

‘SCEPTICISM IN EXCESS’: GIBBON AND EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY CHRISTIANITY*

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ABSTRACT. *Since the appearance of volume 1 of The decline and fall of the Roman empire in 1776, the religion of Edward Gibbon has been subject to intense debate. He has been variously identified as an atheist, a deist, even as a somewhat detached Christian. Examination of his relations, both personal and scholarly, with the varieties of religion and irreligion current in eighteenth-century Britain leads to the conclusion that he remained resolutely critical of all such positions. He did not share the convictions of dogmatic freethinkers, still less those of determined atheists. The product of a nonjuring family, Gibbon benefited from the scholarly legacy of several high church writers, while maintaining a critical attitude towards the claims of Anglican orthodoxy. It was through the deliberate and ironical adoption of the idiom of *via media* Anglicanism, represented by such theologians as the clerical historian John Jortin, that Gibbon developed a woundingly sceptical appraisal of the history of the early church. This stance made it as difficult for his contemporaries to identify Gibbon’s religion as it has since proved to be for modern historians. Gibbon appreciated the central role of religion in shaping history, but he remained decidedly sceptical as to Christianity’s ultimate status as revealed and unassailable truth.*

Edward Gibbon’s first surviving letter, written in 1750 when he was thirteen, describes his stay at a large house near Bristol: ‘King’s Weston is a most Grand House and Mr Southwell has a Great Many Books. yesterday [*sic*] I went to a Chappel (it being Sunday) and after Church upon our Return home we Veiwed [*sic*] the Remains of an ancient Camp, which pleased me vastly.’¹ For the adult Gibbon, the social inevitability of religious practice of some sort – ‘it being Sunday’ – continued to live side by side with a sense of wonder at the monuments of a seemingly richer and more deeply imagined past. Reflection on that past necessitated an engagement with the thought of his own age, and the reader of his writings, both formal and informal, can thus begin to appreciate not only the nature of Gibbon’s own beliefs, but also his reactions to

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¹ *The letters of Edward Gibbon*, ed. J. E. Norton (3 vols., 1956), 1, p. 1. Place of publication is London, unless otherwise stated.

those of his contemporaries. This is a large subject; discussion will therefore be confined in this essay to Gibbon's relations with British religious thought.

I

What, if anything, was Gibbon's religion? Various answers have been proposed: that he was an atheist, a deist, a sceptical Christian.² There appears to be an evolution of sorts in Gibbon's religious life, from the conventionally Anglican child (albeit with nonjuring roots) to the despairing adolescent seeking relief from religious doubts in a conversion to Catholicism; and later, from the apostate reclaimed by Protestantism to the man who rejected the conventional consolations offered by belief in an afterlife.³ For Joseph Priestley this last feature was purely a matter for contempt, and thus to become subject to the doctrinal censures of a Socinian Dissenter demonstrates keenly the liminal nature of Gibbon's religious reputation in the 1780s.⁴ Ironically, within two years of Priestley's remarks, both he and Gibbon were to be publicly censured in a sermon preached by Thomas Howes, who depicted them as like-minded and aspiring revivers of schismatic rationalism, an identification also later to be made by Henry Kett, a fellow of Trinity College, Oxford, in his Bampton Lectures, published in 1791.⁵

The dubious opacity of Gibbon's religious opinions to some of his contemporaries is made vividly clear in a satirical reworking of one of his more notorious footnotes to the first volume of the *Decline and fall*. Written by what the Scottish divine John Ogilvie described as 'A Gentleman of distinguished character in the republic of letters',⁶ it sought to undermine Gibbon's observation on the times of Aurelian: 'Appollonius of Tyana was born about the same time as Jesus Christ. His life (that of the former) is related in so fabulous a manner by his disciples, that we are at a loss to discover whether he was a sage, an impostor, or a fanatic.'⁷ This daring coupling was parodied by Ogilvie's orthodox friend to telling effect: 'The German Geistlicherlichus was born about the same time as Gibbon the Englishman. His life, *that of the former*,

² Cf. Shelby T. McCloy, *Gibbon's antagonism to Christianity* (Chapel Hill, 1933); J. G. A. Pocock, 'Edward Gibbon in history: aspects of the text in *The history of the decline and fall of the Roman empire*', in Grethe B. Peterson, ed., *The Tanner lectures in human values*, xi, (Salt Lake City, 1990), pp. 289–364; Paul Turnbull, 'The "supposed infidelity" of Edward Gibbon', *Historical Journal*, 25 (1982), pp. 23–41; David Dillon Smith, 'Gibbon in church', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 35 (1984), pp. 452–63.

³ On Gibbon's possible rejection of life after death, see appendix C to W. B. Carnochan, *Gibbon's solitude: the inward world of the historian* (Stanford, 1987), pp. 185–6.

⁴ Joseph Priestley, *An history of the corruptions of Christianity* (2 vols., Birmingham, 1782), II, pp. 457–8.

⁵ Thomas Howes, 'A discourse on the abuse of talent of disputation in religion, particularly as practised by Dr Priestley and Mr Gibbon', in *Critical observations on books ancient and modern*, III (1784), pp. 1–36; Henry Kett, *A representation of the conduct and opinions of the Primitive Christians* (Oxford, 1791).

⁶ John Ogilvie, *An inquiry into the causes of the infidelity and scepticism of the times* (1783), pp. 1–2.

⁷ *The decline and fall of the Roman empire* (hereafter *DF*), ed. David Womersley (3 vols., 1994), I, p. 315 n. 63.

is so variously related by his contemporaries, that we are at a loss to discover whether he was a materialist, a professor of philosophical theism, or a Socinian.⁸ Plainly, some of Gibbon's contemporaries were certain of only one aspect of his religious views, namely that they were heterodox: their actual nature remained, for many commentators, a matter for disapproving conjecture.

It was the scepticism inherent in Gibbon's scholarship which also and necessarily pervaded his religious opinions. Scholarship could well be described as acting as Gibbon's religion, or substitute religion; in a late letter, he claimed to speak (admittedly when passing on some gossip, and then merely parenthetically) with 'the religious duty of the historian'.⁹ Here, indeed, is Gibbonian irony, since the devotion to truth so implied does not necessarily embrace the notoriously unreliable source that is 'gossip',¹⁰ but the truth-claims of history did matter fundamentally to Gibbon the scholar, and it was the failure of certain Christian claims to historicity which so badly compromised the status of religious 'orthodoxy' in the *Decline and fall*. Gibbon's peculiarly vivid brand of scepticism was such as to preclude his ready identification with many of the religious or irreligious alternatives available to his age. His problems with Christianity are endemic to the logic of the *Decline and fall*, and they have been subject to much scholarly scrutiny. Before re-opening them, it is important to sketch his relations with the varieties of unbelief in eighteenth-century England. To begin, then, where his father seems to have begun: the world of Bolingbroke and his sceptical progeny.¹¹

Late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century freethinking was usually deliberately opaque, consciously erudite and cheerfully exclusive, as was made clear in a conversation reported by John Toland in 1720:

[Lord SHAFTESBURY] conferring one day with Major WILDMAN about the many Sects of Religion in the world, they came to this conclusion at last; that, notwithstanding those infinite divisions caus'd by the interest of the Priests and the ignorance of the People, ALL WISE MEN ARE OF THE SAME RELIGION: whereupon a Lady in the room, who seem'd to mind her needle more than their discourse, demanded with some concern what that Religion was? to whom Lord SHAFTESBURY strait replyd, *Madam, wise men never tell*.¹²

Recently, some historians have begun to claim that this was effectively the world of England's Enlightenment, as the critique of revealed religion initiated by Hobbes developed within a *milieu* of sceptics and freethinkers, the circles in which men such as Toland, Shaftesbury, and Bolingbroke moved.¹³ It was,

⁸ Ogilvie, *An inquiry*, p. 2. ⁹ Appendix A, in Carnochan, *Gibbon's solitude*, pp. 181–2.

¹⁰ Cf. Ian R. Christie, 'Horace Walpole: the gossip as historian', in his *Myth and reality in late-eighteenth-century British politics and other papers* (1970), pp. 359–71.

¹¹ For an argument that Gibbon junior had found his way to an acceptance of 'natural religion' by the end of the 1750s, see Peter Ghosh, 'Gibbon's first thoughts: Rome, Christianity and the *Essai sur l'étude de la littérature*, 1758–61', *Journal of Roman Studies*, 85 (1995), pp. 148–64.

¹² John Toland, 'Clidophorus, or, of the exoteric and esoteric philosophy', in *Tetradymus* (1720), pp. 61–100, at pp. 94–5.

