The historian as moralist: a study of Edward Gibbon and The decline and fall of the Roman Empire

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CHAPTER SEVEN

BARBARISM AND RELIGION

If Gibbon's work gave classical expression to the notion of Rome's decline and fall, it did not close the great debate on the end of the ancient world. To some admiring contemporaries he seemed to have said the last word and he long remained without significant challenge. But eventually new questions and fresh evidence led to a diversity of answers and emphases. Perhaps only the assumption contained in his title still seems reasonably certain, though even the appropriateness of 'fall' in relation to the Western Empire has raised doubts. In discussing an aspect of the perennial question two centuries after Gibbon had gazed on the ruined greatness of the imperial city, Arnaldo Momigliano expressed satisfaction that he could at least begin with that 'piece of good news': 'it can still be considered an historical truth that the Roman Empire declined and fell'.

There, however, agreement seemed to end and even when attention is confined to Gibbon's own contribution to the debate, there is divergence of opinion as to what constitutes the theme and crux of his version of Rome's decline and fall. Like Paradise Lost, it has stimulated the ingenuity of critics in suggesting what the work is really about.

1. Hence The Transformation of the Roman World, as an alternative suggested by Lynn White and his collaborators in the reappraisal of that title. Uni. of California Press, 1966; and see especially his 'Conclusion', p. 301. Bury, for one, had of course raised objections many years earlier in his History of the Later Roman Empire. London, 1889. He wrote of 'what is loosely called the Fall of the Western Empire', op. cit., I, 34.

Hence we have the so-called 'Braudy-Jordan hypothesis', and articles raising the question of 'The subject of Gibbon's History' or pointing out what his actual explanation was.2

Let us consider Jordan's comments on the question. He finds, in part one of The Decline and Fall, not too few but perhaps too many suggested 'causes' -- 'at least two dozen' -- and the result, he claims, is confusion: 'To argue that Gibbon's explanation is confusing is merely to describe his History'. We may agree; but the confusion is not in Gibbon alone, for Jordan goes on to state that he has, in fact, 'no explanation for why Rome fell'.3 Thus whether the 'causes' are intended as 'explanations' or whether any explanation at all is offered is not clear; it depends which page of Jordan's chapter one turns to. Nor is it clear whether he finds any thesis. The work, he tells us, is not held together 'by a consistent closely argued thesis'; then more decisively: 'Gibbon had no thesis or rather...abandoned his thesis about halfway through The Decline and Fall,4 though 'his first answer to the question "why did Rome fall"', namely through 'moral corruption', 'is usually assumed to be the thesis of his History'. 'Yet even this thesis', which is also referred to as 'his theme', 'is ambiguously stated'.5 'At any rate', as we are informed a little

4. ibid., p. 214, 'But if Gibbon had no thesis, or rather if he abandoned his thesis...he worked within the traditions of Renaissance historiography'.
5. ibid., loc.cit. It is called 'his theme' on p. 226.
a little further on, 'his thesis is moral decay, not the triumph of Christianity and barbarism', although such a 'thesis...scarcely adequate to account for' the history of Rome, 'could explain nothing about' that of Constantinople. Nevertheless, Christianity and barbarism we are twice reminded, is indeed Gibbon's 'original thesis', despite the fact that it is precisely at the point where he is said to have added Christianity 'to the causes of Rome's fall' that he is also said to have abandoned this 'original thesis'. Jordan's comment is therefore not surprising: 'It is clear that he is already confused' and the commentator does not help to dispel the confusion.

What then is clear in all this? First, that Gibbon does concern himself with 'causes', even if somewhat casually, and secondly, that in his treatment the moral element predominates. With regard to the former, as Jordan reminds us twice over, Gibbon's suggested causes 'march across the pages of The Decline and Fall,' although 'seemingly without pattern, and seemingly unrelated to each other'.

This absence of consistent exposition of causes has long been recognised by various writers. Indeed, as a modern biographer has suggested, even 'some of Gibbon's most faithful admirers would not care to be faced with an examination question: "State in your own

1. ibid., pp. 226.
2. ibid., pp. 221, 3. The reference is to the treatment of Diocletian, DF, xiii, I, 385.
3. ibid., p. 221.
4. op.cit., pp. 213 and 226 where the identical phrase is repeated.
words why the Roman Empire declined and fell."¹ And, like Jordan, he too claims that this is due to the plurality rather than to the lack of explanations. Yet, the repeated emphasis of the word 'seemingly' in Jordan's reference to the apparent absence of pattern and interrelation is suggestive. The absence is not quite as real as it may appear and the impression is no doubt due in part to the fact that Gibbon refrained in most cases from parcelling up his causes or indicating their relative importance, preferring to throw out suggestions at various places in the context of his unfolding narrative. Thus, with certain exceptions, the modern student, as Low pointed out, tends to find his analysis of causes in the first part of the work, disappointing, while the final volumes may 'propound and answer no questions explicitly, but their power of suggestion is inexhaustible.'²

Suggesting rather than giving final and categorical answers, Gibbon relied on the co-operation of his philosophical reader and only occasionally did he make those provocative epigrammatic statements like the celebrated reference to 'barbarism and religion', which have often been too loosely regarded as definitive causal explanations. Cautious, because scholarly and 'philosophical', he would surely have endorsed the conclusion of a modern scholar working in the same field and with two hundred years of further research behind him. A.H.M. Jones, having outlined what he considered 'the principal causes of the empire's decline,' still felt it necessary to add the caution: 'It would be difficult, and probably pointless to weigh their relative importance, for they

² D.M. Low, Edward Gibbon, p. 326. The main exceptions are chapters xv and xvi.
interacted upon one another so as to form a single complex...The
decline and fall of the Roman empire was the result of a complex of
interacting causes which the historian disentangles at his own peril.'

Such a caution makes it easier to appreciate Gibbon's reluctance
to offer lists of definitive causes and also the disagreement among
his commentators regarding those he did put forward. What can, however,
be affirmed is that, in accounting for the decline of Rome, he emphasised
what may be broadly called 'moral' factors and that even 'barbarism'
and 'religion' appear in his History not so much as racial and spiritual
but rather as moral categories. In our consideration of these moral
categories of his work, the fact of his concern with causes and effects,
their primary application to the moral realm and the validity and relevance
of his 'General Observations' as a comment on the action, have already
been seen. But before turning to the two specific and most celebrated
factors, namely 'immoderate greatness' and 'barbarism and religion', it
will be well to look further into the overall tone and effect of Gibbon's
explanations.

To complement the negative impression of confusion and uncertainty
in the references so far taken from Jordan's analysis, we may let him
summarise this positive moral stance in The Decline and Fall. 'His
thesis is moral decay,' he states unequivocally, or 'internal moral
corruption', especially that of the Roman ruling classes. And, if
Gibbon's explanation is seen as 'confusing' or unsatisfactory, he
certainly 'has a moral, almost tragic, view of the stupendous history of
Rome.' In his statement of Rome's decline as the 'effect of immoderate
greatness', of 'the immense fabric' collapsing under its own weight, 'such vague notions as "the artificial supports" or "the principle of decay"...are not very satisfying.' They are acceptable only 'as a moral literary view of Rome's fall.' Jordan notes 'Gibbon's insistence on seeing Roman history in moral terms', and though he 'dutifully discusses' specific causes of decline, such as 'excessive taxation, military licence, economic crisis, civil war, assassination,' he returns, always, to a moral explanation. Human happiness, vice, luxury, misery, civic virtue, these are the terms in which he views the tragedy of Roman history.' The point is clear and a study of Gibbon's text confirms it. It is in such terms and from such a standpoint that he discussed the decline of the Western empire; and, despite a difference in plan and method in the second part of the work, the same essential vocabulary of decline is applied to the 'degenerate' rulers and their 'servile' subjects in the East. In short, as Jordan affirms, 'Gibbon did not alter his moral scheme when his History became universal.'

This 'moral scheme' saw Roman greatness not primarily in extent of territory and dominion, but in 'wisdom and virtue', in the benefits of civilization extended to its subjects, in just laws, moderate government, noble buildings and in practical improvements like the creation of the much needed port of Ostia - 'an useful ornament of Roman greatness'. The health and happiness of the empire was connected with 'virtue', liberty and moderation, its decay with vice, tyranny and excess. In this

1. ibid., pp. 214, 5.
2. Ibid., p.223. Cf. p.224: 'He returns, time and again, to the moral concerns of Enlightenment humanism.'
3. See below, chap. IX.
4. op.cit., p.228.
5. See the opening of chap.ii of DF.
6. DF, ii, I, 56.
sense, then, it was perhaps superfluous to earmark particular 'causes', though they are definitely indicated from time to time. For if the exposure of vices and the emphasis on degeneracy are not to be interpreted as suggested 'causes' of decline, what are they?

It is well to remind ourselves of Gibbon's approach to the various 'causes' of decline and of the 'moral scheme' within which they are seen. There are certainly military factors. Yet the problem is not primarily a matter of weaponry, techniques, money, even man-power, but rather the loss of valour, 'military virtue', and that patriotism 'which had rendered the legions almost invincible.' Improvements and innovations, the product of nine centuries of military experience, were nullified by the 'licentiousness' of the troops.¹ Sloth and indulgence were seen by Gibbon as the real enemies, for, 'in the luxurious idleness of their quarters,' the soldiers shared their grievances and plotted revolution at the very time when a reformation was afoot which 'would have restored health and vigour to the Roman army.'² So also in a later age, despite a plentiful supply of arms, superiority in the art of construction of the engines of war and ingenuity in tactics, the real problem was that 'the solitude or degeneracy of the provinces could no longer supply a race of men to handle those weapons and to reduce the theory of war into bold and successful practice.'³

Again, there is a recognition of agriculture as a crucial factor in the preservation of the state. Yet 'under the Roman empire, the labour of an industrious people was variously, but incessantly employed,

¹. DF, i, I, 10-11, 13.
². DF, vi, I, 154. The particular reference is to Macrinus' attempted reformation of the army in the early third century. See the continued allusions to the 'insolence', 'licentiousness' and 'fury' of the Praetorians and the legions, e.g. DF, vi, I, 169.
³. DF, xlvi, V, 63.
in the service of the rich.' And, while Gibbon admitted the place of luxury in the economy of an imperfect society, not only was it associated in his mind with 'vice and folly', but in actual practice, it led, as he saw, to the most remote parts of the earth being 'ransacked to supply the pomp and delicacy of Rome.'

Gibbon paid comparatively little attention to the economic causes of decline and, amongst these, it was rather the rift between rich and poor and the enervating effects of affluence that concerned him - the social and moral aspects of a wider economic malaise. And, writing of the soundness and defence of the empire at the beginning of the third century, he saw fit to draw a somewhat romantic contrast between the rugged and honest Caledonians, 'glowing with the warm virtues of nature, and the degenerate Romans, polluted with the mean vices of wealth and slavery.' The parallel, he noted, 'would be little to the advantage of the more civilized people.' Indeed, instead of citing the loss of economic prosperity as a cause of general decline, Gibbon reversed the order. The prosperity to be expected of a country which 'united the various excellencies of nature and art', and actually attained in the Antonine period, had, in his view, 'gradually declined with the decline of the empire.' In other words, the essential decline, of which this failing prosperity was merely a symptom, lay outside the economic sphere. It was a decline associated with softness and luxury, with domestic tyranny and with the degeneracy of rulers, senators and soldiers. Thus, at length, when Alaric occupied Rome, the invaders 'were incapable of tasting the more elegant refinements of luxury, which had been prepared

1. DF, ii, I, 58, 59.
2. DF, vi, I, 142.
3. DF, xxxi, III, 350.
for the use of the soft and polished Italians.¹

Whatever explanations and causes Gibbon suggested in the realms of administration and politics, military matters, commerce or society, we are never allowed to forget that we are dealing with a declining empire, and the re-iteration of decay in terms of 'corruption', 'degeneracy', 'selfish ambition', lazy indulgence and the loss of the old Roman virtues, traces a continuous moral line right through his History.

The tradition in which Gibbon worked has been outlined by various writers² and can be traced at least from the use of 'decline' as applied to the state, inclinatio res publica, in the days of the Roman Republic. Cicero's regret at the deterioration in Roman manners³ and the lack of great men, and the observations on 'moral decay' by historians like Livy and Sallust were part of this tradition. And Sallust's connection of decadence with the disappearance of virtus, Gibbon found again in Machiavelli. Humanist historiography reinforced for him the moral reading of historical events, though in Poggio particularly, it was strongly linked with the role of fortune. From France in his own century, his debt to Montesquieu's works on Roman greatness and decline and his l'Esprit des lois, has been repeatedly emphasised and annotated by Gibbon himself.⁴ And there is an interesting correspondence between Gibbon's moral analysis and the comments of another eighteenth-century

1. DF, loc. cit.
3. De Re Publica, V, 1, 2.
4. In his Essai, his Memoirs, and in the footnotes and text of DF.
French writer, whom he transcribed during his apprenticeship in Lausanne and all of whose volumes he acquired for his library.\(^1\)

The Abbé de Vertot began his *Révolutions arrivées dans le gouvernement de la République Romaine* by pointing to the love of liberty as the first object of the establishment of the republic and went on to refer to the place of voluntary poverty and hard work in producing men of strength and valour and of preserving this liberty. But, after the destruction of their great rival, Carthage, 'les Romains, invincibles au-dehors, succombèrent sous le poids de leur propre grandeur.'\(^2\) We are reminded of Gibbon's 'General Observations' and the collapse of the great fabric under its own weight, once 'prosperity had ripened the principle of decay.'\(^3\) So too, in Vertot: 'L'amour des riches et le luxe entrèrent dans Rome avec les trésors des provinces conquises, et cette pauvreté et cette tempérence, qui avaient formé tant de grands capitaines, tombèrent dans le mépris.' In short, it seemed that another nation had appeared on the scene, once this former 'moderation' was abandoned. Then with another phrase suggestive of the classical tradition and of Gibbon, we are told: 'Une corruption générale répandit bientôt dans tous les ordres de l'état.' Justice, votes, and office were publicly sold and not only luxury but even effeminacy was to be found in the military camp.\(^4\)

The emphases are those of *The Decline and Fall* and, not surprisingly, Tacitus, Juvenal and Seneca are prominent among the sources cited by Vertot in this part of his work.

As we document Gibbon's *History*, we find him drawing heavily on

1. His library contained two copies of all Vertot's *Révolutions*, those of the Roman Republic, Sweden and Portugal, as well as his history of the hospitallers and of the Bretons in Gaul. See Keynes, *Gibbon's Library*.
these moral elements in the long tradition stretching from ancient Rome, through Renaissance Italy, to eighteenth-century France, but at the same time playing down the role of fortune. In the one place where he paused to comment at length on causes and effects, his 'General Observations', he gave prominence again to these moral factors. There, he began by emphasising the place of merit and discounting that of fortune in the rise of Rome. Honour and virtue are cited as the principles of the republic and the decline of Rome is associated with 'immoderate greatness' and the ill effects of increased prosperity. The key phrases underline the moralistic approach: the legions 'acquired the vices' of foreigners and mercenaries; they 'oppressed the freedom of the republic and afterwards violated the majesty of the purple'; the emperors were responsible for 'corrupting the discipline' of the forces; there was a relaxation of 'vigour' in the government; the division of the empire 'fomented the vices' inherent in the system; 'the instruments of an oppressive and arbitrary system were multiplied'; and 'a vain emulation of luxury not of merit' became the norm under the 'degenerate successors of Theodosius'. Finally, extreme distress, which unites the virtues of a free people, embitters the factions of a declining monarchy' and the empire was 'betrayed' to its enemies as the 'long period of decay' witnessed the suicidal enmity between East and West.¹

So also, in the religious factors listed in these 'Observations', we find a similar predominance of moral elements: 'the abuse of Christianity', discouragement of 'the active virtues', the 'specious demands of charity and devotion', misapplication of funds, 'earthly passions of malice and ambition' fomenting 'theological discord', the Roman world 'oppressed by a new species of tyranny', the sacred

¹. _DF_, IV, 173-4.
'indolence of the monks ....embraced by a servile and effeminate age', 'the same vices' tempting 'the unworthy Romans to desert' the service of the state from 'baser motives', while over against these damaging and negative qualities are set a few morally positive ones such as 'the pure and genuine influence of Christianity' to be traced in its beneficial effects on the barbarian converts and its softening of the ferocious conquerors of the empire.¹

In this statement we have an index of what Gibbon saw as the moral disadvantages of 'the triumph of religion', already set out systematically in his fifteenth and sixteenth chapters and later portrayed in the synods, persecutions, crusades and papal rule of the second part of his work. It is also in these 'Observations' that we find that other remark which has frequently been abstracted as one of Gibbon's two primary attempts at accounting for the decline and fall of Rome: it was 'the natural and inevitable effect of immoderate greatness.' In the light of this, 'the story of its ruin' is declared to be 'simple and obvious', whereas critics have felt that it is neither and that Gibbon himself did not find it a simple matter to account for. He is thus thought to have shuffled off the responsibility for a satisfactory answer.

That is a common reading of this part of Gibbon's text. Yet another, equally valid, is to consider the epigrammatic summary in its particular context, namely the postscript and review of a completed history of the Western empire and to remember that throughout the preceding volumes, the emphasis has been on internal decay, corruption, luxurious indolence, loss of military virtue, and for the most part degenerate rulers. There

¹. *DF*, IV, 175.
has been no indication of a permanent remission or of a new lease of
life since the Antonine period and, as Gibbon was to write in his final
chapter, 'all that is human must retrograde if it do not advance.'

It is perhaps at first sight surprising that Toynbee, who took such an
opposite view to Gibbon in many respects, almost endorsed his famous
statement here, though he proposed a decline which antedated the empire
altogether. But, he declared: its 'rapid downfall after the Antonine
Age is seen to be not at all surprising. On the contrary it would have
been surprising if the Empire had endured.' For, like Gibbon, he saw
the seeds of decay within the apparently firm structure of that empire.

Given this, and the fact of an overextended empire, lacking the honour
and virtue of the republic and pushing its borders and straining its
resources beyond the bounds of moderation, then, in Gibbon's terms at
least, its decline might well seem 'natural', even 'inevitable' - as
inevitable as the financial ruin which must follow continual and
unchecked overspending in private affairs.

'Moderation in all things' might well be claimed as Gibbon's rule of
life. 'A moderate voluptuary' some may say, with a taste for madeira
and good living, but for all that one who practised moderation himself
and admired it in others. Of his tutor, Pavillard, he wrote with
gratitude, 'he was rational because he was moderate,' while he
regretted Julian's lack of moderation: he 'seldom recollected the
fundamental maxim of Aristotle that true virtue is placed at an equal
distance between the opposite vices.' And moderation is a key

1. DF, lxxi, VII, 316. Cf. Voltaire's even more deterministic state-
ment that the Roman Empire 'fell because it existed for it is after
all a fact that everything must fall.' (Dictionnaire Philosophique,
cited in B. Lyon, The Origin of the Middle Ages. N.Y., 1972, p.23.)
4. DF, xxii, II, 446.
concept in Gibbon's interpretation of the greatness and decline of Rome.

This note is sounded right at the beginning of the work and the opening chapter shows the happy and prosperous times to be founded on 'moderation'. After the rapid victories of the republic, 'it was reserved for Augustus to relinquish the ambitious design of subduing the whole earth, and to introduce a spirit of moderation into the public councils.' There are not many things for which Augustus earns Gibbon's commendation, but he receives unqualified praise for this virtue at least. And 'happily for the repose of mankind, the moderate system recommended by the wisdom of Augustus,' was continued by his immediate successors. What reversed this safe and admirable policy is said to have been the 'avarice' of the Romans, as further conquest was 'undertaken by the most stupid, maintained by the most dissolute, and terminated by the most timid of all the emperors' at a time 'when the throne was disgraced by the weakest or the most vicious of mankind.' The moral associations of moderation and of the destructive forces which overthrew it to the eventual ruin of the empire, are made clear: avarice, dissolution, disgraceful conduct and vice. 'The ambitious design of subduing the whole earth' was an attempt to achieve 'immoderate greatness' which would almost inevitably lead to tyranny over the Romans and their conquered subjects, as the first of many evils.

