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J. G. A. POCKOCK

An Overview of *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*

After *Barbarism and Religion*: A Retrospect and a Prospect

The first three volumes (I776–81) or trilogy (as it may be called) of Gibbon's *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* arrives at the 'extinction' (as he calls it) of the Roman Empire in its western provinces; a second trilogy (volumes IV through VI) covers a history centred on Constantinople to the capture of that city by the Ottoman Turks a thousand years later. The two trilogies differ radically in character, and the purpose of this chapter is to explore what *Barbarism and Religion* may have achieved in situating the first of them in the history of historiography as it stood in Gibbon's time and as we know it, and then to enquire what occurred in the same field as he turned from a western, or 'Roman' history of empire and religion to an eastern, or 'Byzantine'.¹ It can be asked what became of Gibbon's enterprise as he did so, and what the historians of historiography may learn from his experience in constructing his later volumes; but since these are not to be explored in depth, only a tentative and introductory account can be given of this moment in the history of historiography.

The history of historiography is a discipline which has only recently assumed its contemporary character, and the phase of Gibbon scholarship to which *Barbarism and Religion* belongs is to be dated from the middle years of the twentieth century. Giuseppe Giarrizzo's *Edward Gibbon e la cultura Europea del XVIII secolo*² introduced the setting of a culture both historical and historiographical, and Arnaldo Momigliano's 'Gibbon's Contribution to Historical Method'³ introduced what has become a three-tier model of the overlapping modes of early modern historiography. These were, first, the rhetorical and exemplary narrative of actions chiefly political, inherited from Greco-Roman antiquity and revived by the humanists. It is a constant in *The Decline and Fall*, where among its many and sophisticated legacies we find the continuing assumption that 'the historian' is primarily the contemporary or near-contemporary author of a received account of the career of

a people or state, and only in a secondary sense the ‘modern’ who reiterates and critically reviews the former’s authoritative narrative. Momigliano saw Gibbon as marking the conjunction of two further modes of historiography that succeeded without replacing the rhetorical: first in order of time the philological, consisting of the detailed study of past (usually antique) states of language, law, religion and society, extending on occasion to material culture. This major development of the later Renaissance permitted, first, the description of a series of contexts in which narratives of action might be situated and interpreted as belonging to distinctive pasts; second, the possibility of a new species of narrative, relating how distinctive states of culture had come into being and changed into their successors. The historical actor became an agent or patient in historical change. The final mode of historiography in which Momigliano’s Gibbon took part was the ‘philosophical’ history supposedly characteristic of eighteenth-century Enlightenment. This has proved a protean subject, whose mapping depends upon the making of many assumptions, often contestable; but it may be suggested that Gibbon was deeply aware of writers – Montesquieu and his successors in France, the great figures of the Scottish Enlightenment – who pursued what he sometimes called ‘the history of European society’ and sometimes ‘the history of the human mind’. The latter made them philosophers as well as historians, but he often reserved the term ‘philosophical’ for the authors of narratives in the first and second senses we have distinguished. It has proved possible to read *The Decline and Fall* as moving between these three modes of historiography, practising them all but not bringing them together to form a single practice, method or ‘philosophy’ of history. This is part of the case for continuing to regard Gibbon as an early modern historian; perhaps the last of his kind.

Recent scholarship has also revealed the presence, not only in Gibbon but in the historical discourse of his contemporaries in general, of a number of master narratives exercising paradigmatic authority. The chief of these for our purposes has been the narrative of *The Decline and Fall* in the strict sense, originated by historians themselves Roman – Tacitus above all – and descending through the centuries to its revival in early modern political thought by authors predominately Florentine, among whom Leonardo Bruni⁴ developed it into a narrative of the history we term medieval. In this Roman liberty and the energies it generated were dependent upon a class of warrior citizens possessing both military and civic capacity. Those conquered a series of provinces, first in Italy, then in Spain and Mediterranean Africa, finally in Greece and the Hellenistic east as far as the Euphrates, constituting an empire too great for the citizens to control without losing that capacity to a class of professional soldiers who took over its management, and with it

that of the republic. The history of *The Decline and Fall*, set out in Gibbon's first three volumes, was the story of Rome's progressive loss of civic and military capacity, until the western empire was taken over by the barbarian mercenaries recruited to fill the vacuum left by the failure of Rome to defend itself. Though complicated by innumerable variants, this narrative survived until the end of Gibbon's first trilogy, by which point it had become essential to the self-criticism of a 'modern' understanding of empire and society which had none too securely replaced the image of 'ancient' liberty and empire.

Bruni and many others carried the narrative of *The Decline and Fall* through a history we term 'medieval' – Gibbon called it 'modern' – to understand which we must supply two further grand narratives, termed by him 'the triumph of barbarism and religion' (III, 1068). The first of these was in essence the history of the Germanic peoples who had penetrated Rome's western provinces and converted them into proto-feudal kingdoms. Originally, and enduringly, based on Tacitus's account of these peoples as they were known to Romans of the first post-republican period, the history of 'barbarism', never written by the barbarians themselves, had grown by Gibbon's time into a grand thesis of the progress of society, in which pastoral nomads as far east as China had set processes in motion which thrust the forest-dwelling peoples of Europe upon the frontiers of empire on a greater scale than Rome could resist or absorb. This set going in Europe the progress of society through the four stages of philosophical history, and made *The Decline and Fall*, somewhat marginally, a work of the 'Scottish school', and perhaps more centrally of French erudition.⁵