¹³ John Redwood, *Reason, ridicule and religion: the age of Enlightenment in England, 1660–1750* (1976); Margaret C. Jacob, *The radical Enlightenment: pantheists, republicans and Freemasons* (1981); Jacob,

notoriously, to Bolingbroke's equally sceptical publisher, David Mallet, that the young Gibbon was first sent when his father desperately sought a means of curing him from a youthful conversion to Catholicism.¹⁴ It would, however, be too bold to claim that Gibbon's sceptical instincts were at one with those encouraged in this coterie, since many of its criticisms of religion were more usually philosophical than they were in any sense historical, and its claims for the superiority of a religion of nature or of an increasingly godless pantheism were a little too emphatic for Gibbon's sceptical taste. This is not to say that he was unappreciative of the *politique* element in arguments for natural religion. He praised an essay by Walter Moyle, an ardent whig, in which he had championed the need for a minimal religious creed of the sort instituted by Numa. Moyle had claimed in its favour that the 'Religious Institution' of ancient Rome was 'the most politick system of Religion, that ever any Lawgiver founded'.¹⁵

If Gibbon does have anything like a predecessor emanating from such circles, it is Conyers Middleton, a clergyman whose awkward relationship with his faith distanced him as much from any easy kinship with such men as it did from his fellow Cambridge divines. Textual echoes are not too hard to find between the *Decline and fall* and Middleton's *A letter from Rome* (1729), with its often tendentious claims for the similarity between 'superstitious' Catholicism and the rites of Roman paganism; a notably more sophisticated, and historically grounded version of Middleton's account, extending the argument to include Byzantine worship, animates chapter 49 in the fifth volume of the *Decline and fall*.¹⁶ It ought to be no surprise that a youthful enthusiast for Rome, once reclaimed by Protestantism, should have returned to the work of Middleton (whose critique of miracles, published in 1749, had originally sent Gibbon to the consolations of Catholicism), nor yet that, in the process, the attractions of ancient Rome should have begun to predominate over those of papal Rome. This was an adjustment of view which can also be discerned in Middleton's own work, as he turned from the emphatic denunciations of both Romes to a celebration of Roman philosophical theism in his *Life of Cicero* (1741).

Middleton had argued that Cicero, an adherent of the Academy, was a moderating influence in philosophy between 'the rigor of the Stoic, and the indifference of the Sceptic', an opponent of 'dogmatical Philosophy': his was the best thought available in a 'Heathen world', sharply subject to dissension

Living the Enlightenment: Freemasonry and politics in eighteenth-century Europe (New York, 1991); J. A. I. Champion, *The pillars of priestcraft shaken: the church of England and its enemies, 1660–1730* (Cambridge, 1992).

¹⁴ Aside from the relevant passages in the *Memoirs*, a good account is given by D. J. Womersley, 'Gibbon's conversions', *British Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 11 (1988), pp. 51–70.

¹⁵ *DF*, II, p. 72 n. 3; Walter Moyle, 'An essay upon the constitution of the Roman government', in *Works* (2 vols., 1726), I, pp. 1–148, at pp. 10–15. On Moyle and his circle, see Blair Worden 'The Revolution of 1688–9 and the English republican tradition', in Jonathan I. Israel, ed., *The Anglo-Dutch moment* (Cambridge, 1991), pp. 241–77.

¹⁶ Cf. *DF*, II, p. 97 n. 90.

over questions of religion and morality.¹⁷ Cicero was further celebrated as a believer in providence, immortality, and the rewards and punishments of a future state. As regarded ‘*the Religion of his Country*’, Middleton’s Cicero can be seen as a forerunner of the tolerant philosophers in the first volume of the *Decline and fall*, considering public religion as ‘an engine of state, or political system’, a ‘wise institution; singularly adapted to the genius of Rome’.¹⁸ Cicero’s personal religion, by contrast, was ‘undoubtedly of *heavenly extraction*’, but this was natural religion and not revelation, as Cicero was described as having discovered the eternal laws of God in the fitness of things, which was ‘the constant opinion of the wisest of all ages’.¹⁹

Middleton’s portrayal was dismissed by one of Gibbon’s early clerical critics, East Apthorp, who noted in 1778 that Cicero’s religion was not ‘that rational theism, which is the subject of Dr Middleton’s panegyric’. Cicero’s life and writings, Apthorp continued, revealed him to be a sceptic, so that ‘Whenever he dogmatizes on the divine nature, he is a Spinozist: and in all his notions, either of the existence, the unity, or the providence of God, he confounds the divine nature with that of the universe.’²⁰ Remove the implied references to pantheism, and this is Gibbon’s Cicero rather than Middleton’s. Both Middleton and Gibbon opposed the enthusiasms which they saw in religion ancient and modern, but whereas Middleton was content to seek out a middle way in a species of rationalized Christianity, Gibbon was prepared to contemplate a bleaker prospect. In this respect, Gibbon was distant from eighteenth-century rationalism, which historically absorbed what it saw as analogous tendencies in earlier thought. Gibbon was prepared to historicize Cicero in a way that Middleton seemingly was not. For Gibbon, Cicero was not an uncomplicated apologist for Middleton’s idea of natural religion, as is apparent in his slyly ambiguous statement that ‘The writings of Cicero represent in the most lively colours, the ignorance, the errors, and the uncertainty of the ancient philosophers with regard to the immortality of the soul.’²¹ Gibbon’s marked preference for practical activity over metaphysical speculation further undermined Middleton’s reading. He insisted that ‘At the bar and in the senate of Rome the ablest orators were not apprehensive of giving offence to their hearers, by exposing that doctrine as an idle and extravagant opinion, which was rejected with contempt by every man of a liberal education and understanding.’²² Practical atheism or scepticism thus subsumed, if they did not ignore, speculative atheism.

¹⁷ Conyers Middleton, *The life of Marcus Tullius Cicero* (2 vols., 1741), II, pp. 540–2, 564.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* II, pp. 548–52.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* II, pp. 555–7. On the importance of Cicero in the political sphere, in which Middleton’s work played its part, see Reed Browning, *Political and constitutional ideas of the court whigs* (Baton Rouge, 1982), pp. 34, 210–56, and Peter N. Miller, *Defining the common good: empire, religion and philosophy in eighteenth-century Britain* (Cambridge, 1994), pp. 73–87, 89–95.

²⁰ East Apthorp, *Letters on the prevalence of Christianity, before its civil establishment* (1778), pp. 228–9.

²¹ *DF*, I, p. 463 and n. 51.

²² *Ibid.* I, p. 464. Cf. II, p. 793 n. 55, where Gibbon also censures Middleton’s personal *bête noire*, Richard Bentley.

What Gibbon eventually gleaned from Middleton's subversive critique of the miracles of the early church was a means of undermining central tenets of Christianity, and this was most blatantly enacted in chapters 15 and 16 of the *Decline and fall*. An early critic of these chapters, Francis Eyre, opined that Gibbon had copied from Middleton 'as to the substance, several pages together', a view shared by another opponent, Smyth Loftus, and which was turned to accusations of outright plagiarism on Gibbon's part by Henry Edwards Davis.²³ Middleton's *A free inquiry into the miraculous powers* (1749) and his *Introductory discourse* to that work, published in 1747, caused an enormous furore with their explicit claim that post-apostolic miracles were only to be considered as pious frauds. Contemporary readers discerned in this claim the implicit assumption that the Gospel miracles were also suspect, something Gibbon was later to describe as a deliberate evasion on Middleton's part.²⁴ Middleton's critics, who covered a wide arc of opinion from the Arian William Whiston to John Wesley, accused him of being worse than a deist, regretting his waste of talent in undermining the Gospel history and thereby abetting both the rise of universal scepticism and the claims of Rome.²⁵ Gloucester Ridley, an Oxford divine, later characterized the effects of Middleton's work in a damaging riposte to those who saw in its anti-Catholicism a supreme weapon in the ultra-Protestant armoury of anti-dogmatic Anglicanism, stating that 'I never heard of one man who became a protestant, or who was kept from becoming a papist, by reading what he had wrote on the subject; but I have heard of more than one, whom it perverted to infidelity, or confirmed in it.'²⁶

Leslie Stephen found it relatively easy to concur with many of Middleton's contemporaries in characterizing him as a covert unbeliever in revealed religion.²⁷ It would be fairer to characterize Middleton, existing as he did on the fringes of freethinking and Christian faith, as that interesting rarity, a sceptical Christian: an ultra-Protestant, anti-dogmatic divine who occasionally lost his bearings in the sea of religious controversy.²⁸ There is far more to favour such a contention than there is for placing Gibbon in such a small and select

²³ Francis Eyre, *A few remarks on The decline and fall of the Roman empire* (1778), p. 21; Smyth Loftus, *A reply to the reasonings of Mr Gibbon, in his History of the decline and fall of the Roman empire* (1778), pp. 116–18; James Chelsum, *Remarks on the two last chapters of Mr Gibbon's History* (1776), p. 91; Henry Edwards Davis, *An examination of the fifteenth and sixteenth chapters of Mr Gibbon's History of the decline and fall of the Roman empire* (1778), pp. ivn, 169–85, 271–2; Davis, *A reply to Mr Gibbon's Vindication* (1779), p. 156.