1. DF, i, I, 2.
2. DF, i, I, 3.
3. DF, i, I, 4.
4. The 'present greatness' of Rome is coupled with 'the corruption and the licence of the soldiers' in pressing upon the senate the need for a monarchy into which Augustus, by now 'the crafty tyrant', stepped. The way to autocracy was thus opened and 'the principles of a free constitution' were lost. (DF, ii, I, 67).
The importance, or the necessity, of moderation is reiterated throughout the first chapter, the only threat being seen as the 'ambitious spirit' of Trajan which placed him among Gibbon's 'destroyers' of mankind. But, despite this interruption, the wise policy of the other emperors had its expected result, as we are informed in the following chapter: 'Domestic peace and union were the natural consequence of the moderate and comprehensive policy embraced by the Romans.' If peace and union are the natural consequence of moderation, then conversely, we would predict strife and disunity as the natural consequence of an immoderate policy and an attempt to advance beyond the limits of moderate greatness. And this is what Gibbon affirmed when he came to his 'General Observations'. Nor did the moderate policy of the early empire apply only to military and secular affairs. It is one of Gibbon's major tenets that it extended to religion and other spheres as well. Rome's religious toleration, 'the mild spirit of antiquity', avoided the 'theological rancour' of later times, and promoted harmony. Moderation characterised the life style of the people and 'the modest simplicity of private houses...announced the equal condition of freedom,' before enervating luxury destroyed this admirable way of living.

With a classical moralist's appreciation of the golden mean and avoidance of excess, Gibbon discerned a basic cause of decline in 'the

1. e.g. 'with these moderate views' (I, 19), 'the spirit which moderated...the power of Hadrian and the Antonines' (I,20), 'the real or affected moderation of the emperors' (I,29).
2. DF, i, I, 6, 8. Trajan's 'martial spirit...formed a very singular contrast with the moderation of his successor.' (I,8).
3. DF, ii, I, 47.
4. DF, ii, I, 32, 34-5.
5. DF, ii, I, 51.
excessive magnitude' of the empire. Here, his debt to his classical sources is clear; so too is his acknowledged debt to Montesquieu as well as to others in the tradition. But are his words on 'the natural and inevitable effect of immoderate greatness,' simply, as Jordan suggests, 'an echo of Montesquieu' and an expression of his own 'fatalistic view'; or can we see beyond this? Is there not a moral inevitability about throwing moderation to the winds and ignoring the consequences - in this case, imperial decline and ultimate fall? And did not Gibbon at various points indicate that he saw in the ambitious and unrestrained extension of the empire, a root of every kind of evil? He did, in fact, make clear the moral results of this policy. Some of these we have noted; others have been referred to by Gerald Gruman who saw 'balance' and 'excess' as Gibbon's explanation of the decline and fall.'

Gruman has pointed out that moderation in extending citizenship to worthy members of conquered peoples met with Gibbon's approval as a desirable measure; but this policy of assimilation was carried to extremes so that eventually the conquerors began to be submerged by the conquered and the true Roman character was lost. This extreme policy also led to an undesirable 'uniformity' - a 'uniform government' and 'a uniform artificial foreign education' imposed on diverse provinces. Then too, as Gibbon claimed, 'the public freedom was

1. DF, xxxi, III, 377.
2. op.cit., p. 215.
5. DF, ii, I, 63.
lost in extent of conquest' and the Roman world degenerated into 'a dreary prison' for the enemies of its autocratic ruler. Furthermore, he believed that this 'universal dominion...and the resultant Pax Romana caused a deterioration of political virtues,' that 'slow and secret poison' working in 'the vitals of the empire.' Even war itself was 'improved into an art and degraded into a trade,' while patriotism, that ancient 'public virtue' made little impression 'on the mercenary subjects of a despotic prince,' and the mercenaries of the army, like the ordinary Roman soldier, 'were drawn from the meanest, and very frequently from the most profligate of mankind.'

These were some of the evils, without taking into account those of religious origin, which to Gibbon's mind stemmed from the abandonment of moderation. It was, however, he admitted scarcely possible that in a long period of peace and apparent prosperity, contemporaries should 'discover the latent causes of decay and corruption.' They were perceptible only to the penetrating observer with moral discernment. To Gibbon, as he drew attention to the significance of these symptoms, they seemed clear enough in retrospect; and he would probably have been surprised that some twentieth-century readers and critics should feel he had not made a serious attempt to display them, in view of his later reference to them as 'simple' and 'inevitable'. Of course, more recent study of the later empire, particularly in the Byzantine period, has led to the suggestion of more substantial and varied causes of decline or survival. But the main reason why Gibbon's 'causes' have

1. DF, i, I, 10.
2. DF, iii, I, 89-90.
3. Gruman, op. cit., p.78; and see DF, ii, I, 62.
4. DF, i, I, 10, 11.
5. DF, ii, I, 61-2.
been deemed unsatisfactory and inadequate seems to be the fact that they are essentially moral and immaterial: lack of moderation with its consequent evils, and those qualities like greed, selfish ambition, laziness, indulgence, loss of ideals of service, which he often loosely included under the general notions of 'corruption' and 'decay'.

While drawing deeply on Ammianus for a moral indictment of the Romans for such qualities, Gibbon declared that he had made extensive use of the Theodosian Code, but 'as a work of history rather than jurisprudence.' Here he found a basic source for documenting Rome's economic and social malaise as an obvious symptom of its decline. From his research into these symptoms there must have seemed to him a certain inevitability about the outcome. Facing one of the problems which had confronted Gibbon, namely, 'why the invasions of the fifth century succeeded while the earlier failed,' Sir Samuel Dill also appealed to the Theodosian Code and did so in terms which might well be mistaken for Gibbon's, with the same ring of 'melancholy' and the 'slow and inevitable decay': 'In the voluminous enactments issued from Constantine to Majorian, the student has before him a melancholy diagnosis of the maladies which by a slow and inevitable process of decay, were exhausting the strength of Roman society.'

Turning from 'immoderate greatness' and the inevitability of decline, what are we to make of the more famous pair of 'causes', that is, 'barbarism and religion'? Are they put forward as causes at all and what is their moral significance? These factors, coupled for all time

1. See his footnotes in DF and his statement here quoted from Memoirs, p. 147.
in the famous statement in his final chapter, were, without doubt, closely associated in Gibbon's mind. They have, however, been cited frequently, and sometimes rather casually, as his primary explanation or cause of Rome's fall. Even Bury, whose care and scholarship rivalled that of Gibbon, gave this impression when he referred to the famous epigram as 'the guiding idea or "moral" of his history,' with Christianity being 'mainly to blame for the retrogression in human societies since the second century A.D.' E.H. Carr wrote more bluntly: 'Gibbon attributed the decline and fall of the Roman empire to the triumph of barbarism and religion,' while Jordan saw this as his 'original thesis'. Some writers, in their certainty about it, have not even been careful in quoting this alleged cause. Thus R.M. Haywood began his book by suggesting that 'Gibbon offers two reasons for Rome's fall. He speaks of the triumph of Christianity and the barbarians, and in another place asserts that the vast fabric sank under its own weight.' J.B. Morrall likewise wrote: 'The fall of the Western Empire may have been, as Gibbon maintained, due to the triumph of barbarism and Christianity'. Yet there are others who are aware that whatever we might assume Gibbon to have meant, he did not actually state that these two factors brought about the fall. Michael Joyce, for instance, has commented: 'Although at first glance Gibbon's statement seems so definite, a closer examin-

1. DF, Ixxi, VII, 321.
5. op. cit., p. 221.
ation may leave us in doubt whether he is seriously maintaining, as
Bury would have us believe, that the connexion between the decline of
Rome and the triumph of The Christian Church was of a causal nature.¹

It is easy, however, to see why the epigram may be taken as Gibbon's 'explanation' and also why the second element should have largely dominated critical discussion, especially in view of Gibbon's best known chapters and his reaffirmation in the Memoirs of the connection between 'the triumph of the Church' and 'the decline of the Roman monarchy'.² Yet it is important to keep both factors in conjunction, for in The Decline and Fall, we find now one, now the other, uppermost in his moral consciousness, as he presented what he saw as their 'connexion with the ruin of ancient Rome.'

Gibbon saw both factors as contributing to the weakened resistance of an already declining empire, though in the actual terms of the epigram, they might just as easily be read as effects; that is, these triumphs which Gibbon has described in his preceding volumes were made possible only because of a basic and continuing weakness in the empire itself, which antedates either of these forces. In fact, he admitted that he should have taken the beginning of decline back to an even earlier period than he actually did.³ But even in his History as it stands, a decline begins to be evident with the assumption of supreme

1. Edward Gibbon, pp. 131-2. 'But we must remember, he writes, 'that when two series of events are taking place over the same period, it cannot be assumed that one of these series is determined by the other.' We must handle Gibbon's text carefully to discover how far he saw them as determining factors. Parkinson (Edward Gibbon, p.45) referred to the implication or inference of 'a causal relationship' as seen by Gibbon's contemporaries.
3. See his revision of chapter i, in DF, I, Appendix 1, p.508. 'Should I not have deduced the decline of the Empire....even from the tyranny which succeeded the reign of Augustus? Alas! I should.'
power by 'the crafty tyrant', Augustus, and indubitably from the reign of Commodus,\(^1\) that is to say, a considerable time before 'the triumph of Christianity'. There are also strong suggestions in The Decline and Fall that Gibbon shared the view of Roman writers and many of his contemporaries in seeing decline and moral deterioration in the late republic, in other words before 'barbarism' became a destructive force, and he certainly saw the change from a republic marked by 'freedom', 'honour' and 'virtue' to the imperial system as in itself a decline. It was thus not the barbarians who caused, 'but who,' in Gibbon's words, eventually 'discovered the decline of the Roman empire' to their own advantage.\(^2\) And towards the end of his third volume, he reaffirmed his conviction that, 'if all the Barbarian conquerors had been annihilated in the same hour, their total destruction would not have restored the empire in the West.'\(^3\) It has thus been affirmed: 'Barbarism and Christianity triumphed over Rome, but only by outlasting her; they did not cause her collapse.'\(^4\)

Though not initiating the decline, barbarism and religion are seen by Gibbon as alien forces, inimical to those qualities which made Rome great and which in the end usurped its dominion. But whether they are regarded as causal or not, they appear in The Decline and Fall primarily as moral issues and we shall consider them each in turn to see how this applies.

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1. See DF, ii, I, 86. 'The happy and prosperous' period of the empire finishes with the accession of Commodus, though Severus, a decade later is seen as 'the principal author of the decline and fall of the Roman empire.' (v, I, 137).
When we ask what 'barbarism' meant to Gibbon, we find that it is one of those terms, like 'philosophy' or 'civilization' which he assumed rather than stopped to define, if indeed he can be said to have defined any of his key terms in any formal way. Such concepts are clarified to a great extent by his application and contexts, though with the proviso that we avoid reading our present connotations into eighteenth-century usage. 'Barbarism', in Johnson's Dictionary, included 'ignorance of the arts' and 'want of learning' as well as those rougher qualities of 'incivility', 'cruelty' and 'brutality'; and for the first sense of 'barbarous', he offered the synonym, 'uncivilized'.¹ In fact, in looking for the marks of 'barbarism' as Gibbon saw them, we may perhaps discover these most clearly in the contrast with its virtual opposite, 'civilization'.

The most dramatic antithesis in The Decline and Fall is that played out between the opposing forces of the great civilization of pre-Christian Rome on the one side, and on the other, the barbarian world and the new religion which finally conquered both.² At the very beginning we are introduced to what Gibbon regarded as an almost ideal age when the Roman Empire embraced and supported 'the most civilized portion of mankind.' The collapse of this unparalleled civilization, the awful revolution 'still felt by the nations of the earth,'³ forms the central theme of the work, while its final scene shows a stream of modern pilgrims from the once barbarous nations of the north, paying their

¹. Samuel Johnson, A Dictionary of the English Language. London, 1755, entries BARBARISM, 2,3,4; BARBAROUS. Sheridan and Walker, in their dictionaries, virtually repeat the senses given by Johnson.

². 'The real victor, as the history of both the Eastern and Western Middle Ages shows, was Christianity,' wrote François Furet, 'Civilization and Barbarism in Gibbon's History', in Bowersock, op. cit., p. 166.

³. DF, i, i, 1; or, in Gibbon's revision: 'the decline and fall of Rome, of whose language, religion and laws the impression will long be preserved in our own and the neighbouring countries of Europe.' (see Bury's Appendix, Vol.I, p. 508).
respects to its monuments and ruins, now in the midst of ecclesiastical Rome. ¹

It is not that we are presented with a rigid dichotomy, a black and white contrast between civilized and barbarian. Instead, we are sometimes shown supposedly civilized peoples with barbaric traits, of which even the nomadic nations might be ashamed: and we are shown so-called barbarians acquitting themselves more honourably than their civilized counterparts and successors, and even displaying more respect for the capital of the empire than a Holy Roman Emperor in a later age. We must also note at the outset that Gibbon, having made his statement about 'barbarism and religion', immediately added a warning against the fanciful notion of fierce barbarians from the north coming down upon the empire to avenge, and to destroy classical books and buildings. 'In simple truth,' he declared, 'the northern conquerors were neither sufficiently savage nor sufficiently refined to entertain such aspiring ideas of destruction and revenge.'² He showed himself far more hostile to the spirit of barbarism which was not confined to particular peoples, but could dominate individuals and even highly 'civilized' nations like the ancient Romans, the medieval Greeks or the modern French and Italians.

The antithesis, civilization and barbarism, represents the positive and negative, or the progressive and retrograde aspects of much of the great span of history which Gibbon related. Directly after his account of the very civilized age of the Antonines, we are confronted with the case of a truly barbarous emperor, Commodus, characterised not only by

¹. DF, lxxi, VII, 337–8.
². DF, lxxi, VII, 321.
cruelty, brutality, savagery of manners and avarice, but also by 'his ignorance and low sports', of which his appearance as a gladiator was the most shameful illustration. 1 'To see virtue with Gibbon as the life of civilization, is to see also what he meant by vice and degeneracy,' wrote Cochrane, who cited Commodus as a 'conspicuous example', 'the very embodiment of classical vice.' 2 This sort of public vice, unlike the personal and more excusable failings of certain rulers, was destructive of society and civilization, as was this emperor's 'savageness of manners' and his disdain for 'the majesty of Rome'.

It was this reign that Gibbon saw as the real beginning of decline. 3 He thus clearly indicated that the impending fall was due primarily to moral collapse from within rendering the empire unable to withstand the pressure which soon came from without. 4 Consequently, four chapters later, 'the Barbarians of the East and of the North' are introduced into the story, 5 the following chapter is devoted to 'the state of Germany till the invasion of the Barbarians' and the next brings us to the study of the Goths, about to burst in upon the Roman scene. It is only when the civilizing virtues have been lost and manners barbarised by such conduct as that of Commodus, that these outsiders are able to press in upon the empire with any success. This at least is the order of events as seen by Gibbon. There follow a survey of relations between Romans and barbarians, and an account of the lands inhabited by these peoples —

3. See DF, i, I, 1, end of paragraph 1.
4. Historians like Bury and A.H.M. Jones have denied the primary significance of this inwardness of decline. See, e.g. Jones, 'The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire', op.cit., p.221: 'These facts indicate that Rome did...not collapse from internal causes.' Yet note Jones' stress on 'psychological factors', ibid., p.215.
5. DF, chap. vii.
Germany, Britain, Africa and the Danube region - with a chapter on 'the pastoral nations' to conclude the second volume.¹ Then, after 'the final division of the Roman Empire', we are shown the hegemony passing in turn to Goths, Huns and Vandals, while the final chapters of the first part present the barbarians still fierce and merciless, though now under a veneer of Christianity.² 'If we take a wider and more imaginative view of history,' beyond looking merely at the stability of Roman defence of the frontiers, then 'the grounds for Gibbon's conclusion become apparent. Long before the barbarians burst the barriers on the Rhine and the Danube, the civilization which those barriers shielded was sinking into decay.'³

In applying the collapse 'to the instruction' of his own age, Gibbon looked beyond nationalism to the concept of 'Europe as one great republic' held together by a common civilization, a civilization and culture offering the only safeguard against a return of barbarism, or at least against a new inroad of barbarous peoples.⁴ In this same place, his 'General Observations', he presented the antithesis in sharpest focus. From his Europocentric viewpoint, we are shown the nations of that continent enjoying 'almost the same level of politeness and cultivation,' while 'the savage nations of the globe are the common enemies of civilized society.'⁵

As commentator on current affairs, writing from the vantage point of

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1. See chaps. xxv (sections I, II, III, V) and xxvi.
4. DF, IV, 175-6.
5. DF, IV, 176.
his completed work, and like a prophet addressing a complacent age, Gibbon felt that the question which the reader should ask with 'anxious curiosity' was whether Europe was threatened by a calamity similar to that which overwhelmed Rome: 'Perhaps the same reflections will illustrate the fall of that mighty empire, and explain the probable causes of our actual security.' On balance, he thought there seemed less need to fear a repetition of the external events which had played their part in the final collapse of Rome at the end of its long period of decline: 'The reign of independent Barbarism is now contracted to a narrow span; and the remnant of Calmucks or Uzbecks, whose forces may be almost numbered, cannot seriously excite the apprehensions of the great republic of Europe.' At the very worst, faced by a new barbarian onslaught, 'the remains of civilized society' could be transplanted across the Atlantic 'and Europe would revive and flourish in the American world.' The basic threat, therefore, seemed to be less a military than a moral one; in fact, within a decade, the mob, whose barbarity and violence had already appalled Gibbon in his homeland, was to become once again the 'barbarians' whom he saw shaking to its foundations the centre of the great European republic.

Yet as he laid down his pen at this stage of his work, he found a more philosophic source of hope for civilization in the recollection of the slow and painful struggle through which it had been achieved by the once savage peoples of that continent. From this story of man's progress the moral seemed clear enough to warrant a qualified optimism:

1. DF, loc. cit.
2. DF, IV, 179, 178.
4. 'Barbarians' was the word he used in his letters for the French revolutionaries.
'The experience of four thousand years should enlarge our hopes and diminish our apprehensions; we cannot determine to what height the human species may aspire in their advances towards perfection; but it may safely be presumed that no people, unless the face of nature is changed, will relapse into their original barbarism.'

What are, in Gibbon's view, the essential features of civilization, and so by implication, those of its ancient rival, barbarism? Some are referred to in the 'General Observations': laws, arts and sciences, ideas, the cultivation of language, the benefits of trade and manufactures and the superior powers of reason and fancy, exemplified at their highest in the philosopher and the poet. Encompassing all these, and more fundamental than any of them, were the moral bonds which unite individual citizens in their membership of a commonwealth: 'the fidelity of the citizens to each other and to the state;' 'the firm and equal balance of the constitution, which united the freedom of popular assemblies with the authority and wisdom of a senate and the executive powers of a magistrate.' And permeating all are those principles of 'honour and virtue', so clearly seen in the Roman republic, and illuminating for a brief span that happiest period of the empire. That period, too, was marked by moderation, the name of Rome was revered by distant nations and 'the fiercest barbarians frequently submitted their differences to the arbitration of the emperor.' As Rome conquered she civilized, and the minds of the barbarians were thus 'opened to... new impressions of knowledge and politeness.'