The grand narrative of the history of religion⁶ may outweigh all others in bulk and complexity, and differs from them all generically. While possessing a rhetoric, philology and philosophy of its own, it was differentiated into ancient and modern in quite other ways; and above all, its written sources were Greek and Hebrew in excess of Latin and its cultural setting was Hellenistic Greek, Egyptian and Syrian rather than European. Through the Hebrew Bible and the Christian testament, it looked back to the creation of the world and the actions of God and recorded them in a sacred history as well as a human. From the Deluge and Dispersal of the Peoples, it related a history of Israel, to whom divine truth was known, and another of the Gentiles, who had lost it and must somehow recover it. In addition to the history of idolatry and subsequently polytheism, there was another of religions which must be false and philosophies which might be true, and therefore of the difficulties which Gentile converts to Christianity had encountered in freeing themselves from them, as well as from the stubbornness of the Jews. Historians whom Gibbon read and recommended, orthodox as well

as Enlightened, dealt at length with these problems, emphasising especially the persistence of philosophies in which the universe was uncreated and coeval with God,⁷ so that monist or dualist pantheisms had stood beside the mechanistic atheisms of Democritus and Lucretius. As narrated as far back as Eusebius himself, this had given rise to the gnosticism with which even the first apostles had had to struggle, as well as to the later Manichaeism; and there was a history of how western monotheism had been faced with religions without a creator to be found in Persia and further east. There was a world history of religion alongside the sacred and ecclesiastical history of the first and second Israels.

A crucial position was occupied by Platonism, in which the failure to enlarge the Demiurge into a Creator had perpetuated the errors of the ancient philosophers, but the perception that the godhead might be differentiated into three capacities or persons had preceded the revelation of the Christian Trinity. From this ambivalence had arisen the great debates of the fourth and fifth Christian centuries, and it is of the first importance to acknowledge that Gibbon traced their history in some detail, so that his personal scepticism of all theologies did not prevent his seeing that their assumptions and categories were active historical forces. The case to be made against them did not diminish their meaning in history, or that of the actors in it.

Christian history in all its fullness thus became both one of the grand narratives and one of the modes of historiography exerting paradigmatic guidance over Gibbon's history of *The Decline and Fall* and its consequences. There was a further set of narratives, not related by Gibbon because he did not arrive at them, but constantly implicit in the modern history in which he perceived the setting for his work. These narrated the rise of the great kingdoms of Atlantic Europe, exclusive of German history with which he scarcely dealt: first, the medieval kingdoms and the debates over their legal foundations; second, the growth after 1494 of a system of states capable of a balance of power; third, the wars of religion which nearly destroyed them between 1550 and 1660; and finally, the emergence of a 'republic of states', in his own phrase (II, 511–13), proof against civil and religious war or threat of universal monarchy, in which Gibbon believed himself to be living. Enlightenment, as we use the term, was one of its instruments; in order to bring the sacred under the control of the sociable, it was necessary to modify both Christian doctrine and the nature of Christian belief, and Gibbon's second and third volumes contain a history of how the turn in late antiquity from a poetic polytheism to a philosophic monotheism inescapably raised the problems of truth and error, disputability and toleration.⁸ The last concept became the ideological foundation of the Enlightened *ancien régime*, which Gibbon thought secure against both barbarism and religion, but of

which he was in fact living in the very last moments. He completed *The Decline and Fall* in May 1788, one year before the revolution which was to transform his Europe and its use and writing of history. If other historians – Raynal, Ferguson, Mably – knew that something of the kind was happening, he did not.

Eurasian Narratives

Seven years previously, Gibbon had completed the publication of what is here called his ‘first trilogy’, ending with (but looking forward from) the extinction of the Roman Empire in its original capital and western provinces. He now faced (as he had always intended) the challenge of writing a history of the eastern or ‘Byzantine’⁹ empire for the thousand years of its continued existence; the challenge of deciding how this history was to be written and even whether it was worth writing at all. To understand this problematic, we must recognise that the governing paradigms – the method of historiography and the master narratives – which had determined his project so far were, with the single gigantic exception of Christian history in its first five centuries, Latin, Roman and post-Roman in character, and therefore inapplicable to the Hellenistic, or Graeco-Oriental, history he was now committed to writing. The primary meaning of ‘Decline and Fall’ had been the disintegration of the Roman capacity to combine military with civic ‘virtue’; that of ‘barbarism’ the culture of the Germanic tribes who had taken over the western provinces, becoming themselves part-Romanised in the process; that of ‘religion’, while so far a history of dispute and intolerance springing from the conversion of civic polytheism into the encounter of monotheism with Greek philosophy, had begun to emphasize the limited extent to which the Latin churches were involved in this. The eastern decline and fall – if the term was to be used – was not a matter of the progressive barbarism of provinces, but of the loss of the Greek east to the organised empires of Persians, Arabs and Turks and the religious revolution of Islam; a history less of barbarism than of enthusiasm, itself organised into empires. West of the Bosphorus and north of the Danube, the former *barbaricum* had been recreated as ‘Europe’ by Latin and Frankish colonisation spreading from the west, and there had taken shape the competition between Roman papacy and post-Roman empire, the growth of the western kingdoms and the movement towards a republic of Enlightened states in which Gibbon and his contemporaries situated their early modern and modern history. *The Decline and Fall* is written as a prelude to this history; but Gibbon knew no way of arriving at it from Byzantine or Ottoman beginnings.

He knew that the paradigms shaping western history were not applicable in the east, and doubted both whether others could be found to replace them and whether Byzantine culture had shaped a history of its own that could or should be narrated and studied. In the course of his third volume he said it consisted of a thousand years of ‘premature and perpetual decay’ (II, 237), meaning apparently that Roman history was reducible to the decline of an original ‘virtue’, and that Byzantine history began when that process was so far advanced that nothing could be done, or usefully written, about it. This was to deny that there was anything but a Roman history; he offered no account of how the heroic hoplites of Athens and Sparta had degenerated under Macedonian and Roman empires, and may have possessed no authoritative or written history relating to the process. Gibbon’s Greek history is less Hellenic than Hellenistic; his Greeks are already semi-orientalised. The capacity to write history depended, as Tacitus had remarked, on the freedom and capacity to enact it, and at the outset of his fifth volume (III, 23–5), with the reign of Justinian behind him, he pronounced that the history of the Byzantine dynasties was no longer worth studying, since they had neither made nor written one of their own. Byzantine history could only be written as that of its ‘passive connections’ (III, 25) with the recorded actions of a series of more active peoples, whom he proceeded to enumerate from the Franks and Latins in the west to the Mongols and Turks in the ‘Scythian’ north and east. He was proposing radical changes in the history to be related and studied, and the historiography to be studied and practised, by readers and students of *The Decline and Fall*’s concluding volumes.

