

VOLUME XVI, NUMBER 4, FALL 2016

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REVIEW OF BOOKS

*A Journal of Political Thought and Statesmanship*

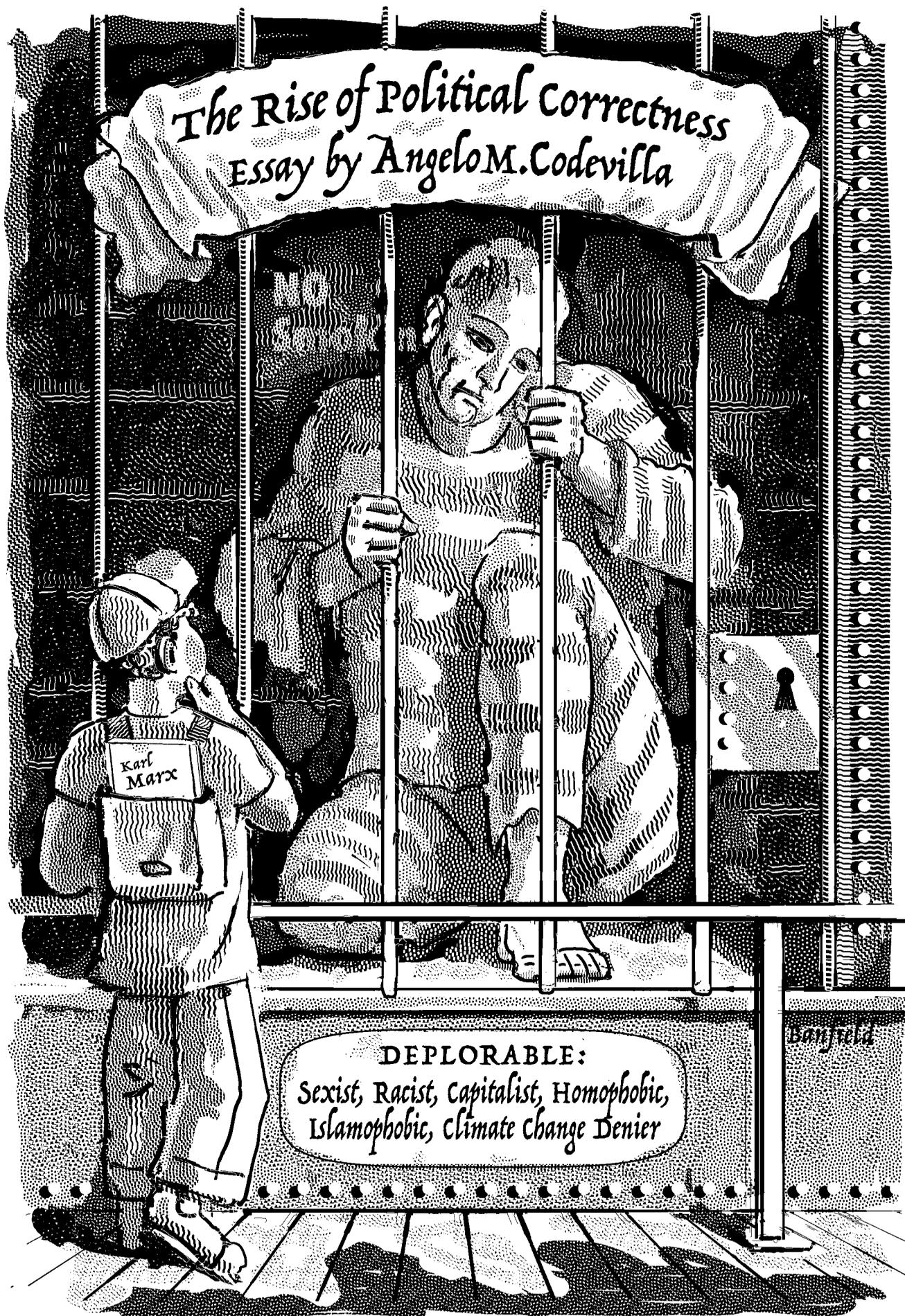
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Rabkin:  
**Randy Barnett's  
Republican  
Constitution**