1. DF, IV, 179, 180.
2. DF, IV, 179, 180.
3. DF, IV, 172.
4. 'The vast extent of the Roman empire was governed by absolute power, under the guidance of virtue and wisdom.' Marcus Antoninus was 'just and beneficient to all mankind.' (DF, iii, I, 86, 85).
5. DF, i, 1, 20.
Civilization, whether in 'the great republic' of eighteenth-century Europe or in the great days of ancient Rome, was thus seen by Gibbon as transcending narrow nationalism and giving scope to the powers of mind and imagination of men of varied racial origins thus allowing them to share in the common culture which flourished in an atmosphere of peace and prosperity. A further most important aspect of civilization, exemplified both in an enlightened Europe and in a wise and benevolent Rome, can be described as the preservation of a great intellectual tradition which encourages the free exercise of man's powers and the realisation of his dignity as a moral being. Thriving in an atmosphere of mental and moral freedom, civilization alone provided a fertile soil for this development of man's potential, his creativity and reason, which bore their fruit in the arts and sciences. 'In a civilized state,' wrote Gibbon, 'every faculty of man is expanded and exercised.' Hence Roman greatness was to be estimated not just by rapid and extensive conquest, but rather by the fact that 'the firm edifice of Roman power was raised and preserved by the wisdom of ages.'

The provinces were united not so much by arms as by laws and were adorned by the art and architecture of Rome. The empire stood for tolerance, unspoiled by destructive 'theological rancour'. Its mentors, the teachers of philosophy, while not unresponsive to law and custom, 'asserted the independent dignity of reason.' In such a climate 'the spirit of enquiry' flourished primarily because it was 'supported by freedom.'

1. See e.g. DF, iii, I, 82, 85 concerning 'peace and prosperity' and Marcus' abhorrence of war 'as the disgrace and calamity of human nature.'
2. DF, ix, I, 238.
From such passages we can form a clear picture of what Gibbon understood by 'civilization', a word which came into use in his century both in England and France,¹ as he and other 'enlightened' men looked for a term to describe a culture which they saw as the antithesis of the darkness of the middle ages and of the barbarity of most of the world beyond the continent of Europe.² It was a concept which Gibbon did much, both positively and negatively, to encourage by his own work.

Barbarism, by contrast, was the denial of all this and was therefore barren and unproductive. It was doubtless with approval, since it is consistent with his views elsewhere in The Decline and Fall, that in writing of the birth of learning among the Arabs, Gibbon quoted a maxim to the effect that: 'The teachers of wisdom are the true luminaries and legislators of a world which, without them would sink in ignorance and barbarism.'³ In a reciprocal relationship, such men, 'the select few', are seen as the makers of civilization, while they themselves, in each generation, are nourished and sustained by it. Appreciating his own advantages as a member of this elite,⁴ and also the dependence of an enlightened society on its 'teachers of wisdom', Gibbon was seduced neither by notions of 'the noble savage' nor by those of a 'wild' egalitarian democracy, in which he felt civilization would be reduced to the lowest common denominator of education and culture. But he also made it clear that political and social morality,' founded on rational

1. See OED, entry CIVILIZATION; also Furet's essay in Bowersock, op.cit., p. 159. The word did not, however, find its way into the dictionaries. If recorded at all, it is found, as in Bailey (1730) and Johnson (1755), as a law term for rendering a criminal process civil.
2. See, e.g. W.P. Ker, The Dark Ages, Mentor Books, N.Y., 1958, pp. 11-12, with the quotations from Moyle, Goldsmith and Cotter Morrison.
3. DF, lii, VI, 29. Abulpharagius, primate of the East was commenting on the enlightened Abbassid caliph, Almamon.
freedom, formed the true basis of a healthy civilization for once these were destroyed, decay would set in as it had in ancient Greece or Rome.

History and experience taught him the frailty and vulnerability of civilization. At various points in his narrative he recorded a relapse into barbarism as a civilization went down under its enemies, once liberty, vigour and virtue had gone and when vigilance was forgotten. Betrayed from within by its own degeneracy, it became a prey to violence from without. This was true of Rome in the fifth century and of Africa in the sixth: 'That country was rapidly sinking into the state of barbarism from whence it had been raised by the Phoenician colonies and Roman laws; and every step of intestine discord was marked by some deplorable victory of savage man over civilized society.'¹ A similar relapse was to be seen when the tide of a restored civilization in the age of Charlemagne was turned back by 'new swarms of invaders, the Normans, Saracens and Hungarians, who replunged the western countries into their former state of anarchy and barbarism.'²

If not everywhere extinct in Gibbon's day, barbarism seemed to belong mainly to another world, beyond, or at least on the fringe of 'the great republic of Europe'; for it remained a sad fact that 'the barbarian lords of Ionia and Lydia still trample on the monuments of Christian and classical antiquity,' and that 'the provinces of the East present the contrast of Roman magnificence with Turkish barbarism.'³ But it was not so much Turks or Calmucks who posed the threat to eighteenth-century civilization as Gibbon saw it. Among the enemies

1. DF, xliii, IV, 419.
2. DF, lxi, VI, 464.
3. DF, lxiv, VII, 28; lvii, VI, 268. 'A spirit of native barbarism.' he wrote, 'prompted the Turkmans to insult the clergy of every sect,' after describing the Turkish conquest of Jerusalem.
of civilization which could open the door for a return to barbarism
were superstition, fanaticism, and above all the destruction of liberty,
which maintained its precarious balance between the opposite evils of
autocracy and anarchy.

Autocratic rule on the one hand and mob rule on the other - 'the
despotism of the prince or people'\(^1\) - endangered man's freedom to enjoy
the good life and to develop the best society. Fanaticism, political
or religious, likewise threatened the bases of civilization with its
emphasis on intellectual excellence, moderation, tolerance, and wise
government. As he read not only ancient history but also 'the signs of
the times', Gibbon was very much aware of such dangers. He had watched
with apprehension what seemed to him to be the growing power of the crown
and the abuse of office in England, he had followed each step of an
alarming revolt in America, and he was soon to be aghast at what he
regarded as a return to barbarism in France. In the middle of his great
work he found himself in his own metropolis surrounded by religious
frenzy which no doubt coloured his scenes of Arian witch hunts in
Constantinople and other cities of the empire.\(^2\) 'Our danger is at an
end,' he wrote to his step-mother at the time of these Gordon riots, 'but
our disgrace will be lasting, and the month of June 1780 will ever be
marked by a dark and diabolical fanaticism, which I had supposed to be
extinct.'\(^3\)

It is apparent that in his famous epigram and in his expression of

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1. DF, lxvii, VII, 191; here with reference to the Bulgarian, Baltha
   Ogli.
2. See Memoirs, p. 186.
'anxious curiosity' about the immediate future of European civilization, Gibbon was more concerned about barbarism than about barbarians as such, who were, after all no longer a serious threat. There is, of course, the etymological connection between the words, but the connotations and use of the derivates showed a clear distinction. In eighteenth-century usage, 'barbarism', 'barbarity' and 'barbarous' had largely lost a direct reference to these peoples and the dictionaries define them mainly in terms of linguistic crudity, ignorance, especially in arts and learning, incivility, and such clearly moral traits as 'brutality', 'inhumanity', 'cruelty', 'hardness of heart' and lack of pity. Even 'barbarian' itself had seen a shift from its primary racial sense, a fact shown in Johnson's entry on this word. After noting the original etymology, he listed 'foreigner' merely as the second of three uses then current. And in Gibbon, we notice first a scrupulous avoidance of what we would call a 'racist' use of the term 'barbarian' and secondly an awareness that 'barbarism' was not essentially or solely the property of these nations. Let us consider more closely this first point.

Reflecting on an account of the buildings of ancient Rome, Gibbon noted in his Journal the common prejudice by which we consider the barbarians of the North as enemies of the arts and attribute the destruction of the monuments of Rome to Alaric, Genseric and Totila. The author he was reading demonstrated the falsity of this view since most of these buildings were still standing in the time of Theodoric, who showed greater care in preserving them than had the last Western emperors.

1. See the dictionaries of Bailey (1730, 1734 &c.), Johnson (1755), Sheridan (1780) and Walker (1791).
2. 'Petri Angellii Bargaei De Privatorum Publicorumque Edificiorum Urbis Romae Eversoribus Epistola', which he read in the Thesaurus of Graevius.
Moreover, the account continued, we wrongly regard the fifth-century invaders as savages issuing from the depths of the forests to break through the barriers of the Roman defences. While this might apply to some peoples, the Goths, the Vandals and the Franks had lost much of their former barbarism before their invasion of Roman territory. Large numbers of them had already served in the Roman armies, learned the Latin language, adopted Roman manners and accepted, or at least respected, the Christian religion. If they were inclined to despise the vanquished, they showed no hatred. The soldier was sometimes cruel, but the general rarely barbarous and the legislator never.¹

In The Decline and Fall, Gibbon emphasised this, pointing out that 'the Gothic kings, so injuriously accused of the ruin of antiquity, were anxious to preserve the monuments of the nation whom they had subdued.'² But he went even further to correct the prejudice to which he here referred. In a chapter dealing with the Gothic and Vandal invasions, he suggested that 'the legionaries of Augustus appear to have surpassed, in violence and injustice, the Barbarians who invaded Gaul, under the reign of Honorius;'³ and that the conquered peoples came to prefer barbarian rule to 'the tyranny of the Imperial officers.'⁴ With regard to the sack of Rome in 410, he pointed out that 'some rare and extraordinary examples of Barbarian virtue had been deservedly applauded,'⁵ while Alaric, 'the wise Barbarian, justified his regard for the faith of treaties, by the just severity with which he chastised a party of licentious Goths.'⁶

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1. JB, 6 me Octobre, 1763, p. 83. 'Le Soldat etoit quelquefois cruel, mais le General etoit rarement barbare et le legislateur ne l'etoit jamais.'
2. DF, xxxix, IV, 204. Gibbon referred his reader to Cassiodorus 'for the Gothic care of buildings and statues.' (see IV, 204, n.76)
3. DF, xxxi, III, 370.
4. DF, xxxi, III, 368.
5. DF, xxxi, III, 330.
The relative nature of 'barbarian' and the abuse to which it was liable can be seen in many parts of *The Decline and Fall*. Gibbon referred to the origin of the term in the prejudiced view of Greeks and Romans who applied it to those born in a world outside their own and hence unable to speak their great languages. But a similar prejudice persisted into the eleventh century. The French and German emperors enjoyed supreme dominion as imperial successors of Caesar, Augustus, Constantine, Justinian, Charlemagne and Otho; their jurisdiction was accepted over the imperial city and the papal coins bore their title and image. 'But every Roman prejudice was awakened by the name, the language, and the manners of a barbarian lord.' A similar attitude clouded relations between French and Greeks at the time of the Crusades. When the French forces under Godfrey de Bouillon and his peers encamped in the plains of Thrace, the Byzantine emperor Alexius Comnenus tried to appease and accommodate them. But the old mutual jealousies continued between the two peoples who 'despised each other as slaves and barbarians.'

The Emperor Charles IV, grandson of the German Emperor Henry VII, was born in Bohemia amongst a people whom the Germans regarded as 'strange and barbarous'. Yet, as Gibbon noted, 'personally Charles must not be considered as a Barbarian.' He was educated in Paris, spoke and wrote not only his native tongue but also French, Latin, Italian and German, and was always represented by Petrarch as 'a polite and learned prince.'

Even Petrarch, however, 'promiscuously bestows' the term 'barbarous' on 'the countries beyond the Alps.' But, as Gibbon made clear, while a son of Florence might justly regard Italy as 'superior to France both in art and science, in wealth and politeness,' the difference hardly

3. *DF*, xlix, V, 328 and n.159.
supported his use of the epithet 'barbarous' in so exclusive and patronizing a way.¹

It is all so relative and so much a matter of prejudice as Gibbon showed. And in this context he also showed how little such names come to mean. Though he continued to use the Graeco-Roman designation 'barbarian' for nations beyond the frontiers of 'civilization', yet as an 'impartial historian' with a 'knowledge of human nature', he did not confuse a somewhat contemptuous title with the real character of these peoples. He was prepared to give honour where honour was due and it was due in many instances to these foreigners rather than to the 'degenerate Romans' who had so much to learn from them. The Romans in the West, and more particularly those in the East, he claimed, had become unworthy of that name. Of the latter he wrote that 'the subjects of the Byzantine empire, who assume and dishonour the names both of Greeks and Romans, present a dead level of abject vice.'² The names had been emptied of their content when the spirit which had made those civilizations great had departed. In his opening survey, he referred to the Greeks as 'long since civilized and corrupted...still preserving the prejudices after they had lost the virtues of their ancestors.' They 'affected to despise the unpolished manners of the Roman conquerors,' even though they had to acknowledge their 'superior wisdom and power.'³ The Romans, in their turn, after losing their freedom 'in the extent of conquest,' and being prepared to survive the loss of liberty, faced in the North 'a hardy race of Barbarians who despised life when it was separated from freedom.'⁴

¹. DF, lxx, VII, 291.
². DF, xlviii, V, 181.
³. DF, ii, I, 42.
⁴. DF, i, I, 10; i, 1, 2.
Rome's decline is thus seen essentially as the surrender of its Romanness, of the civilization built on that 'wisdom and virtue' which had made possible and justified its civilizing mission. This gradual loss of its distinguishing virtues represents the central tragedy of Gibbon's History, no matter what larger or epic significance we may see in it. A 'prodigal commons' slowly 'sunk under the reign of the Caesars into a vile and wretched populace which must, in a few generations, have been totally extinguished, if it had not been continually recruited by the manumission of slaves, and the influx of strangers.'¹ Even by Hadrian's time, citizens complained of the capital having 'attracted the vices of the universe; the manners of the most opposite nations.' The mixed multitude of the city, bringing together the worst features of these foreign peoples, had the affrontery, 'under the proud and false denomination of Romans,' to despise both their fellow subjects and their sovereigns.² It is as a rare exception to this general departure from its ancient character that we find the occasional example of 'Roman courage' or 'the magnanimity of a genuine Roman.'³

The northern barbarians, in contrast, had much to recommend them. They showed up the decline of the Roman spirit by their own simplicity of life, honour, courage, adherence to 'the faith of treaties' and their social virtues. It is certainly traditional enough, a convention to which Tacitus conformed in his Germania ⁴, to find the ancient Roman mores amongst these foreigners. But it is significant that Gibbon, who

1. DF, xxxi, III, 319.
2. DF, xxxi, III, 319. This view of the capital as a sink or cesspool became something of a commonplace among Latin writers from late republican times. See e.g. Donald Earl, The Moral and Political Tradition of Rome. London, 1967, pp. 96-7.
3. DF, xxxi, III, 359, 361. The references here are to the generals Gerontius and Constantius.
4. Germania, 6, 27. e.g. 'no one laughs at vice there; no one calls seduction the spirit of the age' (Loeb ed., tr. M. Hutton, 1970, p.161.)
was prepared to take an independent line in some cases, here chose to emphasise the moral interpretation of barbarian life. Thus, in the end, he showed the Roman virtues as having deserted to the peoples of the North, who proved not only strong enough but also worthy to conquer a degenerate Rome.¹ The Goths, in fact, came to consider themselves 'as the friends of peace, of justice and of Rome.' One of their leaders, Fravitta, is described by Gibbon as 'a valiant and honourable youth, distinguished above the rest of his countrymen, by the politeness of his manners, the liberality of his sentiments, and the mild virtues of social life.'² And these, apart from the higher intellectual and aesthetic attainments, are the basic human qualities seen by both the eighteenth-century lexicographers and by Gibbon, as those of civilized man as opposed to barbarism.³

Who then is the barbarian? It was not essentially a question of birth for to be born among these peoples was no determinant of character nor did it prevent a man from exhibiting what would once have been recognised as the old Roman virtues. The Emperor Romanus, in a pretentious and ridiculous statement of his terms for peace, insolently addressed the Sultan Alp Arslan as 'the barbarian'. 'But,' said Gibbon, 'this barbarian by his personal merit and the extent of his empire was the greatest prince of his age.'⁴ In a provincial like Trajan, Gibbon saw one whom the Scipios would have accepted as a fellow Roman and whose virtue the Senate applauded over two-and-a-half centuries after his death.⁵ And it was Theodoric, the Ostrogoth, whom, on his visit to Rome, the

¹. DF, xlviii, V, 182.
². DF, xxvi, II, 138.
³. The dictionaries from Bailey to Walker tend to repeat the same definitions with emphasis on 'savageness of manners' for the one, and softness and politeness of behaviour for the other.
⁴. DF, lvii, VI, 254.
⁵. DF, ii, I, 41-2; iii, I, 82.
Senate advanced in solemn procession to salute as 'a second Trajan'.

And even the very formula repeatedly used by Gibbon to indicate the essence of Roman greatness is applied to an eastern vizir: He thus saw 'the light and splendour of Asia' reflected in the 'wisdom and virtue' of the vizir Nizam, in 'a period when Europe was plunged in the deepest barbarism.'

Writing of Atilla, Gibbon claimed: 'We must applaud the Barbarian who respected the laws of hospitality and generously entertained and dismissed the minister who had conspired against his life.' And in his account of Alaric's capture of Rome, he deliberately introduced the well-known contrast with the sack of the city by Charles V and drew the conclusion that 'the ravages of the Barbarians... were less destructive than the hostilities of Charles the Fifth, a Catholic prince, who styled himself Emperor of the Romans.' In his description of those nine months, hourly stained by 'some atrocious act of cruelty, lust and rapine,' Gibbon showed what real barbarism meant: 'sanguinary crimes... polished vices, rapacious avarice, and unrelenting cruelty;' in short, 'a remarkable scene of the depravity of mankind.' This appeared all the more shocking by contrast with the moderation shown by a 'barbarian' eleven centuries earlier. And in Gibbon's pages we find many Romans whose conduct was more barbarous and uncivilized than that of the foreigners they might despise. Returning, in his final chapter for a description of 'the eternal city' in the time of Petrarch, he headed his description: 'Ignorance and barbarism of the Romans'.

1. DF, xxxix, IV, 203.
2. DF, lvii, VI, 256. The vizir held office from 1063 to 1092.
3. DF, xxxiv, III, 464. Cf. Gibbon's remark about 'a peculiar strain of delicacy' shown by 'the gentle Barbarian', Amir (lxiv, VII, 29).
4. DF, xxx, III, 347.
5. DF, loc. cit.
6. DF, lxxi, VII, 334.
Barbarism was thus a state into which even the most civilized might relapse when the true values of that civilization were discarded, just as liberty always tended to drift into licence when it was divorced from order and from moral principles. This is one of the 'lessons' Gibbon suggests throughout The Decline and Fall and he strongly connected the two qualities of civilization and liberty in a number of places. And though he did not espouse an 'original sin' type of morality, he felt free to use some of its terms within his humanistic framework and to write not only of corruption and degeneracy, but even of human 'depravity'. Even in a polished society, that is, as he saw it, a society with a polished minority, 'the nature of the tiger was the same' as when he had once bluntly shown 'his teeth and fangs' in more savage times. And, lurking below the surface, barbarism, which had revealed itself in gladiatorial shows, inhuman treatment of captives and popular outbursts in ancient Rome, was always ready to break through and reassert itself even more dangerously. When Gibbon described 'the triumph of barbarism' he was concerned above all with those psychological and moral qualities which were in effect the negation of those which are the essentials of a great civilization.

