

# BARBARISM AND RELIGION

Volume Four

*Barbarians, Savages and Empires*

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# Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	<i>page</i> ix
<i>List of abbreviations</i>	x
Introduction	I
PART I THE HISTORY AND THEORY OF BARBARISM	
1 Introducing the barbarian: problems of barbarism and religion	II
2 Anquetil-Duperron: despotism and prophecy in Sassanid Persia	17
3 Antoine-Yves Goguet: the Confusion of Tongues and the origins of civility	37
4 Thomas Carte: Japhetic settlers in the western islands	65
5 The forest Germans: lethargy and passion in a transhumant culture	79
PART II JOSEPH DE GUIGNES AND THE DISCOVERY OF EURASIA	
6 Gentile history in the further Asia	99
7 The many faces of Fo: the problem of religion in Eurasian history	110
8 Hans, Huns and Romans: the rhythms of barbarism and empire	133

PART III THE NEW WORLD AND THE PROBLEM  
OF HISTORY

- 9 The invention and discovery of savagery 157
- 10 Robertson's *America*: the Scottish theoretical encounter  
with the New World 181
- 11 The universe of savagery and the search for history 192
- 12 Ancient history for modern colonists: the reception  
of Robertson 205

PART IV THE CRISIS OF THE SEABORNE EMPIRES

- 13 European history and the global ocean 229
- 14 The antiquity of Asia: priests, legislators and the tragedy  
of history 246
- 15 American savages and European barbarians: the invasion  
of the natural world 269
- 16 Slaves and settlers: the sugar islands in the new geopolitics 294
- 17 Utopia and revolution: the northern continent in history 313

CONCLUSION

- 18 Gibbon and the empires 331

Envoi 340

*Bibliography of works cited* 343

*Index* 351

## *Introduction*

This volume occupies a special place in its series. In the first fourteen chapters of the *Decline and Fall* – the subject of *Barbarism and Religion* III: *The First Decline and Fall* – Gibbon related the disintegration of the imperial regime of pagan Rome, but did not arrive at the disintegration of the system of polytheism on which it was based. He reached the moment at which the Christian church was about to become the established religion of the empire, but, instead of going on to narrate how this happened or what had been its consequences, interrupted his narrative to insert the two chapters on the church before Constantine, which are the subject of a future volume of *Barbarism and Religion*. He had thus introduced the theme of religion, one of the two forces whose triumph he came to see the *Decline and Fall* as narrating; but the break in sequence caused by the insertion of chapters 15 and 16 was such that he did not resume this theme, or return to the point reached at the end of chapter 14, until he published his second volume in 1781, five years after its predecessor. Not only the causes of this hiatus, but its effects on both the writing and the reception of the *Decline and Fall*, present problems with which this series must be concerned. We are at midpoint in a study of how the theme of religion entered Gibbon's history and came to dominate it; and what happened when he took up the narrative again in his second volume of 1781 will also be the subject of a further volume of this series.

The theme of barbarism, however, has already appeared. Chapters 8, 9 and 10 of the 1776 volume were mentioned in *The First Decline and Fall* for their role in unfolding the narrative of imperial decay, but it was remarked at the same time<sup>1</sup> that they initiated a theme of another kind: that of who the barbarian peoples were, what were their cultures, and what was to be made of 'barbarians' as a category and phenomenon which (in a relationship with religion yet to be understood) came to replace the Roman world and lay the

<sup>1</sup> FDE, pp. 464–6.

foundations of the European. How chapters 8 to 10 initiate this theme is the subject of the first part of the present volume, 'The History and Theory of Barbarism'. It is necessary to consider 'barbarism' as a concept both ancient and modern – meaning by 'modern' the patterns of thought emerging in periods preceding and including Gibbon's own – with a view to seeing how he employed the term and what part it played in the discourse to which he contributed. Here an important role is played by stadial theory: that is, by the sequence of stages through which human society was held to have progressed by eighteenth-century philosophic jurists, moralists and historians. Gibbon was on friendly terms with David Hume, William Robertson, Adam Smith and Adam Ferguson, Scottish leaders in the construction of this branch of 'philosophy', in whose works the 'barbarian' was commonly identified with the shepherd or pastoralist and European history presented as the outcome of periodic 'barbarian' invasions by 'shepherd' peoples and their subsequent civilisation.<sup>2</sup> He took much from them in his accounts of the German, Gothic and Scythian invaders of the Roman frontiers, but it can be shown that he relied also on earlier works, in which the biblical chronologies and Noachic genealogies – derided by Gibbon – were compatible with schemes of stadial development, and on systems like that of Antoine-Yves Goguet,<sup>3</sup> which did not draw the sharp Scottish distinction between hunting and herding peoples or between the 'savage' and the 'barbarian'. Gibbon not uncommonly used these terms interchangeably, and it has been argued that European history, as he learned it from the Scots, contained no 'savage' stage – no stage, that is, at which the western peninsulas of Eurasia had been populated by hunter-gatherer peoples. The crucial step for Gibbon, as for others, became the equation of the shepherd stage with the nomad pastoralists of central Asia, whose intermittent mobility and expansiveness had thrust the plains-dwelling Goths and the forest-dwelling Germans over the Roman frontiers, creating a crisis with which the impoverished imperial system was unable to cope.

Gibbon did not reach this moment in his first volume, or until chapter 26, which terminates his second and marks the point of division between the two volumes published in 1781. This chapter, on 'the manners of the pastoral nations', closes a volume on Constantine and his heirs which has related the establishment of Christianity, the rise of theological dispute occasioned by the marriage of religion and philosophy, and the attempt of Julian to turn the clock back to a paganism now irretrievably (as cultic

<sup>2</sup> NCG, pp. 328–9, 332–45; FDE, pp. 387–92, 402–3.

<sup>3</sup> Goguet, 1758; *Library*, p. 136.

paganism had not been) taken over by a philosophy more or less neo-Platonic. At this point the history of the Roman empire is enlarged into a history of Eurasia; the nomad Huns and Hsiung-nu are seen to have impinged on the Chinese as well as the Roman empires, and the contexts of learning needed to understand the *Decline and Fall* are enlarged by the addition of histories – notably that of Joseph de Guignes<sup>4</sup> – that examine both the Chinese dynasties and the nomads of the steppe. The second part of this volume is headed ‘The Discovery of Eurasia’; the word ‘discovery’ being employed in its correct sense: the discovery that something existed by people who had not known that it did.

The ‘barbarian’ of antiquity, who spoke neither Greek nor Latin and did not live in free cities, had by now undergone several enlargements and mutations, merging first with the ‘Gothic’ and ‘Scythian’ invaders of the Roman provinces, secondly with the ‘shepherd stage’ of advanced stadial theory – which Gibbon admired if he did not always follow – and finally with the Central Asian nomads who intermittently devastated and transformed the European subcontinent. In this sequence, the barbarian inhabited both ancient and modern history, from the mythic times of the Cimmerians and the progeny of Japhet to the very recent moment when Chinese and Russians were thought to have joined hands to subjugate the steppe and end this phase of world history for ever. He – the figure was not often female – linked antiquity to modernity in more ways than one; if he had been an agent in replacing the ancient world by one of barbarism and religion, the processes of his civilising had been crucial to the replacement of the latter world by civil society and commerce. By contrast, the ‘savage’ – meaning the hunter or hunter-gatherer – though preceding the shepherd barbarian in the order of stadial theory, was paradoxically a figure of modern history; the more so if we speak of the ‘invention’ of the savage, following the conventions of a postmodernism in which nothing happens or exists other than the creation of fictions. As Europeans, who believed they had no prehistory but that of patriarchal shepherd clans, took to the sea and mastered every arm of the global ocean, they everywhere encountered peoples who might be thought hunter-gatherers, or who practised those blends of village horticulture and fishing or hunting we now have in mind when we use the term ‘indigenous’ (or describe them by one of the many names such people have found for themselves).<sup>5</sup> There ensued a complicated and disastrous history in which the will to describe such peoples as ‘savage’ (and so sub-human)

<sup>4</sup> HHTM; *Library*, p. 141.

<sup>5</sup> For extensions of this point in oceanic directions, see Pocock, 1992 (2001) and 1999.

was reinforced by stadial theory, for the reason that the two steps the latter thought essential to progress – the domestication of hoofed mammals and their harnessing to wheeled transport and deep-cutting ploughshares – did not seem to have occurred outside Eurasia, or in the Americas, Polynesia or Australia (the historisation of sub-Saharan Africa is a somewhat later process). In the two American continents particularly, neither pastoral nomads, productive agriculturalists nor trading cities could easily be found, or recognised when they were found, and it was overwhelmingly tempting to relegate all American peoples before settlement to the category of ‘savages’ defined as the first stage of human development.

The effect was to involve the savage, defined as ‘primitive’ or more significantly ‘natural’ man, in an immediate encounter with the most ‘modern’ of histories: that of the seaborne empires established by ocean-going Europeans after the year 1500. This was not a history Gibbon was concerned to write; the *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* ends with the fall of Constantinople in 1453,<sup>6</sup> and the major event preceding it is the transitory supremacy of Timur – held to be the last of the nomad conquerors in ways which left the relation of Ottoman to nomad history in need of explanation.<sup>7</sup> But there already existed a perceived relation between the Ottoman conquests and the voyages of the Portuguese to India and the Spaniards to the New World. In the third and fourth parts of the present volume, the *Decline and Fall* will be confronted with two histories appearing between 1776 and 1781, with which Gibbon was acquainted and to which he makes reference: William Robertson’s *History of America*, published in 1777–8, and the *Histoire philosophique et politique du commerce et des établissements des Européens dans les deux Indes*, written by a team of authors under the direction of the Abbé Raynal, to which the edition of 1780 gave its decisive form, largely though not wholly shaped by the contributions of Denis Diderot.

Both works confront the savage with the seaborne empire; both are deeply concerned with the enormous problems of fitting the New World into a European vision of history. Since the *Decline and Fall* is a history of empire in antiquity, late antiquity and what we term the middle ages, and since it is situated in a Eurasian history ending just before the European voyages began, it is obvious that these concepts and problems play no part in its making or its content. The enterprise of presenting Robertson and

<sup>6</sup> DF, VI, ch. 68.      <sup>7</sup> DF, VI, ch. 65.

