



BOOK REVIEW

Hugh Liebert. *Gibbon's Christianity: Religion, Reason, and the Fall of Rome*

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The reception of Edward Gibbon's six-volume *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* has always been shaped by its intellectual and physical heft—the Duke of Gloucester reputedly greeted the second volume as “another damned, thick, square book”—and recent scholarship on Gibbon has tended to match the massive erudition of the historian's original achievement. John Pocock's *Barbarism and Religion* (1999–2015), also in six volumes, has reconstructed the intellectual world of Gibbon's history and its place within it with a depth and breadth that are invaluable for the specialist scholar but potentially intimidating or unwieldy for the more general reader. Hugh Liebert's compact study *Gibbon's Christianity* offers something quite different: an admirably clear and well-written introduction to Gibbon's early life and career that is suitable for those approaching Gibbon's work for the first time. Its discussion of Gibbon's historiography within the context of the author's life and intellectual development is accessible to students and nonspecialists but the work is grounded on recent scholarship and contributes to relevant debates concerning Gibbon's attitudes toward toleration, skepticism, and faith.

Liebert's study argues that Gibbon's feelings toward Christianity were more “subtle and sympathetic” (138) than the heavier ironies of the fifteenth and sixteenth chapters of the *Decline and Fall* might lead us to believe. The opening chapter situates Gibbon's autobiographical account of the intellectual inception of the *Decline and Fall* “amidst the ruins of the Capitol, while the bare-footed fryars were singing vespers in the temple of Jupiter” (qtd 10) in relation to the genres of Grand Tour travelogues and confessional autobiography. The possible lines of influence traced here are necessarily attenuated—we move from Richard Lassels to Joseph Addison and then Laurence Sterne in one tradition, and from Paul and Augustine to Jacques-Auguste de Thou and David Hume in the other—but the concluding sense of Gibbon as a writer open to a proto-Romantic, secularized wonder is intriguing and in keeping with previous scholarship on the persistence of awe and sublimity in Gibbon's work. The second chapter, on Gibbon's *Autobiographies*, offers an extremely useful critical biography of Gibbon's early years, prior to his moment of historiographical self-determination. Liebert deftly manages a variety of autobiographical sources, including the drafts of Gibbon's *Memoirs*, his journals, and letters, and valuably pauses on underexamined writings such as the “Letter on the Government of Berne.” The final three chapters examine some of Gibbon's published works: the *Essai sur L'Étude de la Littérature* (including its 1759 draft and 1761 publication), the first volume of the *Decline and Fall*, and the “General Observations on the Fall of the Roman Empire in the West” that Gibbon appended to the

third volume of his history. These chapters trace the fall of Rome and the rise of Christianity as an iteration of the classical and philosophic narrative that sees decadent and complacent empires superseded by vigorous and virtuous republics, until these republics become decadent in their turn.

As this summary makes clear, the brevity and focus of Liebert's approach necessitate some significant omissions that are frankly acknowledged by the author in the introduction to the work. Liebert dedicates only two chapters to discussion of the *Decline and Fall* (and one of these is a brief coda of a little more than 10 pages). No more than passing references are made to volumes two to six of Gibbon's history, which means that there is no discussion of Constantine or the process by which Christianity develops from a minor sect to the dominant religion of empire, nothing on Julian, Athanasius, or any of the internecine quarrels of the early church, and no examination of the position of Christianity following the rise of Islam. The chapter on the first volume of the *Decline and Fall* examines Gibbon's account of Roman polytheism and the religions of Persia and the Germanic tribes in relation to the account of the rise of Christianity contained in the fifteenth chapter, but the sixteenth chapter on the persecutions of the early church is only summarized in passing and there is no extended discussion of later works such as the *Vindication* in which Gibbon defended himself against the accusations of impiously motivated historical inaccuracy made by Henry Edwards Davis.

Omissions of some sort are a practical necessity in any study of Gibbon's work, but the integrated, relational nature of his thought means that scholars' conclusions are inevitably affected by their chosen limits. Liebert reads the final paragraph of the 1759 draft of the *Essai*, which describes the emergence of Christianity from obscure and degraded origins to become the dominant faith of the modern world, as an anti-philosophic moment of unregulated awe. Juxtapositions like this can be, and are, felt in Gibbon's writings as wonder and surprise, but contrasts do not always defy explanation, and this passage anticipates the narrative of Christianity's political triumph told in the fifteenth chapter, as well as that chapter's ironic confluences of the new religion's sordid origins, self-aggrandizing claims, and subsequent grandeur. Gibbon's writing is at its most interesting when it combines these purposes: when philosophic interpretation is both mooted and allowed to slip away, and when the sublimity of decline undercuts the complacency of ironic judgment. This complexity is particularly characteristic of the later volumes of Gibbon's history, and an expansion of Liebert's argument to consider these works would doubtless have given further richness to what is already an interesting and valuable study.