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Christianity and Uncertainty in Gibbon's History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire

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Christianity and Uncertainty in Gibbon's *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*

Brendan W. Clark

Edward Gibbon and his *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* contends with questions of the rise and impact of Christianity upon Roman policy and governance from Nero to Constantine. Gibbon's narrative struggles with ascertaining the degree of influence that Christian thought held on Roman polity and the Empire's fall, at times identifying deleterious Christian acts and at others leaving Christian significance ambiguous. It is this discordance in Gibbon between a narrative of Christian responsibility for and stymieing of the fall that leaves the extent of Christianity's impact largely indeterminate.

Gibbon's treatment of the Christian question commences with a review of Christian persecution under the Romans. Gibbon frames the Christian faith as innocent and free from any culpability that would have warranted persecution, positing that "if we seriously consider the purity of the christian¹ [sic] religion, the sanctity of its moral precepts,"² how are we to understand their rejection by Roman authorities? Gibbon does not acknowledge here foundational aspects that form the crux of early Christian piety. Gibbon, indeed, fails to take into account Christianity's peculiar "kind of polarization to its audience at various points in what may be called pagan theology—a polarization that pricked or alarmed the observer,"³ as Ramsay MacMullen describes in his magisterial account of the Christianization of the Empire. Christianity, for Gibbon, is presented as uniquely independent and imbued with favorable qualities. As Gibbon argues, we would imagine Christians to "have been received with due reverence, even by the unbelieving world."⁴ Gibbon seems unable throughout his account—as with other questions surrounding Christianity—to provide an explanation of why Christianity was subject to this greater degree of persecution. If this Christianity in his *History* was truly an uncorrupted faith in its purest form, then the impetus for Roman persecution remains decidedly unclear.

In assessing Christian influence, MacMullen urges us to be wary of "generalizing" and that, to avoid such a methodological trap, the "historical conclusion must be shown to arise out of the minds of the people being studied."⁵ Gibbon, however, disregards that advice in contending from the outset that the "religious policy of the ancient world seems to have assumed a more stern and intolerant character."⁶ He offers as his only evidence for this sentiment one instance: that of the Christian persecution. Gibbon seems to acknowledge the precarious standing of his generalizations on Christian oppression under Roman rule, offering that he will seek to "separate (if it be possible) a few authentic, as well as interesting, facts from an undigested mass of fiction and error."⁷ However, Gibbon does not address that this "mass of fiction and error" has already been considered and digested by somebody, *viz.* ecclesiastical historians and the "sectaries of a persecuted religion."⁸ Gibbon's reasoning here demonstrates a critical flaw in his *History*: because he is consistently mistrustful of ecclesiastical sources and those that deal with ecclesiastical subjects, he overlooks the value of these sources in rectifying some of the ambiguity surrounding Christianity's influence from, admittedly, a specific perspective. Nevertheless, disregarding sources on the basis of disagreement fails to enlighten the historical truth around Christianity's ultimate place in the fall itself.

While Gibbon is skeptical of ecclesiastical sources, he examines the traditional account of Christ's existence by relying, in part, on the contents of classical histories and those of their objectors. Gibbon argues that the failure of these "carnal men," viz. the "pagan multitude"⁹ and historians of the time, is their inability to "acknowledge his [Christ's] stupendous triumph over the powers of darkness and of the grave" and their poor treatment of the "ignominious death, of the divine author of christianity."¹⁰ Gibbon goes further, identifying as particularly egregious the treatment of the "birth and character of our Saviour [sic] with the most impious contempt" by the pagan objector Celsus in his *Origen*.¹¹ Gibbon demonstrates, on this occasion, a willingness to argue in favor of the Christian narrative and consider the value of early classical sources. What is perplexing, however, is Gibbon's oscillation between reverence for a particular aspect of the faith (e.g., Christ's divinity) and his simultaneous critique throughout the *History* of the perfidy of its institutions. Gibbon, despite his disdain for these sources, still appears to be reticent to make any outright condemnation of Christian beliefs.

Gibbon, notes J.W. Swain in his biography of the historian, would go on to write in his memoirs that he still believes "the propagation of the gospel and the triumph of the Church are inseparably connected with the decline of the Roman Monarchy."¹² Concurrently, Gibbon himself would admit to his historical liberality in constructing the *History*, writing that he had treated the primitive Church "with some freedom."¹³ Gibbon does not resolve this tension between competing positions, instead weighing the import of Celsus and his validity against an interest in promoting a narrative that presents a reverential view of Christ. This incommensurability between Gibbon's respect for Christ as man and his relation of its history may have been the result of the approach Gibbon adopted: as Roy Porter suggests in his account of the man, "Gibbon the philosophical historian made religious belief itself into a historical problem."¹⁴ The shift from a theological disputation to historical inquiry on the value of religion make Gibbon's *History* appear as both an account of the validity of religion and a flawed critique that disregards certain foundational texts.