Raynal in relation to Gibbon is to some degree a continuation of that pursued in *Barbarism and Religion* II: *Narratives of Civil Government*, when a series of major Enlightened writers on history – Giannone, Voltaire, Hume and Robertson, reinforced by Smith and Ferguson – were shown to have constructed histories of the millennium of barbarism and religion and the exit from it into enlightened Europe, which helped us to understand the *Decline and Fall* as a history of the entry into that millennium and its history to 1453. *Barbarism and Religion* V will show Gibbon beginning to lay foundations for that history by laying those of ‘the triumph of religion’, and the first half of the present volume shows him beginning to present the theme of barbarism. Part four, ‘The Crisis of the Seaborne Empires’, however, reverts to volume II’s enterprise of setting the *Decline and Fall* in the large context of Enlightened historiography. It does so in part because we have begun to be concerned with the hiatus in Gibbon’s production of his work between 1776 and 1781. Between the year of the Declaration of Independence and that of the surrender at Yorktown, Gibbon sat in the House of Commons as an increasingly disquieted supporter of the North administration, and wrote a state paper justifying the British government against the French;<sup>8</sup> this may help explain the five-year delay between his volumes. It can certainly be said that the histories of Robertson and Raynal are deeply affected – in ways to be explained below – by the events of the American Revolution, and that, in sequence with those of Hume, Voltaire and Robertson himself as a historian of Europe, they show the culture of commerce and manners, civil government and civil society, which had emerged at the beginning of the century, as it plunged into what Franco Venturi termed *la prima crisi dell’ Antico Regime*.<sup>9</sup>

The relation between this crisis and contemporary historiography, however, is by no means simple. Ingenious readers constantly search for ways in which the text of the *Decline and Fall* may be applied to the events of the 1770s and 1780s, and even if (as the present writer suspects) this search should be in vain, it was a rhetorical commonplace – to which Gibbon at least once succumbed<sup>10</sup> – that the decline of the Roman empire might find a parallel in the fall of the British. There are, however, massive objections in the way of this parallel. The first is that – as was widely recognised – an ancient empire held together by legionary camps along lines of communication by land was structurally and generically unlike a modern – now meaning a post-medieval – empire in which seaborne power held together

<sup>8</sup> Gibbon, 1778; MW, v, pp. 1–34.

<sup>9</sup> Venturi, 1979; Litchfield, 1989.

<sup>10</sup> FDF, p. 8.

a system of commerce. It could be, and was, added that, whereas the Romans had allowed the military government of provinces to destroy and absorb the political structure of the republic, the British were willing to see their American colonies rise in rebellion rather than extend to them the parliamentary liberties of the kingdom; the ancient parallel that suggested itself was not the Decline and Fall of the empire so much as the Social War that had hastened the downfall of the republic.<sup>11</sup> Lastly – though this is to look beyond 1781 – the outcome of the *prima crisi* was as much the enlargement of the British empire as its dissolution. The empire acquired in India was, disturbingly, a good deal more Roman than that lost in North America, and there was to be a later moment at which Gibbon, and after him Robertson, can be seen showing interest in Dow, Jones and Rennell, the historical scholars of British India.<sup>12</sup>

It is the contrast between ancient and modern empire – indeed, between ancient and modern history – which makes it important to confront the *Decline and Fall* with works of historiography appearing between 1776 and 1781; Raynal's *Histoire des deux Indes* (as it is called for short) in particular. This work by many hands – just how it was written and edited is still the subject of enquiry<sup>13</sup> – has many faults, sentimentality and self-dramatisation among them; but it is a major achievement in several ways, and ranks as a counter-piece to the *Decline and Fall* itself.<sup>14</sup> Its authors provide a history of the rise (they would add the fall) of the European seaborne empires over three centuries, from the voyages of the 1490s and their encounter with the civilisations of Asia already known to them: Islam as a modern (i.e. a post-Christian) phenomenon, Hindu India with which they shared an antiquity, Confucian China as a possible alternative to the dreadful history of religion. The narrative then turns west, and becomes a history of encounter with the New World and therefore with peoples easily described as 'savage'; even the Mesoamerican and Andean city systems did not prevent this. There was added a third narrative: that of the transportation of Africans reduced to slavery, a condition as artificially distanced from civil society as that of savagery was naturally remote. The history of modern empire thus became that of encounter between European civil society and those excluded from its history.

<sup>11</sup> FDF, pp. 45, 48, 84–5, 162, 351–2, 396, 405.

<sup>12</sup> For references, see Womersley, 1994, 111, pp. 1211, 1229, 1257; *Library*, pp. 162–3, 236.

<sup>13</sup> The Voltaire Foundation intends a critical edition. For preliminary study, see Lüsebrink and Strugnell, 1995.

<sup>14</sup> For a prospectus of this volume's treatment of the *Histoire*, see Pocock, 2000.

The secondary thesis of the *Histoire des deux Indes* was that European commerce with peoples outside Europe was expropriative and monopolistic, conducted through chartered companies whose debts threatened European society itself with corruption. Here was a modern equivalent of the ancient thesis that empire corrupted the liberty that had acquired it; but the concept of savagery operated to enlarge this trope in a metahistorical direction. The savage was the natural man;<sup>15</sup> savage society, in so far as it existed, was as distant as possible from the hegemonies of kings, republics and priests which provided history with its subject matter; and Diderot was able to join Rousseau in asking whether it had been good to leave the state of nature for the processes of history, but whether that departure once taken was not irreversible. Here was a crucial step in late Enlightened philosophy of history, and it would not have been possible without the concept of the savage. The *Histoire* becomes a narrative of the encounter of history with nature, and necessarily (if none too satisfactorily) ends by telling Europeans they must recover their own nature, corrupted by a civil society itself corrupted by empire. The work becomes a pre-revolutionary treatise, but as with Machiavelli there is doubt whether humans are not too far committed to history to return to its beginnings.

The *Histoire des deux Indes* is therefore a work of Enlightened philosophical history which Gibbon neither could nor would have written. He had no contact with the concept (though he used the adjective) of the 'savage', and the 'barbarian' was not a figure of nature opposed to history; only in modern history, we might say, could that opposition appear – whatever ancient Cynics and Stoics might have dreamt of in their philosophy. Gibbon was writing a history of the Old World, of a Eurasia in which cities and empires interacted with the migrations of pastoralists; what is startling to our eyes is the virtual omission from Enlightened philosophy of the alluvial city empires of Mesopotamia and the Nile Valley. All these peoples could be included in histories of civil society, whether biblical, philosophical or stadial; and as Gibbon had shown in his early *Essai* against d'Alembert and the *Encyclopédie*,<sup>16</sup> he had no desire to leave civil history for the philosophy of nature. This choice made him a figure of the conservative rather than the *philosophe* Enlightenment. If we read the *Histoire des deux Indes* as prefiguring revolution, we must read the *Decline and Fall* as prefiguring Gibbon's instantly Burkean responses to the events of 1789–92;<sup>17</sup> and this antithesis must be connected with that between the *Histoire* as a history of

<sup>15</sup> Pagden, 1982.

<sup>16</sup> EEG, ch. 9.

<sup>17</sup> Womersley, 2002, pp. 195–202.

modernity, savagery and nature, the *Decline and Fall* as a history of antiquity, barbarism and religion. The former entailed a critique of civil society and civil history; the latter did not. The *Histoire* supplies the *Decline and Fall* with a context by acting as its antithesis, and the function of savagery in the present volume is to clarify what Gibbon was doing with the concept of barbarism.

PART I

*The history and theory of barbarism*

## CHAPTER I

# *Introducing the barbarian: problems of barbarism and religion*

### (I)

As Gibbon reached the end of chapter 7 of the *Decline and Fall*, he elegiacally reviewed Roman history since its heroic beginnings, and remarked that, as the discipline of the legions disintegrated in the wars of succession, ‘the barbarians ... soon discovered the decline of the Roman empire’.<sup>1</sup> *The First Decline and Fall* carried on the process, through the wars of succession – in which barbarians played an increasing part – as far as the victory of Constantine; but it was observed<sup>2</sup> that chapters 8 to 10, immediately following the words quoted, digress from the narrative and are written in a different key. In place of the *récit* of Roman actions and their systemic consequences, these chapters offer a *peinture*<sup>3</sup> of the laws and manners of the invading cultures, and we shall find Gibbon observing that a history of barbarians and barbarism must be written on different principles from one in which civilised men are the actors. Chapters 8 to 10 introduce that history, but the meanings of the words ‘barbarian’ and ‘barbarism’ are not yet determined and need to be explained.

‘Barbarians’ – Gibbon or his printer almost always accords them a capital initial – are hostile peoples beyond and upon the frontiers of empire, and are to some extent defined by those frontiers, which, however, run through a diversity of lands and societies. Chapter 8 deals with the Persians, who will threaten Rome’s Asian frontiers through the defeats of Valerian and Julian, and a succession of wars down to Chosroes; chapter 9 deals with the Germans and chapter 10 with the Goths, resuming the narrative with the Gothic, Persian and civil wars of the third century. The latter peoples are ‘barbarian’ in the sense that they are not civilised, whereas the Persians, though ‘barbarians,’ are not merely civilised, but ‘civilised and corrupted’;<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Womersley, 1994, 1, pp. 211–12; FDF, pp. 461–2.      <sup>2</sup> FDF, pp. 464–6.

<sup>3</sup> For the use of these terms in a formula by La Curne de Sainte-Palaye, many times employed in the present series, see NCG, p. 17.