²⁴ *DF*, I, p. 473 n. 73.

²⁵ Anon., *A letter to the Reverend Dr. Conyers Middleton* (1749), p. 227; Thomas Church, *An appeal to the serious and unprejudiced* (1751), pp. vii–x; John Jackson, *Remarks on Dr. Middleton's Free enquiry* (1749), p. 60; William Dodwell, *A free answer to Dr. Middleton's Free inquiry* (1749), pp. 126–7; Zachary Brooke, *An examination of Dr. Middleton's Free inquiry* (1750), pp. xix–xx; William Whiston, *Mr. Whiston's account of the exact time when miraculous gifts ceas'd in the church* (1749), p. 27; John Wesley, 'A letter to Dr. Conyers Middleton', in John Telford, ed., *The letters of John Wesley* (8 vols., 1931), II, pp. 312–88.

²⁶ Gloucester Ridley, *Three letters to the author of the Confessional* (1768), letter 3, pp. 140–1.

²⁷ Leslie Stephen, *History of English thought in the eighteenth century* (2 vols., 1876), I, pp. 254–7, 270–2.

²⁸ See in particular the interesting arguments contained in *Some cursory reflections on the dispute or dissension, which happened at Antioch, between the Apostles Peter and Paul*, in *The miscellaneous works* (4 vols., 1752), II, pp. iii–x, 1–20.

category of eighteenth-century thought. Intriguingly, Middleton was a close friend of a divine who was to take it upon himself to defend the truth-claims of Christianity both against Bolingbroke and his acolytes and the scepticism of Hume: William Warburton. An important passage in the *Life of Cicero* is heavily indebted to one of the many peculiar readings of classical literature which litter Warburton's contentious work, *The divine legation of Moses* (1738–41). Writing about Cicero's initiation into the Eleusinian mysteries, Middleton supported Warburton's argument that these rites had been contrived to inculcate belief in the unity of God and in the immortality of the soul. An appended footnote further supported Warburton's analogous interpretation of the sixth book of the *Aeneid* as a veiled description of the mysteries themselves.²⁹ Such apologetically useful interpretations of classical literature and religious belief either as *preparationes evangelicae* or as the cynical ploys of double-dealing hierophants were the antithesis of Gibbon's desire to read such texts firmly as products of their own times, free from the glosses of Christian divines. As Gibbon emphatically reminded readers of his *Memoirs*, his first English publication was a convincing refutation of what he considered to be Warburton's perverse misreading of Virgil.³⁰

The figure of Warburton is unavoidable in discussion of Gibbon's intellectual career. J. G. A. Pocock has argued that the *Divine legation* and the *Decline and fall* are the two major works created during England's uniquely conservative, predominantly clerical Enlightenment, and it ought therefore to come as no surprise that Gibbon considered an intellectual assault on the notoriously arrogant bishop of Gloucester a necessary element in his sustained critique of the historico-literary dimension of Christian apologetic.³¹ The engagement between the two writers began with the contest over Virgil and continued, in more muted terms, in chapter 23 of the *Decline and fall*. Warburton himself did not reply to the former, and was two years dead when the latter appeared in print. There are only seven direct references to Warburton in chapter 23, and these are to be found in footnotes, an art form of which Gibbon remains the undisputed master. All but one of these allusions are to Warburton's essay in historical apologetic, *Julian* (1750), which sought to demonstrate that the fires which prevented Julian the Apostate's sacrilegious attempt at rebuilding the temple at Jerusalem were of a miraculous nature.³² Had their miraculous status been confirmed, then they would have been on the very cusp of chronological acceptability to most Protestants, who were keen to downgrade all such alleged events to the status of *fabulae*, signs of the corruption of the early church into the errors supposedly endemic to Roman Catholicism. The first of Gibbon's notes

²⁹ Middleton, *Life of Cicero*, 1, pp. 42–3, and n^b.

³⁰ Gibbon, *Memoirs*, ed. John Murray (1896), pp. 280–3, 304–5, 410; *Observations on the sixth book of the Aeneid* (1761).

³¹ J. G. A. Pocock, 'Clergy and commerce: the conservative Enlightenment in England', in Raffaele Ajello et al., eds., *L'età dei lumi* (2 vols., Naples, 1985), 1, pp. 523–62, at pp. 553–4. For a broader discussion, see B. W. Young, *Religion and Enlightenment in eighteenth-century England: theological debates from Locke to Burke* (Oxford, forthcoming).

³² The other direct reference attempts once more to show the absurdity of Warburton's interpretation of the Eleusinian mysteries: *DF*, 1, p. 872 n. 25.

has an air of anti-clerical, anti-dogmatic natural religion about it, as he avers that ‘The secret intentions of Julian are revealed by the late bishop of Gloucester, the learned and dogmatic Warburton; who, with the authority of a theologian, prescribes the motives and conduct of the supreme Being.’³³ He also noted the opposition to Warburton’s argument of the Dissenter Nathaniel Lardner (whose collections of *Jewish and Heathen testimonies to the truth of the Christian religion* (1764–7) and *Credibility of the Gospel history* (1730–57) were frequently and often appreciatively alluded to in the *Decline and fall*), claiming that he ‘perhaps alone of the Christian critics, presumes to doubt the truth of this famous miracle’.³⁴ Gibbon, naturally, was happy to dispatch another miracle from historical testimony, in addition to the many willingly sacrificed elsewhere in the *Decline and fall*. Intriguingly, while happy to appeal to an essay by the religiously reticent Walter Moyle in deriding the earlier alleged miracle of the Thundering Legion, Gibbon did not refer to Moyle’s apparent acceptance of the Jerusalem miracle which is to be found in the same piece.³⁵ Was this mere tidiness on Gibbon’s part, or an attempt at quietly rejecting the provenance of all miracles, whatever the testimony of otherwise useful sources?

An indirect reference also served to eliminate Warburton’s greater apologetic project, as laid out in the *Divine legation*. When Gibbon quietly criticized Julian’s liberality in interpreting Greek mythology, he noted obliquely that ‘His reasoning is less absurd than that of some modern theologians, who assert that an extravagant or contradictory doctrine *must* be divine; since no man alive could have thought of inventing it.’³⁶ This is an obvious strike at Warburton’s claim, ‘on the principles of a religious deist’, that since all ancient religions save Judaism had promised a future life of rewards and punishments in order artificially to guarantee order in their societies, and that, although such a doctrine had been revealed by God to Moses he had chosen not to share it with his followers, then Judaism alone was true.³⁷ Furthermore, the intellectually rebarbative Warburton, rebuked as a ‘polemic divine’ by many of his contemporaries, including his erstwhile admirer Laurence Sterne, is surely alluded to in the strongest terms in Gibbon’s dismissal of Julian as having ‘imbibed the illiberal prejudices and passions of a polemic divine’. Julian, in common with Warburton, ‘was tempted to distrust the sincerity, or to despise the understandings of his antagonists, who could obstinately resist the force of reason and eloquence’.³⁸ In short, Warburton, in common with Julian and, in

³³ Ibid. I, p. 888 n. 71.

³⁴ Ibid. I, p. 891 n. 84. Nathaniel Lardner, *A large collection of ancient Jewish and heathen testimonies to the truth of the Christian religion* (4 vols., 1764–7), IV, pp. 18–10. Cf. Anon., *A review of the fiery eruption ... In which Mr. Warburton’s arguments are considered* (1752). Smyth Loftus, among others, reasserted the miraculous nature of the fire: *Reply to the reasonings*, pp. 127–9.

³⁵ *DF*, I, p. 551 n. 106; Moyle, ‘The miracle of the Thundering Legion examin’d’, in *Works*, II, pp. 79–390, at pp. 100–2, 388.

³⁶ *DF*, I, p. 869 n. 15.

³⁷ William Warburton, *The divine legation of Moses demonstrated* (2 vols., 1738–41), II, pp. 344–468, and *passim*.

³⁸ *DF*, I, p. 870; F. M. Doherty, ‘Sterne and Warburton: another look’, *British Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 1 (1978), pp. 20–30; Melvyn New, ‘Sterne, Warburton, and the burden of exuberant wit’, *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 15 (1981–2), pp. 245–74.

a famous dismissal, Voltaire, had become what the tolerant Gibbon most despised: a bigot.³⁹ Bigotry, whether that of a Christian divine, a pagan emperor, or an occasionally flippant *philosophe* went against the grain of Gibbon's open-minded variety of scepticism.