Further, Gibbon's concern with the question of intention, especially his non-committal attitude towards a condemnation of Roman behavior, informs much of his apparent uncertainty with Christianity's station itself. Gibbon seems unable to resolve the intention of Christians in the exercise of their faith and the intention of the Romans in the exercise of their authority. He predicates an argument on Christian consciousness by presupposing a "personal guilt which every christian had contracted"¹⁵ as an element inherent in the practice and one contrary to the institutional faith. The source of this intention is never identified and, rather, Gibbon adduces only the Roman conferral of the "privileges of private corporations...bestowed with a very sparing hand"¹⁶ as evidence for a Roman sentiment adverse to opposing viewpoints. This discourse presents an unsteady history whose faulting gait erodes Gibbon's larger argument of Christian expansion. If the rise of Christianity and the subsequent Roman persecution aimed to sow "the principle of discord" and keep the spirit of belligerence "alive in their bosom,"¹⁷ Gibbon has not proved there to be a clear Christian or Roman intention that would have precipitated the persecutions. Instead, Gibbon suggests that the best that can be done is to continue speculation, such that a Roman distrust of Christians generally is admittedly only a "probable supposition" supported "by the evidence of authentic facts."¹⁸ The qualification of these intentions as a "supposition" evinces the perpetual lack of clarity over Christianity's contribution to the fall and Gibbon's obstinance to seek answers among other sources.

Gibbon continues, seeking to explain the particular actions that underlay Roman violence against Christian practitioners. Here, there is a demonstration of a measure of caution and

commentary on the limitations of sourcing, with Gibbon urging that history not serve to “plead the cause of tyrants or to justify the maxims of persecution.”¹⁹ This notwithstanding, Gibbon concludes that men such as Charles V and Louis XVI had access to “a just knowledge of the rights of conscience, of the obligation of faith, and of the innocence of error” whereas the “princes and magistrates of ancient Rome,”²⁰ lacked a commensurate familiarity with such ideology. This apologia of historical ignorance toward conceptions of faith and liberty of conscience still does not clarify what specific Roman considerations engendered Christian oppression. These questions are left unanswered. Gibbon cites Tacitus’ account that Romans understood Christians to be guilty of “their hatred of human kind,”²¹ though does not go much further than that. Indeed, the tension remains unresolved, leaving us to conclude that from this uncertainty we can “presume to imagine some probable cause which could direct the cruelty of Nero against the christians of Rome.”²² This absence of certainty in identifying the elements which brought about the Roman persecution demonstrates Gibbon’s fondness for never stepping “far beyond the gut prejudices of *engagé* Protestant historians”²³ when discussing clerical history and the impact of Christian interests on Roman stability.

Perhaps an answer to the intentionality of both parties lies in the realm of ecclesiastical histories, which are simultaneously derided and praised by Gibbon. Gibbon contends that he “purposefully refrained from describing the particular sufferings and deaths of the christian [sic] martyrs.”²⁴ While admitting that the accounts of both Eusebius and Lactantius may be replete with an extensive coverage of these sufferings (and perhaps also an account of widely-held Roman beliefs),²⁵ Gibbon casts doubt on their veracity by virtue of their content: “these melancholy scenes might be enlivened by a crowd of visions and miracles...to celebrate the triumph, or to discover the relics, of those canonized saints who suffered for the name of Christ.”²⁶ Gibbon, here, takes as inconclusive any account of martyrdom during the prosecutions that is ecclesiastical in nature, particularly when such an account contains details that might affirm a Christian tenet contrary to his Enlightenment rationality. The general dismissal of Eusebius and Lactantius because of their Christian mystical identities overlooks their potential value as a cultural account that can be qualified within a given context. Rather than present a valid critique of Eusebius’ methodologies, Gibbon goes further to discredit him, noting in dicta that “it is well known that he [Eusebius] himself had been thrown into prison.”²⁷ What bearing this holds on his accuracy as a historian and the reasons for his imprisonment remain unexplained: we are instead left to assume that Gibbon takes issue principally with Eusebius’ character and that, accordingly, the value of the source is nullified. This critique of certain sources speaks to, as Porter suggests, Gibbon’s aversion to Christianity while living in a world still reeling from the “unfeigned horror...[of]...the fanaticism which had brought the sword and the Inquisition to Europe almost within living memory.”²⁸ Gibbon appears to suffer from a recollection of historical Christianity at its worst and seems unable to overcome this as he considers ecclesiastical descriptions of the persecution. This obstinance towards religious sources interferes with Gibbon’s ability to answer clearly any question of Roman intentionality. How can he begin to draw widespread assumptions of Christian cultural belief and doctrine if he does not incorporate fully the histories—however inaccurate in historic detail they may prove to be—that are written by the proselytizing faithful themselves?