William  
Voegeli:  
**The Left's  
Dilemma**

Algis  
Valiunas:  
**Edward  
Gibbon**

John M.  
Ellis:  
**The Essential  
Goethe**

Bradley C.S.  
Watson:  
**Conservatives  
on Campus**



David  
Azerrad:  
**Yuval Levin's  
Fractured  
Republic**

Christopher  
Caldwell:  
**Immigration's  
Hidden Costs**

Bruce Cole:  
**Robert  
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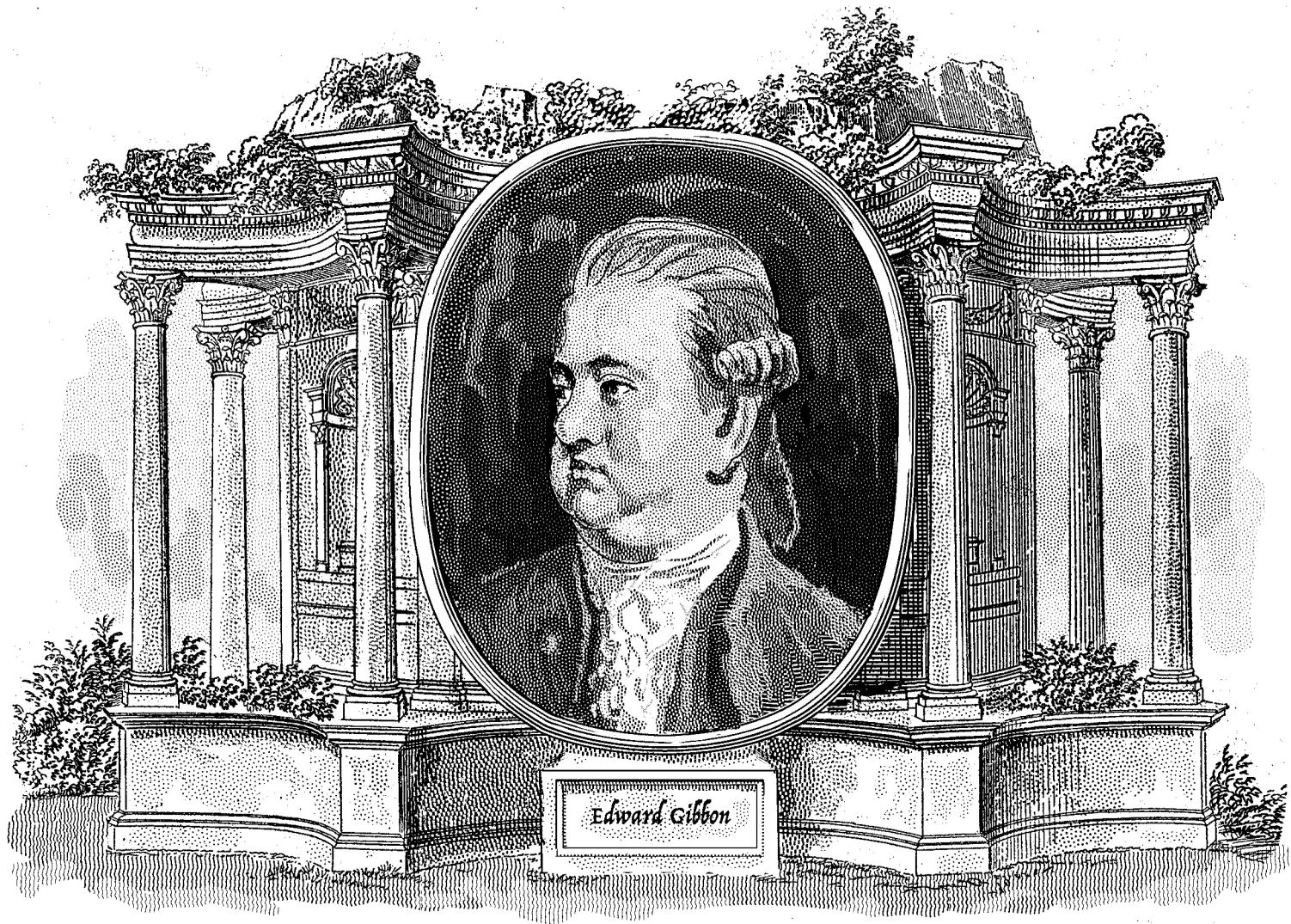
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## VOICE OF CIVILIZATION