This distrust of bigotry is what, in large part, prevented Gibbon from becoming an atheist. Atheism between the Reformation and the Enlightenment has been identified as a problematic categorization by many historians, although a consensus seems to have emerged that it was a status that some thinkers, especially in France, were happy to ascribe to themselves by the second half of the eighteenth century.⁴⁰ Had Gibbon, whom Pocock sees as an ultra-sceptical Humean on the question of religion, wished to espouse the atheism imputed to him by many of his opponents, it would have been socially inconvenient, but not intellectually impossible for him to have done so.⁴¹ The problem he might have faced, had he indeed been an atheist, was recognized in 1782 by William Hammon, a self-professed 'philosophical unbeliever':

It has indeed been often disputed, whether there is or ever was such a character in the world as an atheist. That it should be disputed is to me no wonder. Every thing may be, and almost every thing has been disputed. There are few or none who will venture openly to acknowledge themselves to be atheists.⁴²

Certainly, Gibbon never openly acknowledged himself to be an atheist, either practically or speculatively, and one of his earliest critics, the Irish clergyman Smyth Loftus, whether rhetorically or sincerely, addressed his antagonist as a theist, and not as an atheist.⁴³ In order further to clarify this matter, it is necessary to relate Gibbon to other elements in the Christianity prevalent in eighteenth-century Britain.

II

There is an appreciative reference to the work of Warburton in the *Decline and fall*, but it is decidedly double-edged. In a reference to Moses, Gibbon noted that the patriarch 'had not disdained to adopt many of the rites and ceremonies of Egypt'. The accompanying note is suggestive: 'I shelter myself behind Maimonides, Marsham, Le Clerc, Warburton &c. who have fairly derided the fears, the folly, and the falsehood, of some superstitious divines.'⁴⁴ Gibbon's insinuating tone is interesting, since he was knowingly exploiting divisions within Anglican apologetic. The division to which he alludes further strengthens an identification of his work with that of Middleton, for it was the latter who determined the course of much of this debate regarding Egyptian influences on Moses. It was their common belief in the significance of these

³⁹ *DF*, II, p. 916 n. 13.

⁴⁰ For usefully varied responses to this problem, see the essays in Michael Hunter and David Wootton, eds., *Atheism from the Reformation to the Enlightenment* (Oxford, 1992).

⁴¹ J. G. A. Pocock, 'Superstition and enthusiasm in Gibbon's history of religion', *Eighteenth-Century Life*, 8 (1982), pp. 83–94.

⁴² William Hammon, 'Prefatory address' to [Matthew Turner], *Answer to Dr. Priestley's letter to a philosophical unbeliever* (1782), pp. ix–xxxiv, at p. xvi.

⁴³ Loftus, *A reply to the reasonings*, p. 33.

⁴⁴ *DF*, I, p. 888 and n. 72.

influences which had also once united Warburton with Middleton against the apologetic of some more consciously orthodox divines. Attacking Daniel Waterland's *Scripture vindicated* (1730), itself a reply to Matthew Tindal's notorious tract *Christianity as old as the creation*, Middleton had insisted that the widely respected Waterland had gone too far in defending literally such allegorical aspects of the Old Testament narrative as the talkative serpent in Eden, just as he had equally mistakenly removed Moses from those dubious Egyptian influences which Middleton traced through the rite of circumcision.⁴⁵ In thus tentatively 'sheltering behind' Warburton, whose defence of divinely inspired Mosaic originality he had already caustically undermined, Gibbon left open the possibility that freethinking histories of religious obfuscation and priestly fraud, which happily traced all 'superstition' back to the supposed mires of Egypt, contained some interpretative viability.⁴⁶ Again, like Middleton, Gibbon did not commit himself to an open acceptance of such histories, but he did signal something like an appreciation of their possibility. It is also important to remember that Jews, often branded as 'fanatics', do not come out well in the opening volumes of the *Decline and fall*.⁴⁷ Warburton's defence of Judaism, which famously delighted in the apologetic necessity of paradox, did not win him many converts, and Gibbon was happy to use his work to undermine the larger apologetic project of which it was a part. Derision of Warburton had also formed part of Hume's leisure-hours, as is apparent in a letter of 1759:

As to private News there is little stirring; Only Dr Warburton turned Mahometan, & was circumcised last Week. They say he is to write a Book, in order to prove the Divine Legation of Mahomet; and it is not doubted he will succeed as well in proving that of Moses. I saw him yesterday in the Mall with his Turban; which really becomes him very well.⁴⁸

For both Gibbon and Hume, Warburton had become merely a mythographer, so unsatisfactory did they find his Christian apology. By isolating Warburton in this manner, and this despite appreciative references to his theory of hieroglyphic writings and the possibility of a Sarmation chronology,⁴⁹ Gibbon had removed himself from one of the most idiosyncratic if powerful sources of Christian apologetic in the mid-eighteenth century. His debts to and distance from other, numerically more significant groups within the Church of England were also to be found in the richly suggestive notes to the *Decline and fall*. Familial inheritance dictated the course of one of the more interesting of these relationships, Gibbon's enduring connection with the nonjurors, which was to become most apparent in literary terms in the *Memoirs*.

Gibbon's first tutor, John Kirkby, had been a nonjuror, and he was to

⁴⁵ Conyers Middleton, *A letter to Dr. Waterland; containing some remarks on his Vindication of scripture* (1731). A copy in the Bodleian Library, Rawl. 8°.437, contains Waterland's vexed annotations.

⁴⁶ On which 'histories', see Peter Harrison, *'Religion' and the religions in the English Enlightenment* (Cambridge, 1990).

⁴⁷ For the *locus classicus*, see *DF*, I, pp. 447–51.

⁴⁸ *The letters of David Hume*, ed. J. Y. T. Greig (2 vols., Oxford, 1932), I, p. 310.

⁴⁹ *DF*, I, p. 700 n. 43, III, p. 578 n. 55.

become indebted to one of the most prominent of early nonjurors, Henry Dodwell, in the composition of the *Decline and fall*. Gibbon had turned to Dodwell's 1682 work on Cyprian for information on Hadrian's persecution of Christians with Dodwell's suggestion that the number of martyrs had been exaggerated, and he also used his lectures as Camden professor at Oxford for an assessment of Hadrian's legal reforms.⁵⁰ Reference was also made to Dodwell's defence of the miracles of the second century, whose apostolic ancestry Dodwell was keen to emphasize.⁵¹ It is one of the nicer ironies in Gibbon's intellectual career that his father was taught by the most prominent and influential of the later nonjurors, William Law, with whom Gibbon's maiden aunt later lived in chaste retirement. Gibbon had himself praised Law's literary work and his moral consistency, regretting his enthusiasm for the writings of the seventeenth-century mystic Jacob Boehme as the immediate cause of his declining reputation in the mid-eighteenth century.⁵² His relations with Hester Gibbon, Law's confidante, were always difficult: an early letter to Catherine Porten, largely concerned with gambling debts, testified to the distance he felt, as he noted that he 'Would write to my aunt Hester but know not what to say to her.'⁵³ The puritanical imperatives of the 'holy living' tradition were not attractive to a man of Gibbon's character. There are echoes of Law the proponent of celibacy in Gibbon's account of the sexual theories of the fathers, repudiated on account of their abhorrence of 'every enjoyment, which might gratify the sensual, and degrade the spiritual, nature of man'.⁵⁴ This is complemented by a claim which echoed his belief that his virginal aunt had sublimated her sexual desires, as he noted of the early Christians that 'The loss of sensual pleasure was supplied and compensated by spiritual pride.'⁵⁵ Law's influence had also been felt by the young John Wesley, who developed his suggestion that the community of goods mentioned in Acts 2: 44–5 could inspire a revival of the moral economy of the early church, a belief which occasioned much criticism from the Anglican mainstream.⁵⁶ Gibbon later adverted to this ideal, describing it as a 'generous institution' which 'would too soon have been corrupted and abused by the returning selfishness of human nature', and taking the opportunity of a footnote concerned with Plato and

⁵⁰ Ibid. I, pp. 545 n. 90, 556 n. 124, 570 n. 165, 627 n. 149, II, p. 787 n. 36; Henry Dodwell, *Dissertationes Cyprianicae* (1682), pp. 56–118; Henry Dodwell *Praelectiones academicae in schola historiae Camdeniam* (Oxford, 1692), pp. 319–39. Davis once again accused Gibbon of plagiarism in his use of Dodwell: *An examination*, pp. 205–64, and *A reply*, pp. 156–7.