Religion, the second element of the famous pair, has received the major share of attention from Gibbon's biographers and critics. On this score he has been attacked and defended from his day to ours. He was fascinated by religion, and Christianity in particular, as a cultural phenomenon, and he traced its development from imperial to papal Rome. He saw it as an alien and disintegrating force within the empire, as alien indeed as the barbarians and 'it is a Rome

1. *DF*, liv, VI, 133. The immediate reference is the apparent, though not real softening, of religious animosity between the times of Calvin and Cranmer.
weakened by "the spirit of Christianity"...that is finally conquered by the barbarian invasions'.

Gibbon admitted that he disliked Christianity as an innovation undermining the old order, and thus, by implication, connected with the decline of Rome. Yet, in a frank assessment of this old pagan religion at the time of Julian's attempted restoration, he admitted that it was moribund, being 'destitute of theological principles, or moral precepts, and of ecclesiastical discipline' and, as it 'rapidly hastened to decay and dissolution', it was therefore 'not susceptible of any solid or consistent reformation'. In like manner, Gibbon's estimate of the new religion is also that of the moralist, though the moralist appears as an 'impartial historian' who first assembles and examines the evidence and then proceeds to judge the church as far as possible on its own claims. Thus he found its first adherents conspicuous for their moral purity, simplicity of life, and consistency. But he ironically excused himself from 'the pleasing task of describing Religion as she descended from Heaven, arrayed in her native purity'. That task he would leave to the theologian. The historian would content himself with a secular account of what he regarded as a human institution.

2. 'I was attached to the old Pagan establishment', he explained. _Letters_, No. 771, 5/2/91, III, 216. Cf. his remarks on his objection to such innovations with his almost identical comment on Burke's reaction to the French Revolution, _Memoirs_, p. 195.
3. _Memoirs_, p. 147. ('As I believed, and as I still believe...')
4. _DF_, xxiii, II, 472.
5. _Memoirs_, p. 147: 'I weighed the causes and effects of that Revolution'.
which, like all human institutions, inevitably began to show signs of
human 'error and corruption'.

His low esteem for the moral teaching of the Church Fathers
probably dated from his first period in Lausanne. As he took up the
study of Grotius and Puffendorf at that time, he welcomed the aid of
their commentator, Jean Barbeyrac, who, in his preface to Puffendorf,
'proves that the morality of the Fathers is much inferior to that of
modern philosophers'. When he came to write his chapters on the rise
of Christianity, Gibbon again turned to Barbeyrac, in this case, to his
'very judicious treatise...sur la Morale des Pères'. From this tribute
and from his treatment of the subject, it can be seen that Gibbon's
respect for this author agreed with that of Voltaire, who wrote that
Barbeyrac 'goes back...to the sources of morality; and has the bold
candour to show that the Fathers of the Church did not always understand
this pure morality, which they disfigured by strange allegories...and
he draws attention to the contradictions which he observes' in their
morality. This same view of an early decline from a 'pure morality'

1. DF, loc.cit.
2. Memoirs, p. 78: 'My fatigues were alleviated by the good sense of
their commentator, Barbeyrac'.
3. Voltaire wrote thus in his catalogue of writers, Siècle de Louis XIV:
'Il y preuve que la morale des Pères est fort inférieure à celle des
philosophes modernes'. See Oeuvres Complètes, ed. Louis Moland, Paris,
1877-85, Vol. XIV, p. 36.
4. DF, xv, II, 36, n. 89; also 40, n. 102. But according to Davis' An Examination of the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Chapters of Mr. Gibbon's
History. London, 1778, pp. 185ff., he was indebted to Barbeyrac for
no less than twenty-one passages in his text.
5. Voltaire, 'Mélanges, Annales de l'Empire', Oeuvres Complètes, Vol. XXVI,
p. 505. ('Il remonte...aux sources de la morale; et il a la candeur
hardie de faire voir que les Pères de l'Église n'ont pas toujours
connu cette morale pure, qu'ils l'ont défigurée par d'étranges
allologies...Il relève les contradictions qu'il remarque dans la
morale des Pères'.

is fundamental to Gibbon's approach to the subject of Christianity, not only in the two chapters of his first volume but throughout his work. And despite his plea for recognition of the 'spiritual heroes' of the middle ages, he found it difficult - some would say impossible - to understand their religious experience and ideals or to empathise with (the) 'saints'. 'By their fruits ye shall know them', was to him the only safe and effective criterion. Hence he would judge religion on what could be seen, its moral and social record.

The basic question for the historian, then, was: did the new religion, unlike a morally bankrupt paganism, achieve any great moral reformation and improvement of society? Gibbon's simple answer was that though 'the primitive Christian demonstrated his faith by his virtues', corruption soon and inevitably set in. The story of the church thus paralleled that of the empire in its steady degeneration and decline. This story was epitomised in the career of the first Christian emperor, who, 'as he gradually advanced in the knowledge of truth...proportionately declined in the practice of virtue'. By the time of that emperor, and even earlier, it was clear that the church had imitated the ambition, greed and power politics of the declining state in which it had developed. It had surrendered its spiritual independence as it gained political acceptance.

1. DF, lix, VI, 346. 'A philosophic age has abolished with too liberal and indiscriminate disdain, the honours of these spiritual heroes'.
2. DF, xv, II, 34. Gibbon proposed 'the pure and austere morals of the Christians' as a cause of the rapid growth of the church (xv, II, 3). For the 'uncandid' nature of his claim, see Milman's note in his 1846 edition of DF, vol. 1, p. 486 and his more general comment in his Preface I, ix-xiii.
3. DF, xx, II, 329 and cf. also 340.
Documenting this decline by a reference to a Christian apologist, Gibbon maintained that 'the corruption of manners and principles so forcibly lamented by Eusebius', was a consequence as well as a proof of the political freedom these later Christians 'enjoyed and abused... Prosperity had relaxed the nerves of discipline'. The widening rift observable in Constantine and Christians of his day, is brought out in a statement made by Gibbon about the Syrians of Antioch in the reign of Julian: 'The majority of the people supported the glory of the Christian name, which had been first invented by their ancestors; they contented themselves with disobeying the moral precepts, but they were scrupulously attached to the speculative doctrines of their religion'. In the same century Arians and orthodox bitterly divided the church over a small but significant theological issue; yet, said Gibbon, 'the moral character and conduct of the hostile sects appear to have been governed by the same common principles of nature and religion'. And while, as he suggested, in a later age, 'a speculative reasoner' might assume the restraining influence of the Christian faith upon the conduct of the Crusaders, this was not the case, for 'seldom does the history of profane war disclose such scenes of intemperance', prostitution and other vices. By the fifteenth century, the divorce between religious observance and moral conduct seemed almost complete. Concluding his 'Outlines of the History of the World' with a reference to the daily invention of new legends and superstitious practices and to the expiation of every sin by penances or mere fine, Gibbon declared that 'this Religion had scarcely any connection with Morality'.

1. DF, xvi, II, 125.
2. DF, xxiv, II, 509. Referring to the conversion of the Russians, Gibbon commented: 'an imperfect conversion, if they still consulted the wizards of Curland'. (DF, lv, VI, 158, n. 68).
3. DF, xv, II, 34. Cf. the distinction he made in the case of Alexius, between 'his moral and religious virtues'.
4. DF, lviii, VI, 314.
5. MW, III, 55.
This divorce between religion and morality is at the bottom of most of Gibbon's objections and serves as a convenient heading under which they may be systematically discussed. He set down, in his comments on Zoroastrianism, two basic requirements for any religion if it were 'to make a deep and lasting impression on the human mind': it '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'.  

There is no doubt from his treatment of religion in The Decline and Fall that it is on the effectiveness of the second requirement that he felt religion should be judged. And it is in keeping with this view of religion as practical morality that he pointed out that the ancient philosophers, living under the mild religious spirit of antiquity, 'deduced their morals from the nature of man, rather than from that of God'. Here, as elsewhere, he was stressing the marked contrast between a human, socially based morality and that of the Judaeo-Christian type, which he saw as being arbitrarily imposed from above on purely religious grounds. Regulations and requirements should not be external to man in society, but instead should be deduced from his own nature and practised for his benefit. 'The social virtues' were thus given a high priority in Gibbon's scale of religious values as he emphasised in examining the character of Timour, where he claimed that 'the rules of morality are founded on the public interest'. This moral emphasis determined Gibbon's assessment of Christianity, which, in Falco's words, he reduced 'to two doctrines and a moral system'.

2. DF, ii, I, 33.
3. DF, lxv, VII, 72-3.
In the development of Christianity, he observed, morality was soon esteemed less than orthodoxy and submission to ecclesiastical authority. Such a change could be seen in the Fathers of the Church. 'From the imperious declamations of Cyprian, we should naturally concluded that the doctrines of excommunication and penance formed the most essential part of religion; and that it was less dangerous for the disciples of Christ to neglect the observance of moral duties than to despise the censures and authority of the bishops'. Gibbon was therefore agreeably surprised to find, as for instance in some of the 'rational divines' of Lausanne, occasional exceptions to this trend which he felt, continued to characterise both Catholic and Protestant theologians. And in the work of a British preacher, James Foster, he found a statement reflecting his own emphasis: 'The true manner of preaching the Gospel', Foster maintained, 'is to inculcate the great duties of morality...That is and must be, the end of all revelation worthy of God'. After reading the sermon, Gibbon remarked with astonishment: 'Quel miracle! Un Theologien qui prefere la raison à la foi, et qui est plus effrayé du vice que de l'heresie'.

We may distinguish four main aspects of this divorce between religion and morality as brought out in The Decline and Fall. In the first place, not only did Christianity, in Gibbon's estimation, fail to maintain the standard of conduct expected of it, but its very principles seemed to represent an inverted scale of moral values, exalting the trivial and the irrelevant at the expense of the useful and the essential. The sort of emphasis he looked for, was found in Zoroaster's requirement

2. JB, Ir, Sept., 1763. In a note (p. 20, n.3) Bonnard cites from the volume the words translated above. Gibbon found the sermons in a volume of the Bibliothéque raisonné. Foster's Sermons were published in London in 1733. Cf. reference in DF, lvi, VI, 230, to a priest who preferred 'his country to his religion'.
of such 'moral duties' as justice, mercy and liberality, and his exact connection between the degree of eternal happiness and that of present 'virtue and piety'.

So too, the Magian saint, unlike the Christian, was expected to beget children, plant useful trees, bring water to the dry land and make himself of service to society. In contrast to the essentially Christian order of good works as the fruit, rather than the ground of acceptance with God, Gibbon gave a characteristic twist to the Pauline injunction to work out one's own salvation, by transferring it to this alien context: the Magian saint for his part, was required 'to work out his salvation' by such valuable labours as irrigation and acts of social usefulness.

Usefulness to society and promotion of human happiness ranked high in Gibbon's scale of values, but low, it seemed to him, in that of most religions, especially Christianity. He regarded the construction of canals as a better use of 'cost and labour' than the construction of cathedrals.

Referring to a new edition of the lives of the saints which a tenth-century chancellor of the Eastern Empire had been directed to prepare, he added: 'The merits and miracles of the whole calendar are of less account in the eyes of a sage than the toil of a single husbandman, who multiplies the gifts of the Creator and supplies the food of his breathen'. A similar but more scathing comment concerning the qualifications of a successful candidate for the papacy, brings out very clearly Gibbon's view of the ecclesiastical scale of values: The likely

1. DF, viii, I, 217.
2. Phil. 2; 12. Cf. Augustine's comment on the verse: 'Nos ergo volumus, sed Deus in nobis operatur et velle; nos ergo operamur, sed Deus in nobis operatur et operari'. ('De Dono Perseverantiae', Migne, PL, XLV, cap. xiii, cols. 1012-3).
3. DF, xlix, V, 309.
4. DF, liii, VI, 67-8.
candidate will have learnt amongst other irrelevancies and absurdities, not only 'to revere all that is contemptible, and to despise whatever might deserve the esteem of a rational being', but even 'to consider the missal or the crucifix as more useful instruments than the plough or the loom'.

To Gibbon, the plough and the loom represented 'the most prolific, the most useful, and in that sense the most respectable part of the community', those who, in producing the necessary food and clothing, support life in the great cities by 'the dexterity or labour of their hands'. Yet the farmer, the weaver, the craftsmen and other useful members of society were not respected in this way by the church. The extreme instance of this false valuation and reverence for the 'contemptible', was to be found in those who withdrew themselves completely from society to spend their life in devotion or idleness. Christian preachers, whilst they might recommend 'the practice of social duties', had from early times 'exalted the perfection of monastic virtue, which is painful to the individual, and useless to mankind'. This yardstick of utility Gibbon consistently applied to religion. As he watched the Eastern Empire sink in its calamities during the tenth century, he pointed out that though its subjects were more dexterous and diligent than those of most nations, religious superstition, particularly in the form of monasticism and holy days, vitiated much of this talent and energy. 'The Greek superstition relaxed the mind by prayer and emaciated the body by fasting; and the multitude of convents

1. DF, lxx, VII, 310.
2. DF, xxxi, III, 318.
3. DF, xx, II, 346.
and festivals diverted many hands and many days from the temporal service of mankind'.

Religious life is thus represented as physically and economically unproductive and as intellectually stagnant.

This points us to a second aspect of the divorce, which may perhaps be seen as a specific and extreme example of this more general inversion of values. Religious superstition seemed to Gibbon not only to have confused the order of moral priorities, but to have replaced real virtues with a set of 'specious virtues'. In the ecclesiastical scale pre-eminence was given mainly to what he regarded as 'painful', useless and anti-social. A pope could be expected 'to reward mortification and celibacy as the first of virtues', whereas to an enlightened and 'philosophic' mind, these practices were devoid of any virtue. Though the term 'specious virtues' is applied to the emperors Diocletian and Charles V, as those derived less from nature than from art, Gibbon reserved this description almost exclusively for religious contexts. Such 'virtues' were 'fictitious' and reflected only the mistaken view of men suffering from a degree of moral blindness.

'Specious virtues' were for Gibbon characteristically 'monastic virtues', virtues falsely so called, but extolled by ecclesiastical writers who were at the same time 'apt to despise the profane virtues

1. DF, liii, VI, 72. Cf. also VI, 71, n.13, regarding the number of monks on the Greek islands.
2. DF, lxvi, VII, 121, where Gibbon refers to the great amount 'of time and talents that were lost in the devotion, the laziness, and discord of the cloister'.
3. DF, lxx, VII, 310.
4. DF, xiii, I, 416.
of sincerity and moderation'.

1. Even noble minds could be seduced by these apparent virtues. Such was Louis IX whom 'a monkish historian' would applaud for 'the most despicable part of his character', that part corrupted by 'the baleful influence' of superstition.  

2. So too, Godfrey of Bouillon, with blind yet sincere piety, practised in the camp, 'the real and fictitious virtues of a convent'.

3. It is these 'fictitious virtues' which are shown to be dangerous, more dangerous in fact than the vices of the clergy, since they are morally deceptive. Gibbon's Constantine thus exhibited not 'real virtue' but only a 'specious piety' which won the acclaim of churchmen and ecclesiastical historians.  

4. And the 'virtues...supposed to deserve the peculiar favour of the Deity', included not only mortification, fanaticism, withdrawal from society and from useful service to mankind, but also liberal gifts to sacred institutions and the rigid suppression of all those whose creed was contrary to that of the ruling majority.

More damaging still to the good life and to ordinary codes of morality, was a third aspect of the divorce, by which religion and its priestly caste claimed to set themselves above these codes and to override commonly accepted notions of right and wrong. This involved the substitution of rites and observances for moral requirements. Gibbon was offended by the suggestion that a life of continued disregard for

1. DF, xxvi, III, 128.
2. DF, lxx, VI, 374. Cf. 'His devotion stooped to admire and imitate the begging friars of Francis and Dominic...' (loc.cit.)
3. DF, lvi, VI, 289.
4. DF, xlxi, V, 318-9 and see below, pp. 387-9.
5. DF, xx, II, 325. Eusebius' Life of Constantine is here cited by Gibbon, p. 326, n. 56.
truth and goodness could be put right by a single ceremonial act like baptism, a rite purely external and incapable of making restitution for all the previous wrong inflicted on others. Such a view of religion seemed to threaten the whole moral order, just as to Hume, Gibbon and others of their day, miracles seemed to threaten the physical order. And it was the first Christian emperor, who, by such a violation of moral law, set the tone for future abuse: 'The example and reputation of Constantine seemed to countenance the delay of baptism. Future tyrants were encouraged to believe, that the innocent blood which they might shed in a long reign would be washed away in the waters of regeneration; and the abuse of religion dangerously undermined the foundations of moral virtue'.

What was true of baptism applied equally to other rites of the church. Under the reign of superstition which allowed the wrong doer absolution through penance, and the fulfilment of his penance by means of a fine, Gibbon saw religion further parting company with morality. Pilgrimage likewise attained not only merit but popularity, becoming one of 'the fashionable superstitions' of the age, and being much favoured by the Normans, who successfully combined 'the habits of pilgrimage and piracy'. It thus provided an alternative to morality as well as to those other sacred expedients so advantageous to military-minded rulers. Of Henry the Lion, who, in a holy war, had brought to his neighbours the choice of baptism or death, Gibbon wrote: 'The baptism or the blood, of so many thousand pagans might have expiated the sins of the Catholic

1. DF, xx, II, 330.
2. See 'Outlines of the History of the World', MW, III, 55. A similar sentiment recurs in DF.
3. DF, lvi, VI, 181; lv, VI, 156. See also xlviii, V, 232, regarding Michael, husband of Zoe; also lvii, VI, 266-71; lviii, VI, 305.
hero: but his conscience was still unsatisfied, his salvation was still doubtful, and it was in the fairest season of victory and peace... that he accomplished the fashionable devotion of a pilgrimage to the Holy Land.¹

Perhaps the most blatant triumph of religion over morality to Gibbon's mind was the use of rich gifts to the church to compensate for private or public wrongs. He never lost his sense of disgust, first stirred by his youthful visit to the Abbey of Emsiedeln, so richly endowed and perpetually nourished by the gifts of pilgrims. The experience is recorded in four of his writings both before and after The Decline and Fall,² and the same theme recurs throughout that work also. There our attention is drawn to the case of those who 'atoned for the injuries of war by the rich foundation of monasteries and churches'.³ In his chapter on the conversion and conquests of Clovis, Gibbon told of the action of Sigismund, king of the Burgundians, to salve his conscience: 'The Catholic Sigismund has acquired the honours of a saint and martyr; but the hands of the royal saint were stained with the blood of his innocent son, whom he inhumanly sacrificed to the pride and resentment of a stepmother...The reproaches of a guilty conscience were alleviated, however, by his liberal donations to the monastery of Agaunum, ...which he himself had founded in honour of the imaginary martyrs of the Thebaean legion'.⁴ Wallace-Hadrill summed up the activities of a noble and powerful French family which included the founder of Cluny, as 'cutting throats but endowing churches'.⁵

1. 'Antiquities of the House of Brunswick', MW, III, 547.
3. DF, xlvi, V, 31. The reference is to Autharis, king of the Lombards.
4. DF, xxxviii, IV, 121-2.
Religion is thus shown as anti-moral in its effects when bishops, priests and monks devised substitutes for the ordinary rules of morality and when kings and emperors eagerly adopted these substitutes. Sometimes royal patrons took the lead in making and controlling prelates. Glycerius, the assassin of the exiled emperor Nepos, was, we are told, 'translated, perhaps as a reward of his crime, to the Archbishopric of Milan'. Especially in the East, 'the episcopal conscience' was often, 'after the Greek fashion, in the hands of the prince'. The emperor might hover over church councils, which were careful not to issue decrees contrary to his declared will. These decrees, which were binding on the consciences and actions of the people, concerned morals less frequently than orthodoxy and acts of devotion. This was true of the second council of Nicaea, which pronounced on the question of images. The Empress Irene was dedicated to the overthrow of the iconoclasts and she promoted to the patriarchal throne, Tarasius, who presided over the council. From its acts, which Gibbon described as 'a curious monument of superstition and ignorance, of falsehood and folly', he restricted himself to one example, designed to show 'the judgment of the bishops on the comparative merit of image-worship and morality. A monk had concluded a truce with the daemon of fornication, on condition of interrupting his daily prayers to a picture that hung in his cell. His scruples prompted him to consult the abbot. "Rather than abstain from adoring Christ and his Mother in their holy images, it would be better for you", replied the casuist, "to enter every brothel in the city".'