<sup>4</sup> See below, p. 24.

it is clear that we have shifting meanings before us. The Persians are ‘barbarians’ in the ancient sense of the word; meaning that they do not speak Greek – or, since Romans adopted Greek culture and its discourse, Latin. They are the original barbarians, defined as such in the classical literature of Hellas: the ‘barbarians’ of Herodotus, whose mighty deeds deserve to be recorded alongside those of the Greeks;<sup>5</sup> yet at the same time the ‘barbarians’ of Aristotle, ‘slaves by nature’ because they do not live in free cities, but are ruled by god-kings living in palaces, who govern them as if they were slaves. What it is that converts this ‘as if’ into a fact by nature is discussable; by Gibbon’s time European jurists and philosophers were inclined to stress the absence of free tenures defensible at law. There was a contrast between the barbarian as free and virile warrior, and the barbarian as servile and effeminate subject of an ‘oriental despot’; the latter indeed was a key element in the construction of ‘orientalism’;<sup>6</sup> and the tension can be found in Gibbon’s portrait of the Persians. It was a consequence of the original extension of ‘barbarian’ and ‘barbarism’ in an eastward direction from the Mediterranean basin.

The Germans and Goths, and many peoples associated with them, were ‘barbarians’ in senses exceeding the original meanings of the term. They did not inhabit the polis or the palace, but lived in villages or encampments among forests or open plains; they were ‘uncivilised’, whatever the meanings of the term thus negated. Their abode was not ‘the east’ in the ‘oriental’ sense of the word, but that vast and ill-defined region known in Gibbon’s time as ‘le nord’.<sup>7</sup> They had been known to fifth-century Athenians as ‘Thracians’ or ‘Scythians’, and Herodotus’s account of the unending plains of Scythia and the nomadic peoples inhabiting them remained cardinal in descriptions of the non-oriental barbarians until modern times. They were known to be migratory, and Roman experience with Gauls, Cimbri, Teutones and Helvetii had produced a literature pointing out that wars with cities were fought for supremacy, wars with *Volkerwanderungen* for survival; Machiavelli had commented on this distinction.<sup>8</sup> When Gibbon turned from Persians to Germans and Goths, he was employing the term ‘barbarian’ in a sense no longer Hellenic but neo-Latin: to denote peoples who had migrated and settled in provinces of the Roman empire, conquering less by arms than by cultural change, and inaugurating the millennium of ‘barbarism and religion’ at the end of which Latin and Greek had been

<sup>5</sup> Below, p. 19, n. 3.

<sup>6</sup> This term requires acknowledgement of the work of Edward Said (1979), though I have not followed him in other respects.

<sup>7</sup> For this concept in Voltaire, see NCG, p. 78.      <sup>8</sup> FDF, pp. 222–9.

restored to their classical purity and become instruments of historical criticism and construction.

If the 'oriental' extension of 'barbarism' encountered an image of 'despotism', the northward extension of the term encountered the more problematic concept of 'liberty'. It was known that wild and ungovernable peoples valued their freedom, and the Scythian queen Tomyris had said as much to the Great King Darius; her notion of freedom, however, was unlike that of the Spartans who, it had been explained to another king, feared their law more than any master.<sup>9</sup> In the earliest chapters of the *Decline and Fall* it is said that the freedom of barbarians was incapable of self-discipline,<sup>10</sup> and alongside the concept of a 'state of nature' developed by a succession of philosophers, the historiography of barbarism since Tacitus<sup>11</sup> had developed the premise that liberty was something primordial, to be disciplined and perfected by a relationship with law and authority. In this scenario the 'Gothic' – later and less happily the 'Teutonic' – barbarians came to play a pivotal role, both in political and moral philosophy and in the history of Europe as neo-Latin historical writers came to perceive it. Uncouth and alien to Romans, they came to possess for Europeans what Gibbon once called a 'domestic' significance.<sup>12</sup> Who were the barbarians? They are ourselves. Primeval liberty came to be confronted and reconciled with Roman law, and the ancient problem of *libertas et imperium* was restated. In this process the establishment in the barbarian and feudal kingdoms of free tenures regulated by law played a central part, and by Gibbon's time it had been debated for more than two centuries how far this had been an achievement of Roman law, how far of Frankish, Saxon, Batavian or Gothic free customs;<sup>13</sup> that the debate was irresolvable and unending was the source of its strength. Introducing the barbarians as enemies of empire, Gibbon was at the beginning of a history of Roman-Germanic Europe which he did not intend to narrate because it was already well known; its authority was assured by its contestability.

How migratory peoples, driving their cattle before the wagons bearing their women and children, had become sedentary tenants, bound to the soil or free under law, on arable land where grain was grown for commerce, was a central problem in constructing European history. In solving the problem and creating its value system, the invention of the heavy plough

<sup>9</sup> Herodotus, 1, 205–6; in George Rawlinson's translation (1998), pp. 109–13 (Tomyris); v11, 104; p. 544 (Spartans).

<sup>10</sup> Womersley, 1994, 1, pp. 32, 33.

<sup>11</sup> For Tacitus's *De moribus Germanorum* in European historiography, see FDF, pp. 262–4.

<sup>12</sup> Below, p. 37. <sup>13</sup> Pocock, 1957 (1987), chs. 1, 1v; Kelley, 1970.

was seen to be crucial, and was located within a variety of stadial schemes designed to explicate the transition from herding to trading by way of farming. We shall find Gibbon operating more than one of these schemes, of which that developed by his Scottish friends was the most advanced if not necessarily the one he found most useful. It had a peculiar importance in the historiography of barbarism as he came to study the question, because while Germans and Goths were known to be pastoralists, the force that drove them to invade the Roman provinces, where they settled and became ploughmen, was nomadic: the Huns and other shepherd peoples of Central Asia, who had intermittently invaded and settled in Europe. If beyond the frontiers of Roman servile or tenurial agriculture – itself the reason why the legions were no longer free citizen warriors – lay the forests of the German transhumants, beyond them lay the grasslands of the Ukrainian Goths, and beyond them the steppe of the Huns, Avars and Mongols. The stadial sequences of conjectural history could be spatialised as the imagined geography of Eurasia,<sup>14</sup> providing European history with an eastward vista in which the ‘orientals’ of Iran, Mesopotamia and Egypt played no part. Hunter-gatherer peoples, envisaged in theory from the most ancient stadial schemes, were little to be seen in Roman or European history and played little part in its narratives; it was the relation of herdsman to farmer on which these turned.

## (II)

The theme of religion was interwoven with that of barbarism, but arose from different sources and carried different discourses. ‘Barbarians’ in the language of sacred history were ‘gentiles’, not because they lived in *gentes* as pre-civilised peoples, but because they were defined by the distinction between them and ‘Israel’, the people of God to whom the covenant and the law had been revealed. They shared a descent from the peoples wandering the earth after the fall of Babel and the Confusion of Tongues; and since in some narratives Nimrod the builder of the Tower had also been the first ruler by the sword, there was an association between ‘gentiles’ and the peoples whose empires had been governed from heathen cities: Babylonians and Assyrians, Medes and Persians, who linked but did not identify the history of Israel with that of the Four Empires. These gentiles did not know the God of Israel, and history and philosophy joined in seeking to explain what religion they had and what had shaped it. Before and after the Flood they

<sup>14</sup> A term in modern usage, not employed by Gibbon.

had been aware of God, and it was held that knowledge of him had persisted even though it was corrupt. The natural religion, or *prisca theologia*,<sup>15</sup> of mankind was an almost instinctive monotheism which the mind could not refuse, and it was to this that 'deists' in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were suspected of seeking to reduce the faith in revealed truth. In another perspective, it was this that Christian missionaries sought to discover – and were dismayed when they could not find – in the alien belief systems they encountered: a religion of the Father to which they might add a knowledge of the Son. Matteo Ricci's enterprise of proving that Confucian belief was originally a simple theism is a case in point.<sup>16</sup>

Christians scrutinising the remotest antiquity known to them – they were often led to do this by the need to co-ordinate biblical with other chronologies – speculated on what had corrupted the original religion of the gentiles and led God to reveal himself to a peculiar people. A common explanation was euhemerist; heroes, kings and ancestors had been seen as doing the work of God and falsely supposed gods by peoples who had forgotten him. An alternative thesis was that of idolatry; the profusion of false gods worshipped in temples led to the explanation that images erected to a true god had substituted themselves for him.<sup>17</sup> The heathen in his blindness bowed down to wood and stone; but though the images might have been the work of crafty magicians – Christians originated the notion of priestcraft until they found it turned against them – they might also be ascribed to the crudity of the 'barbarous' or 'savage' mind. Humans wandering in ignorance and confusion from the plain of Shinar had lost all knowledge and been obliged to re-imagine the world in darkness; hence the fantasies of superstition. But once primitive religion was supposed to be the simple product of the unaided and unguided human mind, philosophy had come upon the scene, and the history of religion might be a 'philosophic' or 'natural' history of the mind, from a state of 'nature' or of 'savagery' through whatever states of society had succeeded it.

Having become a history of superstition, such a history might also be one of philosophy. Here emphasis veered away from the shepherds of Scythia or the steppe, and settled on the civilisations of the non-Greek east. The beliefs of shepherds might not be the idolatry of savages. In some systems it was held that they had worshipped wind, light and darkness, or the four elements of earth, air, fire and water, by which they were surrounded. This – as Giannone hinted in the *Triregno*<sup>18</sup> – was not far from a Spinozistic

<sup>15</sup> D. Walker, 1972, where it is extended in magian and Neo-Platonic directions.

<sup>16</sup> NCG, pp. 99–100; below, pp. 102–4. <sup>17</sup> Manuel, 1959, 1983. <sup>18</sup> NCG, p. 68.

pantheism (as far back as the thirteenth century, Snorri Sturlason had declared that the heathen Norse supposed the earth a living being and said their prayers to it<sup>19</sup>). It permitted the thought that the 'savage', unable to perceive natural causes, had populated the earth around him with spirits – *daimones, atua, kami* – with which he was himself linked through his ancestors in a system of animism, so that spirit and matter were one. It was this also, however, that permitted a history of philosophy, situated not among the non-Latin 'barbarians' of the shepherd north, but among the non-Greek 'barbarians' of the city-dwelling but servile east. In a later volume we shall have occasion to notice Enlightened histories which traced philosophy from its beginnings among sages and mages, lawgivers and prophets, who had reduced the multifarious superstitions surrounding them to allegorical expressions of a single ineffable reality – itself the subject of gnosis rather than of revelation – and in making themselves philosophers had become or begotten a new species of priests.