Despite his discrediting of certain sources, there is still a sense of certainty apparent when discussing and dismissing ecclesiastical histories that, in its style, attempts to impart a sense of authority on Gibbon’s commentary:

it is certain, and we may appeal to the grateful confessions of the first christians, that the great part of those magistrates who exercised in the provinces the authority of the emperor...behaved like men of polished manners and liberal education, who respected the rules of justice, and who were conversant with the precepts of philosophy.²⁹

The exact source that affirms this historical certainty is not specified, however, Gibbon's allusion to a wider acceptance of Christian practice or, at minimum, a toleration within the provinces seems counter to certain martyrdom accounts circulated by Eusebius, *et al.* While the extent of martyrdom is doubtless a valid topic for historical inquiry, there is no attempt by Gibbon to examine its credibility with the introduction of sources. Further, Gibbon's commentary on internal strife within the early Church demonstrates his belief of the Church as an institution whose principal contribution had been "centuries of religious warfare"³⁰ and whose practitioners, "in the course of their intestine dissensions, have inflicted far greater severities on each other, than they had experienced from the zeal of infidels."³¹ As one instance of this internal dissension, Gibbon cites the condemnation of Nestorius, writing that "the profane magistrate was driven with outrage and insult from the assembly of the saints...the partial extracts from the letters and homilies of Nestorius were interrupted by curses and anathemas: and the heretic was degraded from his episcopal and ecclesiastical dignity."³² Here, the faithful had yet again demonstrated their ability to disrupt and denigrate the state to Gibbon, leading him to recollect that "Protestant zeal"³³ around criticism is directed towards the early Church and not the later. Still, Gibbon's characterization of the institutional Church is predicated on specific instances within the ambit of "heresy, schism and fraternal persecution,"³⁴ rather than affording consideration to the concomitant historical efforts in monastic preservation of texts and provision for the sick. Again, historical institution action seems to beget Gibbon's inability to see the Church in its totality.³⁵

Separate but interrelated to Gibbon's credulity regarding ecclesiastical sources, Gibbon also calls into question the intentions of the martyrs themselves. As one means of diverting responsibility for Christian persecution, Gibbon describes the ardour of the martyrs, recalling that Ignatius demanded "that when he should be exposed in the amphitheatre [sic], they [the Romans] would not, by their kind but unseasonable intercession, deprive him of the crown of glory."³⁶ Here, the Romans are presented as upholding the "restraints which the emperors had provided for the security of the church,"³⁷ whereas it is the "fortitude of believers" that have gone "beyond the bounds of prudence or reason."³⁸ Thus, Gibbon appears to question who is responsible for martyrdom: is it the Romans, who imposed their "restraints," or the Christians by way of their alleged imprudent actions? Gibbon also draws attention to the sourcing here, noting that the "behaviour [sic] of the Christians was too remarkable to escape the notice of the ancient philosophers."³⁹ However, Gibbon is careful to specify that these philosophers understood Christian action "with much less admiration than astonishment,"⁴⁰ implying that others—namely ecclesiastical historians—offered a position of admiration for martyrs that is to be discouraged.

Gibbon's distrust of Christian accounts and their intentions is perhaps most prevalent, however, in his review of the edicts of Tiberius and Marcus Antoninus. Here, Gibbon again challenges an ecclesiastical history, contending that in Tertullian's apology:

we are required to believe, *that* (emphasis added) Pontius Pilate informed the emperor of the unjust sentence of death which he had pronounced against an innocent, and, as it appeared, a divine person; and that, without acquiring the merit, he exposed himself to the danger, of martyrdom.⁴¹

Gibbon seems unable to rectify a Tertullian account when such an account “escaped the knowledge of the historians of Greece and Rome” and was “only visible to the eyes of an African christian, who composed his apology one hundred and sixty years after the death of Tiberius.”⁴² Gibbon here exhibits that characteristic for which he was so often condemned, *viz.* that he could “never rest satisfied with its [Christianity’s] conventional expressions as provided by the Churches.”⁴³ Gibbons insinuations of dishonesty on the part of Tertullian play into his distrust of the “Church with its priests and monks, its popes and saints, its miracles, and its absurd theological wrangles.”⁴⁴ Doubtless, the act of questioning Tertullian’s account is not the crux of the issue: rather, it is the wholesale condemnation absent an attempt to present Gibbon’s presumably accurate sources that demonstrates an absence of historical certainty. On balance, the portrayal of Christianity in the *History* seems distorted acutely on questions that engage those “theological wrangles,” and Gibbon is far more sympathetic to Christianity in its purest and most unencumbered early form of the disciples.