1. DE, xxxvi, IV, 51.
2. Here in fact the princess, as the immediate reference is to Irene's control of the Patriarch of Constantinople and the Eastern Church, DE, xlix, V, 296.
4. DE, xlix, V, 296.
A fourth aspect of the divorce is seen when religion, again assuming precedence over morality and truth, stooped to unworthy means to achieve a desired end. In the history of the church, Gibbon saw Christian emperors, without the excuses of their pagan predecessors like Decius and Diocletian, cruelly persecuting their opponents in the name of religion and thus violating 'the precepts of humanity and of the gospel'. 'Such', he wrote, 'was the persecuting spirit of the laws of Theodosius, which were repeatedly enforced by his sons and grandsons, with the loud and unanimous applause of the Christian world'. 1 So also, the popes, thrust into a position of temporal power in calamitous times, 'as the ministers of charity and peace', had, in fact, 'deluged Europe and Asia with blood'. 2

Such abuse of power and the tendency of religious leaders to see themselves above common morality and thus to justify vicious methods for holy ends, appeared to Gibbon characteristic of religion in general, especially when it was dominated by enthusiasm and fanaticism. Mahomet seemed to consider 'that he alone was absolved by the Deity from the obligation of positive and moral laws'. 3 Gibbon ironically added that this might appear to be an evidence of his sincerity as a divine messenger, in view of the cruel and unworthy methods he used to accomplish his designs. Since he allowed himself 'to employ even the vices of mankind as the instruments of their salvation', he saw 'the use of fraud and perfidy, of cruelty and injustice', as 'often subservient to the propagation of the faith'. Yet, 'he would have started at the foulness of the means had he not been satisfied of the importance and justice of the end'. 4

2. DF, xlv, V, 39.
3. DF, 1, V, 402.
4. DF, 1, v, 401-2.
The Catholic Church also 'satisfied of the importance and justice of the end', had produced a specific instrument of persecution or conversion in the Inquisition. Gibbon, champion of freedom of the mind and conscience, of toleration and 'the mild spirit of antiquity', was appalled by this and all other forms of coercion, as 'the Catholic Inquisitors of Europe...defended nonsense by cruelty'. He saw it as one of 'the two most memorable victories' of the papacy, a victory in this case over 'the common rights of mankind'. It was, he claimed, 'an office more adapted to confirm, than to refute, the belief of an evil principle'. And the triumph of religion had made possible this offence against the dignity and moral integrity of human beings.

Holy wars, another shocking instance of justifying immoral methods to achieve what was considered a desirable result appeared to Gibbon a blot on the record of Jews, Christians and Moslems alike. Such wars, which disgraced the history of the expansion of the church, involved the forced conversion of its enemies to Christianity or to orthodoxy, whether by Clovis in the sixth century, Charlemagne in the eighth, or Henry the Lion in the twelfth. These two latter conquerors offered their pagan enemies the alternatives of death or baptism; and Charlemagne, by 'an abuse of the right of conquest', pronounced the ultimate penalty against the defeated Saxons for 'the following crimes': the refusal or false pretence of baptism, relapse into idolatry, murder of priest or bishop, human sacrifices, and even eating meat in Lent; a strangely mixed list which is yet another testimony to the confusion of moral values which then prevailed.

2. "Outlines of the History of the World", *MW*, III, 21, where Gibbon referred specifically to Innocent III. The other victory was that of transubstantiation.
5. *DF*, xlix, V, 303 and n. 103.
Of all holy wars, the Crusades were the most remarkable both in their consumption of human resources and in their dire effects.

Gibbon was familiar with Hume's description of them as 'the most signal and most durable monument of human folly that has yet appeared in any age or nation'. Yet as he pointed out, 'Christians, both of the East and West, were persuaded of their lawfulness and merit'. For it was felt, as in other holy wars, 'that a difference of religion is a worthy cause of hostility; that obstinate unbelievers may be slain or subdued by the champions of the cross; and that grace is the sole fountain of dominion as well as of mercy'. Enlistment absolved the feudal ties of peasants, the vows of the monk, and the creditor's claim on the debtor, while 'outlaws and malefactors of every cast might continue to brave the laws and elude the punishment of their crimes'.

What was more morally shocking to Gibbon was that the Christian nations, having asserted 'their peculiar title to the Holy Land', set out on a brutal and sanguinary conquest which they justified as the service of God: 'War and exercise were the reigning passions of the Franks or Latins; they were enjoined, as a penance to gratify those passions'.

The conduct of the Crusaders was as mixed as their motives: valour and idealism of some noble leaders, unpredictable and inconsistent enthusiasm of hermits and monks, brutality and licence of the rabble who engaged in looting, prostitution and drunkenness. And, if discipline broke down and behaviour was loose, penance was readily available, so that 'with the multiplication of sins, the remedies were multiplied'. But over and above all this incidental contempt for

2. DF, lviii, VI, 275-7, 282-3.
3. DF, lviii, VI, 277, 281.
4. DF, lviii, VI, 278.
morality, was the irreparable damage done to the principles of justice and mercy under the sanction of religion: 'Vainly would it be alleged...that the recovery of Bethlehem or Calvary...will atone for the violation of the moral precepts of the gospel'.

This paradoxical notion of a 'holy' way with its idea of sanctified slaughter, raises the matter of what was, in Gibbon's view, one major source of the divorce between religion and morality, namely a false and repugnant concept of an avenging God, which was held by the Jews and passed on to the Christians. Moral objections to the Jewish religion had already been expressed by the Gnostics, and such objections, according to Gibbon, 'too readily present themselves to the sceptical mind'. A fundamental problem was 'how to reconcile with the common notions of humanity and justice', the conquest of Canaan which, at God's command, involved 'the extirpation of the unsuspecting natives'. Furthermore, 'the sanguinary list of murders, of executions, and of massacres, which stain almost every page of the Jewish annals', showed that the chosen people had exercised no more compassion than the barbarous peoples whom they had slaughtered. As to the law, it was surely 'impossible that a religion which consisted only of bloody sacrifices and trifling ceremonies, and whose rewards as well as punishments were all of a carnal and temporal nature, could inspire the love of virtue, or restrain the impetuosity of passion'. In short, as Gibbon expressed it in discussing the God of Islam: 'The moral attributes

1. DE, loc. cit.
2. DE, xv, II, 12-3. That Gibbon was expressing many of his own sentiments here is clear from the context, from footnote comments, e.g. pp. 12, 13, nn. 27, 28, and from other passages in the work.
3. DE, xv, II, 13. 'The same bloody precepts' seemed to characterise both the Koran and the Old Testament. 'The Lord of hosts marched in person before the Jews' in these wars of extermination (DE, 1, V, 383).
of Jehovah may not easily be reconciled with the standard of human virtue'. And the Christians, he felt, in their religious wars, crusades, forced conversions and Inquisition, had perpetrated similar offences against morality in the name of religion.

Nor had the Reformation radically altered the situation. If Augustine and his successors were notorious for their 'ardent zeal against heretics of every denomination', Calvin must carry the blame for the killing of Servetus, and the principles used to justify the conduct remained substantially the same. 'Stupendous doctrines' like original sin and predestination were carried over from the old faith to the new and, in Gibbon's view, 'the rigid system of Christianity' framed by Augustine so nearly resembled that of Calvin in its essentials, that 'the real difference between them is invisible even to a theological microscope'. Despite the reformers' modification or rejection of the doctrine of transubstantiation, 'the weight of supernatural belief inclines against the Protestants', and 'many a sober Christian would rather admit that a wafer is God, than that God is a cruel and capricious tyrant'.

Thus Gibbon saw the moral deficiencies of the Judaeo-Christian Deity reflected in those of his followers. It was more than mere inconsistency of life or failing to maintain a high ideal. Behind the cruelties and persecutions of Jew, Catholic and Protestant, lay a morally distorted view of God and man. God was represented as merciless and tyrannical, and his demands on his creatures as stultifying

1. DF, 1, V, 360.
2. DF, xxxiii, III, 430-1 and n. 33.
3. DF, liv, VI, 131-2.
and unreasonable, not designed for the greatest happiness of mankind. Man was burdened with original sin and denied his physical and intellectual fulfilment in a free and culturally satisfying society. Theological systems did not inspire much confidence in the goodness of either God or his creatures. Boethius, 'the last of the Romans', who edified the church by 'his profound defence of the orthodox creed', still had to attempt 'to reconcile the perfect attributes of the Deity with the apparent disorders of his moral and physical government'. Hence the conduct of his Christian subjects was often determined by a perverse system of moral values. Not charity, mercy and justice, but liberality to churches and monasteries and the rigid suppression of heresy were deemed most worthy of merit for 'such virtues were supposed to deserve the peculiar favour of the Deity'.

So perverse and rigid were the values of this system that not only were all deviations from the ruling orthodoxy suppressed in this world, but even the best men of ancient times were condemned to everlasting punishment in the next. This mark of Christian exclusiveness seemed to Gibbon not only inhuman but also a denial of moral values. It ignored and nullified the effect of ordinary virtues outside the limits of the Christian faith. So offensive was it to his sense of right that he repeated his charge several times in the course of The Decline and Fall. In the fifteenth chapter, on 'The Progress of the Christian Religion', he summed up the situation thus: 'The condemnation of the wisest and most virtuous of the Pagans on account of their ignorance or disbelief of the divine truth, seems to offend the reason and the

1. DF, xxxix, IV, 211, 212, 215-6.
2. DF, xxxii, III, 407.
humanity of the present age. But the primitive church, whose faith was of a much firmer consistence, delivered over, without hesitation, to eternal torture, the far greater part of the species'. The moral attributes' of such a God, Gibbon held, fell short of those expected of men and women of virtue and good will. These 'rigid sentiments' were alien to the easy toleration and spirit of harmony of the ancient world. After quoting from 'the stern Tertullian', exulting at the spectacle of so many proud kings, deluded philosophers, persecuting magistrates and many learned and literary men of antiquity suffering in everlasting flames, Gibbon appealed to 'the humanity of the reader' to let him draw a veil over the rest of this vindictive description. It was also to humanity and decency that he appealed in the following chapter, when he referred to the pagans being incensed at this 'recent and obscure sect' presuming 'to devote their ancestors to eternal misery', especially as these ancestors included some of the 'wisest and most virtuous' in ancient Greece and Rome.

To the moralist, virtue is virtue no matter what the soil that produces it. Gibbon saw religious bigotry denying this fact or at least rendering the virtues of outsiders to the faith worthless as far as acceptance and salvation were concerned. He found this rigid and exclusive doctrine not only in the writings of the Fathers, but

1. DF, xv, II, 28.
2. DF, xv, II, 29. CF. xl, IV, 282, where the reference is to the 'new religion, whose masters...condemned the infidel to eternal flames'.
3. DF, xvi, II, 126. The sentiments of early Christians like Ignatius, desirous of martyrdom, are also 'most repugnant to the ordinary feelings of human nature'. (DF, xvi, II, 111).
also enforced by the reformers in their acceptance of the Athanasian Creed, whereby 'they pronounced the eternal damnation of all who did not believe the Catholic faith.' The incorporation of this creed into the Book of Common Prayer meant that the offensive article of faith was repeated in public worship even by a modern and enlightened age. Gibbon's revulsion at such a doctrine remained with him to the end. It is the note on which he concluded his Memoirs. His final gloss to the text explained that the 'celestial hope is confined to a small number of the Elect,' from which we must deduct 'all the mere philosophers,' all the 'earthly Christians' and 'all the gloomy fanatics who are more strongly affected by the fear of Hell, than by the hopes of Heaven. "Strait is the way, and narrow is the gate, and few there be, who find it!"'^2

No was such exclusiveness and false emphasis confined to Christianity. While Gibbon applauded its absence from the old Roman religion, he saw it as a concomitant of fanaticism wherever it arose. Thus even Islam, which he considered as in many ways admirable, did not escape his censure in this regard. On his interpretation, 'every man who believes in God, and accomplishes good works, may expect in the last day a favourable sentence.' But, 'the good works are those which he [Mahomet] has enjoined' and 'the spiritual blindness' of those outside the faith, 'though excused by ignorance and crowned with virtue, will be scourged with everlasting torments.'^4 Bigotry, especially when it substituted religious observance for the service of man or nullified the real

1. DF, liv, VI, 131. See also 'Vindication', MW, IV, 606.
2. Memoirs, p. 196. The note refers to the text on p.189, 'the faith of enthusiasts who sing Hallelujahs above the clouds.'
virtues of others, was morally offensive to Gibbon wherever he encountered it.

Christianity, in his view, combined not only the moral defects of religion in general with those inherited from Judaism in particular, but also others taken over from the defeated Roman empire and from ordinary unregenerate human nature. If the Christian religion could be credited with an original purity in its primitive or semi-mythical state, it was certainly 'corrupted' by the time of its triumph and that triumph resulted in what might be called the paganisation of the church. Gibbon shows us the first imperial convert, influenced less by his heart than by his head and by the consideration of political gain, opening the gates of Christendom to adherents of the old religion on the basis of temporal inducements such as royal patronage and material rewards. He shows the even balance of the two religions tipped in favour of the emperor's choice by an appeal to unworthy and even immoral motives: 'the piercing eye of ambition and avarice soon discovered that the profession of Christianity might contribute to the interest of the present as well as of a future life.'

And where 'the venal and obsequious crowds' of courtiers, moved by 'hopes of wealth and honours' led the way, the common people followed in imitation and with similar hopes, their conversion being 'purchased at an easy rate.'

Moreover, with the 'separation of men' into clergy and laity, Constantine's favour seemed to confirm 'the inalienable rights' and

1. DF, xx, II, 330.
2. DF, xx, II, 330-1.
privileges of the ecclesiastical order, from which stemmed many later abuses. It helped to implant a worldly outlook in the seats of ecclesiastical authority, for bishoprics, as Gibbon observed, especially those in important and wealthy cities, were frequently sought for temporal rather than spiritual reasons, and with scandalous results. 'The interested views, the selfish and angry passions, the acts of perfidy and dissimulation, the secret corruption, the open and even bloody violence, which had formerly disgraced the freedom of elections in the commonwealths of Greece and Rome, too often influenced the choice of the successors of the apostles.'

The unmistakable divorce between religion and morality was thus officially confirmed in the edict and policy of Constantine and his successors. A triumphant Christian establishment took over the moral inadequacies of the imperial system, its power structure and its methods, and allowed into positions of authority worldly men governed by human motives and passions. So, while 'the religion of Constantine' quickly achieved 'the final conquest of the Roman empire,' the result was that 'the victors were insensibly conquered by the arts of their vanquished rivals.' In this pyrrhic victory involving the paganisation of the triumphant church, Gibbon pointed to 'the same methods of deceiving the credulity, and of affecting the senses of mankind.' In this spirit, he claimed, 'the ministers of the Catholic church imitated the profane model which they were impatient to destroy.'

1. DF, xx, II, 334.
2. DF, xx, II, 336. See also pp. 337-8 and the dangers of 'the faculty of spiritual generation.'
4. DF, xxviii, III, 226-7 and see nn. 96, 97. Cf. xvi, II, 92: 'The gardens and circus of Nero on the Vatican, which were polluted with the blood of the first Christians, have been rendered still more famous by the triumph and by the abuse of the persecuted religion.'
Gibbon's desire for impartiality saved him from unqualified condemnation of the clergy, especially the humbler and poorer of them. He even acknowledged certain admirable qualities in saints like Athanasius and Bernard and he held in high regard some of the more rational and moderate Swiss pastors. His scorn was reserved for those corrupted by ease and luxury and for those he regarded as responsible for the abuse of power.

In the first place, he saw churchmen being corrupted by much the same vices as other citizens of the declining empire: softness, ambition, luxury, avarice and grosser sins. He thought of his English clerical contemporaries as enjoying 'the fat slumbers of the Church' quite unlike the lower clergy and even the bishops in fifth-century Britain, whose poverty compelled them 'to deserve the public esteem by a decent and exemplary behaviour.' Such, however, was the decline in clerical behaviour over the years, that fifteenth-century Europe presented this striking contrast with earlier times: 'The Popes, bishops, and rich abbots, careless of the public esteem, were soldiers, statesmen, and men of pleasure; yet even such dignified ecclesiastics blushed at the grosser vices of the inferior clergy.'

For certain popes and for monks in general Gibbon had nothing good to say. The latter, 'in every age and country' were distinguished by 'a cruel and unfeeling temper', 'religious hatred' and 'merciless zeal'. They insinuated themselves into noble and wealthy families to secure

1. Memoirs, p. 140.
2. DF, xxxi, III, 375.
3. 'Outlines', MW, III, 55.
4. DF, xxxvii, IV, 80. 'Their minds were inaccessible to reason or mercy.' (DF, xlvii, V, 130).
proselytes for their unnatural way of life and riches for themselves, all by means of 'the specious arts of flattery and seduction.' ¹

Prosperity inevitably corrupted their discipline and ideals, with the result that 'every age of the church has accused the licentiousness of the degenerate monks; who no longer remembered the object of their institution, embraced the vain and sensual pleasures which they had renounced and scandalously abused the riches which had been acquired by the austere virtues of their founders. Their natural descent from such painful and dangerous virtue to the common vices of humanity will not excite much grief or indignation in the mind of the philosopher.' ²

Yet, in the mind of the moralist, there was indignation and disgust which comes out in Gibbon's description of this betrayal of ideals and this drift into a scandalous way of life under the guise of religion. ³ 'The numerous vermin' of monks, friars and hermits of the cell or the desert, who spread across the Middle Ages, struck him as not merely useless, but offensive. They 'disgraced religion, learning and common sense.' ⁴

Bad popes too, there certainly were, for 'the sanctity of the office might be degraded by the personal vices of the man.' ⁵ These vices Gibbon stigmatised on numerous occasions: ambition ⁶ avarice, ⁷ treachery and falsehood, ⁸ and even bloodthirsty behaviour; ⁹ he recorded the vileness of John XII and he left it to church councils to condemn 'the

1. DF, xxxvii, IV, 68. 'Abject plebeians,' said Gibbon, 'who gained more in the cloister than they had sacrificed in the world' (IV, 69).
2. DF, xxxvii, IV, 75-6.
3. DF, xxxvii, IV, 72, where he used the words 'horrid and disgusting', adding, they seemed to think 'every sensation that is offensive to man...acceptable to God.'
4. 'Outlines', MW, III, 29.
5. DF, lxix, VII, 222.
6. See DF, lxxix, V, 282, 300, n.94, 311, 319; lvi, VI, 212; lxix, VI, 369; lxx, VII, 308.
7. See DF, lxix, V, 291; lxix, VI, 369 (by implication); lxvi, VII, 104; lxii, VI, 454.
8. DF, lxix, V, 291.
9. DF, liv, VI, 130: 'Innocent III surpassed the sanguinary fame of Theodore.'
incorrigible vices' of Eugenius and of John XXIII.¹ Yet he was willing to concede that 'of the Christian hierarchy, the bishops of Rome were commonly the most prudent and least fanatic,' one of their number even being responsible for 'the meritorious act of saving the majestic structure of the Pantheon.'²

It was not so much the vices of particular popes as the development of papal pre-eminence and the immense possibilities for the abuse of temporal power which disturbed Gibbon and his narrative recorded many actual instances of this abuse. Opposed to one-man rule in the state, he found ecclesiastical autocracy equally dangerous and obnoxious. He was certainly in agreement with Hobbes' description of the new 'ecclesiastical dominion' as being simply the ghost of the old empire seated on its grave,³ for he saw 'the Christian Pontiffs' making 'their claim of universal dominion' after having 'succeeded to the throne of the Caesars.'⁴ His rather empirical approach in certain places where he listed the failings of individual popes is thus subservient to his general philosophical stance and his main objective. He regarded as immoral the ecclesiastical system which had developed by the twelfth century and he summed up his charge against the Roman church in no uncertain terms: 'Her avarice was oppressive, her despotism odious... her innovations more rapid and scandalous' than those of her Eastern counterpart; 'the lives of the Latin clergy were more corrupt, and the Eastern bishops might pass for the successors of the apostles, if they

1. DF, lxvi, VII, 117; lxx, VII, 299-300.
2. DF, lxxi, VII, 322.
4. DF, xvi, II, 92. For references to the 'tyranny' and 'despotism' of the popes, see e.g. xlvi, V, 138, lx, VI, 416; lxvi, VII, 104, 107; lxx, VII, 296, 306.
were compared with the lordly prelates, who wielded by turns the crosier, the sceptre, and the sword.'