In the succeeding volume, however, we shall find both the early Fathers and their early-modern exponents deeply concerned with the penetration of Christian belief by philosophies like this, and the growth of a Christian philosophy to control it. The moderns asked whether the earliest heresies, Gnosticism and Arianism, had been produced by misapplications of a Platonist idea of creation, or by elements of a Zoroastrian dualism that lay further back and might account for Pythagoras and Plato himself. Here the investigation of 'barbarism' in the Greek sense of the word became an investigation of a non-Greek or pre-Greek 'philosophy' that had played a none too comfortable part in Christian sacred and ecclesiastical history. Gibbon's own studies of barbarism begin with Persia, and entail a study of Zoroaster and his religion that owes much to both Christian and the most recent of *philosophe* writers; and Joseph de Guignes's great history of Eurasia, on which he came increasingly to rely, is a history of both barbarism and the kinds of religion that gave rise to philosophy. To the history of the last-mentioned we shall have to return. Whether the stadial histories of the human mind as progressively engaged in property produced a satisfactory sequence of the stages of religion and philosophy is another matter again. These problems lay before Gibbon as he wrote chapters 8 to 10, and lie before us as we read them.

<sup>19</sup> Faulkes, 1987, pp. 1–2.

*Anquetil-Duperron: despotism and prophecy  
in Sassanid Persia*

(1)

This passage opens chapter 8 of the *Decline and Fall*:

Whenever Tacitus indulges himself in those beautiful episodes, in which he relates some domestic transaction of the Germans or of the Parthians, his principal object is to relieve the attention of the reader from a uniform scene of vice and misery. From the reign of Augustus to the time of Alexander Severus, the enemies of Rome were in her bosom: the tyrants, and the soldiers; and her prosperity had a very distant and feeble interest in the revolutions that might happen beyond the Rhine and the Euphrates. But when the military order had levelled, in wild anarchy, the power of the prince, the laws of the senate, and even the discipline of the camp, the barbarians of the north and of the east, who had long hovered on the frontier, boldly attacked the provinces of a declining monarchy. Their vexatious inroads were changed into formidable irruptions, and, after a long vicissitude of mutual calamities, many tribes of the victorious invaders established themselves in the provinces of the Roman empire. To obtain a clearer knowledge of these great events, we shall endeavour to form a previous idea of the character, forces, and designs of those nations who avenged the cause of Hannibal and Mithridates.<sup>1</sup>

Gibbon's predicament at this point is as follows. The Tacitean explanatory narrative is over; there is nothing to be added to our understanding of how Roman virtue expanded and corrupted itself, and the rise and fall of princes, who are ceasing to be even despots and becoming warlords instead, can add nothing, in consequence, for the time being. The initiative is with the barbarians, who cease to be an external nuisance and become a force making for change; and the history that needs to be written is the history of the barbarians themselves. But the writing of history was not practised by the northern barbarians or in Gibbon's belief by the eastern, and the histories which have come down from antiquity, and which it is the duty of Gibbon as a modern historian to explore, continue to be narratives and

<sup>1</sup> Womersley, 1994, 1, p. 213.

portraits of the predominantly futile emperors reigning between Alexander Severus and Diocletian. The three chapters (8 to 10) introduced by the paragraph just quoted are therefore studies of the manners and customs of the barbarous nations, containing relatively little narrative of 'the revolutions that might happen' among them. Because these chapters are in various ways pervaded by Enlightenment understandings of social and religious structure and change, they are nearer to a modern conception of 'history' than are narratives of princely and military actions; but Gibbon remains a humanist, obliged to follow the patterns of Greek and Roman historiography, and 'philosophical' history continues to be reflected in the mirror of princes, even when the latter has been cracked from side to side. Narrative and digression therefore continue to alternate.

Nevertheless, Gibbon is not indulging himself in beautiful episodes, or relieving his reader's attention from the uniform scene of Roman history, when he constructs three chapters on the state of the barbarous peoples; they have become actors on the stage. At the moment when the Severan dynasty, and with it the Augustan principate, could be pronounced extinct, 'barbarians' of two kinds had made their appearance as wearers of the purple. 'Barbarians' who might speak Latin and Greek, but were oriental in their culture, had appeared with the Emesan matriarchs and their sons; 'oriental' because they brought with them palace politics dominated by women and eunuchs, and by the worship of the phallic deities who had tempted the monotheists from Sinai into repeated betrayals of their covenant with the Lord. The prophets had expelled these baalim from Jerusalem, and the censors and senators had banned them from Rome; yet they kept coming back to the holy places, and the ludicrous pornotopia of Elagabalus<sup>2</sup> was in its own way the abomination of desolation, while standing at the same time for the corruption which went with the excess of conspicuous consumption. When the legions or the guards destroyed sons and mothers together, there came to be emperors who were 'barbarians' in the sense then usual: the fierce giant Maximin, Philip the robber from the desert. These were not invading chieftains, but soldiers in the Roman service; the armies had been barbarised (or the warriors civilised) before the barbarians fought their way across the frontiers. But the barbarian soldiers came from the wastelands outside the empire, not from the civilised and corrupt cities which lay mostly, but not wholly, within it.

These 'barbarians' must be bracketed together because it was already a given in the historiography that the end of the Parthian and the advent of

<sup>2</sup> FDE, pp. 458–9.

the Sassanian dynasty had made the Persian empire once more a formidable military adversary, and that renewed large-scale war beyond the Euphrates had coincided with renewed pressure by German-speaking peoples on the Danube and the Rhine. Gibbon was looking towards three climactic military disasters: the defeat of Julian by the Persians; the crossing of the Danube by the Goths and the defeat of Valens at Adrianople; and the collapse of the Rhine frontier in the face of the Goths and Alamanni. There were military, but there were also cultural interconnections between these events; Roman and non-Roman worlds were to be shown interacting; but the decision to group all non-Romans as 'barbarians' tended to pull the word apart into its several meanings. There were Mesopotamians, Iranians and Germans to be dealt with; city-dwellers, plains-dwellers and forest-dwellers; and the resources of classical rhetoric and enlightened philosophy were to be stretched by the attempt. Gibbon was not the first to make the attempt, but the scale on which he made it was his own.

The people of the Persian empire could not well be denied the appellation of 'barbarians', since they had been so described in one of the seminal sentences of European historiography;<sup>3</sup> but it was not denied that they were civilised, and the increasing habit of using 'barbarism' to denote a social condition only one stage removed from 'savagery' was not applicable to them. Gibbon stated his awareness of this.

In the more early ages of the world, whilst the forest that covered Europe afforded a retreat to a few wandering savages, the inhabitants of Asia were already collected into populous cities, and reduced under extensive empires, the seat of the arts, of luxury, and of despotism.<sup>4</sup>

To historians whom Gibbon read and utilised, the forest was the great Hercynian or Caledonian wood which had grown up after the Flood, and the savages were rather the sons of Japhet engaged in clearance and settlement. Gibbon was amused by this chronology, but was not equipped with an advanced alternative to it.

Among the nations who have adopted the Mosaic history of the world, the ark of Noah has been of the same use as was formerly to the Greeks and Romans the siege of Troy. On a narrow basis of acknowledged truth an immense but rude superstructure of fable has been erected, and the wild Irishman, as well as the

<sup>3</sup> 'These are the researches of Herodotus of Halicarnassus, which he publishes in the hope of thereby preserving from decay the remembrance of what men have done, and of preventing the great and wonderful actions of the Greeks and the Barbarians from losing their due meed of glory.' Herodotus, *History*, 1, 1, in George Rawlinson's translation (1998, p. 3).

<sup>4</sup> Womersley, 1994, 1, p. 213.

wild Tartar, could point out the individual son of Japhet, from whose loins his ancestors were lineally descended.<sup>5</sup> The last century abounded with antiquarians of profound learning and easy faith, who by the dim light of legends and traditions, of conjectures and etymologies, conducted the great-grandchildren of Noah from the tower of Babel to the extremities of the globe . . . The learned Rudbeck<sup>6</sup> allows the family of Noah a few years to multiply from eight to about twenty thousand persons. He then disperses them into small colonies to replenish the earth and to propagate the human species. The German or Swedish detachment (which marched, if I am not mistaken, under the command of Askenaz, the son of Gomer, the son of Japhet) distinguished itself by a more than common diligence in the prosecution of this great work. The northern hive cast its swarms over the greatest part of Europe, Africa, and Asia; and (to use the author's metaphor) the blood circulated from the extremities to the heart.<sup>7</sup>

Irish antiquaries claimed a national pedigree from Fathaclan, the son of Magog, the son of Japhet;<sup>8</sup> but behind all this easy fun – though it was only recently that these genealogies had begun to seem ridiculous – Gibbon's starting point is a Germanic world of trans-frontier barbarism, and he need not look back with Pelloutier or Beaufort<sup>9</sup> to a pre-Roman era when the invading northern swarms were all Gauls and Celts. Those peoples were to be relegated to the fringe of the Roman-Germanic historical imagination of 'Europe'. What Gibbon finds amusing is less immediately the authority of Moses than the constructions of humanist philology; but he was not equipped to replace philology with archaeology, and pre-Christian literature offered him no better account of human origins and dispersals.

There is not anywhere upon the globe a large tract of country which we have discovered destitute of inhabitants, or whose first population can be fixed with any degree of historical certainty. And yet, as the most philosophic minds can seldom refrain from investigating the infancy of great nations, our curiosity consumes itself in toilsome and disappointed efforts. When Tacitus considered the purity of the German blood, and the forbidding aspect of the country, he was disposed to pronounce those barbarians *indigenae*, or natives of the soil. We may allow with safety, and perhaps with truth, that ancient Germany was not originally peopled by any foreign colonies already formed into a political society; but that the name and nation received their existence from the gradual union of some wandering savages of the Hercynian woods. To assert those savages to have been

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. 1, p. 233, notes 13 and 14; references to Keating's *History of Ireland* (1723, Womersley, 1994, 111, p. 1231) and Abulghazi's *Genealogical History of the Tartars* (c. 1660; Womersley, 1994, 111, p. 1187). For the latter see below, p. 121.