The account of the Incarnation of Christ is one probative example, where Gibbon states that “his [Christ’s] progress from infancy to youth and manhood, was marked by a regular increase in stature and wisdom; and after a painful agony of mind and body, he expired on the cross. He lived and died for the service of mankind...the tears which he shed over his friend and country, may be esteemed the purest evidence of his humanity.”⁴⁵ There is a certain degree of reverence here, a reverence often unmentioned in the critical tracts against the *History*, that demonstrates Gibbon’s willingness to undertake a new program of historical exploration that provides a measure of unity to the secular and sectarian. As Porter notes, the confluence of “histories of the Church” and “histories of Rome”—and the “investigation of their interrelation from a secular point of view”⁴⁶—presents perhaps one instance of Gibbon’s historical ingenuity, his treatment of ecclesiastical sources notwithstanding. It had always been his intent, wrote Gibbon, to undertake in “an age of light and liberty...an enquiry into the *human* (emphasis added) causes of the progress and establishment of Christianity.”⁴⁷ Approaching the *History* from the position that Gibbon sought to understand the actions of man relative to Christianity, his approval of certain sources and derogation of others seems, at the least, predicated on an interest in reason. While Gibbon weighs martyrs against the interests of man in advancing the Church, he still acknowledges that for many citizens “religion was their only crime.”⁴⁸ Christianity and its contributions to the fall, still uncertain, at times seem to almost stymie Rome’s decline.

Indeed, Gibbon cites Christianity as a contributing factor in elevating the esteem and influence of Constantine. That “partial and increasing favour [sic] of Constantine” may be attributed to the “esteem which he entertained for the moral character of the christians.”⁴⁹ Therein lies the value of Christianity: it serves to “inculcate the practice of private and public virtue”⁵⁰ and presents exactly the mechanism necessary to provide some measure of peace and civility to the empire. Gibbon, then, seems to find fault with the institution and not *per se* the theological practice. His observation that “the catholic princes connected their own interest with that of the clergy, and enforced by fire and the sword the terrors of spiritual censures”⁵¹ appears drastically out of place next to his statement that the Christian vision offers “the people a pure, benevolent, and universal system of ethics, adapted to every duty and every condition of life.”⁵² This constant struggle, perhaps intentional, between a position that suggests corruption of the Church and also advances the virtue of religion leaves the impact of Christianity on the fall noticeably unresolved throughout the *History*. His hatred toward the faith is tempered at times, yet also manifestly present in his attacks of the institution that propagates it.

What, then, can be said about Christianity for Gibbon? He seems certain of the facts in many accounts yet leaves the more significant questions of theology variable. It seems evident that Gibbon does not display a hostility towards Christianity to the full extent that critics often advance, though he nevertheless takes exception to a certain, as Swain suggests, “priestly avarice and lust for power” manifest in the institutional Church itself. Can it be said, however, that his disregard of certain ecclesiastical contributions amounts to a wholesale rejection of the value of Christian doctrine? Certainly not. Gibbon, as Porter suggests, fought a philosophical war in the *History* and “reprobated religious bigotry,”⁵³ constantly aiming to demonstrate that institutional Christianity’s undoing lay with the fact that Christianity “had also come with a sword.”⁵⁴ The divisional and fractured Christianity that Gibbon condemns, the Christianity that has “naturally led [us] to enquire what confidence can be placed in the doubtful and imperfect monuments of ancient credulity,”⁵⁵ is to be viewed independent of any study of the “pure” Christianity in its original form. Thus, Gibbon challenges us in the *History* to view Christianity and its influence on the fall in two forms: as a practice, strictly regulated under Christ’s teachings, and as an institution, subject to the concomitant degradation that comes from any organized structure.