Finally, apart from these aspects of barbarism and religion and the particular criticisms of the latter, there is also a sense in which Gibbon presents religion as barbarism in *The Decline and Fall*. He saw religious wars as often more barbaric than those waged for other motives. The Jewish invasion of Canaan, the Moslem expansion of the faith, Christian holy wars, and especially the Crusades, had a large element of barbarism in them. He regarded the conquest of the Promised Land as a war of extermination in which 'the common notions of humanity and justice' were forgotten, while 'the barbarians of Palestine' exercised 'as much compassion towards their idolatrous enemies as they had ever shown to their friends or countrymen.' For examples of the fanatical and furious spirit of the Moslems, one can turn to a number of places in *The Decline and Fall*. 'In the first year of the first caliph, his lieutenant Caled, the sword of God and the scourge of the infidels, advanced to the banks of the Euphrates, and reduced the cities of Anbar and Hira.' The victors were elated by the slaughter of "an immense multitude of infidels" and the acquisition of innumerable quantities of spoil, while the rifling of the great Persian palace during the sack of Ctesiphon, is itself a barbaric tale: 'The naked robbers of the desert were suddenly enriched beyond the measure of their hope or knowledge,' shouting 'with religious transport, "This... is the promise of the apostle of God."'

1. *DF*, liv, VI, 129.
No less barbarism had been displayed by the Christians throughout history. Seven centuries after these Moslem barbarities, Ladislaus, king of Naples, named by the pope as 'general of the church', intervened in the Great Schism. 'Besieging Rome by land and water, he thrice entered the gates as a barbarian conqueror; profaned the altars, violated the virgins, pillaged the merchants, performed his devotions at St. Peter's and left a garrison in the castle of St. Angelo.' The association of barbarism with religion is clearly made here and in other places, such as the comparison of the sack of Rome by Charles V with that by the Goths, a comparison decidedly to the advantage of the latter. When reminding his reader in the final volume of this contrast, Gibbon wrote: 'In the history of the Gothic siege, I have compared the barbarians with the subjects of Charles V.' And, as Stephen Graubard has noted: 'Such comparisons, however accurate, are intended principally to communicate moral outrage about Christian behaviour."

The barbarity of holy wars and forced conversions has already been noticed. But a reference to the theme of 'barbarism and religion' is brought out in Gibbon's examination of the 'Justice of the Crusades'. Writing of the specious claims made by the crusaders to justify the slaughter or subjugation of unbelievers, he went on to add: 'Above four hundred years before the first crusade, the eastern and western provinces of the Roman empire had been acquired about the same time, and in the same manner, by the barbarians of Germany and Arabia.' The implication is clear: the new or Christian barbarians acted no better than their heathen predecessors.

1. DF, lxx, VII, 297.
2. DF, xxxi, III, 347.
3. DF, lxx, VII, 308, n.102.
5. DF, lviii, VI, 287.
Within the Christian world, warring sects are shown displaying a singular degree of barbarism. Africa was the scene of some of the bitterest conflicts between Catholics and Arians, when the fanatic and ruthless Vandal king, Genseric, having as a youth 'renounced the orthodox communion,' became the scourge of his Catholic subjects. He is portrayed by Gibbon as a barbarian in name and nature, 'furious and formidable' in his language, fierce and ambitious as a conqueror, and possessing 'a ferocious mind...incapable of compassion.' But both sides in this religious struggle were barbarous, inflicting, when they had the upper hand, inhuman cruelties on the minds and bodies of their opponents. So too, in the Eastern Empire, barbarity characterised the prolonged conflict between these two religious factions, which ended in the overthrow of Arainism and placed Gregory Nazianzen triumphantly on the archiepiscopal throne. And amid 'the tumultuous voice of rage, grief, astonishment, and despair,' Gregory declared that 'on the memorable day of his installation, the capital of the East wore the appearance of a city taken by storm, and in the hands of a Barbarian conqueror.' Yet it was simply celebrating the triumph of orthodoxy with the support of a Christian emperor.

The Christians are also cast in the role of barbarians for their destruction of monuments and works of pagan antiquity. Gibbon saw this as another product of fanaticism, a sort of gratuitous barbarism, which, having triumphed over paganism in the religious sphere, signalled the triumph by destroying some of the treasures of the old culture. Islam, except for a few extremists, he thought free from

1. DF, xxxvii, IV, 89; see also the following pages of that chapter.
2. Theodosius had been baptized into the orthodox faith early that year, A.D. 380. See DF, xxvii, III, 148, 155.
this vindictiveness;¹ but, in acquitting the Moslems of such 'destructive zeal', he was reminded of the fate of the Alexandrian library and 'the mischievous bigotry of the Christians who studied to destroy the monuments of idolatry.'² He lamented the empty shelves of the great library which had been 'pillaged or destroyed' and threw the blame on Theophilus, archbishop of Alexandria in the late fourth century, 'a bold, bad man, whose hands were alternately polluted with gold and with blood,' and who brought about the destruction of the temple of Serapis. 'Surely,' Gibbon felt, 'the compositions of ancient genius,' might 'have been excepted from the wreck of idolatry,' accomplished by 'either the zeal or the avarice of the archbishop.'³

And what of the capital of the world, to which Gibbon returned to bring his narrative to a close? He had earlier shown himself unwilling to believe the common view of Pope Gregory's mutilation of the temples and statues of ancient Rome, and of his burning of the Palatine library. Yet, while admitting that the evidence of 'the barbarian' pope's 'destructive rage is doubtful and recent,' there was the fact that Gregory's writings 'reveal his implacable aversion to the monuments of classical genius; and he points his severest censure against the profane learning of a bishop who taught the art of grammar, studied the Latin poets, and pronounced with the same voice, the praises of Jupiter and those of Christ.'⁴ In the eyes of Gibbon, the eighteenth-century gentleman scholar, who breathed the air of classical Rome, this pope

¹. See DF, li, V, 482-3.
². DF, li, V, 483 and n. 140.
³. DF, xxviii, III, 211-2.
⁴. DF, xlv, V, 33-4. 'Gregory may not have burned the Palatine library, as John of Salisbury relates,' said Rand, 'but really he did not need to burn it. His programme, if universally accepted, would automatically close the doors of the collectors of ancient books and leave their treasures to moulder on their shelves.' Founders of the Middle Ages. N.Y., 1929, p. 249.
was potentially, and indeed intellectually, if not in actual practice, a 'barbarian'.

In a comparison between Rome and Constantinople, Gibbon borrowed from the lament of 'an eloquent Greek, Emanuel Chrysoloras, over the capital of the East at the beginning of the fifteenth century: 'The works of ancient sculpture had been defaced by Christian zeal or barbaric violence; the fairest structures were demolished; and the marbles of Paros or Numidia were burnt for lime or applied to the meanest uses.'

In similar vein, Gibbon lamented with Poggio the ruins of ancient Rome. The city and its buildings had, in the main, been spared by Alaric and Genseric, 'and the momentary resentment of Totila was disarmed by his own temper and the advice of his friends and enemies.' Where did the chief responsibility for the destruction lie? 'From these innocent barbarians,' Gibbon concluded, 'the reproach may be transferred to the Catholics of Rome. The statues, altars, and houses of the daemons were an abomination in their eyes; and in the absolute command of the city they might labour with zeal and perseverance to erase the idolatry of their ancestors.'

Yet their culpability did not seem to extend beyond 'the moments of heathen superstition.' However, in writing of the decay of the Coliseum, Gibbon alleged that 'whatever was precious, or portable, or profane, the statues of gods and heroes, and the costly ornaments of sculpture...beame the first prey of the barbarians or the Christians; while, 'of the present ruin the nephews of Paul the Third are the guilty

1. DF, lxvi, VII, 140, and see p.138, n.1.
3. DF, lxxi, VII, 329.
agents; and every traveller who views the Farnese palace may curse the sacrilege of these upstart princes.\textsuperscript{1} It is clear from such passages that Gibbon not only linked 'barbarism' and 'religion' in his reflections on the ruin of Rome but that, in certain circumstances, he expected much the same conduct from both.

Most of Gibbon's reactions to the triumph of religion which we have examined have fallen on the debit side of his moral balance sheet. Yet to make good his claim as an impartial historian, he was determined to render a factual and objective account of the growth and corruption of the church and his endeavour or his achievement have been acknowledged by such diverse writers as J.M. Robertson and John Henry Newman.\textsuperscript{2} If there were defects in the impartiality of his presentation, he did at least suggest some points to the credit of both Christianity and other religions.

He expressed an admiration for certain features of Zoroastrianism, listing examples of its practical and social morality which he considered worthy of praise.\textsuperscript{3} He stressed also some of the advantages brought by Islam, such as its civilizing effect on the tribes of Arabia. The prophet, he claimed, had 'breathed among the faithful a spirit of charity and friendship, recommended the practice of the social virtues, and checked, by his laws and precepts, the thirst of revenge and oppression of widows and orphans.'\textsuperscript{4} He mentioned also the good

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{1} DF, Ixxi, VII, 333; though Gibbon admitted the evidence for their plundering of the Coliseum to furnish materials for their palace was slight. See p.333, n. 73.
\item \textsuperscript{3} DF, viii, I, 217-8.
\item \textsuperscript{4} DF, 1, V, 421.
\end{itemize}
government and resulting prosperity of certain countries under their Moslem conquerors.\(^1\) There is, doubtless, often an element of polemic in Gibbon's commendation. In his day Islam tended to fill the vacancy for an Oriental myth which a disillusionment with the Chinese 'as a model of moral virtue...and of secular tolerance,' had created and which the Enlightenment sought as one of its ideal prototypes. Its historians, as Bernard Lewis, has pointed out, were attempting 'to correct the negative stereotypes of the Middle Ages and to recognize the contributions of Islamic civilization to mankind.' Furthermore, Islam and its founder, lacking the social and legal protection afforded in Europe to Christianity, 'thus served as an admirable vehicle for anti-religious and anti-Christian polemic. Gibbon occasionally accomplished this purpose by attacking Islam while meaning Christianity, more frequently by praising Islam as an oblique criticism of Christian usage, belief, and practice.'\(^2\) Even making allowance for this ploy, it is significant that most of his evaluative summaries of the legacy of Mahomet and his successors are examples of impartiality and preserve a strictly judicial balance of praise and blame.

Some further entries on the credit side of religion are to be found in Gibbon's treatment of Christianity. They may be few, often a little grudging, especially in comparison with his numerous adverse criticisms, but they are there nonetheless. They include the tributes to some of the 'saints', notably Augustine, Athanasius and Bernard for qualities like incorruptibility, 'undaunted courage', and even mental energy and

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1. e.g. DF.; i, V, 441; and particularly the prosperity and religious toleration enjoyed in Spain, ii, V, 514-7.
2. 'Gibbon on Muhammad', in Bowersock, op.cit., p. 70.
eloquence. 'A philosophic age,' he admitted, 'has abolished, with too liberal and indiscriminate disdain, the honours of these spiritual heroes.' Ulphilas, 'the bishop and apostle of the Goths', he acclaimed for his 'blameless life and indefatigable zeal', which won his people's 'love and reverence.' So too, in contrast to the forced conversions and religious wars, he acknowledged 'a purer spirit of religion' in the relief and the freeing of captives, for in this a ruler like Heraclius showed 'the charitable spirit of a Christian hero.'

Beyond giving honour to the individual, Gibbon recognised the moral and civilizing effects of Christianity itself, and nowhere more than among these Goths. 'Christianity, which opened the gates of Heaven to the Barbarians, introduced an important change in their moral and political condition.' Not only did they receive 'the use of letters', but 'their minds were insensibly enlarged by the distant view of history, of nature, of the arts, and of society.' And even 'in the most corrupt state of Christianity,' they 'might learn justice from the law, and mercy from the gospel;' and, however far practice fell short of precept, they were, at least, 'sometimes restrained by conscience, and frequently punished by remorse.'

As in Gibbon's censures, so in his praise of Christianity, we are left in no doubt that it is the moralist who is passing judgement. He is concerned primarily with the cultural and moral effects of religion on these barbarians, a pragmatic attitude characteristic of

1. _DF_, lix, VI, 346. He is here writing particularly of Bernard of Clairvaux.
2. _DF_, xxxvii, IV, 82.
3. _DF_, xlvi, V, 89; and see xlv, V. 19, where the 'Christian hero', Tiberius Constantine, is said to have imitated 'the purer virtues of the Antonines.'
his approach to religion as an aspect of manners. The contrast between this primary, and what he saw as the incidental or 'supernatural' side of religion, emerges in his discussion of the various motives and influences behind barbarian conversions. 'The moral precepts of the Gospel,' he wrote, 'were protected by the extravagant virtues of the monks; and a spiritual theology was supported by the visible power of relics and the pomp of religious worship.' By contrast, it was the moral rather than the spiritual side of Christianity which he acclaimed, and its morality was of the social kind, not that associated with cloistered or 'monkish virtues'.

The conversion of the barbarians also brought benefits which transcended their own society, since it made them members of a wider, European community. This 'Christian republic', whose union was cemented by 'the perpetual correspondence of the Latin clergy, the frequent pilgrimages to Rome and Jerusalem, and the growing authority of the Popes,' had for Gibbon, a positive value as a step towards a common culture, and ideal which he cherished in 'the great republic of Europe' in his own day. It is a testimony to his desire to achieve impartiality that, however much he deprecated pilgrimages and papal power in themselves, he recognised their contribution to this ideal, since they 'gradually produced the similar manners, and common jurisprudence, which have distinguished, from the rest of mankind, the independent, and even hostile, nations of modern Europe.' In his 'General Observations', where he optimistically pictured this 'great

1. As he wrote in 1764: 'A valuable work might be written giving a philosophical picture of religions, their genius, reasonings and influence on the manners, government, philosophy, and poetry of their respective votaries.' ('An Examination of Mallet's Introduction to the History of Denmark', MW, III, 231.

2. DF, xxxvii, IV, 84 (Section headed, 'Motives of their faith').

3. DF, xxxvii, IV, 86-7.
republic' raised above the threat of future barbarian invasions, he wrote once again of the softening influence of Christianity on these once ferocious peoples. At the bottom of this list, and as an expression of faint praise, he gave Christianity some credit for breaking the violence of the fall of the empire whose decline it had hastened. Furthermore, Christianity, over the last few centuries, seemed to him to have shed some of its former prejudice and repression. He was aware of 'a secret reformation...silently working in the bosom of the reformed churches; many weeds of prejudice were eradicated; and the disciples of Erasmus diffused a spirit of freedom and moderation. The liberty of conscience has been claimed as a common benefit, an inalienable right.'

In the chapter following that from which this statement is taken, Gibbon examined the expansion of Christianity over Western and Northern Europe in the ninth, tenth and eleventh centuries, and took the opportunity to weigh the pros and cons of this important event. After acknowledging that the monks were initially prompted by pure motives and active courage to visit the tents and huts of the barbarians, he recounted the now familiar story of rapid degeneration into superstition and forced conversions. The whole Baltic coast was 'invaded under the standard of the cross,' and this made way for 'the reign of idolatry.' If the spiritual effect was negative, 'truth and condour' had to admit that 'many temporal benefits' came to these Christians of the North. And even if the precepts of the gospel could not subdue 'the rage for

1. DF, xxxviii, IV, 175.
2. DF, liv, VI, 133-4.
3. DF, lv, VI, 168ff.
war, inherent in the human species,' and bring about peace, at least, 'the admission of the barbarians into the pale of civil and ecclesiastical society delivered Europe from the depredations, by sea and land, of the Normans, the Hungarians, and the Russians, who learned to spare their brethren and cultivate their possessions. The establishment of law and order was promoted by the influence of the clergy; and the rudiments of art and science were introduced into the savage countries of the globe.'¹ Here we find once more 'the impartial historian' searching, even in the triumph of religion, for what he can acknowledge as positive gains.

It is in the context of a plea for impartiality that we find his famous remark that, 'to a philosophic eye the vices of the clergy are far less dangerous than their virtues.'² The epigram is often quoted but seldom expounded. Its immediate setting, as Owen Chadwick reminds us, is often forgotten by those who use it.³ It is that of the papal disorders of the tenth century, where, after ridiculing the legend of Pope Joan, Gibbon referred to the actual influence of the 'sister prostitutes, Marozia and Theodora', in making popes out of 'the most strenuous of their lovers.' The 'rare genealogy' of the papacy in this century, according to Gibbon, included three descendants of Marozia who all occupied the throne of St. Peter.⁴ 'In its context,' Chadwick noted, 'the celebrated mot was Gibbon's way of rebuking the Protestant historians for their cruder anti-papal prejudice and of subtly distinguishing his claim to detachment.'⁵ The passage is one

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¹. DF, lv, VI, 171-2.  
². DF, xlix, V, 318-9.  
³. 'Gibbon and the Church Historians', in Bowersock, op.cit., p.224.  
⁴. The third, her great-grandson, however, was never pope. See Bury's note, DF, V, 318, n.140a.  
of a number in which he deprecated the partisan exploitation of papal misdemeanours, clearly dissociating himself from such a use of history.

But there is more to 'the celebrated mot' than this. We have noticed Gibbon's exposure of the vices of the clergy, above all of the monks and popes. We have examined his rejection of what he considered a false scale of moral values associated with traditional and institutional Christianity. Here, in an aphoristic statement, he linked these two aspects to express what he saw as an important truth. The mot does not stand alone. It is merely a neat, succinct expression of a moral indictment which runs through The Decline and Fall.

In the first place, the Catholic Church has admitted the failings of popes and 'has accused' in 'every age...the vices of the cloister.' At the same time, it has exalted and emulated their seeming virtues. In this, 'to the philosophic eye,' lies the danger: 'specious virtue' would be substituted for the genuine. From the standpoint 'of a philosopher' also, Gibbon viewed the 'natural descent' of the monks from their 'painful and dangerous virtue to the common vices of humanity.' The vices are merely 'common' and human, the virtue 'dangerous' as it placed an unnatural strain on ordinary mortals. And in writing of the conversion of the barbarians, Gibbon juxtaposed 'the moral precepts of the Gospel' and 'the extravagant virtues of the monks,' while he linked 'monk' and 'sophist' in a reference to the education of an

1. Chadwick gives some instances, op.cit., pp. 222ff; see also DF, xlix, V, 318, n.140 and lxx, VII, 310, n.106.
2. See DF, xxxvii, IV, 75 and Memoirs, p. 67.
3. DF, xxxvii, IV, 75-6.
4. DF, xxxvii, IV, 84; already quoted in the sentence above, p.385.
Eastern emperor, whose 'character was degraded, rather than ennobled by the virtues of a monk and the learning of a sophist.' In a similar way, 'fictitious virtues', those 'of a convent', though devoid of moral value, deceived such noble souls as Godfrey of Bouillon.