LIKE HERODOTUS, THUCYDIDES, MONTAIGNE, and Proust, Edward Gibbon (1737–1794) was a one-book wonder. True, he wrote a couple others, a long youthful French essay and a posthumously published memoir, but the sum of his genius he poured into *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, which appeared in six volumes between 1776 and 1788. It was quite enough to speak for a supremely well-spent scholarly and literary lifetime. That part of his life in which he wasn't engaged in writing the book was either preparation for the appointed task or well-deserved rest from his labors—though much of his youth he considered time wasted.

He was the only surviving child of a prosperous merchant family; suffered through a sickly boyhood that saw him only intermittently in school but constantly reading history; came out of Oxford with small Latin and less Greek, shown the door for conversion to popery; was exiled by his outraged father to

Lausanne, Switzerland, and the oversight of a Calvinist minister, who gradually helped restore him to respectable (not Calvinist but Anglican) worship; and fell in love there with a French beauty whom his father refused to let him marry, upon pain of disinheritance (she would become the mother of Madame de Staël, while he remained a lifelong bachelor). Gibbon returned to England, and served as a captain in the Hampshire militia, which he said gave him important military knowledge, though he never saw action; pursued expertise in the classical languages, but by his own judgment failed to master Greek as he did Latin; lived the life of a gentleman amusing himself with literature; thought about writing a life of Walter Raleigh or a history of the Medici or the narrative of Swiss liberty; and served in Parliament for nine years without ever speaking. On a trip to Rome in 1764, he heard “the bare-footed fryars...singing vespers in the Temple of Jupiter,” and had an idea about a book to

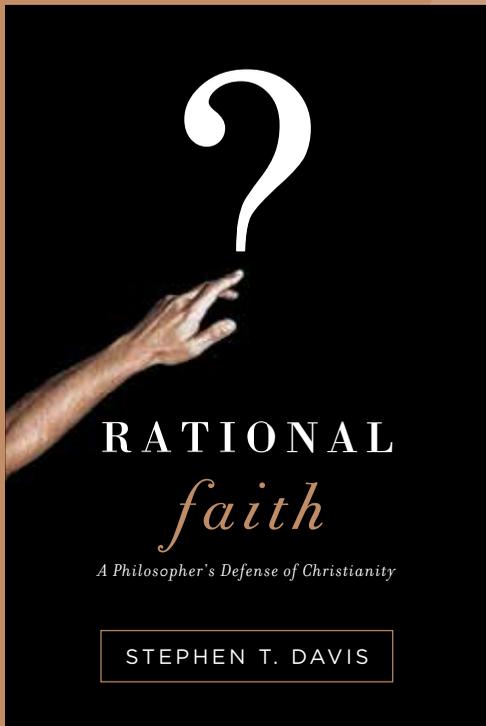
write; eventually settled on the thing he was meant to do and did it; enjoyed the adulation of the discerning and endured the charges of the pious that he was an “infidel wasp,” as James Boswell put it; sided with his friend Edmund Burke in reprobation of the French Revolution; and died at 56 following surgery for a grossly inflamed hydrocele in his scrotum.

### Crimes, Follies, and Misfortunes

DECLINE AND FALL TREATS, AS EVERYONE must expect, what most people mean when they speak of the fall of Rome, with “the subversion of the Western Empire, by the barbarians of Germany and Scythia, the rude ancestors of the most polished nations of modern Europe”; and of course it details the emergence and ascendancy of Christianity as spiritual force and imperial power. The history also encompasses the “transient splendour [of] the Eastern Empire,” most



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glorious under the reign of Justinian, prolific conqueror and compiler of the renowned legal code; and it relates the ultimate “extinction of a degenerate race of princes, who continued to assume the titles of Caesar and Augustus, after their dominions were contracted to the limits of a single city,” Constantinople, which fell to the sultan Mahomet II and the Turks in 1453. Gibbon retails the numerous collisions and sideswipes down the centuries between the Empire and the Persians, the Muslim Arabs, the Mongols. His Roman masterwork is a panoramic history of the Old World.