⁵¹ *DF*, I, pp. 473n. 77, 162; Henry Dodwell, *Dissertationes in Iranaeum* (Oxford, 1689), pp. 89–218.

⁵² Their relationship is further analysed in B. W. Young, 'William Law and the Christian economy of salvation', *English Historical Review*, 109 (1994), pp. 308–22.

⁵³ *Letters*, ed. Norton, I, p. 8.

⁵⁴ *DF*, I, pp. 479. On Law and the clerical cult of virginity, see B. W. Young, 'The Anglican origins of Newman's celibacy', *Church History*, 65 (1996), pp. 15–27.

⁵⁵ *DF*, I, pp. 481; Gibbon, *Memoirs*, pp. 21–3.

⁵⁶ John Walsh, 'John Wesley and the community of goods', in Keith Robbins, ed., *Protestant evangelicalism: Britain, Ireland, Germany and America, c. 1750–c. 1950*, Studies in Church History, Subsidia VII (1990), pp. 25–50.

Thomas More to associate the community of goods indelibly with the common use of women, a sexual innuendo long familiar to critics of Wesleyanism.⁵⁷ Both nonjuring and Wesleyan spirituality were subject to Gibbon's explicit and implicit condemnation.

Next to Dodwell's nonjuring scholarship, Anglican high churchmanship, with its pronounced interest in patristics, naturally provided Gibbon with much of his material. Joseph Bingham, who had been deprived of his fellowship at University College, Oxford, for being over-ingenious in his ultra-orthodox defence of Trinitarianism, was a favoured source, his multi-volume *Origines ecclesiasticae*, the first volume of which appeared in 1708, acting as a guide to credal formularies, the form of the priesthood, ancient catechetical instruction, baptism, and notions of clerical and monastic celibacy (this last something of an obsession with the notoriously prurient Gibbon).⁵⁸ Similarly, appeal was made to William Cave's *Primitive Christianity* (1673) on the subject of penances and other disciplines, and to William Beveridge's 1672 work on the laws of the Greek church, on which Gibbon frequently relied for the texts of the ancient councils.⁵⁹ Most significant of all were references to the work of George Bull, the foremost defender of Trinitarian orthodoxy in the Anglican church at the close of the seventeenth century. Bull's works were cited as 'Staunch polemics', and his defence of the orthodoxy of the Nazarenes, voiced in his otherwise well-received *Judicium ecclesiae catholicae* (1694), was strategically placed alongside the doubts of Mosheim on the same subject.⁶⁰ Gibbon further berated Bull for accepting a Trinitarian comparison between the status of Christ and that of the sons of the emperor, and for reconciling (in the name of orthodoxy) irreconcilable synods, before he tersely adverted to dismissals of Bull's attempts at defending the pre-eminence of the Father with the independence of the Son, 'which some of his antagonists have called nonsense, and others heresy'.⁶¹

This leads to the question of the Trinity, the centre of theological disunion in the eighteenth-century church, and a subject which in turn fascinated and appalled Gibbon. By systematically pointing out the often murderous consequences of Trinitarian speculation in the early church, Gibbon was both undermining its claims to pacific dogmatism and emphasizing the tumultuous divisions inherent in the church which claimed to be its natural successor. By emphasizing theological partisanship, both ancient and modern, Gibbon was able to challenge the status of orthodoxy in Christian thought. The *Decline and*

⁵⁷ *DF*, I, pp. 490–1 and n. 128.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.* I, pp. 726 n. 5, 745 n. 63, 746 n. 67, 752 n. 86, 753 n. 88, 754 n. 93, 755 n. 95, 841 n. 22, II, pp. 418 n. 32, 813 n. 121. Gibbon owned Bingham's works, which were issued in two volumes in 1726. On Bingham see L. W. Barnard, 'Joseph Bingham and asceticism', in W. J. Shiels, ed., *Monks, hermits and asceticism*, Studies in Church History, xxii (Oxford, 1985), pp. 299–306.

⁵⁹ William Cave, *Primitive Christianity* (1673), pp. 402–39; William Beveridge, Πανδεκτικόν: sive pandectae canonum SS. apostolorum, et conciliorum, ab ecclesia Graeca receptorum (2 vols., Oxford, 1672), I, pp. i–xxiv, 429–52, II, pp. 47–151, 182.

⁶⁰ *DF*, I, pp. 774 n. 23; George Bull, *Judicium ecclesiae catholicae* (1694), pp. 24–60.

⁶¹ *DF*, I, pp. 780 n. 50, 783 n. 57; Bull, *Defensio fidei Nicaenae* (Oxford, 1685), pp. 8, 13, 25–42, 341–3.

fall is littered with references to the Trinity, and his discussion of the Arian controversy is one of the work's great set-pieces. His dismissal as inauthentic of the only explicitly Trinitarian formulation in the New Testament, 1 John v.7, led him to denounce the New Testament studies undertaken in the 1700s by the Oxford divine John Mill, and was itself the origin of a debate between Archdeacon Travis and the classicist Richard Porson.⁶² An inclination towards Arianism or Socinianism could well be detected in his approving reference to Isaac Newton's disparagement of I Timothy iii.16, and to his praise for 'the wiser and less partial theologians of the present times'.⁶³ He approvingly cited tracts by the Socinian Dissenter Thomas Emlyn on the error of worshipping Christ as God rather than as 'a very excellent creature';⁶⁴ what most divided Gibbon from modern Arians was their addiction to metaphysics. This was especially true of Samuel Clarke, whose *Scripture doctrine of the Trinity* (1712) was quietly but effectively lampooned in a footnote as Gibbon noted that 'The metaphysics of Dr. Clarke ... could digest an eternal generation from an infinite cause.'⁶⁵ More provocatively still, Gibbon's speculations on the nature of the Trinity are mostly located in his discussion of the rise of Islam, a sect he equally suggestively described as Unitarian in nature.⁶⁶ The Unitarians proper he largely ignored, until Priestley's censures obliged him to turn on them; one of their founding fathers, Theophilus Lindsey, was well aware of the dangers of Gibbon's denunciations, leading him to note in a letter written in 1781 that 'There never was a more industrious or more artful adversary to Divine revelation than our Historian, and not many of more ability.'⁶⁷ Modern Christian heresy was not a favoured hunting-ground of Gibbon, although he plainly enjoyed the excesses of the Arian Whiston and of Thomas Burnet, whose notoriously allegorical reading of Genesis, millennialism, and damaging tendency to the mortalist heresy appear in separate footnotes in the *Decline and fall*.⁶⁸ A parallel between an ancient heresy, that of James Baradeus, did appeal to this son of a nonjuring family, as Gibbon reflected that its name 'has been preserved in the appellation of Jacobites, a familiar sound which may startle the ear of an English reader'.⁶⁹

Trinitarian speculation of the sort entertained by Gibbon won him few clerical admirers, and he was therefore proved at least partially wrong in his claim, made in the final volume of the *Decline and fall*, that 'the modern times

⁶² *DF*, II, pp. 442.

⁶³ *Ibid.* II, pp. 940, 942.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.* I, p. 777 n. 38; Thomas Emlyn, *A collection of tracts, relating to the deity, worship, and satisfaction of the Lord Jesus Christ* (1719).

⁶⁵ *DF*, I, pp. 780 n. 49.

⁶⁶ Cf. *ibid.* III, pp. 177–8, 191, 212.

⁶⁷ Paul Turnbull, 'Gibbon's exchange with Joseph Priestley', *British Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 14 (1991), pp. 139–58; H. MacLachlan, ed., *The letters of Theophilus Lindsey* (Manchester, 1920), p. 18.

⁶⁸ *DF*, I, pp. 61 and n. 69, 456 n. 28, II, 94 n. 81; Thomas Burnet, *The theory of the earth* (2 vols., 1684–90), II, pp. 161–73; Thomas Burnet, *De statu mortuorum et resurgentium* (1700), pp. 63–74; Thomas Burnet, *Archaeologiae philosophiae* (1692), pp. 277–314. On Burnet, see Scott Mandelbrote, 'Isaac Newton and Thomas Burnet: biblical criticism and the crisis of late-seventeenth-century England', in James E. Force and Richard H. Popkin, eds., *The books of nature and scripture* (Dordrecht, 1994), pp. 149–78.