Gibbon's contention amounts to this. While rabid protestants exclaim with holy horror but also with 'malicious pleasure', over the scandals of the papacy, and use even such a 'poor engine of controversy' to attack their opponents, the dispassionate and 'philosophic eye' sees these things in their true perspective. Certainly there were bad popes and bad monks. History does not deny it. And no one is deceived by it. Vice is ugly and stands openly condemned. What is more dangerous, because it is more deceptive and because it is sanctified by sacred authority, is 'fictitious virtue', or evil masquerading as good. Only the discerning, the enlightened, the moral philosopher, can detect these 'specious virtues'. So, towards the end of The Decline and Fall, in a passage which echoes 'the celebrated mot', with its reference to the outrageous conduct of the popes, Gibbon admitted that 'the sanctity of the office might be degraded by the personal vices of the man,' but once again added a moral rider that 'the scandals of the tenth century were obliterated by the austere and more dangerous virtues of Gregory the Seventh and his successors.' Nothing could make clearer the stance of the moralist towards what he saw as a set of false values which the triumph of religion' had imposed on the Christian world.

1. DF, xlviii, V, 238.
2. DF, Iviii, VI, 289.
3. DF, xliiv, V, 318 and n. 140.
4. DF, lxix, VII, 222.
From this standpoint, Gibbon's History, it has been suggested 'sounds like a moral treatise differing only from the work of some Christian apologist in that he has reversed the traditional values.'

How far does this reversal of values, which reflected the general perspective of his own century, satisfy us as doing justice to Christianity and the so-called age of faith which followed its official acceptance? How far do his moral judgements in this area now appear to be just?

While Gibbon's achievement as an historian, perhaps the greatest of historians, is almost universally acknowledged, certain of his assumptions and conclusions have been widely challenged from his day to ours. The challenge has come from learned editors of such divergent ideologies as Milman and Bury from most of those writers who, in the first half of the present century, have probed specific questions concerning the later Roman Empire and the middle ages, and more recently from Lynn White and the group of historians who set out to re-examine 'Gibbon's problem after two centuries'. Such a re-examination was felt necessary not so much because of advances in scholarship and methodology over the past two hundred years, as because of altered standards of judgement. 'Essentially,' they concluded, 'it is neither new facts nor more careful appraisal of facts known to the late eighteenth-century which compels

3. The areas of challenge can be seen broadly in the introductions to their editions and more specifically in particular notes to the text, e.g. Bury's claim that 'Gibbon's account of the internal history of the Empire after Heraclius is not only superficial; it gives an entirely false impression of the facts,' though he found some excuse for this. (DF, Intr. I, xvi).
4. Such writers as Baynes, Oman, Rostovtzeff, Bark and others concerned in the Pirenne debate.
us to disagree with Gibbon's perspective and judgments: it is our
different mode of vision.'

The now rejected mode of vision was seen to rest on 'absolutist' or
'exclusive sets of values' belonging to men steeped in the humanist
tradition. By contrast, 'the pluralism that increasingly has come to
dominate the minds of Western men since Gibbon's day...insists on the
spiritual necessity of judging one's own relationship to everything',
whether 'a work of art, a political system, or a religious belief,' and
on 'an obligation of understanding from the inside even, or especially,
the things we do not like.' The present approach was seen also to
reject the temptation to measure the height of a civilization in terms
of the old absolutist values, and to avoid a rigid 'periodization'
of the past and similar interpretative fallacies. Yet, according to
Charles T. Wood even historians impelled to undertake such a revaluation
by their awareness of these revolutionary changes in attitude, still
suffer 'from the limitations imposed by Gibbon and his contemporaries
in their interpretation of what happened to Western civilization after
the happy, though silver age of the Antonines.'

Thus, in the broadest sense, the altered 'mode of vision' concerns
the question of the middle ages as a whole. The historical problem
for Gibbon and his contemporaries was that 'cultural trough' between

2. Ibid., pp. 310, 194.
3. Charles T. Wood, review of The Transformation of the Roman World,
4. Ibid., p. 145.
Andrew Losky in his Introduction to The Transformation of the
Roman World, also uses the term 'trough'.
those two peaks, their own Augustan age and that of the legendary
Antonines. 1 With very rare exceptions, notably Edmund Burke’s little
Abridgment of English History 2 they found it hardly possible to write
of medieval institutions with...intelligence and appreciation. 3
While epigrams do not tell the whole truth, they are a useful index to
the fairly general consensus of an age and the 'barbarism and religion'
sentiment, echoed in numerous writings, is neatly summed up in Pope’s
familiar couplet:

A second Deluge Learning thus o'er-run,
And the Monks finished what the Goths begun. 4
And, if Gibbon in drawing his History to a close, conceded that 'the
darkness of the middle ages exhibits some scenes not unworthy of our
notice,' 5 the vast extent of this dark period was a solemn reminder to
his readers that it had taken civilization a millenium and a half to
recover its true basis and values. In this sense Gibbon is seen by Lynn
White as one of those makers of masterpieces who have 'cannibalized
the past.' 6 It is a natural corollary of his undisputed position as
historical spokesman 7 for his century and his pre-eminence as a writer,

1. Without much contemporary evidence for such a view, this age had,
long before Gibbon, been idealised into something of a myth. To
Toynbee (op.cit., IV, 60) and Walbank (The Awful Revolution, Liver-
pool, 1969, p.19) it was at best an 'indian summer'.
2. 'An Essay towards an Abridgment of English History', Works, London,
1842, 2 vols. II, 503-596.
3. Lord Acton, Essays on Church and State, ed. D. Woodruff, London,
1952, p.455. See, however, T.P. Peardom, The Transition in English
Historical Writing, 1760-1830. Columbia U.P., 1933, especially
chaps. IV, V; also H. Weisinger, 'The Middle Ages and the Late
Eighteenth-Century Historians', Philological Quarterly, Vol. XXVII,
5. DF, 1xix, VII, 219.
inevitable reaction against the mediaeval view of life' which 'still
obscures the thought of many outside the ranks of historical students,'
de Burgh claimed that 'Gibbon did more than anyone to fix this
prejudice in the mind of the public. W.G. de Burgh, The Legacy of
7. As far as 'the public' is concerned Gibbon is the sole survivor of the triumvirate of historians and the only one widely read.
that his authority gave a lasting influence to his pronouncements. Thus, as Bury pointed out, his 'designation of the story of the later Empire as "a uniform tale of weakness and misery" is one of the most untrue, and most effective, judgments ever uttered by a thoughtful historian.' The effectiveness and influence of his judgements is thus not necessarily dependent on their truth.

There is no doubt, however, that Gibbon's fine historical sense enabled him for the most part to transcend the bias and limitations of his age which are nevertheless enshrined in some of his categorisations of the middle ages and in some of his most quotable and therefore most quoted remarks. It enabled him to produce an unrivalled and largely impartial account of what to him was a period of civilization in decline. But our admiration for the masterpiece need not make us unaware of its limitations. We can, I feel, at times detect in the historian a tension between an impulse to censure or ridicule what struck him as contemptible or irrational and a strong desire for strict impartiality. This tension, only half resolved, is felt when his philosophic scrutiny is directed to certain features of medieval life and thought or when his distinctly Western telescope is trained on the capital of the East. But it is never more apparent than when he is dealing with religion wherever it is found. And nowhere does the irony, the contempt, or the pose of the candid inquirer break through more consistently than in these parts of his work.

It is here, therefore, particularly that we sense a need for revaluation in attitudes and judgements and this is all the more apparent

1. DF, Introd., I, xvi.
since religion is a major element in The Decline and Fall. In fact, some writers have seen the religious problem as fundamental to the whole work. At all events the subject occupies eleven whole chapters and significant sections of others, apart from the numerous references to religious matters which arise in the course of the narrative. But once again, it is not so much facts as our viewpoint which has changed. The altered viewpoint was already making itself felt before the beginning of this century. The 'candid and rational inquiry' into early Christianity which had appeared 'uncandid' and 'disingenuous' to Milman appeared to Bury in much the same light: 'Our point of view has altered, and if Gibbon were writing now, the tone of his "candid and rational inquiry" would certainly be different. His manner would not be that of sometimes open, sometimes transparently veiled dislike.' The approach Bury saw as appropriate to the changed historical and critical climate included greater detachment and tolerance and a more 'unobtrusive scepticism... which seems to render offensive warfare superfluous.'

While we may accept the general truth of Bury's verdict, based on the most scholarly investigation of one historian's work by another, it is also true that the point of view has again shifted since Bury's Cambridge inaugural lecture and his conception of history as a science. We might now qualify his notion of 'detachment' and, as White and his fellow historians have suggested, think rather in terms of looking at one's personal relation to the objects of inquiry and of an obligation

1. See e.g. Giorgio Falco, La polemica sul medioevo, Torino, 1933, reissue of 1977, p.197. ('Il problema religioso è uno dei tratti fondamentali.')
2. Bury's Introd. to 1896 ed. of DF, I, xxxix. "Though the moral of Gibbon's work has not lost its meaning,' he concluded, 'yet it is quite otherwise with the particular treatment of Christian theology and Christian institutions.'
to understand from the inside. And while we may agree with Bury that 'neither the historian nor the man of letters will any longer subscribe, without a thousand reserves, to the theological chapters of *The Decline and Fall* we may also wish to qualify the other part of his assertion, that 'no discreet inquirer would go there for his ecclesiastical history.'\(^1\) If he is discreet, we might reply, he may safely go there for the facts, since Gibbon vindicated his scrupulous use of the original authorities to everyone's satisfaction,\(^2\) but he will use a thousand reserves in dealing with Gibbon's interpretation and conclusions.

Nevertheless we are still inclined to ask, how could he with his obvious antipathies produce a satisfactory history of the church? But then, the greatness and penetration of *The Decline and Fall* itself have surprised generations of men from Horace Walpole onward.\(^3\) And Lytton Strachey, in many ways a writer after Gibbon's own heart, considered it a paradox that such a masterpiece should come from the pen of that rather vain and pompous little eighteenth-century gentleman: 'the point of his achievement lay in the extreme improbability of it.'\(^4\) The paradox becomes even more striking when we consider the ecclesiastical sections of his work.

A modern ecclesiastical historian has put the question in this form:

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2. As witness the finality of his *Vindication*, the discomfiture of most of his critics and the weight of historical opinion from his time to the present.
4. 'Gibbon', *Portraits in Miniature*, London, 1931, p. 159. 'The utter incongruity of those combining elements,' he continued, 'produced the masterpiece.'
'Could Gibbon with his profound Enlightenment presuppositions - a lack of sympathy for any kind of superstition or excess in religion to the point of disparaging even such an institution as monasticism, and with his emphasis on the rational to the exclusion of an understanding of the specifically religious values in Christianity's development - could Gibbon, given these assumptions, write satisfactory church history?'

Professor Geanakoplos, after an examination of Gibbon's treatment of the East-West schism, answered his own question with a qualified affirmative. He found that Gibbon displayed his customary diligence in seeking out primary sources, a discerning use of them, an objectivity beyond that of his Catholic or Protestant predecessors and, in certain instances, a surprising anticipation of the findings of recent scholarship. He even seemed to accept the sincerity of the monks whose delusions he ridiculed and he brilliantly conveyed the issues of theological debate, accurately setting down 'the subtle differences between essence and energies in the Godhead.'

What then were his limitations? It was not just a matter of the 'many basic flaws' and 'great gaps' in the Byzantine sections of the work. The deficiency was not so much historical and technical as dispositional: a lack of understanding in certain cases of what he found ridiculous and a failure to give credit to certain things for which he had no sympathy. Milman, as a scholarly editor, made a comment much to this effect in a note near the beginning of Gibbon's

fifteenth chapter: 'Divest this whole passage of the latent sarcasm betrayed by the subsequent tone of the whole disquisition, and it might commence a Christian history, written in the most Christian spirit of candour.' But is latent sarcasm compatible either with candour and sympathetic understanding or with that ability recommended by Gibbon in his Essai of getting inside one's historical characters?'

It is this failure which is one of the most conspicuous weaknesses in Gibbon's treatment of religion. Despite his interest in the subject and its prominence in The Decline and Fall, it is essentially the outward and visible side that we are shown. Did he ever penetrate or even seem fully aware of another side, of the deep springs of religious experience? Religion appears as an aspect of manners, a political issue, the subject of controversies and verbal duels, or as a matter of biographical interest in the lives of religious leaders. Any material giving insight into the inner and spiritual life of the early Christians, the deeper motivation behind the missions to the barbarians, the dynamic experience shared by St. Bernard, St. Francis and even Luther, remains to the historian and thus to his reader a closed book. The result is that the more sympathetic reaction sometimes shown towards such notable figures is largely for qualities not in themselves religious: statesmanlike abilities in some of the popes, fearlessness in Athanasius, courageous patriotism in Leo, bishop of Rome, tenacity and opposition to autocratic control in Ambrose, or praise for the learning of the Maurists and the accuracy of Tillemont.

This concentration on the externals of religion is not hard to account for. In the first place, it is the manifestations of religion in the spheres of manners and morals, of politics and war, which are seen as the real business of the historian, who attends synods merely to observe 'the principle of discord' at work and then to relate it to imperial decline; who considered the influence of popes, pilgrimages and crusades from the same motive, the evangelisation of the barbarians in terms of its social and cultural effects, and a leader like Athanasius as a rare study in psychology. After all, it was only such observable facts as these which were readily accessible to the objective historian.

In the second place, there was the virtual impossibility of empathising with the spiritual side of men and movements. The intellectual climate of the age, its blend of deism, unenthusiastic Anglicanism and overenthusiastic Methodism, together with Gibbon's personal religious history, all militated against such an understanding. In a sense, this deficiency is no more culpable than colourblindness or one's unfamiliarity with conditions at the South Pole, but it is for all that a limitation. A.H.M. Jones, in his re-examination of a subject which forms a pivotal part of Gibbon's work, namely Constantine and the Conversion of Europe, both recommended The Decline and Fall to his readers and at the same time found it necessary to forewarn them 'against Gibbon's greatest weakness, which is not so much anti-Christian bias as a temperamental incapacity to understand religion.'

1. See DF, xlvii, V, 103-4; liv, VI, 318: 'the spiritual wars' disturbing 'the peace and unity of the church' had such a bearing on the decline and fall of the empire, 'that the historian has too often been compelled to attend the synods, to explore the creeds, &c.'
2. See DF, xxi, II, 383.
This incapacity is apparent in a number of places. We have already considered the pragmatic scale of values which Gibbon applied to Christian people and institutions. But did he look below the surface of things? What, beneath the rites and observances in an apparently topsy-turvy system of priorities, inspired the Christian to strive after the highest, even if he often fell short of the ideal? And this is of vital concern to the moralist. Thus it has been suggested that, though Gibbon rightly 'links the Christian reform of morality to repentance,' he underestimates the depth and extent of that spiritual change of heart; that he 'does not sufficiently analyse, because he does not sufficiently understand Christian ethics, which is an ethic of spiritual perfection modelled' on a perfect 'mediator between God and man.'

Whatever the truth of this explanation, there is an obvious failure 'to understand from the inside' this as well as other aspects of religion.

The same failure also led to some dubious conclusions which appeared to indicate a moral blind spot in the historian. Gibbon could understand and applaud tenacious resistance and even suffering in the cause of liberty; he seemed unable to appreciate the same qualities in the adherence to one's faith. Looking at a stubborn and intractable group within the Roman Empire, he referred to 'the inflexibility and intolerance of Christian zeal.' Bishop Watson, the most moderate and balanced of his early critics, whose reply he warmly received, saw it rather as unshakable conviction and attachment to truth. Watson agreed with Gibbon's statement of the facts but differed completely in his

interpretation: 'You deduce it from the Jewish religion; I would refer it to a more obvious source, a full persuasion of the truth of Christianity.'

The outstanding instance of Gibbon's concern with externals at the expense of deeper understanding and sympathy is his reassessment of the scope of the early Christian persecutions. His account is careful and scholarly as he sought to present the matter in what he saw as its true perspective by rejecting the traditional exaggeration of the extent and numbers. Leaning heavily on Dodwell's work, 'On the small number of martyrs', he presented its findings in a persuasive form. It has been suggested that Dodwell wrote in the spirit of a special pleader, with a tendency to minimize rather than exaggerate, while Gibbon has been seen in the role of devil's advocate in his treatment of these persecutions.

Whatever the true facts and figures may be, many readers have found a lack of feeling in Gibbon's account. He tends to reduce suffering to a mere statistic and that statistic to a polemic in which a comparison with later Catholic persecutions serves to reduce the relative culpabil-

1. Richard Watson, An Apology for Christianity, Cantab., 1776, p.8. The whole context of Watson's reply to this first of Gibbon's 'five causes' needs to be studied to see how he read no derogatory sense into terms like 'inflexible'.
2. Gibbon acknowledged his debt to Dodwell's Paucitate Martyrum (DP, xvi, II, 95, n.43). Davis confronted Gibbon with 'Instances of Plagiarism from Dodwell' in his Examination of the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Chapters of Mr. Gibbon's History, &c., London, 1778, pp.229-230 (incorrect pagination), while Chelsum pointed to an example of Dodwell's use of evidence as 'more accurate' than Gibbon's (Remarks on the Two Last Chapters of Mr. Gibbon's History, &c. Oxon, 1778, p.206, n.8.)
4. See Falco, La Polemica sul medioevo, p. 268 ('Nello....le cause, l'estensione, la durata delle persecuzioni, il Gibbon fa la parte dell'avvocato del diavolo.').
ity of pagan Rome. It is, of course, hard to generalise about the reactions of readers and critics to this chapter, but Lecky, who cannot be accused of religious bias, was moved to write of it in terms beyond his usual moderation: 'Notwithstanding the great knowledge and critical acumen displayed in this chapter, few persons, I imagine, can rise from its perusal without a feeling both of repulsion and dissatisfaction. The complete absence of all sympathy with the heroic courage manifested by the martyrs, and the frigid and, in truth, most unphilosophic severity with which the historian has weighed the words and actions of men engaged in the agonies of a deadly struggle, must repel every generous nature, while the persistence with which he estimates persecutions by the number of deaths rather than by the amount of suffering, diverts the mind from the really distinctive atrocities of the Pagan persecutions.'

The reader of The Decline and Fall, and specifically of chapters xv and xvi, can hardly doubt that the author found it harder to show the strengths of Christianity than its weaknesses, and he must also suspect that the intention behind his impartiality in presenting the other, or neglected side of Christianity, was to emphasise these weaknesses. The impression is confirmed though not created by Gibbon's confessed adherence to the old 'Pagan establishment' of Rome. Nor is the underlying reason always to be sought in the tension between antipathy and impartiality, or in a valiant but unsuccessful attempt to discover some item for the credit side of his moral balance sheet on Christianity.


2. Letters, No. 771, 5/2/91, III, 216.
At times there seems to be a manipulation, though never any falsification, of the facts to produce the desired effect. At least it is certain that other church historians surveying the same primary sources can produce a rather different story. The process is perhaps most readily apparent to Gibbon's editors, admirers of the great historian, who have scrutinised his text and weighed his authorities page by page and note by note. Milman, himself a writer of church history, and an editor always scrupulous, guarded, and determined to be as impartial as the historian on whom he was commenting, sometimes felt obliged to point to certain misleading, even inaccurate, impressions produced by Gibbon's presentation.