“In the second century of the Christian Aera, the empire of Rome comprehended the fairest part of the earth, and the most civilized portion of mankind.” This is the opening sentence, from which Gibbon sets off on a 3,000-page consideration of what it means to be civilized. Frontiers protected by “ancient renown and disciplined valour,” “[t]he gentle, but powerful influence of laws and manners,” the refined pleasure in and the morbid indulgence of “wealth and luxury,” reverence for “the image of a free constitution”: thus had Roman power and virtue been secured and preserved, and it would be by the attenuation and corruption of such force, energy, decency, and public spiritedness that the empire would topple and shatter.

In his final chapter Gibbon lamented “that in proportion to her former greatness, the fall of Rome was the more awful and deplorable,” and he announced, “I have described the triumph of barbarism and religion.” Until quite recently most civilized people could agree that barbarism is a bad thing—multiculturalist sensibilities now quiver in agony at the very word—but religion has been generally believed a good thing, if only for those other people who need its exemplary restraints. So what Gibbon intends by his very long threnody will not be palatable to many well-meaning readers, on one count or the other or both. But such is the price to be paid for civilization as he understands it, instruction for which is not infrequently disagreeable. The history is disturbing—a severe challenge to comfortable pieties, especially to Christian piety. The potency of Gibbon’s argument—and his history is also polemic—is sufficient to unsettle even those whom he does not convince.

From the start, his plummy civilized voice is rich with the “grave and temperate irony” for which he is celebrated: the intellectual delight of being among those who understand is a pre-eminent privilege of the truly civilized, which means it is not for everyone who might consider himself civilized. What Gibbon means by “the most civilized portion of mankind” will only be clear when one returns to his first sentence after reading the rest of the book. For *most* is not a simple superlative here. The most

civilized portion of mankind will prove to be only comparatively more civilized than the rest—in some respects, marginally so, or not at all—which is to say shot through and through with barbarism. For history, as he famously states, is “indeed, little more than the register of the crimes, follies, and misfortunes of mankind.” The somberness of this truth is relieved by the evident relish with which he serves up his sorrowful tale. The historian’s art in Gibbon’s hands involves cultivating a certain cool reserve, which allows him to treat with wit and aplomb matters worthy of despair. And there is no desperation in him, no Voltairean fury at the infamy that must be crushed, however grisly the spectacle he describes. He accepts with gratitude the gifts that history has delivered to his genius: crimes and follies furnish his daily bread, misfortunes a rich dessert. It would be grotesque to say he believed Rome fell so that he could write of it; but Gibbon could not be unhappy that Rome fell, for there was no other subject so perfectly suited to his ambition and his skill.

## Thirst for Glory

**A**MBITION IS A MATTER HE KNOWS well—although as with many writers, the only ambition he admires without qualification is literary. Men of action, Romans above all, in his view, pursue questionable ends with dire means. Rome conquered most of the surrounding peoples, and for seven centuries from Romulus to Augustus triumph followed triumph; it was the emperor Augustus who determined “to relinquish the ambitious design of subduing the whole earth, and to introduce a spirit of moderation into the public councils.” Holding onto imperial acquisitions requires a hand at least as powerful as the one that conquered, and subsequent emperors would have done well to follow Augustus’s example.

But even so great a man and ruler as Trajan could not free himself of the craving for glory as magnificent as Alexander’s. What most Romans considered an essential princely virtue, Gibbon calls the besetting vice of the best of them. “Trajan was ambitious of fame; and as long as mankind shall continue to bestow more liberal applause on their destroyers than on their benefactors, the thirst of military glory will ever be the vice of the most exalted characters.” Rome’s very power and honor are monstrous at the core. Statesmanship reliant on generalship and the massed violence of the legions is severely compromised. The virtues worthy of unadulterated honor are strictly peaceable, Gibbon soberly advises readers who might harbor latent world-beating fires in their souls. And yet he knows that the most ambitious political men, the ones who



make history, have never been and never will be any different. So he proceeds to detail the Roman military virtue that won the empire and sustained it, enabling the Romans to dispense justice to a barbarian world in need of it: “the reigns of Hadrian and Antoninus Pius offer the fair prospect of universal peace. The Roman name was revered among the most remote nations of the earth. The fiercest barbarians frequently submitted their differences to the arbitration of the emperor.”