⁶⁹ *DF*, II, pp. 988.

of religious indifference, are the most favourable to the peace and security of the clergy'.⁷⁰ The deliberate provocations of chapters 15 and 16 had themselves already suggested otherwise. Nor was this unease felt only by the clergy, as is apparent in the response of at least one of the influential periodicals of the day. *The Gentleman's Magazine* had been far less sanguine than either of its competitors, *The Monthly Review* and *The Critical Review*, in its assessment of chapters 15 and 16.⁷¹ Its reviewer regretted that Gibbon had renewed the calumnies of Jews, heathens, and heretics; and here, he concluded, was the familiar weaponry, albeit 'more disguised', both of indigenous and Voltairean irreligion. The opportunity to regret religious and moral declension so typical of the eighteenth century was eagerly seized, and a concomitant call to arms with decidedly clerical resonances were duly and appropriately sounded. The reviewer ritually condemned the 'too fashionable principles of this too fashionable work', insisting that 'its tendency cannot be overlooked, and therefore should carefully be exploded by every friend to the christian faith'.⁷²

The clerics did not need such a clarion call before taking up the challenge. A great deal of scholarly attention has long been paid to Gibbon's clerical critics, and it is not the purpose of this essay to reconstruct what is readily available in Shelby T. McCloy's now dated but still useful work, *Gibbon's antagonism to Christianity* (1933). All that needs to be remembered about these attacks is that they were relatively feeble; witness Gibbon's damning reply in his *Vindication* (1779) to Davis and Chelsum, who had ill-advisedly dared to contest his use of sources in chapters 15 and 16.⁷³ Other critics adverted to Gibbon's impiety, his love of sexual innuendo, his over-elaborate style, his compromising preference for pagan over Christian sources, all of which together tended to his supposed hatred of Christianity and, more especially, of its clergy. With the single exception of the ultra-liberal Richard Watson, whom he treated with icy good manners, Gibbon did not rate his contemporary critics at all highly, and there seems little reason to assume him wrong not to have done so.⁷⁴ To many of these critics, Gibbon was at best a reviver of the natural religion promoted by Tindal and others, and the fears of the 1720s and 1730s were thereby revived as Smyth Loftus opined that Gibbon's work would serve to spread scepticism and infidelity in society 'till it shall at last throw it into slavery, and all the absurdities, superstitions and idolatry of the church of Rome'; East Apthorp, however, was nearer the mark, not least in a tacit appreciation of Gibbon's irony, when he noted that 'There is no part of the author's disquisitions relating to revealed religion, which do not lead to arguments in favour of it.'⁷⁵ The problem was simple: few of Gibbon's

⁷⁰ Ibid. III, p. 983.

⁷¹ Cf. *The Monthly Review*, 55 (1776), pp. 41–50; *The Critical Review*, 41 (1776), pp. 264–71.

⁷² *The Gentleman's Magazine*, 46 (1776), pp. 365–7.

⁷³ Not that Gibbon was unaffected by them, on which see David Womersley, 'Gibbon and the "Watchman of the Holy City": revision and religion in *The decline and fall*' in Rosamond McKitterick and Roland Quinault eds., *Edward Gibbon and empire* (Cambridge, 1997), pp. 190–216.

⁷⁴ *Letters*, ed. Norton, II, pp. 119–20, 129–30, 173; *Autobiography*, pp. 317, 322.

⁷⁵ Loftus, *A reply*, p. 189; Apthorp, *Letters*, p. xi.

contemporaries were capable of defending such arguments, and they retreated into the solace offered by berating the manners of the times as the means of this difficulty, to wit ‘an unsolid LITERATURE, a sceptical PHILOSOPHY, a neglect of theory and system in THEOLOGY, a prevailing LUXURY, and the effect of these causes, an avowed HOSTILITY to revealed religion’.⁷⁶ What is emphasized by these critics again and again is Gibbon’s savage enjoyment in chronicling the shortfallings of the clergy of the ancient church, an alleged misjudgement of tone familiar in criticisms made of Gibbon by more recent commentators.⁷⁷

It is important, however, to remember that Gibbon was also aware of the virtues of restraint. Consider his detailing of the particularly brutal murder of the pagan teacher Hypatia by the followers of Cyril of Alexandria in 415. Within the latter half of one long paragraph, he communicates what Toland took an essay to convey, and what Charles Kingsley would utilize as the basis for a Catholic-baiting novel in 1853.⁷⁸ Hypatia’s butchery, instigated by Peter the Reader and his ‘troop of savage and merciless fanatics’ (who used sharp oyster-shells in order to tear off her flesh), is made yet more horrid by Gibbon’s economical and scholarly retelling of it. The close of one footnote, bathetically devoted to the oyster-shells, demonstrates the neat meshing of morality and history typical of Gibbon’s scholarly presentation of disreputable events: ‘I am ignorant, and the assassins were probably regardless, whether their victim was yet alive.’⁷⁹ The moralizing tone is made yet more emphatic in a further footnote, elucidating the reaction of a great Catholic historian to Hypatia’s fate: ‘At the mention of that injured name, I am pleased to observe a blush even on the cheek of Baronius.’⁸⁰ Between the propagandist tracts of the unbelieving Toland and the firmly Protestant Kingsley, Gibbon’s reaction is a model of concise and emphatic moral judgement, so that one cannot but accept his wearied conclusion that ‘the murder of Hypatia has imprinted an indelible stain on the character and religion of Cyril of Alexandria’.⁸¹

Such a conclusion was not incompatible with the ecclesiastical history provided by John Jortin, an anti-dogmatic clergyman, whose view of the church’s past, as enunciated in his *Remarks on ecclesiastical history* (1751–73), was particularly favoured by his fellow liberal clergy. Jortin’s is the only specifically ecclesiastical history of any value written by an English cleric in the eighteenth century, but its liberal sentiments denied it the impact that a less partisan work might have had. Gibbon was indebted to the work at several points in the *Decline and fall*, sometimes with reservations, as in Jortin’s alleged

⁷⁶ Apthorp, *Letters*, p. 177.

⁷⁷ Cf. Duncan S. Ferguson, ‘Historical understanding and the Enlightenment: Edward Gibbon on Christianity’, *Historical Magazine of the Protestant Episcopal Church*, 52 (1983), pp. 391–403; Myron C. Noonkester, ‘Gibbon and the clergy: private virtues, public vices’, *Harvard Theological Review*, 83 (1990), pp. 399–414.

⁷⁸ John Toland, ‘Hypatia’, in *Tetradymus*, pp. 101–36; Charles Kingsley, *Hypatia, or new foes with an old face* (1853).

⁷⁹ *DF*, II, p. 945, and n. 26.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.* II, p. 946 n. 27.

⁸¹ *Ibid.* II, pp. 945–6. For a critical analysis of the legend of Hypatia, a particular favourite of anti-clerical writers, see Maria Dzielska, *Hypatia of Alexandria*, trans. F. Lyra (Cambridge, Mass., 1995).

delight in the ‘wonderful deaths’ of anti-Christian persecutors and his desire to turn the cure of Severus into a miracle, at other times with scholarly indulgence, as in Jortin’s censure of a rival of Arius which Gibbon described as having been undertaken with Jortin’s ‘usual freedom’, and occasionally with praise, as in the significant claim that Jortin had examined the Arian controversy ‘with learning, candour and ingenuity’.⁸² Gibbon was also very taken with Jortin’s notably liberal dislike of Theodosius’ edict forbidding teaching by pagans, praising his ‘becoming asperity’ in censuring ‘this intolerant law’. Likewise, he admired whilst denying the validity of Jortin’s ‘charitable wishes’ in excusing the role of Pulcheria in the promotion of pious frauds.⁸³ Many of Jortin’s prejudices and preconceptions, the common property of anti-dogmatic divines, would also have been attractive to Gibbon, as in his observations regarding the early monks and hermits that ‘Nothing is more probable than that such a cause of life should produce melancholy madness’, and his disavowal of Warburtonian excesses: ‘Our Chelsea-College... was designed by King James I for *Polemic Divines*; and then, with a very small and easy alteration, it was made a receptacle of *married and disabled soldiers*.’⁸⁴ Even more pointedly, Jortin’s characterization of the influences at play on early Christianity chimes very neatly with those dissected by Gibbon:

When Christianity became a bulky system, one may trace in it the genesis of the loquacious and ever-wrangling Greeks; of the enthusiastic Africans, whose imagination was sublimed by the heat of the sun; of the superstitious AEgyptians, whose fertile soil and warm climate produced Monks and hermits swarming like animals sprung from the impregnated soil of the Nile; and of the ambitious and political Romans, who were resolved to rule over the world in one shape or other. To this we may add the Jewish zeal for trifles, arising from a contracted illiberal mind; the learned subtilty of the Gentile philosophers; and the pomp and ceremony of Paganism.⁸⁵

The best efforts of Jortin notwithstanding, a common lament in the late eighteenth century was voiced by East Apthorp: ‘A general ecclesiastical history, on the liberal principles of our own church, is still a desideratum in our English literature.’⁸⁶ Joseph Milner, Master of Hull Grammar School, and a censorer both of Hume and Gibbon, expressed similar sentiments, although it was an evangelical interpretation which he desired, leading him to solve the problem by writing his own church history.⁸⁷ This regret was still keenly felt by Newman as late as the 1840s: ‘It is notorious that the English Church is destitute of an Ecclesiastical History; Gibbon is almost our sole authority for subjects, as near the heart of a Christian as any can well be.’⁸⁸ As analysis of

⁸² *DF*, I, pp. 416 n. 38, 552 n. 108, 779 n. 45, 783 n. 58; John Jortin, *Remarks on ecclesiastical history* (5 vols., 1751–73), II, pp. 5, 178, 212, 307–56.