In the case of his treatment of early Christian expansion, this amounts to almost a sleight of hand or a device typical of a clever politician. 'The art of Gibbon, or at least the unfair impression created by these two memorable chapters, consists in confounding together in one indistinguishable mass,' what are, in fact, two quite distinct matters: 'the origin and apostolic propagation of the Christian religion with its later progress.' Gibbon's plan was to begin in medias res, that is to say, in the post-apostolic period, so that 'the main question, the divine origin of the religion is dexterously eluded or speciously conceded,' while his very dark presentation of 'the failings and follies of succeeding ages' serves to cast their shadow 'back on the primitive period of Christianity.'

So too, the darker aspects of Christianity can be made to appear

1. DF, ed. Milman, II, 165, note 'a'.
typical by selecting the words or actions of extreme or unattractive persons as representative. There is the familiar use of 'the stern Tertullian' as spokesman for the church as a whole, and this is but one instance of a wider tendency: 'Gibbon has too often allowed himself to consider the peculiar notions of certain Fathers of the Church as inherent in Christianity.' And this, as Milman pointed out, 'is not accurate.' Similarly, E.K. Rand, in his lectures on Founders of the Middle Ages, commended to his audience Gibbon's treatment of monasticism as 'a brilliant account of the weaker side' of that movement. And he went on to note that this is one of the few places where Gibbon can be charged 'with a suppressio veri; his material is drawn mainly from Cassian and the worst parts of Jerome. In a word, he does what a good satirist ought to do, but not a good historian.'

Monasticism is a very significant example of an institution in which historian after historian has discovered positive values which Gibbon either could not or would not see. Lecky, writing just a hundred years after Gibbon, castigated the church, the ascetic and monastic life, in no less outspoken terms. Yet he went on to indicate a nobler side to be seen in both the moral example of self-denial at a much needed time, and also the practical channels into which the monastic spirit in the West was directed. For Gibbon, however, monasticism was doubly damned by its withdrawal from public life and by its set of 'fictitious virtues', not to say also its instances of actual vice. These facts obscured for him its contribution in areas of life which he could appreciate, such as the

1. Ibid, II, 167, note 'a'.
multiplication of books, promotion of agriculture and social solidarity amidst disintegration and disorder. He refers to such things but grudgingly and with qualification. He 'insinuates that the copying of the classics was a kind of transgression into which the monks were tempted now and then. On the contrary it was a regular part of their task; for the study of the Pagan authors was ingrained in the scheme of monastic discipline as established by Cassiodorus.'\(^1\) Indeed, Benedict of Nursia, founder of Western monasticism, not only exhibited the ancient Roman virtues, but as Trevor-Roper reminds us, also 'created for an atomized rural society, the basic social and economic cell of its survival.'\(^2\) Furthermore, if Gibbon was sincere in acknowledging the purity of life and simplicity of the primitive Christians, which he saw lamentably corrupted with time, should he not have given some recognition to monasticism as 'the first attempt in the history of Christianity... to peel off the accretions and to return to the primitive faith?'

Nor, as Rand also noted, would we 'call monasticism altogether selfish or unsocial;' for in fleeing the world and making his 'protest against the iniquities and frivolities of a Pagan and a Paganized Christian society,' the monk wished 'to give an example to society of a life of simplicity and godly living.'\(^3\) And Gibbon's view of the ascetic ideal of the Eastern Empire as 'a barren withdrawal from the world,' has been shown by modern Byzantine scholarship to be at best a half truth; for 'one of the outstanding features of early Byzantine asceticism is its

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2. The *Rise of Christian Europe*, London, 1965, p.68. See also his reference to Knowles, to the effect that Benedict was 'the embodiment of all the oldest Roman virtues.'
passion for social justice and its championship of the poor and oppressed.¹

To the end of his life, Gibbon continued to connect the decline of the Roman Empire with 'the propagation of the gospel and the triumph of the Church.'² Though he did not define the connection specifically, he gave ample suggestions for exploring its effect. It was at all events a negative influence, which combined with other factors to weaken an already ailing empire. Perhaps the notion of a 'cancer' imperceptibly sapping the vitality of Roman society comes as close as any to Gibbon's idea of Christianity 'insensibly' weakening the state. Falco gave expression to this view of the 'insidious cancer', the incompatible principle, which, 'while respecting the established order, undermines its foundations.' It did this, he maintained, by putting its faith in transcendental Truth, by its demands on the consciences of men and by its transfer of the real meaning of life to another world, while its official adoption and the consequent persecution of the pagans, involved a denial of the empire's ancient nature and traditions.³

The metaphor of the parasitic, alien growth, draining the life of the body politic was made explicit in a passage in Frazer's Golden Bough, which reads like a gloss on Gibbon, on the historian as moralist, but again with the traditional Christian values reversed.⁴ Frazer saw a prime cause of Rome's decline in the Christian contempt for the earthly

¹ E. Dawes and N.H. Baynes, Three Byzantine Saints. Oxford, 1948, pp.198, 197. Gibbon, in fact makes two complimentary references to John the Almsgiver, one of the three saints included in these biographies. See DF, xlvi, V, 76; xlvii, V, 172 and Dawes and Baynes, op.cit., pp. 195ff.
² Memoirs, p. 147.
³ The Holy Roman Republic, p.20.
city in favour of the 'City of God', a shift of the centre of gravity from this world at the expense of the empire. And, like Gibbon, he saw it primarily in terms of moral dereliction, the failure of citizens to fulfil the unselfish Graeco-Roman ideal of subordinating individual interests to those of the state. Oriental religions, and Christianity in particular, with an emphasis on individual salvation and communion with God, taught the individual to concentrate on himself, thus endangering the very existence of the state: 'The inevitable result of this selfish and immoral doctrine was to withdraw the devotee more and more from the public service.'

Toynbee, who quoted this passage in his discussion of 'The Church as a Cancer', included Frazer with Gibbon amongst the 'Western neo-pagans' who 'first emerged in the Italy of the Quatrocento,' who captured European thought in the late seventeenth century and whose voice continued to be heard into the twentieth. In their eyes the Christians injured ancient society in a number of ways, but perhaps above all by their non-cooperation. Michael Grant, in his reappraisal of Gibbon's problem, put them amongst 'the groups that opted out', with the nuns and monks in particular being similar to our modern 'drop-outs' from society.

The same 'selfish, immoral doctrine is stated in Gibbon's well-known gibe: 'it was not in this world that the primitive Christians were desirous of making themselves either agreeable or useful.'

3. The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, Radnor, 1976, Pt.V., 232ff.
4. DF, xv, II, 37.
Granted a measure of truth in this judgment, the degree of emphasis has varied among historians as to how far this contributed to the decline and fall of Rome. Bury, while referring to the separateness of the church and the loss to the state when 'the best refuse to have children,'\(^1\) gave less prominence to this factor than Jones, who nonetheless admitted that 'the Roman Empire seems never to have evoked any active patriotism from the vast majority of its citizens.'\(^2\) Nor could Rostovtzeff see the new religion as responsible for the collapse of the empire. He considered this a very narrow view since the effect of Christianity was at most but one side of the gradual change in the mentality of the ancient world.\(^3\) The whole Roman world, the Roman spirit itself, as Bury showed, was undergoing a profound change; 'but yet, as far as Christianity itself was concerned, there seems no reason why the Roman Empire should not have continued to exist in the West just as it continued to exist in the East.' Remembering this continuance in the East, 'we must conclude that Christianity did not contribute to produce what is loosely called the Fall of the Western Empire.'\(^4\)

Reconsidering Gibbon's problem after two centuries, and no longer from the standpoint of a neo-classical age, we are better able to appreciate not only what died but also what emerged. And in the emergence of a new type of civilization, to discover also the positive contribution made by Christianity; or, in Toynbee's terms to see the

\(^{1}\) History of the Later Roman Empire, London, 1889, I, chap.III, 'Elements of Disintegration within the Empire.'

\(^{2}\) The Later Roman Empire, London, 1964, II, 1062. See chaps. xxii, xxiii, and xxxv of this work, and also his article, 'The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire', History, XL, 1955, 213-5.


church rather as a chrysalis than as a cancer. Even those historians who reject his general approach, and that would seem to be most, may still find some truth in his proposition that Christianity preserved and transmitted something essential to the life of a civilization in the dangerous period between the dissolution of the old and the genesis of the new. No longer are we shut up to the Gibbonian view, bluntly expressed by Falco as: 'Christianity saved souls but ruined the empire.' Instead, it has been seen as quite possible to assert a connection between the triumph of Christianity and the decline of the empire and still be aware of the positive contributions made by the new faith.

Momigliano, who asserted the connection, thus hastened to add: 'but, of course, it will not be a simple return to Gibbon.' He was therefore able to come to some very different assessments of medieval institutions and of the role of Christianity. 'Judged from the traditional point of view of the pagan society,' he admitted, 'the monks were a subversive force;' but in the altered situation, 'they provided an alternative to pagan city life.' In this way, monasticism ultimately 'became a constructive force in society,' uniting men 'in a new form of communal life' with 'a considerable amount of economic independence and political self-government.' And this was but one of the ways in which Christianity 'built something of its own,' which, while undermining the current military and political structure, also brought much needed leadership, protection and guidance. With its superior dynamism,

3. La polemica sul medioevo, p.202 (II Christianesimo salva le anime, ma rovina l'impero.)
4. 'Christianity and the Decline of the Roman Empire', in The Conflict between Paganism and Christianity in the Fourth Century, p.6.
efficiency and adaptability to the new social and political conditions, Christianity, 'discovered a bridge between barbarism and civilization: the process of romanizing the barbarians by christianizing them is an essential feature of the history of the Roman empire between Constantine and Justinian. If it did not save the empire, at least in the West, it saved many features of Roman civilization.'¹ This view of the church as chrysalis goes far beyond what we find in Gibbon. It is, however, in line with the morally positive contribution which Milman, in his *History of Christianity* had claimed for the church, that, 'if treacherous to the interests of the Roman Empire, it was true to those of mankind.'²

In the present century the challenge to the old viewpoint espoused by the 'neo-pagans' has even taken the extreme form of disputing the whole premise that the fall of the empire was perhaps the most awful scene in human history. The question became in W.C. Bark's rephrasing: 'For whom was the Roman failure bad?'³ And, in the new, more creative synthesis which followed, he saw Christianity playing a vital part. So too, Pirenne agreed that, 'for all its decadence, the church of the earlier middle ages was a great civilizing influence against barbarism.'⁴ And Trevor-Roper, second to none in his admiration for Gibbon and the eighteenth-century historians, reflected very clearly this altered point of view when he wrote: 'The Empire adopted Christianity in the fourth century, but did it not perhaps thereby, arrest -- however

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temporarily - a decline which had already begun in the military anarchy of the third century: a decline which, at that time, cannot be ascribed to Christianity or even connected with it? And when, in the gloom of the eighth century, 'a historical philosopher...might reasonably have concluded that it was all over with Europe,' whose civilization seemed to have gone out, what gave it the power of recover? 'How was it that Christendom not only recovered but was able, at the end of the eleventh century, to launch a counter-attack? This counter-attack, the Crusades, is surely another of the turning points of history.'¹

At that point in his third volume where Gibbon recorded the twin triumphs of the barbarians and the church over the Roman Empire, he placed first, and it seems with a greater degree of resentment, that of the church. Persecuting emperors were replaced by Christian rulers bent on extirpating 'the fabulous gods of antiquity' and 'the public devotion of the age was impatient to exalt the saints and martyrs of the Catholic church on the altars of Diana and Hercules.'² The passage foreshadows that final scene in the History with its more epigrammatic summary of 'the triumph of barbarism and religion' and is consistent with Gibbon's view of the official adoption of Christianity as involving simply the exchange of one superstition for another. But, we may ask, however one interprets the nature of the change, was the triumph of the church unaccompanied by no moral victories?

There was one which Gibbon, in common with later historians, stressed,

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² DF, xxxiii, III, 439. The link with imperial decline is then suggested: 'The union of the Roman empire was dissolved; its genius was humbled in the dust;' and the barbarian armies from the North 'had established their victorious reign over the fairest provinces of Europe and Africa.'
namely the abolition of gladiatorial shows. In doing so he was far ahead of his Roman mentors, like Cicero and Seneca, who saw nothing wrong with this custom. But we have to go to Gibbon's successors to find a recognition of the moral advance of which this victory was but one manifestation. 'One of the most far-reaching changes introduced by Christianity into the conduct of life,' Bury wrote, 'was the idea that human life as such was sacred; an idea distinctly opposed to the actual practice of the pagans, if not quite novel to them.' And he pointed out that this conviction not only discredited and ultimately spelt the end of gladiatorial combat, but also changed the public attitude towards suicide and infanticide. In his survey of the 'influence of Christianity on society,' he also noted that the idea 'that all men are brothers' both softened 'to some extent the relation between the Roman world and the barbarians' and also had far-reaching effects for good on the accepted institution of slavery.

Much has been made in this chapter of the divorce between religion and morality as seen by Gibbon. More recently, A.H.M. Jones found it strange that with the official adoption of Christianity, 'the general standards of conduct should have remained in general static and in some respects have sunk' - this despite vigorous preaching of the Christian code backed by the fear of punishment in this world and the next. Other historians, however, have noted, that even amid superstition and fanaticism, the church's teaching and enforcement of a pure morality, had a wide and important effect. And the surprisingly new thing about

1. DF, xxx, III, 273-4, where he praised the Christian poet, Prudentius and the monk, Telemachus, for their part in this reform.
2. See e.g. Lecky, op.cit., I, 271 and notes.
4. The Later Roman Empire, II, 979.
5. Thus Lecky, op.cit., II, 154; also e.g. Pirenne, Oman, Butterfield, Haywood and Ladner.
the Christian religion was, in fact, its indissoluble link and deep concern with morals, even though the emphases may have been very different from those of the ancient philosophers or the 'Western neo-pagans'. And it must also be remembered that the bulk of our evidence for moral failure in the early Christian centuries, such as that cited by modern historians, comes from the Christians themselves, whether the denunciations of the stern Salvian, Jerome, Gregory of Nyssa, or other authorities on whom Gibbon relied.

The connection between 'the religious and the moral sphere' has indeed been seen as uniquely close in Christianity: 'That a man must strive for moral goodness in order to worship God effectively is not a commonplace in the history of religions.' And Christian morality 'was all the more novel in the late ancient milieu as it included sexual purity' and fidelity in marriage.¹ This essential connection and the 'moral importance of Christianity', Lecky claimed, was missed by the pagan writers simply because, in the religion with which they were familiar, no such connection existed.² And, despite his view that the church had largely failed to raise the general level of conduct in the later empire, Jones attributed this in part to those moral standards being too high and too rigid rather than the reverse.³ In fact, he acknowledged the influence of the church not only in abolishing gladiat-

orial shows, but also in rescuing prostitutes and in legislation to prevent the practice itself.\textsuperscript{1} Others have gone even further, pointing to the suppression of the large schools of prostitution operating under the aegis of the temple of Venus and to the virtual disappearance of the grossest scenes such as graced the walls and portals of the houses in Pompeii. So that even in what Gibbon regarded as a dark and 'degenerate age', 'in some respects...Christianity had already effected a great improvement.'\textsuperscript{2}

The mixture we have seen in Gibbon of strict impartiality, a horror of Voltaire's anti-Christian bigotry, on the one side, and on the other, an equal horror of 'enthusiasm' and 'fanaticism', which at times bordered on bias\textsuperscript{3}, shows an ambivalence towards religion and the process of history which is sometimes reflected in the judgements of the moralist. This aspect has been brought out to some extent in an examination by J.G.A. Pocock of The Decline and Fall as 'a product of the last years of the Enlightenment, the uneasy years between the American and French revolutions.'\textsuperscript{4} Both his reading of history and his reaction to the changed climate of these years contributed to this ambivalence in Gibbon.

He had more respect than contempt for some of those Church Fathers, whom superficially and consistent with his general approach, he might have

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\item Jones, The Later Roman Empire, II, 976. His section entitled, 'The Church's Failure' is the conclusion to this chap. xxxiii, II, 979ff.
\item Lecky, op.cit., II, 153-4. Cf. Lecky, op.cit. II, 213: 'It had been at first one of the broad distinctions between Paganism and Christianity, that, while the rites of the former were for the most part unconnected with moral dispositions, Christianity made purity of heart an essential element of all its worship.'
\item As Professor Hancock has reminded us, Gibbon 'was no enemy to bias.' Professing History. Sydney, 1976, p.10
\end{enumerate}
been expected to scorn. Against the background of 'the failure of ancient skepticism', 'the apostacy of the philosophers' and notably 'the failure of Julian to restore philosophic magistracy and virtue,' that emperor is seen as 'the inferior of Athanasius in statesmanship and public morality.' The reason given by Pocock for Gibbon's respect for these men of religion - Athanasius, Ambrose, Gregory the Great and John Chrysostom - is that they 'were leaders, effective and not without statesmanship,' and that 'the Christian republic...was being led by Christian virtue.' And this, in spite of the fact that such virtue was fanatical, that the leaders and their people were alike under the sway of prophecy and metaphysics, and that their virtue was 'anticivic and otherworldly', in no way serving the defence of the empire. Gibbon, Pocock argues, 'was beginning to make use of Hume's distinction between enthusiasm, which was fanatical and intolerant but drove men to assert their liberties against their rulers, and superstition, which was passive and law-abiding but disposed men to accept their rulers even when these were priests.' Christian enthusiasm, having triumphed in the destruction of the pagan temples, was transformed into a new superstition as neo-paganism emerged.

'About all this,' Pocock points out, 'Gibbon had ambivalent feelings and saw history as an ambivalent process. Religion as superstition had originally been an aspect of barbarism, and it would be possible to see its revival as a return to barbarism.' And in his own day he

2. op. cit., pp. 299-300.
3. op. cit., p. 300. Pocock notes that 'the relation of barbarism to religion can be explored when we realize that the Enlightenment's sociology of barbarism, which Gibbon knew very well, was also a sociology of superstition and rather less of fanaticism.' (p. 298).
reacted with horror, not only to the American and French revolutions and the Gordon riots, but also to the views of Joseph Priestley, as a 'union of philosophy with fanaticism', seeing in this man 'a second Arius, who would have been at home in the streets of fourth-century Alexandria.' Yet, ironically enough, having as a dutiful 'civic humanist' drawn the attention of the civil magistrate to the dangerous opinions of Priestley, Gibbon would have been appalled when the Birmingham mob, set on by the magistrates, destroyed the philosopher's property and tried to burn his house. This was the very sort of 'barbarism' that shocked him in France.

The historian of the Roman Empire, scathing as he was of 'religion as enthusiasm' just as he was of that more primitive religious superstition connected with barbarism, was reminded by Hume 'that liberty and virtue might rest - as in the Reformation and the Puritan Revolution they had rested - on a foundation of fanaticism... There was something to be said for superstition, if it was compatible with the rule of enlightened and tolerant magistrates.' And it is part of Gibbon's ambivalence, or perhaps sheer practicality, that, as moralist and lover of civic virtue, he could even excuse Burke's 'reverence for Church establishments' and should think of writing of 'the danger of exposing an old superstition to the contempt of the blind and fanatic multitude.'

1. op. cit., p.302. For Gibbon's references to Priestley, see DF, liv, VI, 134, n.49; Letters, Nos. 563,4,5, 28/1/83, 6/2/83, 22/2/83, II, 320-3; Memoirs, 171-2.
2. op. cit., p. 301.