First things first, and Gibbon devotes the larger part of the opening chapter to war-making as the supreme Roman art. Patriotic fervor and regimental pride invigorated the ranks. “The attachment of the Roman troops to their standards, was inspired by the united influence of religion and honour. The golden eagle, which glittered in the front of the legion, was the object of their fondest devotion.” Severe discipline instilled the necessary hardness and readiness to obey any order, a disposition that made the legions superior to barbarian hordes. Relentless drill in every aspect of warfare inculcated tactical mastery. The art of weapon-making gave the Romans the most elementary advantage over enemies less capably equipped. Such technology—the best javelin and sword, helmet and buckler in the business—is part of the achievement of civilization: an indispensable part.

### Paths of Blood

**W**AR MADE THE ROMANS MASTERS OF the world if not masters of themselves, and peace unmade them. Gibbon extols the age of the Antonines—the wise and temperate emperors Antoninus Pius and Marcus Aurelius, the Stoic philosopher—as the supreme epoch of human flourishing, from which the ruinous decline began. “This long peace, and the uniform government of the Romans, introduced a slow and secret poison into the vitals of the empire. The minds of men were gradually reduced to the same level, the fire of genius was extinguished, and even the military spirit evaporated.” Where Romans had formerly aspired to be superb—and that meant perpetual war to feed the insatiable hunger for glory—mediocrity now became the rule; and this was as true of poetry, oratory, even philosophy, as it was of crumbling military virtue. “The diminutive stature of mankind... was daily sinking below the old standard, and the Roman world was indeed peopled by a race of pygmies, when the fierce giants of the north broke in, and mended the puny breed.”

The Roman army abdicated its role as protector of the empire and began prowling for ready spoil. The army’s practice was no longer with danger, to borrow a phrase from Thomas

Hobbes’s translation of Thucydides, and the soldiers grew accustomed to taking their ease. Under the monstrous emperor Commodus, who succeeded his father, Marcus Aurelius, the Praetorian Guard enjoyed a privileged life; and although the Guard found the murder of Commodus to its taste, for he had disgraced all Rome by fighting in the amphitheater as a gladiator, the Praetorians murdered his virtuous successor, Pertinax, with equal alacrity. His crime was trying to restore “the strictness of the ancient discipline.” The “licentious fury” of the Praetorian bands, Gibbon declares, “was the first symptom and cause of the decline of the Roman empire.” With the head of Pertinax impaled on a spear, the Praetorians proclaimed that the throne of empire was open to the highest bidder. The vastly rich Didius Julianus bought the title and held it for 66 days.

Septimius Severus, commander of the army in the province of Pannonia, inflamed the legions with outrage at the Praetorians’ infamy, and he led his army into Rome to behead Julianus “as a common criminal,” punish the Prae-

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torians, and assume the imperial purple. But Severus could not curb “the insolence of the victorious legions.” The “nerves of discipline” were shot. The soldiers wore gold rings, lived with their wives in quarters, demanded more pay and got frequent bonuses to boot. Severus quadrupled the size of the Praetorian Guard and made its chief officer head of imperial finance and even of law. The emperor crushed the remnants of senatorial power. In *The Prince*, Machiavelli writes, “For in Severus there was so much virtue that, maintaining the soldiers friendly, even though the people were burdened by him, he was always able to rule happily.” Machiavellian princely happiness is a long way from the imperial good. Gibbon renders harsh judgment on Severus: “Posterity, who experienced the fatal effects of his maxims and example, justly considered him as the principal author of the decline of the Roman empire.”