My own study of Gibbon, *Barbarism and Religion*, was constructed by following two strategies. The first may be termed contextual: it pursued the sequence of Gibbon’s successive chapters, marking how they moved from one master narrative to another, and from one mode of historiography to another as the former choice required. The theme of imperial decay emphasised a narrative of reigns, that of barbarism a part-conjectural history of Eurasian society, that of religion an ecclesiastical history increasingly Enlightened, and Gibbon moved from one to the other as sources and premises indicated. The several modes of historiography were interrelated but never integrated, and this is a reason for continuing to regard him as an early modern historian, closer to humanism than to historicism. The second strategy was contextual in another sense: it consisted in a series of close studies of historians ancient, recent and contemporary with him, aimed at treating them as historians in their own right and presenting their texts at a length and in a depth comparable to that in which *The Decline and Fall* was presented. Gibbon appeared, as he did to himself, a participant in the contentious historiographical culture of the eighteenth century. His

opponents – especially Tillemont – presented contexts in which he might be better understood; and so, for reasons certainly paradoxical, did those – like Raynal and his colleagues,¹⁰ or Robertson in his later writings¹¹ – who entered on fields and explored historical and philosophical concepts he never engaged in. The fact that they did this and he did not was relevant to the understanding of his work.

There appears to be no reason why these strategies should not be employed in the study of Gibbon's second trilogy. As he pursued the several histories of the 'active' peoples with whom the eastern empire interacted, he sets each out as they were known to the scholarship of his time, and we encounter the narrative histories, if any there are, generated by each before and during its encounter with Byzantium. If any of them was still in a pre-literate or 'barbaric' condition – perhaps of pastoral nomadism – Gibbon must turn to what 'conjectural' or 'philosophic' historiography permits us to suppose of them, and here we begin to rely on what European moderns have proposed concerning the history of others, continuing to use the narratives and forms of historiography known to them. Gibbon will be found dealing with west European, Christian and modern – perhaps Enlightened – communities of scholars. His chapters may be expected to change, not only in subject matter but in patterns of discourse, as he moves from one to another. This is no more or less than had happened as he wrote his first three volumes; but these possessed a central narrative to which he constantly returned, and we have been told that the history of the eastern Roman Empire no longer supplies one. The question remains whether the later volumes consist of more than a collection of separate national and religious histories, loosely connected by the passive responses of an empire no longer capable of a history of its own making. This is the question to be pursued by historians interested in Gibbon's second trilogy.

We enquire whether the relations between a Christian empire and church supply the connective tissue we are looking for, but the answer seems to be negative. Gibbon's very early readings in eastern Roman history were indeed focused – William Howel,¹² Simon Ockley¹³ – on post-Laudian and High Church authors; but he shows no apparent interest in anticipating Hugh Trevor-Roper's suggestion that their caesaropapist tendencies pointed in a proto-Enlightened direction.¹⁴ Had James II succeeded in establishing a Catholic Church, 'Anglican' in the sense in which the French was Gallican, things might have been different; but this is to imagine the counter-factual, and Gibbon's involvement in Hanoverian ecclesiology seems to have begun from a point closer to Hoadly or Middleton. When he wrote of the Iconoclast controversy and its role in the division of a constructed empire between Charlemagne and Irene, his argument was Humean and therefore

ambivalent. Image-worship, he had fiercely insisted, was superstitious and had turned the Church towards priestcraft; but perhaps this was preferable – except on extreme occasions – to the enthusiasm of worshipping ideas and formalised images that he found in the iconoclasm of the eastern monks. The Roman papacy's espousal of the western worship of tangible relics had led it halfway to the primacy of a western republic anchored in the reality of the world; only then had the counter-corruption of superstition set in. Gibbon insisted on this point to the very last chapter of *The Decline and Fall*; but as these chapters show us, it drew him constantly back to a history of religion and sociability which was western and Latin, rather than Greek or oriental.

Similarly, when at the end of his fourth volume he returned to the Council of Chalcedon (11, 976–80), which he had passed over when narrating the sequence of reigns, the emphasis lay not on the emperor's role as mediator (as it did for Howel) or even on the contrast between Latin sobriety and Greek disputatiousness, but on that between Greeks and Latins together and the 'oriental' churches, Nestorian and Monophysite, which rejected the council's decisions and embarked on the separation of Syria and Egypt from the authority and history of the Roman Empire. Here Christianity is an agent in the disintegration of empire; or is Gibbon rather telling us that its history exceeds the limits of the Graeco-Roman? Chapter 47, which concludes the volume, is his last word on the history of Christological debate, starting with Cerinthus, the gnostics and the Apostle John, and ending with the expulsion of the Jesuits from Ethiopia in the sixteenth century. It is not a dismissal, but a recognition that Christian history extends beyond that of an empire now lacking a directive centre. This is where the history of the eastern empire is leading us.

Chapter 50 opens: 'After pursuing above six hundred years the fleeting Caesars of Constantinople and Germany, I now descend, in the reign of Heraclius, on the eastern borders of the Greek monarchy' (111, 151). It is a splendidly rococo image: the rotund pink form descends, scattering shafts of light over a darkened desert landscape; but it marks a crucial moment. Gibbon has just completed two of the long-range surveys which his choice of strategies is pluralizing into narrative: a history of the Byzantine dynasties from Heraclius to 1204, and a history of the increasingly shadowy western (and German) empire from Charlemagne to 1356. Neither presents a master narrative, but he is about to begin one: the struggle of what no longer deserves (though it may receive) the name of Roman Empire against a new force in world history, originating outside that of western empire and society though not outside that of west Eurasian monotheism. The history of Islam will dominate the rest of *The Decline and Fall*, together with the

disastrous interference of the Crusades; and it will further dominate the species of historiography Gibbon is trying to write. His juvenile reading had been drawn towards the east by Barthélemy d'Herbelot's *Bibliothèque orientale*¹⁵ and he paired that work in the architecture of the second trilogy with Joseph de Guignes's *Histoire des Huns, des Turcs, et des Mogols*. The latter has figured in *Barbarism and Religion* as a key to the history of barbarism;¹⁶ with the Islamisation of the western steppe it becomes a major episode in the history of religion; and first with the Arabs and then with the Turks, Islam will achieve greater changes in the map of global culture than any achieved by post-Roman Europe before the conquest of the oceans – the last a narrative that Gibbon does not touch but that Robertson, Raynal and Diderot take up.

