

MELANCHOLY DUTY

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The Hume-Gibbon Attack on Christianity

by
STEPHEN PAUL FOSTER

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To my Father—Howard Foster

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PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book is a study of the work of two formidable critics of Christianity—the Scottish infidel, David Hume, and the author of the magisterial *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Edward Gibbon. Their work in many important respects represents the culmination of philosophic history, a monumental eighteenth-century achievement of thought which conjoined empirical philosophy, methodological naturalism, and critical historiography. Christianity, both as a social-political institution and a historical and moral interpretation of the world, was the central object of their trenchant and often hostile criticism. Their writings form, if you will, a complementary critique of Christianity. Philosophic history was in part a profound reaction against the intellectual and moral domination of the church, and Hume and Gibbon have emerged as the most gifted and insightful of that elite community of Enlightenment thinkers in Great Britain that pushed historical inquiry into confrontation with eighteenth-century Christianity. Gibbon deeply admired Hume—twenty-six years his elder—and sought to emulate him. The skeptical Hume crafted his philosophical attacks upon centerpiece Christian notions such as miracles and immortality of the soul. His philosophical productions, moreover, were accompanied by the *History of England*, a massive work of cultural history which also dealt heavily with the politics of Christianity. Gibbon, though, set his own course and became *the* historian of the Roman empire. He amassed an unparalleled stock of historical erudition and, with the skill of the consummate ironist, cast the central elements of Hume’s philosophical criticism into an iconoclastic, skeptical history of Christianity itself, a version that was unhappy reading for faithful believers.

No other full length work that I am aware of deals with the complementary features of the work of Hume and Gibbon in the complete range of its confrontation with Christianity. Christianity is a historical religion, and Hume and Gibbon made history itself a problem for the defenders of the Faith. This book explores in depth the efforts of Hume and Gibbon—self-consciously refining and employing the canons of philosophic history—to confront Christianity both epistemologically and morally, and attempts to show just how deeply both of these thinkers were preoccupied with the social and political dimensions of their own religion, that is, the religion that defined and dominated European culture. Epistemologically, *Christian history* came under their attack. The Divine plan of redemption for man, including Christ’s entry into human history, was cast into doubt, an effect of Hume’s “Of Miracles” and Gibbon’s “infamous” chapter fifteen of the *Decline and Fall*. Morally, the *history of Christianity* became the history of fanaticism and superstition. The conduct of Christians—in extreme—was a huge

object of interest for Hume and Gibbon: their history of Christianity focused on the perversity of its practitioners.

In chapter fifteen of the *Decline and Fall* Gibbon speaks of the “melancholy duty” of the historian whose task it is to describe religion as it is discovered among “a weak and degenerate race of beings.” Evidence of Gibbon’s melancholia is found throughout the *Decline and Fall*, and it is most bitter and eloquent in its explorations of Christianity’s shortcomings. Likewise, the steady rhythms of Hume’s normally calm and detached prose are usually broken only when he confronts the fanaticism of sectaries or the superstition of monks. The melancholy duty of which Gibbon speaks carries with it an aspect of inevitable disillusionment, the result of the historian’s discovery and articulation of the profound disparity between human aspiration and achievement. In their confrontation with Christianity disillusionment was the central legacy.

The scholarship on Hume and Gibbon is, of course, voluminous and far ranging. I am particularly in debt to the work of Donald Livingston. His *Hume’s Philosophy of Common Life* in my view is a profound and masterful interpretation of Hume’s philosophy, one of the few general treatments of him that completely integrates his historical with his philosophical work. For the work of Duncan Forbes, J. Pocock and Ernest Gellner I am also appreciative. Gibbon remains a perennial subject of interest for historians, literary theorists and other scholars. In recent years David Jordan and David Womersley have made major contributions to understanding the formation of Gibbon’s thoughts. Womersley has recently edited a fine and long overdue critical edition of the *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. Unfortunately, it appeared too late for use in this book.

A shorter version of chapter three of this book was previously published as “Edward Gibbon and the Anti-Miracle Man: Hume’s ‘Of Miracles’ at Work in The *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*,” *The Modern Schoolman* 71, no. 3 (March 1994), and other small portions of the work were earlier published as “Different Religions and the Difference They Make: Hume on the Political Effects of Religious Ideology,” *The Modern Schoolman* 66, no. 4 (May 1989). I gratefully acknowledge the permission of the editor of *The Modern Schoolman* to use that material.

I wish to offer my thanks and appreciations to those individuals who helped me in many ways, both directly and indirectly, with the writing of this book. To William C. Charron I owe a special debt. As a teacher he was enthusiastic, rigorous, and demanding. In the high standards he set for himself he was exemplary. As a mentor he was kind and encouraging. He also made helpful comments and suggestions on the manuscript. Thanks to Tom Moore for his generous assistance in this project. Also a special thanks to Jane Tilmann, who

provided me with tireless assistance and evinced unwavering cheerfulness through many drafts of the manuscript. Finally, it is with great affection that I acknowledge the contributions of my wife Barbara and my daughters Alyson and Rebecca. Without their steady support, enthusiasm, and good humor throughout my labors, I could not have completed this work.

ABBREVIATIONS

(See Bibliography for full references)

The Works of Edward Gibbon

- EE* *The English Essays of Edward Gibbon*, edited by Patricia Craddock.
- DF* *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, in seven volumes edited by J. B. Bury.*
- Letters-G* *The Letters of Edward Gibbon*, in three volumes, edited by J. E. Norton.**
- Memoirs* *Memoirs of My Life*, edited with and Introduction by Betty Radice.
- MW* *The Miscellaneous Works of Edward Gibbon*, in five volumes, with occasional notes and narrative by John, Lord Sheffield.**

The Works of David Hume

- Dialogues* *The Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, edited by John Valdimir Price.
- EHU* *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, edited by L. A. Selby-Bigge, 3rd edition.
- EPM* *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, edited by L. A. Selby-Bigge, 3rd edition.
- Essays* *Essays Moral, Political and Literary*, edited by Eugene F. Miller.
- HE* *The History of England From the Invasion of Julius Caesar to the Revolution in 1688*, in six volumes.**
- HGB* *The History of Great Britain: The Reigns of James I and Charles I*, edited by Duncan Forbes.

<i>Letters-H</i>	<i>The Letters of David</i> , in two volumes, edited by J. Y. T. Greig.**
<i>NHR</i>	<i>The Natural History of Religion</i> , edited by Wayne Colver.
<i>Treatise</i>	<i>A Treatise of Human Nature</i> , edited by L. A. Selby-Bigge, 2 nd edition.

* All citations to the *Decline and Fall* will include, in order: chapter number, volume number to the Bury edition, and page number. Thus, e.g., (DF-5, I, 118.) I have included chapter numbers for those readers using a different edition of the *Decline and Fall*.

** Volume numbers will be designated by Roman numerals.