Whether monsters such as Elagabalus and Maximin or stalwarts such as Alexander Severus and Aurelian occupied the throne, the end of the story rarely varied. Violent death at a rival’s hands became part of the job description. “A life of pleasure or virtue, of severity

or mildness, of indolence or glory, alike led to an untimely grave; and almost every reign is closed by the same disgusting repetition of treason and murder.” Gibbon occasionally permits himself a poignant note or a bitter one at the killing of an emperor, but mostly he carries on in his decorous murmuring fashion even as the imperial body count mounts astronomically. When he registers his disgust, he does so without raising his voice. The barbarism of the most civilized portion of mankind, especially in its uppermost reaches though not exclusively there by any means, must appall any humane person, but the historian’s job description entails wading down “the paths of blood” without flinching. Undue vehemence must be avoided. Too much compassion can cripple a mind charged with this grim work; a surgeon’s disinterestedness is called for, and Gibbon possesses that to perfection. This calm apprehension of whatever the world might hold is also part of what it means to be civilized. Eminently civilized—and the familiar phrase carries a chill.

### Human and Inhuman

**Y**ET GIBBON IS NOT SIMPLY A COLD FISH. The words *human* and *inhuman* ring throughout the history, proprietary to Gibbon as *virtù* is to Machiavelli, *good* to Hemingway, *real* to Proust; for humanity is the moral virtue Gibbon values most highly, even while he may have to wear his own concealed beneath the historian’s armor. He expects every reader to understand the word’s meaning without coaching, although the meaning really becomes clear only as the reader is acquainted with several variations on inhumanity.

The history abounds with “rash and inhuman deeds,” numerous “inhuman murders,” promiscuous “inhuman massacres,” “inhuman sacrifice,” “the inhuman practice of the times.” Roman inhumanity, which includes the Byzantine variety, is not unexpected in a people once addicted to martial glory and subsequently accustomed to seeing their emperors go down one after another in their own blood. Of the blood-soaked Roman games and festivals, Gibbon writes, “every circumstance of the place, as well as of the ceremony, contributed to kindle [the spectators’] devotion and to extinguish their humanity.” These circuses in which men fought wild beasts or each other were but a fragment of the enormity. Civilized Greeks of the Eastern Roman Empire displayed the refined taste in torture that made rampaging Goths and Vandals seem mere brutes. Among unsuccessful aspirants to the imperial throne of Constantinople in the 7th and 8th centuries, eyes, tongues, and noses still attached to their owners’ faces became a rarity. In the 11th century the Greek emperor Basil II



inflicted a cool and exquisite vengeance on fifteen thousand [Bulgarian] captives who had been guilty of the defence of their country. They were deprived of sight, but to one of each hundred a single eye was left, that he might conduct his blind century to the presence of their king. Their king is said to have expired of grief and horror.

Elsewhere, in a footnote to another characteristic act of Greek imperial savagery, Gibbon reviews “the various modes of blinding: the more violent were scooping, burning with an iron, or hot vinegar, and binding the head with a strong cord till the eyes burst from their sockets. Ingenious tyrants!” Poor Gibbon, to have to write such things! Fortunate Gibbon, to have such things to write!

With barbarians one expects not ingenuity so much as basic barbarism, and they do deliver. The 14th-century Mogul emperor Timour (also known as the Mongol Tamerlane or Tamburlaine) was as ambitious as Trajan or Alexander the Great. “The conquest and monarchy of the world was the first object of the ambition of TIMOUR. To live in the memory and esteem of future ages was the second wish of his magnanimous spirit.” Gibbon ensures that Timour lives in the reader’s memory. As the conqueror was

explaining to the Syrian cadhi his peaceable nature and aversion to aggression,

the streets of Aleppo streamed with blood, and re-echoed with the cries of mothers and children, with the shrieks of violated virgins. The rich plunder that was abandoned to his soldiers might stimulate their avarice; but their cruelty was enforced by the peremptory command of producing an adequate number of heads, which, according to his custom, were curiously piled in columns and pyramids.

On the ruins of Baghdad Timour constructed a pyramid of 90,000.

Oddly, or perhaps not, Gibbon never does describe Timour as inhuman. It could be that some things go without saying. He avoids the word in writing of Zingis (Genghis Khan), Mahomet (Mohammed), Saladin, and other Asian barbarian warlords as well, and even emphasizes their surprising humane qualities. Zingis’s religion, for instance, “best deserves our wonder and applause. The Catholic inquisitors of Europe, who defended nonsense by cruelty, might have been confounded by the example of a Barbarian, who anticipated the lessons of philosophy, and established by his laws a system of pure theism and perfect

toleration.” Gibbon notes “[a] singular conformity” between Zingis’s religious laws and those promoted by John Locke. In the light of such philosophic concord, certain inhuman aspects of barbarian conquest may be overlooked.