Gibbon's portrait of Muhammad partakes of both sacred and philosophic history. He is aware of the Platonic, gnostic and unitarian overtones of the Koran's insistence that Jesus, though not a divine being, was the apostle of God, the bearer of his word and the vehicle of his spirit (III, 179–80); it is easy to catch sight of the *Naked Gospel's* insistence that Muslim unitarianism was a reaction to Christian disputatiousness.¹⁷ But if reason led to such a reaction, it was a reason that led to enthusiasm; and 'rational enthusiasm' is indeed Gibbon's preferred epithet for Islam. It was only one step – though a long step – away from Platonism to the philosophic account of the legislator who claimed divine authority for his laws and must either deceive others or deceive himself;¹⁸ Hume's history of religion infuses this narrative. The fall of the eastern empire began with its encounter, not with barbarism – whatever might be said of the Bedouin (III, 154–66) – but with religion: with enthusiasm as the organising principle of its own empire. Adam Ferguson had asked, however, and Gibbon would have found Ibn Khaldun asking had he known of him, whether enthusiasm could sustain empire without changing itself;¹⁹ and that had been the fate of the Romans, who had worshipped not God but themselves. Gibbon's chapters on primitive Islam record the conquests of enthusiasm from Turkestan to Spain, but end with the Abbasid caliphate as an oriental despotism of the familiar type. So much for philosophical history; as history of erudition and historiography, they open up 'new and important scenes', as Gibbon would have said,²⁰ in the history of European culture. He knew no Arabic, though he had once wished to learn it, but he read the Arab sacred and secular histories in French translation (III, 237–9).

As the life of the Prophet ends, the history of the Arab Muslim conquests begins. For Gibbon, these are inspired by fanaticism, yet the belief that moves them is no more than the insistence that God is one and Muhammad his prophet; Gibbon admires this creed for its 'rationality', meaning that it

rejects dispute over the nature of God, in which Christians have not ceased to engage. Though the age of the conquests coincides with the beginnings of the unending schism of Sunni and Shia, this does not arise from a dispute between theologies, but from one between rival claimants to the prophetic succession. It becomes involved, says Gibbon, in ‘the immortal hatred of the Persians and Turks’ (III, 220), and therefore in the expansion of an empire of conquest beyond its Arab beginnings. The several Muslim peoples and their cultures are ranked among those with whom the history of Byzantium is ‘passively connected’; but together with the Arabs, they actively create another history, that of Islam, which must be separately related and cannot be confined to its interactions with the history of eastern Rome. Gibbon is from this point committed to writing a history of two empires and religions in conflict, but is at the same time committed to writing a series of histories defined as peripheral to, but more momentous than, the passive history of Byzantium. To further the complexity of his enterprise, there will be times when ‘the Greeks’ (III, 26–7), under the Macedonians, the Comneni and even the dying Palaeologi, assert themselves against their enemies and reshape the empire with their own hands. Small wonder, then, if writing the fifth and sixth volumes of *The Decline and Fall* turned out somewhat otherwise than announced in Gibbon’s initial plan.

It could never, as that plan had made clear, have been the unified narrative of a single process. In the sixth volume, Gibbon seeks to reduce it to a two-sided history of how the empire was ground down by Crusaders from the west, culminating in 1204, and Turks from the east, with its climax in 1453; but even the latter, twice interrupted by Genghiz and Timur, was a history originating in the Eurasian steppelands rather than on the frontiers of Rome or Christendom, or of Arabia. The second trilogy, then, is a history without a central nervous system, and this is why the fifth volume is a series of essays in which a series of histories, pursuing various themes and the fortunes of various peoples, are severally pursued and indicate various master narratives. It is not clear that Gibbon yet has in mind, though he does mention, the double narrative of Crusaders and Turks. The fifth volume will transcend, and yet will not abandon, the negative portrait of Byzantine history with which it opened.

Each of these essay-length chapters is based in eighteenth-century erudition, if only because Gibbon needed modern translation to give him access to Arabic sources. Behind each lies a world of scholarly debate, and it may well be worthwhile to situate each chapter in the context it entails and discover what was being said and thought by scholars, and in what ways Gibbon was part of it. But scholars today will also want to know how, and perhaps whether, he arranged these chapters to build up a unified history

and of what kind that was; and it may be that he had set himself a new task and was in the process of discovering how he would have to perform it. Chapter 51 relates the progress of the Arab conquests, initially in Syria and Mesopotamia; and it was in the nature of Gibbon's enterprise that he should see these as achieved at the expense of the Roman eastern empire, and beginning the centuries of warfare between Islam and Christianity. So perhaps did the Arabs see it, and the chapter takes them all the way to Spain, with world-altering consequences. But before he does so, the second theme of the chapter is the conquest of Persia, the enemy of Hellas and Rome for the last thousand years, and Gibbon gives no indication that he is changing his historiographical starting point by placing this massive event where he does. Yet Persia was to change the conquering culture of the Arabs, just as Greek culture had changed Roman; and its effect was to bring them into immediate contact with the western steppe and its largely Turkish inhabitants, as Gibbon the reader of de Guignes very well knew and said. He does not, however, say that he is turning away from one history and returning to another, as he resumes the conquests of Egypt, Africa and Spain.