<sup>6</sup> Olaus Rudbeck; see Womersley, 1994, 1, pp. 232, 234, nn. 8, 15. Gibbon did not own, and does not otherwise cite, his work, and may have known it only from Bayle's quotations (n. 15).

<sup>7</sup> Womersley, 1994, 1, pp. 233–4. <sup>8</sup> Ibid. 1, p. 233, n. 13.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. 1, p. 231, n. 2; FDF, p. 364; Kidd, 1999, pp. 189–93.

the spontaneous production of the earth which they inhabited would be a rash inference, condemned by religion and unwarranted by reason.<sup>10</sup>

Here we do have the 'savage' as original inhabitant of the European peninsula; but he is less the hunter-gatherer of stadial theory than the Cyclops of Greek thought about pre-civilised man, or the original wanderer in the jurists' state of nature. The context in which he here appears is that of a different problem, that of the origin of the human race in post-biblical thinking. If Gibbon declines to adopt any Stoic or Epicurean theory of spontaneous generation, he rejects equally its Voltairean successor the theory of human polygenesis, from which the racial doctrines of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were largely descended; 'the purity of the German blood' has an ominous ring to us, which we need not impute to him. And this thread in the pattern of European racialism has one of its origins in the attempts of scholars to deal with the northern barbarians by supposing them to be the house of Japhet. The house of Shem presented a different series of problems, productive less of racialism than of orientalism; if there is a biblically based racialism in the eighteenth century, it is anti-Hamitic rather than anti-Semitic. Hatred of Jews was widespread and vicious, but not yet racially based, and could not be aimed at the house of Shem, to which Jesus Christ had belonged after the flesh.

There existed a mass of chronological learning which offered to deduce Nineveh, Babylon and Egypt from the Tower of Babel and the Confusion of Tongues. Gibbon says nothing of this, but he offers no anthropological explanation of how western Asia became the scene of urban despotism when northern Europe was that of forest savagery. The sentence in which he states this antithesis therefore forms a starting point, at which he silently adopts the paradigm of 'oriental despotism'.<sup>11</sup> Since Aeschylus and Herodotus in the fifth century, it had been thought sufficient to assume that Mesopotamian peoples were subject to god-kings living in great palaces, who ruled them as if they were slaves, if they did not actually own them as chattels or serfs. There was of course an ambiguity here: to Aristotle orientals were slaves because they were not citizens, and were ruled by others because they did not rule themselves. To pronounce them on this account slaves in the household of their ruler could therefore be more a metaphorical than a literal statement, but the image was heightened in the minds of Renaissance Europeans by a detailed if inexact acquaintance with the extensive slave-households of the Mameluke and Ottoman empires, which could be equated with the courts of western kings when rhetoric

<sup>10</sup> Womersley, 1994, 1, p. 233.

<sup>11</sup> Venturi, 1972, pp. 41–51; Richter, 1973; Said, 1979.

required it. Living in feudal and post-feudal societies, furthermore, scholars of the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries had become deeply concerned with how the proprietor of realty and personalty might claim to be free when he was not his ruler's equal partner in government; and Bodin, Harrington, Montesquieu and many others had developed complex antitheses between the allodial or feudal hereditary freeholds, deriving equally from Roman and Germanic origins, in which western Europeans held their lands and goods, and the precarious or servile tenures-at-will supposedly characteristic of the 'oriental' from Muscovy to Egypt and from Algiers to Cathay. It was a profound fissure in the image of 'barbarian' society, which explains why Gibbon's 'fierce giants of the north' were enabled to become the parents of liberty, while his 'barbarians of the east' would remain entrapped in the stereotype of 'oriental despotism'.

The last-mentioned paradigm has little room for change, contradiction or growth, and it is easy to think that the palace of one semi-divine despot is much like that of another.<sup>12</sup> Perhaps this is why western political analysis often moves up to the fringe of analysis of government centred on the court or palace, only to recoil the moment it suggests the divans and seraglios of oriental fantasy. It may also be why it has always been easier to write about the palace-bred monsters of the Augustan principate than about the provinces which they peaceably governed; precisely because it is seen as despotic, the palace becomes a self-contained world, lacking any apparent connection with the social structures constituting its empire. This was to be a problem for Gibbon when he came to write about Byzantine history. More generally by far, we may have come upon the reason why western social and historical analysis typically avoids those structures which it sees as despotic, and from which it can elicit no pattern of development; the reason why it writes its history as having as little to do as possible with the great cities and divine kings of Mesopotamia and Egypt. We have already noticed Adam Smith's insistence that the Mediterranean polis was founded by horse-riding shepherds recently arrived from the steppe; and the freeholding agrarian societies of Europe were held to be the creation of Goths by scholars of the seventeenth century, and of Indo-Germanic Aryans by those of the nineteenth.<sup>13</sup> Historiographically, it has been the function of the northern barbarian to ride through the watersheds of the great river valleys, carrying history in his saddlebags and leaving the 'barbarians' celebrated by Herodotus isolated in the stagnation of oriental despotism. This

<sup>12</sup> NCG, pp. 353-4.

<sup>13</sup> Burrow, 1966.

pattern is broadly true of Gibbon's eighth to tenth chapters, and of the *Decline and Fall* as a whole.

## (11)

The Persian empire, however, both before and after its forcible but partial hellenisation by the Macedonians, presented an anomalous image in terms of this paradigm. On its western side, best known to the Greeks and Romans, it was Mesopotamian and could be viewed as consisting of huge cities lacking a political nervous system, whose invertebrate and effeminate inhabitants were ruled by despots in the palace and priests in the temple. The fact that these were cities of merchants and craftsmen made them all the more the capitals of 'extensive empires, the seat of the arts, of luxury, and of despotism', but their vast weight could not subdue the virtue of the hoplite republics to their west, or of Macedon and Rome succeeding Babylon and the Medes in the scheme of the Four Empires.

Followed, as it is said, by two millions of *men*, Xerxes, the descendant of Cyrus, invaded Greece. Thirty thousand *soldiers*, under the command of Alexander, the son of Philip, who was intrusted by the Greeks with their glory and revenge, were sufficient to subdue Persia.<sup>14</sup>

But east of the Tigris river lay a region of highlands and plateaux, inhabited not by city-dwellers who might be considered the natural subjects of despotism, but by Iranians and more distantly by Scythians who did not fit the paradigm so easily. The mounted nobility of Persia were formidable people, and the Macedonian invaders had spent much time seeking their alliance and wondering at the same time why these proud and independent men prostrated themselves before kings in the *proskynesis*. Only life in the polis, it seemed to Aristotle, could save even the strongest of warriors from servility; but the problem confronting Herodotus had been that of depicting the empire of Xerxes as at once a palace-centred despotism herding its slaves into battle, and the focus of loyalties for a nobility taught to ride, shoot and tell the truth. To French *nobiliaire* writers at the end of the reign of Louis XIV, the palace of Versailles presented some not dissimilar problems, and the despotism whose principle is fear was formidable to the mind of Montesquieu precisely because it was so closely juxtaposed with the monarchy whose principle is honour. Uzbek the traveller<sup>15</sup> thought he

<sup>14</sup> Womersley, 1994, 1, p. 214. Gibbon's italics.

<sup>15</sup> The central figure, or anti-hero, of Montesquieu's *Lettres Persanes*.

was a gentleman till he discovered that he was a despot. Gibbon did not explore this philosophical problem, posed by the duality of Persia under western eyes, but he faced the challenge of explaining why the reviving Sassanids should have been as threatening as they were to the disintegrating Severi, and here the oriental paradigm caused difficulties.

Artaxerxes or Ardashir, the Sassanid restorer, was a legislator who understood the structure of physiocratic monarchy<sup>16</sup> and whose code lasted until the Arab conquest; but Gibbon could not resolve the problem presented by the two faces of the Persian system, or add anything significant to the account given by Herodotus. On the one hand, Persia at war was an oriental despotism, its camp<sup>17</sup> a moving palace surrounded by servile and over-taxed common soldiers; on the other, its Iranian hinterland supplied it with two formidable reserves of cavalry. There were the highly mobile mounted archers whose arrow tactics took their name from the Parthians, 'an obscure horde of Scythian origin',<sup>18</sup> who had displaced the Greek Seleucids and defeated the Romans at Carrhae, and differed little from the Scythians who had baffled Cyrus in the sixth century BC. In them the nomads of the steppe assert their historical importance for the first time in the *Decline and Fall*. Secondly, there were the mounted nobility, the heavy mailed lancers whom the Roman legionaries called by a nickname almost translatable as 'tanks' (*clibanarii*, from the word for a portable oven). It was a powerful combination, but according to all classical literature a citizen infantry should outdo it in every kind of virtue, and as the Roman armies degenerated they became less able to cope with such cavalry in becoming more like them. Gibbon was thus unable to separate the image of Persian power from the image of oriental weakness, or to overcome the paradox involved.

The Persians, long since civilised and corrupted,<sup>19</sup> were very far from possessing the martial independence and the intrepid hardiness, both of mind and body, which have rendered the northern barbarians masters of the world. The science of war, that constituted the more rational force of Greece and Rome, as it now does of Europe, never made any considerable progress in the East. Those disciplined evolutions which harmonise and animate a confused multitude were unknown to the Persians. They were equally unskilled in the arts of constructing, besieging, or defending regular fortifications.<sup>20</sup> They trusted more to their courage than to their discipline. The infantry was a half-armed spiritless crowd of peasants, levied

<sup>16</sup> Womersley, 1994, 1, pp. 221–2, 228.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.* 1, p. 223, n. 41, for a parallel account of the camp of the Mogul emperor.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* 1, p. 214.

<sup>19</sup> It is thus possible to be barbarian and civilised at the same time.

<sup>20</sup> This is challenged by modern scholarship; see Luttwak, 1976, pp. 135, 163.

in haste by the allurements of plunder, and as easily dispersed by a victory as by a defeat. The monarch and his nobles transported into the camp the pride and luxury of the seraglio. Their military operations were impeded by a useless train of women, eunuchs, horses and camels, and in the midst of a successful campaign the Persian host was often separated or destroyed by an unexpected famine.