Gibbon never passes up the chance, however, to malign Christian inhumanity. Christianity likes to claim for itself the virtues generally associated with humanity—pity, mercy, compassion; indeed, it has been known to arrogate to its membership and its God exclusive rights to such virtues. Gibbon objects. An abyss separates the sweetness of “Religion as she descended from Heaven” and “the inevitable mixture of error and corruption...among a weak and degenerate race of beings.”

The early Christians not only believed in the pagan gods; they believed them to be demons, which the pagans were damned for worshipping. Gibbon adjudges the pagan polytheism, tolerant of all beliefs, to be more civilized than the Christian monotheism, cocksure of its unique righteousness and refusing to tolerate any dissenters. “The condemnation of the wisest and most virtuous of the Pagans, on account of their ignorance or disbelief of the divine truth, seems to offend the reason and the humanity of the present age. But the primitive church, whose faith was of a much firmer consistence, delivered over, without hesitation, to eternal

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torture, the far greater part of the human species." The loathing for any but the prescribed worship vitiated the profession of Christian love. One recalls Friedrich Nietzsche's revision of the motto over the entrance to Dante's inferno: where Dante had announced of hell, "I too was created by eternal love," Nietzsche places over the entrance to *Paradise* the statement, "I too was created by eternal hate"—and for Gibbon as for Nietzsche, it is human, which is to say inhuman, hate that created this hell and heaven.

### Descent of Faith

**R**AGE, HATRED, VANITY, SELF-RIGHTEUSNESS all figure in the hot disputations the early Christians practiced among themselves: heretics were as surely damned as pagans, and the heretics of course damned in turn those who had damned them. The descent of faith into theological contention showed the civilized intelligence at its most ridiculously presumptuous. The minds of men encountered matters too deep and subtle for them, as they undertook to define the mind of God. What the 18th century called the "polite mind," of which Gibbon's own is a sterling example, recognizes its limitations; the religious enthusiast prefers to be stupefied and must be satisfied, to appropriate a choice

Machiavellian phrase. "The abstruse question of the eternity of the *Logos*," "the admission of the HOMOIOUSION, or Consubstantial," "a real substantial Trinity...refined into a trinity of names, and abstract modifications, that subsist only in the mind which conceives them": such were the source of mental consternation, and they were fighting words, for which a great deal of blood was shed. Eighteen different creeds sprouted from these seeds of dissension.

The Christian Emperor Constantius cruelly enforced the Semi-Arian heresy—that God the Son was of a *similar* substance (*homoiousios*) as God the Father—which stood opposed to the Nicene Creed's proclamation that Jesus and God were of the *same* substance (*homoousios*). One letter in a long Greek word spelled the difference between heaven and hell, and more important between life and death.

The rites of baptism were conferred on women and children, who, for that purpose, had been torn from the arms of their friends and parents; the mouths of the communicants were held open, by a wooden engine, while the consecrated bread was forced down their throat; the breasts of tender virgins were either burnt with red-hot egg-shells, or inhumanly compressed between sharp and heavy boards.

As Christian emperors persecuted heretical Christian subjects, civil laws assumed the tone of maledictions under the influence of doctrinal wrangling: Manichean heretics were condemned to death, as were the Audians, who celebrated Easter on the wrong day. With persecution made policy, an enforcement apparatus for the established church became necessary: "the office of *Inquisitors* of the Faith, a name so deservedly abhorred, was first instituted under the reign of Theodosius."