The destruction – *pace* Braudel – of Mediterranean cultural unity succeeds that of Hellenised Syria and Egypt to complete the Muslim revolution in Eurasian history. Gibbon does not fail to narrate it – in the romantic and heroic style considered characteristic of Arab historiography – but he remains a historian of empire, analysing the strengths and weaknesses it displays in its various forms. As a follower of Montesquieu and a historian in the grand western tradition, it is not surprising that he turns from the empire of the caliphs at its height to its first failures and the beginnings of its decay. Arising from the usual causes – excessive size, the employment of mercenaries, the decay of military spirit – this process coincides over the next three centuries – Gibbon is employing a long-range perspective – with reorganisations of Christian power, temporary in the east, transformative in the west, which *The Decline and Fall* sets out in an order, perhaps planned by Gibbon and perhaps not, which will determine the shape of the fifth volume and prefigure the climax of the sixth. (The complexity of this sentence is an index to that of Gibbon's overall narrative.) From the failure of the Arabs to assault Constantinople by sea, chapters 52 and 53 proceed to the wealth, cultural energy and military reorganisation of the Byzantine Empire under the Macedonian dynasty; 'the Greeks' have been, somewhat paradoxically, listed among the peoples with whom Byzantine history is to interact. In the far west, the Ummayyads fail to extend their control of Spain into Aquitaine; the dynasties disintegrate, and with Charles Martel the Carolingians appear, who will re-erect the western empire and set about expanding it into Germany. After a chapter on Byzantium at its post-Roman

height (chapter 54), however – one not free from the warnings of ultimate decline – Gibbon executes one more, arguably the last, of his sudden shifts into the history of religion, examining the heresy of the Paulicians, heirs of the Zoroastrians, gnostics and Manichaeans, and reopening, with Beausobre and Mosheim to support him, the long familiar question whether it is possible to find in this medieval dualism the seeds of the evangelism which preceded the Reformation. This is no part of the history of empire, and it is the only moment in the second trilogy when Gibbon looks forward from the medieval to the modern and contemporary. He returns to the Humean dilemma that arises when reason becomes enthusiasm, and conducts in a concluding footnote a quarrel he is having with the democratic unitarianism of Joseph Priestley (111, 439 n42). It is Gibbon's farewell to the history of Christianity.

In the last three chapters (55–7) of the fifth volume, he sets the geopolitical scene which he will reduce to narrative in the sixth. We are on the frontiers of former empire, specifically on the Danube, about to collapse finally as a military frontier but still marking the point where peoples moving out of 'Scythia' collide and interact with post-Roman empires east and west. A reshaping of 'Europe' begins when this frontier collapses for the last time under pressure from peoples called 'Slavonians' or 'Slavs', who colonise the peninsula we call 'Balkan' and the provinces formerly Illyrian, Macedonian and Hellenic. This is a major cultural change, but the frontiers of empire do not necessarily recede, and the Slav peoples – Serbs, Croats, Wallachians – arrive sometimes by invasion, sometimes as allies. It seems to be the familiar story of *receptio*, and we expect a scenario in which the Slavs and Bulgars – this name begins to appear – play the role of Goths and Franks, creating new cultures half Roman and half barbaric. It is not recounted, however, perhaps because east Romans are not west Romans, or because Slavs lack a Tacitus to endow them with the primitive virtues of the Germans. Gibbon seems at times unsure what to say of them or their historical formation. There is an earlier passage in which they appear as a squalid people from the Pripet marshes (11, 690–2), but in chapter 55 he insists that the Bulgars are Slavs, and it is hard to name them without invoking the pastoral peoples of the nearer Asia, who have become paradigmatic in explaining all barbarian invaders of Rome and Europe. We have already heard of Avars, who besiege Constantinople and are destroyed by Charlemagne; the shepherd barbarians threaten both Latin and Greek empire and civility by way of Pannonia and the headwaters of the Danube. In chapter 55, Bulgarians are paired with Hungarians and threaten both empires; but the latter are Turkish-speaking (except where their language is Finno-Ugrian) (111, 447–8) and we have rejoined the grand narrative of Joseph de Guignes, with its Hunnish and

Turkish confederacies spreading and subdividing through western Eurasia. From this history the Seljuks and Ottomans will in due course emerge; but for the present we are in the history of Europe and there is another cultural division to observe. The Hungarians, and some Slavic peoples, will be converted to Christianity and civility by Franks and Germans moving east from Latin Europe; others by missionaries and bearers of culture from the eastern empire and its Orthodox church. We have arrived at the divided roots of European history, but a large part of its Orthodox component is to spend centuries under Ottoman and Muslim empire. Gibbon does not narrate this history, but he inhabits and is aware of it.

Gibbon's rather shaky grasp of Slav history has not lost its power to direct his overall narrative. The chapter concludes (III, 455–70) with the primitive and early medieval history of 'the Russians', one of the peoples with which Byzantium interacts. Their power is originally northern and Baltic, the work of Scandinavian 'Varangians', the east wing of the Viking assault on Europe in the ninth century. Alternating as barbarians do between raiding and trade, they make their way along the great rivers, incorporating a miscellany of 'Fennic' and 'Sclavonian' tribes until their language and names have become Slavic. Arrived at the Black Sea river mouths, they form a principality powerful enough to threaten Constantinople itself, but are beaten off at the fourth attempt by John Zimisces (III, 464–6), hero of the Byzantine military revival. The Russians become allies and converts to Christianity; and Gibbon marks this as completing the civilization of 'the North' by 'the monks, both of Greece and Germany' (III, 468), who introduce civility along with letters and bring light where monks usually bring darkness. Gibbon mentions a Greek prophecy that a Russian will 'in the last days' become master of Constantinople, and remarks that this may yet be achieved, not by the light craft of the Russian rivers, but by the modern navy of the empress Catherine, capable of circumnavigating Europe (III, 463). It is one of his few excursions into the history of his own time, but is not further developed. The history of Kievan Rus ends with the Mongol invasions, and he does not return to Muscovite or Romanov history or pursue the civilisation of Europe into the colonisation of Siberia and the nomad steppe.²¹ He has given only this one glimpse of eastern Christianity as the precursor of Enlightenment.