But the nobles of Persia, in the midst of luxury and despotism, preserved a strong sense of personal gallantry and national honour. From the age of seven years they were taught to speak truth, to shoot with the bow, and to ride; and it was universally confessed that in the two last of these arts they had made a more than common proficiency. The most distinguished youth were educated under the monarch's eye, practised their exercises in the gate of his palace, and were severely trained up to the habits of temperance and obedience in their long and laborious parties of hunting. In every province the satrap maintained a like school of military virtue. The Persian nobles (so natural is the idea of feudal tenures) received from the king's bounty lands and houses, on the condition of their service in war. They were ready at the first summons to mount on horseback, with a martial and splendid train of followers, and to join the numerous bodies of guards who were carefully selected from amongst the most robust slaves, and the bravest adventurers of Asia. These armies, both of light and heavy cavalry, equally formidable by the impetuosity of their charge, and the rapidity of their motions, threatened, as an impending cloud, the eastern provinces of the declining empire of Rome.<sup>21</sup>

Oriental or feudal, despotic or aristocratic, this account of the Persian state is as valid, we learn from Gibbon's footnotes,<sup>22</sup> in the age of Ammianus Marcellinus as in that of Herodotus. But if there is no essential difference between Xerxes and Artaxerxes, Gibbon is thrown back on the question why the hoplites of the west are no longer what they were at Marathon; and we know the answer by now. It is not clear that the barbarians of the east are capable of historical change; even their corruption is timeless, and there is a possible contradiction here. If 'orientals' are slaves by nature, as some ancients and moderns have contended, they have no virtue to corrupt.

( III )

But there are several earlier pages in which Gibbon examines Persian civilisation from another point of view. The Sassanid dynasty which came to power in the time of Alexander Severus was held to have re-established Zoroastrian Magianism as the religion of state, and this called for some investigation of the role of prophecy and priesthood in the structure of an empire presumed to have been despotic. Gibbon's account of Zoroaster and his sacred books forms one of his few ventures into remote antiquity and

<sup>21</sup> Womersley, 1994, 1, pp. 228–9; the close of chapter 8.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* 1, ch. 8 nn. 56–8.

the history of the 'Axial Age'; only when he comes to deal with Plato will we find him going there again, and his treatment of these figures must be considered as part of his general understanding of the history of both philosophy and religion. To that we shall return at a later point, but there are some features of his account of Zoroaster which should be emphasised now.

He draws on two works of scholarship, the differences between which exhibit his place in the history of a key branch of erudition. Gibbon was both an Anglican and an orientalist *manqué*; his account of his disappointment with Oxford<sup>23</sup> points to a kind of learning which he could have expected to find still flourishing when he went up. Thomas Hyde, the author of *De Veterum Persarum Religionis Historia*, had worked with Brian Walton on the project for a polyglot Bible which was one of the means by which Anglican theology had kept itself alive during the English Interregnum;<sup>24</sup> like Edward Pococke, another important source in Gibbon's readings,<sup>25</sup> he was one of those learned in Arabic, Syrian and other west Asian languages who had been singled out at Oxford by Laudian patronage,<sup>26</sup> and had this school remained vital the young Gibbon might have attached himself to it. It had been a deficiency in Hyde's learning, however, that he was unacquainted with the ancient Persian written languages, and that the treatise called the *Sadder*, which he had translated into Latin, was of a much more recent date. There is an 'Arabian' or 'oriental' flavour to a single sentence of his preface, which deserves to be rescued for inclusion in the literature of historiography:

Celeberrimus ille *Camusi* Auctor *Phirozabadius*, pro grande suo Opere Apologiam attexens, in sua Praefatione addit:

Homo est Locus Oblivionis, cum sane Primus Obliviscens fuit Primus Homo.<sup>27</sup>

[The celebrated author, Pherozabadius of Camus, prefixing an apologia to his great work, observes in his preface:

Man is the place of forgetting, since the first forgetter was the first man.]<sup>28</sup>

Gibbon was unsure of the reliability of his sources, but the second text on which he drew for his knowledge of Zoroaster belonged to another

<sup>23</sup> EEG, pp. 43–9.

<sup>24</sup> DNB, s.v. 'Hyde, Thomas (1636–1703)', 'Walton, Brian or Bryan (1600?–1661)'. Both were Cambridge men who withdrew to Oxford during the Interregnum, Hyde as a very young man.

<sup>25</sup> DNB, s.v. 'Pococke, Edward (1604–91)'. Gibbon says he had as a child begun to read his Latin translation of Abu'l Faraj (Abulpharagius). The surname is not a common one, and the present author may be allowed to say that he claims no descent from the orientalist, who was appointed to his Oxford readership by Laud himself.

<sup>26</sup> Toomer, 1996. <sup>27</sup> Hyde, 1700, 'Praefatio'. <sup>28</sup> Trans. JGAP.

world than Hyde's. This was the French translation of the *Zend-Avesta*, published in 1771 by Abraham-Hyacinthe Anquetil-Duperron. Gibbon in his autobiographies does not mention Anquetil, then returned to Paris and working on the edition he published eight years later,<sup>29</sup> among those members and associates of the *Académie des Inscriptions* whose company he sought in 1763,<sup>30</sup> but he had heard of Anquetil's travels by the previous December.<sup>31</sup> Turning from Hyde to Anquetil and the *Académie*, Gibbon passed at a step from the 'oriental' learning of the church of England to that of an antiquarian Enlightenment more curious than destructive, and there are passages in Anquetil's preface which show Gibbon at the door of a new universe of anthropology.

Eh! Pourquoi craindrois-je de produire mes foibles efforts, lorsque l'objet qui les a fait naître est le plus digne d'occuper l'être pensant; lorsque le peu de matériaux que j'ai tâché de rassembler peuvent servir à commencer un édifice, la connoissance de l'homme, lequel ne demande pour être achevé qu'une main plus habile, qu'un bras plus fort et plus courageux?

L'homme, le centre en quelque sorte de la Nature, l'être qui nous intéresse le plus, qui nous touche de plus près, dont la connoissance est la base de nos opérations, de toutes nos autres connoissances; l'homme, étudié, ou du moins vû et pratiqué depuis l'origine du Monde, n'est guère plus connu qu'au moment de sa création. On a mesuré les astres, sondé les abîmes de la mer, parcouru toute l'étendue du Globe, et déterminé sa forme; on a surpris le secret de la Nature dans ses productions, dans les loix qui régulent son cours: tout cela est pour l'homme, et l'homme est ignoré.

Deux routes peuvent nous conduire à la connoissance de cet être si intéressant: l'inspection de sa nature: ce qu'il peut, ce qu'il doit être; la vûe de ses opérations: ce qu'il est.

La Métaphysique, suivant la première route, décompose l'homme, analyse ses facultés, leur puissance, leurs rapports; combine ces rapports, calcule les opérations qui peuvent en résulter. Après tout ce travail, l'être qui sort de ses mains n'est qu'un automate, capable d'un petit nombre de mouvemens assignés par le Machiniste, habile, il est vrai, mais infiniment au-dessous de la Nature; et la Philosophe, au sortir des spéculations les plus fines, se trouve souvent aussi neuf au milieu des hommes, quand il a à traiter avec eux, ou qu'il veut simplement les considérer, que s'il s'étoit jusqu'alors occupé de tout autre être que de l'homme.

L'Histoire procedé differemment; elle nous montre l'homme en action, c'est-à-dire, tel qu'il est; seul moyen propre à nous en donner une connoissance exacte.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Anquetil, 1771.

<sup>30</sup> A, pp. 201–2 (Memoir B), 261–2 (Memoir C), *Journal A*, p. 188.

<sup>31</sup> MW, v, p. 287.

<sup>32</sup> Anquetil, 1771, 1; *Préface* (separately paginated preceding the *Discours Preliminaire*), pp. vi–vii. The reader is reminded that I follow eighteenth-century typography in transcribing quotations; it is not always consonant with modern spelling or accentuation.

[Well! Why should I fear to bring forth my feeble efforts, when the aim that has brought them to birth is the most worth the attention of a thinking being; when the scanty materials I have sought to bring together may serve as foundation for a project, the knowledge of man, whose completion calls only for a hand more skilful, an arm stronger and more daring?

Man, in some sort the centre of Nature, the being who interests us most and touches us most closely, the knowledge of whom is at the basis of our actions and all other knowledge; man, studied or at least perceived and worked on since the beginning of the world, is scarcely better known than at the moment of his creation. We have calculated the stars, sounded the depths of the sea, explored the extent of the globe and determined its geography; we have uncovered the secrets of Nature in all her products, according to the laws which govern her course; all this is done for man, and man remains unknown.

There are two paths leading us to the knowledge of this being who so much concerns us: the inspection of his nature, that which he can and ought to be; the view of his actions, that which he is.

Metaphysics pursues the first path; it decomposes man, analyses his faculties, their capacity and relationships; and by combining these, calculates the operations which can result from them. After all this toil, the being that emerges is no more than an automaton, capable of a small number of movements assigned him by his Maker; skilful indeed, but infinitely inferior to Nature; and the philosopher, at the end of his most refined speculations, often finds himself as much a stranger among men, when he has to interact with them or wishes merely to study them, as if he had till now been preoccupied with quite another being.

History operates differently; it shows us man in action, that is to say as he is; the only way for us to acquire exact knowledge of him.]<sup>33</sup>

This is much the world of the *Essai sur l'Etude de la Littérature*;<sup>34</sup> but when Gibbon thought of metaphysics he envisaged something more idealist and less automatist than this, Platonic rather than Cartesian or Condillacian. What Anquetil had in mind was by no means incompatible with Catholic piety or Mosaic chronology, as de Guignes may serve to show; but his is an anthropocentric universe. He proceeds to say that there are two kinds of history, 'celle des opinions, de l'esprit humain, et celle des événements'<sup>35</sup> (that of opinions – of the human mind – and that of events). The weakness of the latter is that events occur, and must be narrated, too rapidly to be set in the contexts which give them their meaning; but these contexts can be derived, apparently exclusively, from a single field of study, that of 'l'Histoire des Opinions Religieuses'.

