la littérature*. In this work Gibbon defended classical erudition against the attacks of the *philosophes* and proposed "philosophical history" as a science more deserving to rule than the natural philosophy favored by the Encyclopedists. In chapter 3, we shall examine the two drafts of the *Essai* that have come down to us (one from 1759, the other published in 1761) to understand how Gibbon's changing religious commitments during that time influenced his conception of history. We shall also consider two ideas that appear for the first time in the *Essai* before maturing into central themes in the *Decline and Fall*. The first is a cyclical theory of political development that Gibbon discovered in ancient authors and made his own: poor, pure peoples acquire empire by conquering rich, corrupt peoples; in doing so, the poor and pure grow rich and corrupt, until they are themselves conquered by the pure and poor. The second is a theory of religion: gods are initially personifications of nature rather than deified human beings, and worship of them

reflects not only man's primal fear of the surrounding world but man's "gratitude and admiration" for it. Both theories informed Gibbon's mature approach to Roman politics and the rise of Christianity in the *Decline and Fall*.

The first of that work's eventual six volumes appeared in February 1776 and quickly became notorious for explaining the rise of Christianity with reference to "secondary" or secular causes.³³ But just as remarkable as this explanation was its placement at the very end of the first volume. Gibbon narrates the decline of Rome over a period of three centuries while barely mentioning the Christians, suggesting that the Empire was declining and indeed was primed for its fall long before Christianity made any measurable impact on its trajectory.³⁴ To explain the rise of Christianity, we shall see in chapter 4, Gibbon takes his readers on tour to Persia and Germany, where they study how professional priests influence the relationship between religion and politics.³⁵ The priests of Persia, Germany, and the nascent Christian church, Gibbon contends, stood to Rome's priest-magistrates as disciplined Roman soldiers stood to undisciplined barbarian hordes. Gibbon thus adapts the ancients' cyclical theory of political development to account for a religious transformation. In doing so, he challenges both Christian historians' claims to detect the hand of God in Christianity's rapid spread and enlightened atheists' contempt for the early church. With a peculiar blend of earnestness and irony Gibbon christens the Church a "Christian republic."³⁶

In the final chapter I turn to the "General Observations on the Fall of the Roman Empire in the West," a short text that Gibbon drafted before starting to write the *Decline and Fall*, then chose to update and insert between the latter work's two halves. Here Gibbon considers what lessons his own age might learn from the history of Rome's decline. He draws a surprising conclusion: The division of Europe into independent states sharing religion, language, and manners allows modernity to escape the ancient cycle of empire.³⁷ Christianity contributed to this condition, "productive of the most beneficial consequence to the liberty of mankind," by enabling a form of union that transcended and tolerated political divisions.³⁸ In the "General Observations," as in the *Essai* and the first volume of the *Decline and Fall*, we shall recognize a historian shaped by the contexts surveyed in the opening chapters, one more eager to comprehend than to sneer at or dismiss Christianity's worldly power.

About all of these themes there is more to be said than I am able to say here. Although I draw on the entirety of the *Decline and Fall*, my close attention will

be limited to the first volume that appeared in 1776 and some small sections of the second and third volumes that appeared in 1781. About the religious history of the eighteenth century the account here can hardly escape superficiality. Thankfully, other scholars have charted these vast terrains, allowing me to draw on their discoveries freely and gratefully. My goal here is merely to mark out a line of approach to Gibbon's great work by reconsidering some elements of his historical context as he conceived the project and executed its early stages. If this facilitates our learning from Gibbon about Christianity and its influence on the development of the modern world, my work will have accomplished its goal.