⁸³ *DF*, II, pp. 86 n. 55, 419 n. 39; Jortin, *Remarks*, IV, pp. 234, 161.

⁸⁴ Jortin, *Remarks*, III, pp. 22–3, 29. ⁸⁵ *Ibid.* I, p. xiii. ⁸⁶ Apthorp, *Letters*, p. 47.

⁸⁷ Joseph Milner, *Gibbon’s account of Christianity considered* (York, 1781); J. D. Walsh, ‘Joseph Milner’s evangelical church history’, *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 10 (1959), pp. 174–87.

⁸⁸ John Henry Newman, ‘Milman’s view of Christianity’, in his *Essays critical and historical* (2 vols., 1871), II, pp. 186–248, at p. 186. See further B. W. Young, ‘Gibbon, Newman and the religious accuracy of the historian’ (forthcoming).

Gibbon's notes and sources reveals, it was largely continental scholars, both Catholic and Protestant, who provided the church histories from which his influentially sceptical appraisal was built.⁸⁹ Eighteenth-century English theologians were not properly historians at all, relying on historical study only occasionally, preferring appeals to physico-theology and ethical theory to the witness of the past. It is notable that two of his occasionally quoted clerical sources, William Stukeley and John Whitaker (the historian of Manchester and the ancient Britons who later critically analysed the *Decline and fall*), were antiquarians, rather than historians per se.⁹⁰ In this sense the intellectually active members of the Anglican clergy were the apologetic products of the challenge of freethinking, which determined the nature of the largely clerical counter-defensive: Gibbon side-stepped both groups by working as an historian. Christianity was compromised historically, but so also was 'natural' religion, and it is noticeable that when Coleridge dismissed Gibbon's views as 'scepticism in excess' he did so when analysing the work of a French ecclesiastical historian, Fleury, alongside the work of Warburton and Lardner on the alleged miracle at Jerusalem in the reign of Julian.⁹¹ Historical apologetic had clearly failed in England, and perhaps this is why so few theologians of any real merit attempted to answer Gibbon (a matter for regret to early nineteenth-century commentators such as Thomas Dunham Whittaker, Dean Milman, and Macaulay): Paley, notoriously, had lamely asked, 'Who can refute a *sneer*?'⁹² In a sermon preached in 1759, an historian-theologian of genuine standing, William Robertson, had provided a providential account of the origins of Christianity in a Roman empire in need of moral re-armament.⁹³ Robertson, an admirer of Gibbon, agreed with Hume in seeing his as an historical age and Scotland as the historical nation, but precious few theologians turned their minds to the fact, leaving themselves open to the notably secularizing force of historical scholarship as it developed in the nineteenth century.⁹⁴ Leslie Stephen, a beneficiary of such developments

⁸⁹ Owen Chadwick, 'Gibbon and the church historians', in G. W. Bowersock et al., eds., *Edward Gibbon and The decline and fall of the Roman empire* (Cambridge, Mass., 1977), pp. 219–31.

⁹⁰ *DF*, I, pp. 77 n. 85, 235 n. 19, 365 n. 25, II, pp. 235 n. 185, 999 n. 111; William Stukeley, *The medallic history of Marcus Aurelius Valerius Caracius, emperor in Britain* (1757), pp. 62, 86; John Whitaker, *The history of Manchester* (2 vols., 1771–5), I, pp. 430–51, 247–57; John Whitaker, *The genuine history of the Britons asserted* (1772), pp. 155–293; John Whitaker, *Gibbon's History of the decline and fall of the Roman empire* (1791).

⁹¹ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Marginalia*, ed. George Whalley, II (Princeton, 1984), pp. 698–752, at p. 746.

⁹² [Thomas Dunham Whittaker] in *Quarterly Review*, 12 (1815), pp. 368–91, at p. 388; H. H. Milman, 'Guizot's Gibbon', *Quarterly Review*, 50 (1833), pp. 273–303, at pp. 293–5; G. O. Trevelyan, *The life and letters of Thomas Babington Macaulay* (2 vols., 1876), II, pp. 284–5; William Paley, *Principles of moral and political philosophy* (1785), pp. 395–6.

⁹³ William Robertson, *The situation of the World at the time of Christ's appearance, and its connexion with the success of his religion, considered* (Edinburgh, 1759). On Robertson and his circle, which productively intersected with that of Hume and Gibbon, see Richard B. Sher, *Church and university in the Scottish Enlightenment: the moderate literati of Edinburgh* (Princeton, 1985).

⁹⁴ Hume, *Letters*, II, p. 230; Owen Chadwick, *The secularization of the European mind in the nineteenth century* (Cambridge, 1975), ch. 8, *passim*. The secularizing drift of Scottish historical writing is

who was also a critic of what he characterized as Gibbon's sceptical conservatism, nonetheless praised his work as 'the first great triumph of a genuine historical method'.⁹⁵ Gibbon's appeal to history had become a vital source in undoing the work of theologians, a subversive division of apologetic labour made explicit in chapter 15:

The theologian may indulge the pleasing task of describing Religion as she descended from Heaven arrayed in her native purity. A more melancholy duty is imposed on the historian. He must discover the inevitable mixture of error and corruption which she contracted in a long residence upon earth, among a weak and a degenerate race of beings.⁹⁶

III

The elegaic tone which some contemporaries attributed to Gibbon's remarks on the genius of late Roman polytheism unhappily gave ground to more than one critic to wonder whether the historian himself was not, in some sense, a 'pagan'.⁹⁷ Priestley pointedly entertained this notion in his censure of the historian:

I have heard of a young gentleman of a sceptical and jocular turn of mind, taking off his hat to a statue of Jupiter ... and saying, 'If you ever come into power again, please to remember that I shewed you respect when nobody else did.' Mr. Gibbon, I hope, has no serious view in complimenting the religion of Greece and Rome, meaning to pay his court to the *powers that may be*, as others do to those that *are*.⁹⁸

This was a fear which Priestley swiftly nullified by remarking that 'The revival of a zeal for the religion of Greece and Rome is not to be compared with the attachment to christianity by inquisitive and learned men in the present age.'⁹⁹ This was undoubtedly the case in England in 1782; in 1788, Gibbon good-humouredly repudiated those Italian scholars who had sought a pagan revival in the late fifteenth century, dismissing theirs as a 'classic enthusiasm'. What he did acknowledge was the presence of a potentially greater problem for the Christians who had condemned those men, as 'the spirit of bigotry might often discern a serious impiety in the sportive play of fancy and learning'.¹⁰⁰ Should the reader infer an implied parallel with the *Decline and fall* here; if so, what was the nature of its 'serious impiety'?

An ironic awareness of what is entailed by the practical workings of religion underpins the subtle critique both of 'natural religion' and of pagan

discernible within the Robertson circle, on which see H. M. Höpfl, 'From savage to Scotsman: conjectural history in the Scottish Enlightenment', *Journal of British Studies*, 17 (1987), pp. 19–40. Gibbon generously acknowledged the superiority of Scottish historical study: *DF*, III, pp. 728 n. 69, 1057 n. 89.

⁹⁵ Stephen, *History of English thought*, I, pp. 446–50.
⁹⁶ *DF*, I, p. 446. A useful perspective is laid out by David Wootton, 'Narrative, irony, and faith in Gibbon's *Decline and fall*', in Anthony Grafton and Suzanne L. Marchand, eds., *Proof and persuasion in history* (Middletown, Conn., 1994), pp. 77–104.

⁹⁷ Cf. Chelsum, *Remarks*, p. 89.

⁹⁸ Priestley, *History of corruptions*, II, p. 455n.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.* II, p. 464.

¹⁰⁰ *DF*, III, p. 909 and n. 117.

