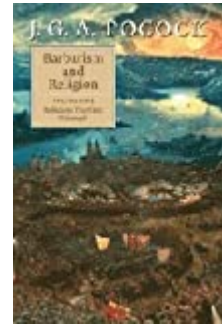




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Gibbon among the Church Historians

Rivaling in length and breadth Edward Gibbon's *The Decline and Fall* (first volume published in 1776) itself, J. G. A. Pocock's study of Gibbon's intellectual context has now reached its fifth volume, which is focused on the portrayal of the rise of Christianity. As with previous volumes, Gibbon becomes a convenient peg on which to hang broader discussions of the character and worldview of the Enlightenment. The difficulties of using such a word in the singular remains one of Pocock's major themes for it is one of the purposes of his studies to show the variety of positions that could shelter under an Enlightenment umbrella. For Pocock, Gibbon's position in relation to the currents of thought encapsulated in the term "Enlightenment" was part of a spectrum that ranged from his Anglican critics at one end—indeed Pocock envisages the use of the term a "Church of England Enlightenment"—to thoroughgoing atheists at the other (p. xi). The skeptical Gibbon, who owed so much to David Hume, was somewhere in between these two poles. There is not, then, in Pocock the sharp dichotomy between a "moderate" and a "radical" Enlight-

enment that one finds in the recent and influential works of Jonathan Israel.

The major context within which Pocock wishes to place Gibbon in this volume is within the world of ecclesiastical history. By his close study of earlier practitioners of this genre from the church fathers to the *Àrudits* of the seventeenth century, Gibbon became engaged in a long and continuing debate about the origins of Christianity. As Gibbon acknowledged, he owed much to the earlier labors of such scholars who had attempted to combine deep erudition with a respect for the divine origins of Christianity. Gibbon himself built on their work to achieve different goals with what, in eighteenth-century terms, was a "philosophical" interpretation of the rise of Christianity, which left little room for larger divine purposes. As Pocock brings out, Gibbon was in some ways replaying debates that had once raged early in Christian history. This was with a view to arriving at an understanding of the church more suited to the goals of many of those who identified with the Enlightenment and wished to reduce the power of the church. Nonethe-

less, Gibbon's predecessors and intellectual companions in this endeavor made him in a sense another ecclesiastical historian whose interpretations and positions were readily comprehensible by his clerical contemporaries—even if many of them became his adversaries. Another part of Pocock's intent in this work is to deal with the reception as well as the origins of Gibbon's work. As he brings out, his critics shared many of the same sources and approaches as Gibbon himself and their objections often had more to do with Gibbon's tone and key silences than the way he conducted the task of writing ecclesiastical history.

Pocock's work does not, however, arrive at any dramatic revision of our understanding of Gibbon's religious views even though Pocock has shown us that he had so much in common with his largely clerical sources and critics. Gibbon largely emerges as a Humean skeptic willing to live with doubt and uncertainty and not inclined to develop a dogmatic position for or against Christianity. Along with Hume, Gibbon owed much to such figures as the (at least nominally) Anglican clergyman Conyers Middleton, who, as Gibbon put it, "rose to the highest pitch of scepticism, in any wise consistent with religion" (p. 355). It was Middleton's critique of Catholic claims to the authority derived from ongoing miracles after the times of the Gospels, which, perversely, had driven Gibbon, when a young Oxford student, into the arms of Rome. As author of *Decline and Fall*, Gibbon drew on a number of Middleton's works, all of which had the effect of upholding the claims of rational over super-

natural religion. Middleton's account of Cicero, for example, portrayed the sort of calm civic engagement and rational detachment that Gibbon snidely contrasted with the character of the early Christians. But, tellingly, Gibbon went even further than Middleton in calling the veracity of the Gospel miracles into question as when he recounted how the darkness that the Gospels describe as having followed the death of Christ went unrecorded in other ancient sources.

Pocock, then, has dug deeply into a body of sources that few have engaged with since the days of Gibbon and, by so doing, has placed Gibbon in another and significant frame of reference. This makes demands on the reader as well as the author. Not many readers will be inspired to turn to the works on which Gibbon drew after reading this work. The level of detailed exposition and complex prose that was their staple makes us admire Gibbon's stylistic gifts the more. Much of Pocock's exposition consists of long quotations in both the original languages, whether ancient or modern, together with an English translation where necessary. The old adage about the best quotation being a short one comes readily to mind. More breaking down such long quotes with authorial commentary and guidance would have made for easier reading. At times, too, as in some of these texts themselves, the level of detail tends to overwhelm the larger themes. Many will be glad, however, that Pocock has done the labor to unearth such sources. Thanks to such intellectual archaeology we now better understand both Gibbon's mentality and his achievement.

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