<sup>33</sup> Trans. JGAP, as are all quotations in this chapter.

<sup>34</sup> Note that Sainte-Palaye's 'ce qu'il a fait' has here become 'tel qu'il est'.

<sup>35</sup> Anquetil, 1771, I, p. vii.

L'attachement de secte, augmenté par la caractere divin imprimé à ces opinions, les transmet plus surement. Le zèle religieux, après avoir soumis des peuples nombreux, les retient long-tems sous une sorte de joug, dans une même posture qu'il est plus facile de saisir et d'exprimer. D'ailleurs il n'est plus question de recueillir des oui-dire souvent incertains, de concilier des relations quelquefois opposées, fondées sur ces oui-dire; les Auteurs mêmes de ces opinions, de ces religions, ont soin de les consigner à la posterité en les confiant à leurs sectateurs, ou du moins ceux-ci, en les développant à leurs disciples.<sup>36</sup>

[Association in sects, reinforced by the divine character impressed on these opinions, guarantees their transmission. Religious zeal, having subjected a numerous people, keeps them long under a kind of yoke, in a single disposition easy to capture and describe. Furthermore it is not just a question of collecting often uncertain traditions, or reconciling the sometimes conflicting narratives founded upon them. The original authors of these doctrines and religions are at pains to transmit them to posterity by confiding them to their intimates; or the latter have done the same by expounding them to their disciples.]

Machiavelli had ranked the founders of religions even above those of cities and kingdoms, and the reason in Anquetil's mind has become that they founded the systems of belief and discourse which stabilise human behaviour in durable structures of historical intelligibility. The sages and prophets are not the authors of mystery so much as the givers of law and language, and as their followers expand and impose their beliefs they alter the speech and action of human societies.

Et de-là l'obligation de recourir aux Ouvrages originaux, d'apprendre les langues dans lesquelles ils sont écrits, d'en fixer l'époque, de rechercher celle des variétés qu'ils ont souffertes, des monumens en pierres ou autres qui en font mention, des peuples dont ils ont fait la Loi: de-là l'obligation de suivre les migrations de ces peuples, de connoître exactement les païs où ils se sont fixés, les noms mêmes des lieux particuliers qu'ils ont habités; d'observer leur habileté dans les sciences, dans les arts; d'étudier leur morale, leur politique. Tout cela mene à la connoissance de l'esprit de l'homme, et tient à l'Histoire des opinions, sur-tout de celles auxquelles, comme je l'ai dit, la religion a imprimé un caractere sacré.<sup>37</sup>

[Hence we are obliged to return to the original writings, to learn the languages in which they were set down, to date them, to seek out the variation they have undergone, the inscriptions in stone or other materials which make mention of them, the peoples whose law they have become; to follow the migrations of these peoples, to determine exactly the lands in which they have settled, the names of the very places in which they have lived; to take note of their advances in the sciences and arts; to study their moral and political laws. All this leads to the knowledge of human culture, and arises from the history of opinions, above all of those to which, as I have said, religion has imparted a sacred character.]

<sup>36</sup> Ibid. pp. viii–ix.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid. p. ix.

Gibbon had Anquetil before him when he wrote of the Zoroastrian religion:

A short delineation of that celebrated system will be found useful, not only to display the character of the Persian nation, but to illustrate many of their most important transactions, both in peace and war, with the Roman empire.<sup>38</sup>

But he had no intention of ceasing to write *l'histoire des événements*, or of devoting himself to the *académicien's* new *science de l'homme*. The intellectual excitement we sense in these passages had moved Anquetil to enlist as a soldier in the service of the Compagnie des Indes, equipped with two shirts, two handkerchiefs, a spare pair of stockings,<sup>39</sup> and some letters of introduction, and to spend six years in the French possessions in India, just as these were being overrun by the British. After travels whose frustrations he describes in the greatest detail,<sup>40</sup> he was possessed of the Parsi scriptures and a knowledge of Zend and Pahlevi sufficient to translate them, but was constrained to take passage in an English ship bearing French prisoners to Portsmouth. He then visited Oxford – he gives a hilarious account of being conducted round the Bodleian and Radcliffe manuscripts by two justly caricaturable dons in the rain<sup>41</sup> – and returned to Paris to encode his field work. The experience gives rise to a utopia. Anquetil delineates a new academy or ‘Corps de Missionnaires littéraires’, a band of apostles sent into all lands, not to teach but to learn the languages, laws and opinions given to all nations by their great prophetic lawgivers; but he concludes:

Vaine espérance, projet chimérique! mon Académie n'existera jamais: et les hommes, accoutumés à leurs erreurs ou effrayés du travail que demanderoient de pareilles recherches, se nourriront de systèmes, de portraits de fantaisie, et continueront de tout étudier, de tout connoître, excepté l'homme.<sup>42</sup>

[A vain hope, a chimerical project! My Academy will never exist; and men, inured to their errors or terrified of the labour which such research demands, will feed upon systems and imaginary portraits, and will continue to study everything and know everything, save only man.]

This was the point from which Anquetil went on to carry out the great and generous projects of his middle and later years: the assaults on the Eurocentric paradigms of ‘oriental despotism’ (in his *Legislation Orientale* of 1778) and ‘American degeneracy’ (in his *Considérations . . . sur les Deux*

<sup>38</sup> Womersley, 1994, 1, p. 216.

<sup>39</sup> Anquetil, 1771, *Discours Préliminaire*, 1, p. vii. His friends intervened to secure his discharge and his freedom of action.

<sup>40</sup> His account of his travels fills the remainder of vol. 1 of the *Zend-Avesta*.

<sup>41</sup> Anquetil, 1771, *Discours Préliminaire*, 1, pp. cccclvi–cccclxii.

<sup>42</sup> Anquetil, 1771, 1, *Préface*, pp. xi–xvi.

*Mondes* of 1780–1804);<sup>43</sup> and to end his days as a species of holy man in Napoleonic Paris, living on bread, cheese, milk and well-water, while working on a translation of the Upanishads and tranquilly awaiting the dissolution of his soul and body.<sup>44</sup> But his detestation of European imperialism in India had produced a denunciation of British national character as well as colonial practice, and to this the usually amiable William Jones, who became the first of British orientalists, had replied with at least equal chauvinism.<sup>45</sup> Gibbon was greatly to admire the work of Jones and his Royal Asiatic Society, whose translations from the Sanskrit opened up a new world of Eurasian cultural history and led to the great debate over the role of 'oriental' learning in British policy for the rule of India.<sup>46</sup> There was a new world of Asian studies open before Gibbon, but it remained to be seen what events and the narrative of events would do with the history of language, opinion and religion.

The problem of despotism at this point recurred, and with it the problem of intolerance. We have seen how an empire of polytheism, conducting a commerce of gods as of goods and manners, could be benignly ruled by a sceptical magistracy; but Artaxerxes had lost no time in convening a great council of the magi and codifying their faith, and had proceeded to a general prosecution of 'the polytheism and philosophy of the Greeks ... the more stubborn Jews and Christians ... [and] the heretics of their own nation and religion', among whom the ambiguous but momentous name of Mani is to be found.<sup>47</sup> There was a double problem here. It was part of the paradigm of despotism that the slavish orientals were ruled as absolutely by priests as by kings; but priests need be no more than ingenious manipulators of idols, prodigies and the superstitions of the multitude. Intolerance was another matter, attached to dogma rather than cult and persecuting opinion when it could be stated and defended as proposition. 'Mr. Hume, in the *Natural History of Religion*, sagaciously remarks that the most refined and philosophic sects are constantly the most intolerant.'<sup>48</sup> The history of persecution was to be sought in that of philosophy rather than of idolatry; leaving behind the innocuous idols of the Mediterranean basin, Gibbon encountered in Zoroastrianism the first religion which could be codified into a law and attempt to set laws for the mind. He turned towards remote antiquity in order to study Zoroaster as a legislator, but with a good deal less

<sup>43</sup> Abbatista, 1993.

<sup>44</sup> Minuti, 1975, p. 40, n. 21. See further Abbatista, 1993, pp. cxx–cxxxiii.

<sup>45</sup> Cannon, 1990, pp. 42–4. Cf. Mukherjee, 1968, Cannon and Brine, 1995.

<sup>46</sup> Stokes, 1959. <sup>47</sup> Womersley, 1994, 1, pp. 220–1; see Gibbon's n. 29.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, n. 24. See NCG, pp. 194–5.

than Anquetil's veneration for such a figure; and finding himself outside the world of the Greeks, had to consider how the same man could be prophet, philosopher and lawgiver at once. To elevate him as culture-hero would not be sufficient.

The great fundamental article of the system was the celebrated doctrine of the two principles; a bold and injudicious attempt of Eastern philosophy to reconcile the existence of moral and physical evil with the attributes of a beneficent Creator and Governor of the world. The first and original Being, in whom, or by whom, the universe exists, is denominated in the writings of Zoroaster, *Time without bounds*; but it must be confessed that this infinite substance seems rather a metaphysical abstraction of the mind, than a real object endowed with self-consciousness, or possessed of moral perfections. From either the blind or the intelligent operation of this infinite Time, which bears but too near an affinity with the Chaos of the Greeks, the two secondary but active principles of the universe were from all eternity produced; Ormusd and Ahriman, each of them possessed of the powers of creation, but each disposed, by his invariable nature, to exercise them with different designs. The principle of good is eternally absorbed in light; the principle of evil eternally buried in darkness.<sup>49</sup>

In the writings translated by Anquetil, it seems more probable that the good and evil principles have existed together from all eternity, Ahriman being concealed in Ormusd's shadow; the pre-existence of undifferentiated being may be a later importation. But it is significant that Gibbon should have followed it here, since we shall find that it incorporated Zoroastrianism into a general account of the ancient cosmogonies, at once religion and philosophy, which both orthodox and sceptical writers held to have grown up together in remote antiquity, and to have formed what they termed the *prisca theologia* in what we term the 'Axial Age'.<sup>50</sup> This history of philosophy is crucial to Gibbon's understanding of the history of religion, and his use of it in chapter 8 establishes it in the text of the *Decline and Fall* as early as 1776. Its immediate function is to assert the philosophical character of Persian religion, as the achievement of wise men struggling, however injudiciously, with the problem of creation and the problem of evil. Such a religion – Anquetil would call it a *loi* – is the very antithesis of polytheism, as Gibbon proceeds to make clear; it is the worship of abstract principles of being, not of the exterior objects which symbolise them. This we might suppose to be rational and enlightened, but the matter does not end there.