Assuming that Gibbon seeks to understand Christianity in two forms throughout the *History*, his narrative still leaves no definite answer to where Christianity falls with respect to the question of Roman prosperity. Did it merely suspend the fall or was its introduction the watershed which invariably marked the fall’s commencement? Christianity, for Gibbon, seems a question that never was nor could be clarified fully. Its irresolution seems to personally haunt him, with Gibbon shifting from his earlier position and writing in his final years that he is now “far more inclined to dispute this comfortable doctrine,” concluding that he will soon be greeted by the “faith of enthusiasts who sing Hallelujahs above the clouds.”⁵⁶ Gibbon’s *History* stands as that historical representation of the secular and the sectarian, a departure from the philosophical tracts of the ancients and ecclesiastics. For Gibbon, though his critics were loath to admit, was among a new brand, “the chief, perhaps the only, English writer who has any claim to be considered an ecclesiastical historian.”⁵⁷ Gibbon’s Christianity, then, is both that “fabric of superstition... which might long have defied the feeble efforts of reason”⁵⁸ and a source of resolute strength in the reign of Constantine. It is perhaps inconclusive in character, being neither guilty of engendering the fall nor wholly faultless in its collapse, setting the bar of Christian responsibility somewhere in the realm of the inscrutable.

Endnotes

¹ Throughout the edition of the *History of the Decline and Fall* referenced, by publishing error or perhaps by action of Gibbon, "Christianity" and its variants are uncapitalized, instead presented merely as "christian." The cited edition's capitalization has been preserved throughout and—to avoid redundancy—[sic] is indicated only after the first occurrence.

² Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, 12 vols., (London: Plummer and Brewis, 1819): 2:374.

³ Ramsay MacMullen, *Christianizing the Roman Empire*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984): 19.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ MacMullen, *Christianizing the Roman Empire*, 7-8.

⁶ Gibbon, *History of the Decline and Fall*, 2:375.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid., 2:376.

⁹ Ibid., 2:384, 2:385.

¹⁰ Gibbon, *History of the Decline and Fall*, 2:385.

¹¹ Ibid.; Gibbon directly criticizes the first and second books of Celsus' *Origen*, expressing his concern via footnote with Celsus' "impious contempt," 2:385, and also mentions as fallacious an account by the orator Libanius.

¹² Joseph Ward Swain, *Edward Gibbon The Historian*, (MacMillan and Company: London, 1966): 66.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Roy Porter, *Gibbon*, (St. Martin's Press: New York, 1988): 118.

¹⁵ Gibbon, *History of the Decline and Fall*, 2:385.

¹⁶ Ibid., 2:386.

¹⁷ Ibid., 8:259.

¹⁸ Ibid., 2:392.

¹⁹ Gibbon, *History of the Decline and Fall*, 2:391.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid., 2:397-2:398.

²² Ibid., 2:402.

²³ Porter, *Gibbon*, 132; emphasis added.

²⁴ See note 19, *supra*, at 2:479.

²⁵ Eusebius offers in his *Ecclesiastical History* many accounts of Roman motivation such as the following:

"Maximinus Cesar, who was afterwards raised to the government, as if to exhibit the evidences of his innate hatred to God and his aversion to piety, armed himself to persecute with greater violence than those before him," Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, (Philadelphia: R. Davis and Brother, 1840): 353.

²⁶ Gibbon, *History of the Decline and Fall*, 2:479.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Porter, *Gibbon*, 133.

²⁹ Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall*, 2:417.

³⁰ Ibid., 2:482.

³¹ Ibid., 2:484.

³² Ibid., 8:290-8:291.

³³ Edward Gibbon, *Memoirs of My Life*, (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1966): 162.

³⁴ Porter, *Gibbon*, 124.

³⁵ MacMullen, *Christianizing the Roman Empire*, 112.

³⁶ Gibbon, *History of the Decline and Fall*, 2:429.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid., 2:430.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Gibbon, *History of the Decline and Fall*, 2:435-2:436.

⁴² Ibid., 2:436.

⁴³ Swain, *Edward Gibbon The Historian*, 65.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Gibbon, *History of the Decline and Fall*, 8:262.

⁴⁶ Porter, *Gibbon*, 117.

⁴⁷ Gibbon, *Memoirs of My Life*, 157.

⁴⁸ See note 45, *supra*, at 3:242.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 3:245.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Gibbon, *History of the Decline and Fall*, 2:485.

⁵² Ibid., 3:246.

⁵³ Porter, *Gibbon*, 127.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 128.

⁵⁵ See note 51, *supra*, at 2:486.

⁵⁶ Gibbon, *Memoirs of My Life*, 189.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 134; Quoting the remarks of Cardinal John Henry Newman.

⁵⁸ Gibbon, *History of the Decline and Fall*, 2:484.

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