‘enthusiasm’ present in Gibbon’s portrayal of the tragi-comic attempt at pagan revival initiated by Julian the Apostate:

The theological system of Julian seems to have contained the sublime and important principles of natural religion. But as the faith, which is not founded on revelation, must remain destitute of any firm assurance, the disciple of Plato imprudently relapsed into the habits of vulgar superstition; and the popular and philosophic notion of the Deity seems to have been confounded in the practice, the writings, and even in the mind of Julian.¹⁰¹

Once again, the inevitability of the compromises attendant on religious practice undermines the purchase of purely ‘natural religion’ in Gibbon’s analysis of the religious impulse as this is inevitably expressed in society. The gentlemanly indulgence of a Bolingbroke, replete with notions of exoteric/esoteric divisions between the knowledge of initiates and the faith of the people, is plainly unworkable in Gibbon’s opinion. Furthermore, while Gibbon had favoured paganism over Christianity on purely conservative grounds, admitting in a letter that he was sentimentally attached to the *older* religion, he was well aware that Julian had been engaged in a hopeless revival, since Roman polytheism had become a religion ‘destitute of theological principles, of moral precepts, and of ecclesiastical discipline; which rapidly hastened to decay and dissolution, and was not susceptible of any solid or consistent reformation’.¹⁰² The unsettling experience of late eighteenth-century religion for the consciously orthodox is also laid out with some precision in the fifth volume of the *Decline and fall*, where the politico-theological lessons of the 1770s, replete with an appeal to parliament against clerical subscription, united an often sceptical laity with an anti-dogmatic clergy:

The volumes of controversy are overlaid with cobwebs: the doctrine of a Protestant church is far removed from the knowledge or belief of its private members; and the forms of orthodoxy, the articles of faith, are subscribed with a sigh or a smile by the modern clergy.

Gibbon, the sardonic reader of Bossuet, turned from a tacit celebration of *via media* Anglicanism to an explicit condemnation of what he saw as the dishonestly secularizing forces of rational dissent, particularly as represented by Joseph Priestley and his ilk, ‘who preserve the name without the substance of religion, who indulge the licence without the temper of philosophy’.¹⁰³ Rational religion, as opposed to scholarly theology, is, as such, impossible for Gibbon; only the compromises struck by an Erasmus, ‘the father of rational theology’, and his supposed descendants, the latitudinarian English divines of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, could maintain the faith without indulging either enthusiasm, be it theological or philosophical, or superstition.¹⁰⁴ Even Luther, whose work in undoing medieval religion was a cause for celebration, was decried for his ‘enthusiasm’, but this was a necessary

¹⁰¹ Ibid. I, p. 870.

¹⁰² *Letters*, ed. Norton, III, pp. 212–17; *DF*, I, p. 879.

¹⁰³ *DF*, III, p. 439. Cf. *Letters*, ed. Norton, II, pp. 320–1.

¹⁰⁴ On which lineage, see *DF*, III, p. 438 n. 38.

evil since, as Gibbon demonstrated in citing an alleged remark of ‘the fanatic’ Whiston to the sceptic Halley, “‘Had it not been for such men as Luther and myself... you would now be kneeling before an image of St. Winifred.’”¹⁰⁵

It is, then, behind an often conventional, if deeply ironic, presentation of the case for *via media* Anglicanism that the authentic tone of Gibbon is to be heard, and even then he teased out problematic doctrines, notably the Trinity, the Incarnation, eschatology, predestination, and grace, which inevitably compromised consciously undogmatic Anglicanism. Just as Middleton could exist as a sceptical Christian at the close of the deist controversy, so Gibbon’s scepticism could be practised in an era when historical study was only beginning to challenge the basis for the reasonable Christianity typical of many Anglican apologists in the closing decades of the eighteenth century. The very language of such apologists, along with their regret that a pure, ethically superior Christianity had been debased by Roman Catholic superstition was subtly used by Gibbon to undermine their claims. Hence, in large part, their inability properly to answer him. It was not until the nineteenth century that the full implications of Gibbon’s achievement were apparent; some of his orthodox contemporaries believed that they had exposed him as a dishonest or a merely incompetent scholar, easily triumphing over infidelity in the process. As Milman and others discovered within decades, these orthodox divines had themselves endured another delusion, mistaking their interested apologetic for disinterested history, their assertions for interpretation. Gibbon negotiated his way through the intellectual and social minefields of theology and philosophy by emphasizing the quotidian realities of the past over the probably illusory eternal verities of metaphysics and religion, and the tensions pervading this personal philosophy in what was both an enlightened *and* a believing age were superbly illuminated by Gibbon’s analysis of the frequently compromised realities of a would-be immortal world order.

To conclude with a later fictional analogy, as befits the attempt at a characterization of the beliefs of Gibbon, a blameless pre-historicist with a taste for the occasionally morally instructive nature of the novel.¹⁰⁶ As an admirer of Gibbon, and one who shared his innately sceptical attachments, Henry James favoured the meticulous intricacies of the Byzantine element in the *Decline and fall*, as is sensitively and subtly made clear in an aside concerning Susan Stringham’s view of Milly Theale in *The wings of the dove*: ‘The great ladies of that race – it would be somewhere in Gibbon – were apparently not questioned about their mysteries.’¹⁰⁷ James’s marked interest in the historian as an autobiographer is similarly suggestive of an alliance of temperaments.¹⁰⁸ Allowing, then, both for the distance between their diction and their experience, it is worth considering the following passage from one of the

¹⁰⁵ *DF*, II, p. 437 and n. 34.

¹⁰⁶ On Gibbon’s enjoyment and utilization of fiction, see Leo Braudy, *Narrative form in history and fiction: Hume, Fielding and Gibbon* (Princeton, 1970).

¹⁰⁷ Henry James, *The wings of the dove*, ed. Peter Brooks (Oxford, 1984), pp. 182–3.

¹⁰⁸ Henry James, ‘London’, *Harper’s Weekly Magazine*, 41 (1987), p. 315.

happily unbelieving James's strangest tales, 'The altar of the dead', which seems readily and suggestively applicable to Gibbon:

He had wondered of old, in some embarrassment, whether he had a religion; being very sure, and not a little content, that he had not at all events the religion of some of the people he had known had wanted him to have. Gradually this question was straightened out for him; it became clear to him that the religion instilled by his earliest consciousness had been simply the religion of the Dead. It suited his inclination, it satisfied his spirit, it gave employment to his piety. It answered his love of great offices, of a solemn and splendid ritual, for no shrine could be more bedecked and no ceremonial more stately than those to which this worship was attached.¹⁰⁹

Read in conjunction with the thirteen-year-old Gibbon's letter, and substituting for the memorial altars and bought prayers of James's protagonist the 'religious accuracy of the historian' as displayed in the stately cadences and deeply felt pen-portraits of the *Decline and fall*, and here is as powerful an evocation of Gibbon's quasi-religious sensibility as one is likely to find in explicit commentaries on the historian. This contrasts with the more assured comments of other Victorian readers of Gibbon. Edward Clodd and J. M. Robertson (the one in a humanist lecture delivered at the South Place Institute, the other in a book sponsored by the Rationalist Press Association) were rather peremptory in recruiting Gibbon as a natural spokesman for the quintessentially Victorian cause of intellectual secularization.¹¹⁰ By the close of the nineteenth century Gibbon had become both a symbol and a resource in a religious and cultural struggle which echoed that of his own age, but whereas his had been a sceptical contribution, albeit excessively so for the likes of the nervously dogmatic Coleridge, that of his self-styled Victorian adherents was altogether more emphatic and certain. There is at least as much intellectual and stylistic distance (and variation in tone) between such later interpreters of Gibbon as there ever was between the historian and his clerical contemporaries, and proleptic histories of rationalism, whether provided by a Lecky, a Robertson or more recent writers, would still need to look elsewhere for their founding fathers.¹¹¹ It is not the proper role of modern scholarship to provide such dubious genealogies.

¹⁰⁹ 'The altar of the dead', in Leon Edel, ed., *The complete tales of Henry James* (12 vols., 1962–4), ix, pp. 231–71, at p. 233.

¹¹⁰ Edward Clodd, *Gibbon and Christianity* (1916); J. M. Robertson, *Gibbon* (1925).

¹¹¹ Cf. W. E. H. Lecky, *History of the rise and influence of the spirit of rationalism in Europe* (2 vols., 1865); John M. Robertson, *A short history of freethought ancient and modern* (3rd edn, 2 vols., 1915), II, pp. 204–5. There is a quasi-apologetic flavour to David Berman, *A history of atheism in Britain, from Hobbes to Russell* (1988). For a resounding criticism of this anachronistic tendency, see Lucien Febvre, *The problem of unbelief in the sixteenth century: the religion of Rabelais*, trans. Beatrice Gottlieb (Cambridge, Mass., 1982), p. 460.