The 'Double-Fall'

At the end of his fifth volume, Gibbon seems to move from a survey of histories impinging on the eastern empire to a master narrative of what he calls its 'double fall', brought about by Latin Crusaders in 1204 and Ottoman

Turks in 1453. It is a double narrative, emerging from a western Latin history that he and his readers know well and an eastern history, part Muslim and part nomadic, which he has been labouring to reimagine all his life. The challenge before us is less to pursue these narratives through his concluding volume than to situate him in the history of historiography as he wrote them, enquiring on what sources and modes of writing he drew and in what problems and debates among the scholars of his time he took part.

Chapter 56 is a history of the Normans in Italy, a prelude to the Crusades but very much more; almost the last, nevertheless, of the peripheral histories he has undertaken to write. They appear in Apulia, Calabria and Sicily, first as mercenaries and then as pursuing independent power among what Gibbon terms 'the three great nations of the world, the Greeks, the Saracens and the Franks' (III, 471); the scene is enlarged beyond even the history of the Roman Empire and has become European if not global. It is nevertheless situated in Italy where all three hold power, and he lists the great modern historians who are his sources and to whom he owes so much more than his immediate theme: Carlo Sigonio, Pietro Giannone and Lodovico Antonio Muratori (III, 471 n1). These inform Gibbon regarding the expulsion of the Arabs from Sicily, the Greeks from Italy and the Norman ambitions in the empire; but the first Crusade will be Frankish rather than Norman, and the narrative will be that of competition between the papacy, the Hohenstaufen and the Angevins, in which the Norman kingdom becomes absorbed and Gibbon's theme becomes Latin rather than Byzantine. Is Gibbon able to escape western history for long? And to what extent is the history of the Crusades part of Byzantium's losing fight against eastern enemies? Chapter 57, which concludes the fifth volume, transcends the history of the peripheral yet dominant peoples by tracing that of the Seljuk Turks from their central Asian origins to the defeat of Romanus Diogenes in 1071 and the transformation of the Greek Anatolia into the Muslim sultanate of Rûm.

Here Gibbon's historiographical context undergoes a change, while remaining one with which we have long been familiar. He acknowledges two principal authorities: Barthélemy d'Herbelot's *Bibliothèque orientale*, which he had sent after him from Oxford to Lausanne,²² and Joseph de Guignes's *Histoire des Huns, des Turcs, et des Mogols* (III, 523), his source for understanding the barbarian invasions of the Roman Empire. The *Huns* display the attributes of nomad pastoralists recoiling from the Chinese frontiers and setting in motion a series of snowball effects felt as far west as the Danube valley. The last of these had been the Magyar invasion of the ninth century, but Gibbon now becomes concerned with the very different story of the *Turcs*. The western steppe is converted to Islam and therefore to literate monotheism, and this in turn is a consequence of the Arab conquest

of Persia and the transformation of Arab culture that follows. We enter the world of Ibn Khaldun, whom Gibbon did not know, and of Adam Ferguson, whom he may have reviewed:²³ one in which cities, capable of commerce, literacy and empire, draw constantly on the shepherd horsemen from whom they recruit their armies and by whose dynasties they are repeatedly ruled. Unlike the western barbarians, among whom the plough sets the progress of society in motion, the Turks are the only one of de Guignes's nomad peoples who become capable of durable empire. They are still governed by oriental despots, but their empire extends across western Asia and deep into Europe as Gibbon is writing. Whether it will last he does not seem to enquire.

Unlike the sultanate of Rūm, Seljuk power over Jerusalem is not acquired by conquest over the Roman Empire, but over the Fatimid caliphate that remains powerful in Egypt. It is not a matter of war between empires, but of control over the lucrative travels of pilgrims to the holy places of all three great religions (III, 548–54), and Gibbon has to enquire into the meaning, in the history he is writing, of the wars of the Crusades that are to follow. He is in no doubt that these were a Latin and Frankish enterprise, external to the history of the eastern empire, yet profoundly damaging to it.

He relates the history of the Crusades, down to the fall of the Christian kingdom of Jerusalem, in the opening chapters (58–9) of his sixth and last volume. He does so in the simplest of the modes of historiography available to him: the paraphrase, with occasional commentary, of the first-hand and near-contemporary narratives of witnesses and participants. It is true that he enjoys massive philological support, in the form of the glossaries of medieval Greek and Latin supplied by Charles du Fresne Ducange, 'the Tillemont of the middle ages' (III, 1212), but there is no 'philosophical' history of the Crusades, and what we read in these chapters is *res gestae*: the heroic and saintly exploits of knightly and clerical actors. This, however, may be misleading; we have only these narratives because the Crusades consisted only of actions of these orders, and once we realise this we have grasped their 'philosophical' history. They constitute an episode in the history, not of empire but of religion; specifically of enthusiasm, an epidemic of which swept through the peoples – particularly the warrior classes – of post-Roman Latin Europe in the eleventh through thirteenth centuries, and did something towards lifting them from barbarism towards civility by converting their savagery (sometimes) into chivalry. This is why their historiography is an incident to the history of society.

There is one exception. When in chapter 59 Gibbon arrives at the fourth Crusade of 1204, he passes it over with the remark that it needs a chapter to itself (III, 645), which it receives in chapter 60. It is a climactic event in the history of empire: the Latin conquest of Constantinople and institution

of a Latin empire, the joint work of French adventurers and aggressive Venetian merchants, from which Byzantine civilisation will not recover. We have embarked on the history of the 'double fall', to which the enthusiastic attempt to seize the holy places of Jerusalem was only directly a prelude. It calls for a different historiography, one of mixed character. If the narrative of the Latin conquest is still supplied by the knightly and chivalrous history by Geoffrey de Villehardouin (111, 1272) (whom Gibbon likes and admires), its prelude and sequel – the establishment and disintegration of the Latin empire, followed by the Greek restoration under the Palaeologi – cannot be understood without the wars between Venice and Genoa for control of commerce in the Mediterranean and the Black Sea; a narrative of a very different kind, ending when Constantinople, no longer an empire, is little more than a maritime trading city, for the moment under Genoese control.