<sup>49</sup> Womersley, 1994, I, p. 216.

<sup>50</sup> For Anquetil's account of the 'Axial Age,' see *Zend-Avesta*, II, pp. 6–8. He makes Zoroaster a mid-sixth-century contemporary of Lycurgus, Solon, Fo (or Buddha), Confucius and Pherecydes, the Phoenician teacher of Pythagoras. At this point he does attribute to Zoroaster a doctrine of 'le *Tem sans Bornes* (l'Éternel)'.

Every mode of religion, to make a deep and lasting impression on the human mind, must exercise our obedience, by enjoining practices of devotion; and must acquire our esteem, by inculcating duties analogous to the dictates of our own hearts.<sup>51</sup>

This is why every prophet must be a legislator; it is an open question what he may have prophesied in the first place. He must enact and establish both a ritual and a moral (a positive natural) law; but the danger is that the symbolic obediences contained in the former may transform the philosophers who inculcate the latter into priests, by giving them a more than magisterial authority to enforce both. Zoroaster was not immune from this danger. There is much to be said for his legislation; it did not enjoin celibacy, so that magi were never monks, and it commanded both holy men and kings to respect the labours of agriculture.<sup>52</sup> Had this been all, 'his name would deserve a place with those of Numa and Confucius';<sup>53</sup> but he erected the magi or 'destours' into a hierarchy, enjoined the faithful to obey them implicitly – apparently on the grounds that they possessed the keys of heaven – and to pay them a regular tithe, 'besides the less invidious possession of a large tract of the most fertile lands of Media'. There is an obvious analogy with the Levites here, and we find one of Gibbon's nicely balanced innuendoes.

The divine institution of tithes exhibits a singular instance of conformity between the law of Zoroaster and that of Moses. Those who cannot otherwise account for it, may suppose, if they please, that the Magi of the latter times inserted so useful an interpolation into the writings of their prophet.<sup>54</sup>

But the reader of course knows better. The account of Sassanid persecution which follows has now a material as well as a psychological explanation. Priests persecute in order to maintain the authority which they have acquired, and they have acquired it because the logic of prophecy turns philosophers into priests. The mere manipulation of images is nothing in comparison; the city cults of the Greeks and Romans lacked ruling priest-hoods because the Hellenic and Latin west had been neither blessed nor cursed with sages and prophets revealing the cosmogonies of systematic reason; and magian religions bred persecuting priest-hoods precisely because they originated in the philosophic rejection of polytheism. Western Asia, which Europeans call 'the Orient' and 'the East', was the homeland of such religions, just as it was supposedly the homeland of despotic monarchies, but it might seem that the two phenomena were at variance. To a Protestant

<sup>51</sup> Womersley, 1994, 1, p. 218.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 219.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, and n. 19.

it was rather obvious that the magi might rival the power of the Great King, and that tithes might be a detention of the things due to Caesar under the false pretence that they belonged to God. It was equally obvious, however, that the popish clergy were the allies of absolute monarchy, and all Gibbon has to say here is that the

spirit of persecution reflects dishonour on the religion of Zoroaster; but as it was not productive of any civil commotion, it served to strengthen the new monarchy, by uniting the various inhabitants of Persia in the bands of religious zeal.<sup>55</sup>

Had the persecuted religions been organised to make their own claims to civil authority, the horrors of religious war would have ensued; but Persia would not have been a despotism.

In Anquetil we find a different account of Zoroaster's turn towards persecution. He was not concerned with the Sassanid consolidation, but with the tale that the prophet had incited King Gustasp of Balkh to war against the heathen Turanians and perhaps perished himself in the conflict. In this connection, Anquetil found himself weighing the view that Zoroaster was a fraudulent prophet like Muhammad against the view that he was a benign sage and legislator. He concluded that Zoroaster was not a mere magician and wonder-worker, but:

Pour ce qui est de l'enthousiasme et de l'imposture, je pense qu'on ne peut en disculper Zoroastre. J'appelle Enthousiaste celui qui, persuadé d'une vérité ou d'une erreur, marque pour elle un zèle exclusif, et la propose, sans avoir pour cela une mission divine, comme d'une excellence supérieure à tout, et d'une nécessité indispensable. L'enthousiasme, pris dans ce sens, renferme les fanatiques en Religion comme en Philosophie et en Politique. Tout homme qui de son Cabinet s'érige un Tribunal, d'où il prétend gouverner le genre humain, réformer les opinions, régler les goûts, je ne crains pas de l'appeller Enthousiaste.

Or il y en a de deux especes: les uns commencent par l'imposture, et finissent par la bonne foi. Des vûtes de fortune, une ambition démesurée, le desir de s'élever au dessus du malheur d'une naissance basse et obscure, font faire des efforts qui réussissent. Ce succès, soutenu par des éloges enchanteurs, éblouit, et persuade quelque fois à un homme dont la tête est affoiblie par le travail ce qui, quelques années auparavant, lui auroit paru ridicule. De cette façon, à force de répéter les choses, et de les voir crues, on se les persuade à soi-même.

L'autre espece d'enthousiasme naît de la bonne foi, qui cede ensuite à l'imposture. Plein de certaines opinions favorites, vraies ou fausses, on croit rendre service au genre humain en les lui proposant. D'abord l'enthousiasme tire un voile sur les supercheries que l'on se permet pour les faire adopter. Bientôt la contradiction fait disparaître l'Apôtre: l'amour propre prend la place de celui de la vérité, et l'homme

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 1, p. 221.

ne combat plus que pour éviter la honte de plier ou d'avoir été trompé. L'Histoire de tous les Peuples ne nous montre que trop de personnages de ces deux caracteres. Le dernier me paroît celui de Zoroastre.<sup>56</sup>

[As for enthusiasm and imposture, I think Zoroaster cannot be discharged of guilt. I call him an enthusiast, who, persuaded of a truth or a falsity, displays exclusive zeal for it and, not authorised by any divine mission, claims for it absolute truth and irresistible authority. Enthusiasm in this sense makes men fanatics in religion, just as in philosophy or politics. When a man from his private cell sets up a tribunal and claims to govern the human race, reform its opinions and regulate its choices, I do not hesitate to call him an enthusiast.

There are two kinds. One begins in imposture and ends in sincerity. The prospect of fortune, boundless ambition, the will to rise above some birth base and obscure, drive one to efforts crowned with success. This triumph, upheld by bewitching praise from his supporters, sometimes dazzles and persuades a man exhausted by his labours of the truth of something he would have found ridiculous a few years earlier. In this way, by repeating his assertions and seeing them believed, he comes to persuade himself of them.

The other kind of enthusiasm begins in good faith and ends in imposture. Filled with one's darling beliefs, true or false, one believes it a service to the human race to propound them. At first, enthusiasm draws a veil over the deceptions one permits oneself in getting them accepted. Soon the contradiction between them annihilates the apostle; self-conceit takes the place of truth, and the man fights only to avoid the shame of giving way or admitting himself deceived. The history of all peoples is too full of examples of both characters. The latter seems to me to have been the case with Zoroaster.]

His preaching of an intolerant crusade was no more than the attempt to save himself from the dilemma in which he was imprisoned by the enterprise of reducing the multifarious sects of Iran to a single system of truth. The danger facing Anquetil is that all the great systems of law and language in which man makes himself known to men may have been codified and rendered permanent by the same grammar of enthusiasm, imposture and self-deceit; perhaps all legislators were false prophets and all discourses hegemonic.<sup>57</sup> But this theory of 'enthusiasm' represents it as no more than the fanaticism and false consciousness of the tunnel vision; in Gibbon, for whom 'enthusiasm' is a key word, we shall find a much more complex account of its genesis. It would also seem that Anquetil, enlightened in a Catholic culture, is not giving the etiology of priesthoods the place which any Protestant would have accorded it at the centre of his historical system; Gibbon was drawn instantly and magnetically to

<sup>56</sup> Anquetil, 1771, II, pp. 65–6.

<sup>57</sup> Tominaga Nakagawa, a very young gentleman at Osaka, had raised similar possibilities with regard to the Confucian and Buddhist classics during the 1730s. See Najita, 1987.

the authority by which the 'destours' (clerics) claimed tithes. Two years after the appearance of the first volume of the *Decline and Fall*, Anquetil published his *Législation Orientale*, remembered today as one of the first full-scale assaults on the paradigm of oriental despotism.<sup>58</sup> He denied with fervour and generosity that 'orientals' were 'slaves by nature', affirming that where west Asian monarchs ruled despotically, it was in defiance of the structures of Muslim, Hindu and Parsi law which protected the subject's property as expressly as the Roman or the feudal. In this he had been preceded by Voltaire, and was to be followed by Burke.<sup>59</sup> But it was one thing to deny that Asians were naturally servile, another to deny that their nature had been rendered servile by the corruptions of despotism. We see already how the 'oriental' paradigm impeded Gibbon's understanding of Persian civilisation; but before it could be eliminated, something would have to replace the companion paradigm of 'priestcraft', of which Gibbon possessed a more complex perception than did Anquetil, one only partly to be explained by the Eurocentricities of 'orientalism'. The history of west Asian society, however, belongs to Gibbon's thinking on the subject of religion. His thinking on that of barbarism will from this point be pursued as part of the history of peoples north of the Danube and east of the Dniester.

<sup>58</sup> Richter, 1973, p. 13; Abbatista, 1993, pp. xxvi–xxvii; Minuti, 1975; Whelan, 2001.

<sup>59</sup> Whelan, 1996.