This history, and that of the partial Greek recovery, is narrated by Gibbon in three chapters (61–3), in which he must follow, with little gratification, the none too reliable historians of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries – notably John Cantacuzenus, whom he seems to find so despicable as to be rather interesting (111, 1203, 1292). These are historians in the primary sense, recounting their own deeds or failures to perform them; but there is a deeper background, of Eurasian and intercontinental dimensions, which needs to be related. This consists of the origins and rise of the Ottoman Turks, who are to bring Hellenistic and Roman history to an end, and needs to be situated in the history of the steppe as Gibbon has inherited it from de Guignes as one of his master narratives. There are two chapters (64 and 65) in which Gibbon presents the last great figures of nomad and post-nomad history – Zingis (the spelling he prefers to Genghiz) and Timur – as the background from which the Ottoman Empire emerges. He reminds his readers of the earlier chapters in which the history of barbarism appeared as a pastoral thrust of nomads from China towards Europe (111, 791 and 111); but he and we know that much has changed since the time of Attila. The nomads have developed an occasionally genocidal capacity to interact with cities and empires; they have accepted Islam and other religions, and have penetrated both Iran in the west and China in the east. Gibbon possesses a life of Zingis in Persian perspective and another in Chinese, and the son of the former's editor has translated a life of Timur.²⁴ He knows also that the last of the Mongol empires is falling under British control in India, and that William Jones and his colleagues are about to produce a revolution in oriental scholarship.²⁵ There is a new age in world history and historiography, in which the Ottoman role is not limited to the fall of Constantinople in 1453.

This catastrophe (in the literary sense) is reduced from effective to symbolic importance – like the sack of Rome by Alaric in 376 – by the events of the preceding century, in which the Ottomans cross the Straits and permanently subjugate the Slav and Orthodox provinces of Byzantine civilisation (chapters 64 and 67). There is now a Turkish and Muslim empire, and what is more a lasting cultural presence, in Europe itself, using that word in both its ancient and its modern senses; and Gibbon leaves us in no doubt that he knows this presence to have persisted into his own time. Its history, however, is subordinated to narrative: that is, to the narratives of the successive reigns from the Latin to the Turkish conquests, and these to the quite distinct narrative of the Eurasian conquests of Timur from the Chinese to the European borders. At the battle of Ankara (Gibbon's 'Angora') he overthrows his fellow conqueror Bajazet and comes within reach of destroying the Ottoman Empire (as it now is) altogether; but he dies on the way to the invasion of China. While Gibbon is dealing with this sequence of narratives (including that of the iron cage in which the captive Bajazet is exhibited), he is also enquiring into the fact that, whereas the heirs of Timur scarcely try to hold his empire together (the death of Attila comes to mind), the heirs of Bajazet do not fall apart. What Gibbon calls 'hereditary succession' – we want him to add 'primogeniture' – has preserved the Ottoman Empire for nearly four centuries until its present decadence (III, 859–60). Gibbon is able to venture past 1453 into the history of modern east Europe.

Ottomans and Slavs

He does not, however, do so systematically. The concluding volume of *The Decline and Fall* lacks any equivalent to the third volume's 'General Observations on the Fall of the Roman Empire in the West', and it is worth enquiring – if need be counterfactually – what resources, if any, Gibbon possessed for writing such an equivalent, what it might have been and why he did not write one. The obvious response has already been given: the history of the eastern empire was not a decline and fall in the western sense, and Gibbon did not feel called on to reflect upon it. It was not a history of interior decay and progressive barbarian and ecclesiastical takeover, but of the rise of an alien if related religion and the organisation of non-Roman peoples into empires capable of conquest. Byzantium was more capable of self-recreation than Gibbon had suggested, and at times he must acknowledge this; but the history of its destruction by Latins and Turks was more one of their strengths than of its weaknesses, and he need only relate the latter at the level of narrative.

East Roman historiography therefore lacked a deep past and a master narrative, but this is only one set of reasons why it did not call for ‘general observations’. It did not possess – alternatively, Gibbon did not see reasons for supplying – a medieval and early modern continuation leading to the modern Europe of his own time. This had been constructed by the republican and Enlightened historians surveyed in *Barbarism and Religion* and by many other writers, but it was essentially a history of post-Roman western Europe and its expansion, and lacked an eastern narrative written on the same scale. Gibbon did not write one, and there is no sign at present that he felt any need to do so; but his text stands at certain points from which one might – counterfactually we may say ‘may’ – have occurred to his mind.

As the successor state to the west Roman empire was the Frankish kingdom expanding eastward through Germany, the successor to Byzantium was the Turkish empire over the Orthodox Slavs and Greeks of southeast Europe. There could have been – are we sure that there was not? – a historiography of Ottoman power in the Danube valley and the Mediterranean seas. Gibbon once mentioned that the frontier of the Austrian empire separated Christian from Muslim Europe along the line which had separated the Roman empire *in occidente* from that *in oriente* (II, 98); and on a global scale, Raynal’s team of historians had made the Turkish conquest of Egypt a starting point of their history of world commerce.²⁶ Though it is dangerous to overestimate, one should not underestimate the capacity of Enlightened historians to envisage history on such a scale. In Gibbon’s time, however, the critical encounter of Turkish–Christian history was that with an expanding Russia. He knew, though he did not much admire, the history in which the Moldavian (and exile in Russian protection) Demetrius Cantemir had offered to recount the rise and anticipated decline of the Ottoman Empire (III, 1203), and we have noticed his mention of the Russian navy’s voyage from the Baltic to the Black Sea. There was a history of Europe here greater than its encounter with Arab–Turkish Islam and other than the epic encounter with the shepherd peoples that had provided the ‘General Observations’ of 1783 with their closure.

‘A Julian or Semiramis may reign in the North’ (II, 513). Julian is Frederick of Prussia, Semiramis Catherine of Russia, and we are at the head of the Baltic (a birthplace of German historiography)²⁷ where Europe is bringing Protestant and French Enlightenment to a still Orthodox Russia, now a Muscovite and Romanov state engaged in the colonisation of Siberia and the steppe, which will expel de Guignes’s nomads finally from world history. All these are episodes of vast importance, which the need to write a

Byzantine history as he understands it obliges Gibbon to mention, but never to bring together in a pattern.

Conclusions

Having arrived at the fall of Constantinople – the culminating moment in the decline and fall of the Roman Empire – Gibbon does what he has done before, and adds three chapters on topics only indirectly related to his immediate narrative. In Volume I, after reaching the accession of Constantine, he had added two chapters on Christianity in the pagan empire; in Volume III, after reaching the end of the empire in the west, he had added a chapter on the structure of the Frankish monarchy. In each case there was some relationship between the addition and a narrative of continuing history; but that could not be the case with the conclusion of the work as a whole, where the additional chapters are retrospective and he offers no general considerations on history after 1453. It is more perplexing, therefore, not only that he offers these chapters, but that he has declared his intention of doing so since publishing his preface to *The Decline and Fall* as a whole in 1776.²⁸ We ask what his intentions were in 1776 and whether he was carrying them out unchanged in 1787–8; and it should be confessed that, in the present state of research and interpretation, we do not know.

Chapters 69 and 70 relate the political and ecclesiastical history of the city of Rome in the Middle Ages, a triangular history of popes, emperors and bandit nobilities competing to control the ghost of the vanished Roman republic. Chapter 71 – Gibbon's last – studies the material history of the city, the partial destruction and partial survival of the ancient buildings of the republic and empire. All three are intensively researched and written, and it may be said that they carry on themes that dominate his historical imagination: the former two relating the conflict of ecclesiastical power with secular, the last recalling that moment in 1764 when 'the idea of writing the decline and fall of the city' – not yet the empire – 'started to his mind'.²⁹ Gibbon, it is easy to say, was in the last analysis a historian of western Europe, and western historiography took control of his mind at the end. But this does not quite explain the lack of any connection between Volume VI and its last three chapters, and it may not sufficiently recognise the absorbing interest in oriental and Eurasian history which long preceded the visit to Rome and can be dated from what would have been his schoolboy years if he had ever been a schoolboy.³⁰

It is easier to discern the paradigmatic history to which chapters 69–71 belong than it is to find that paradigm controlling *The Decline and Fall* as a whole. This present chapter, and the volumes of *Barbarism and Religion*,

have offered a multi-paradigmatic and multi-contextualist reading, in which Gibbon's historiography alters as he moves from one narrative to another. There is not always a necessary connection explaining each move, and that seems in the present state of our insight to be the problem with his last three chapters. Perhaps the grandeur and unity of *The Decline and Fall* is literary after it is historiographical: the majesty of Gibbon's style as he moves from one narrative to another is what gives his work unity.

Notes

- 1 J. G. A. Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion*, 6 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999–2015).
- 2 Giuseppe Giarrizzo, *Edward Gibbon e la cultura europea del Settecento* (Naples: Istituto Ital. per gli Studi Storici, 1954).
- 3 Arnaldo Momigliano 'Gibbon's Contribution to Historical Method', in *Contributo alla storia degli studi classici* (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 1955).
- 4 See *Barbarism and Religion*, III, ch. 8.
- 5 *Barbarism and Religion*, IV, parts I and II.
- 6 *Barbarism and Religion*, v.
- 7 Gibbon's chief source here seems to have been Isaac de Beausobre's history of Manichaeism; see *Barbarism and Religion*, v, ch. 5.
- 8 Jean Leclerc, perhaps even more than the greater David Hume, is the philosopher of this history; William Warburton of the origins of tolerance and intolerance.
- 9 This term is challenged by scholars who rightly remind us that the peoples of this empire continued to describe themselves as 'Romans'. I continue to use it, however, because Gibbon employed it to distinguish between the inhabitants of a Greek-speaking Orthodox east and a Latin-speaking Catholic west.
- 10 *Barbarism and Religion*, IV, chs. 13–17. These chapters may be read as presenting a great sequel and aftermath to *The Decline and Fall* itself; a claim made not without trepidation.
- 11 *Ibid.*, chs. 10–12.
- 12 I present histories used by Gibbon in these volumes as they appear in the bibliographical index to Womersley's edition; here Womersley, 'Index', *The Decline and Fall*, III, p. 1227. See further *Barbarism and Religion*, I, pp. 33–40.
- 13 Womersley, 'Index', *The Decline and Fall*, III, p. 1246.
- 14 *Barbarism and Religion*, I, pp. 8, 322.
- 15 See *Barbarism and Religion*, I, p. 29.
- 16 *Barbarism and Religion*, IV, chs. 6–8.
- 17 *Barbarism and Religion*, v, pp. 105–9.
- 18 *Barbarism and Religion*, IV, pp. 35–6.
- 19 *Barbarism and Religion*, II, ch. 22.
- 20 These words are used of de Guignes, *The Decline and Fall*, I, p. 1029 n10.
- 21 Emphasised in the 'General Observations', *The Decline and Fall*, II, p. 512.
- 22 *Barbarism and Religion*, I, p. 30.
- 23 *Barbarism and Religion*, II, pp. 352–4.

- 24 *The Decline and Fall*, III, p. 794 nn7–9.
- 25 Gibbon considers Zingis a tolerant monotheist and compares him to Locke (III, 793 n6).
- 26 *Barbarism and Religion*, IV, pp. 240–2.
- 27 Kant was a resident of Königsberg, Herder of Riga.
- 28 See *The Decline and Fall*, ‘Preface’, I, p. 3; see also III, pp. 27 and 978–9.
- 29 *Barbarism and Religion*, I, pp. 283–5.
- 30 *The Autobiographies of Edward Gibbon*, ed. John Murray (London: John Murray, 1896), pp. 114–22 (esp. 121); *Barbarism and Religion*, I, p. 29.