Gibbon indulges the fullness of his contempt for the monstrosity of Christian asceticism, which, he believed, inverts the moral order of ordinary human life and replaces simple goodness with the worship of misery, where eternal happiness is said to await: "inspired by the savage enthusiasm, which represents man as a criminal, and God as a tyrant," the monks, hermits, and anchorites in their holy frenzy debased themselves not just to inhuman depths but even to the anti-human nadir. "They aspired to reduce themselves to the rude and miserable state in which the human brute is scarcely distinguished above his kindred animals: and a numerous sect of Anachorets derived their name from their humble practice of grazing in the fields of Mesopotamia with the common herd." Christian princes and people alike goggled in true believers' wonderment at prodigies of penitential renunciation, such

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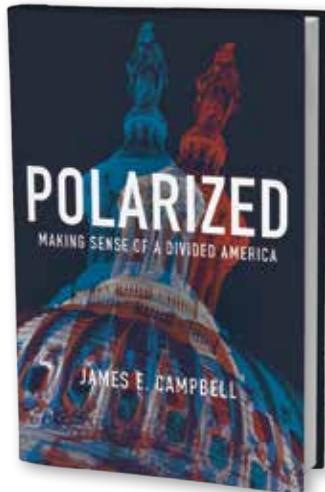
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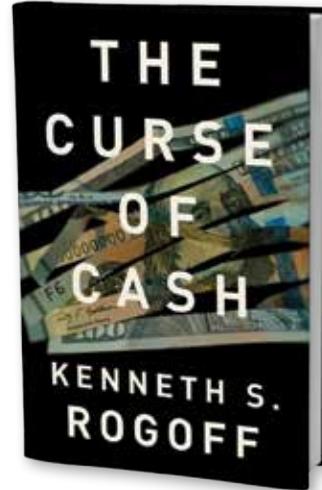
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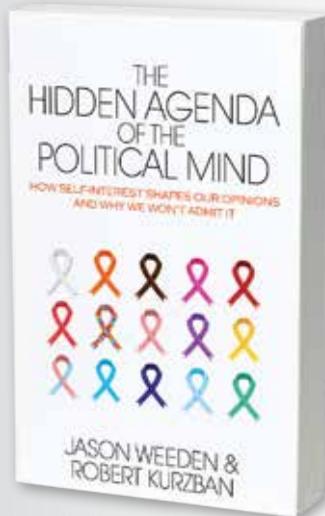
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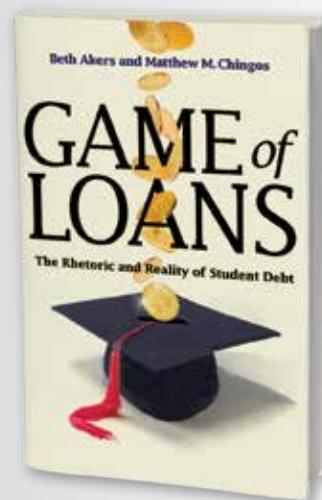
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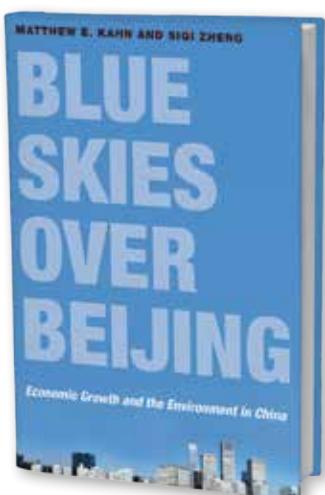
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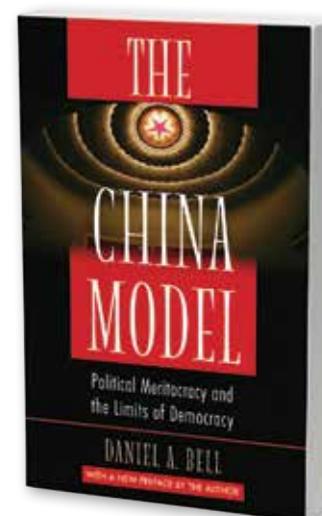
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as Simeon Stylites, who perched for 30 years atop a 60-foot column in the Syrian waste.

The favourites of Heaven were accustomed to cure inveterate diseases with a touch, a word, or a distant message; and to expel the most obstinate daemons from the souls, or bodies, which they possessed. They familiarly accosted, or imperiously commanded, the lions and serpents of the desert; infused vegetation into a sapless trunk; suspended iron on the surface of the water; passed the Nile on the back of a crocodile, and refreshed themselves in a fiery furnace.

The prevalent credulity that swallowed those amazing tales corroded “the reason, the faith, and the morals, of the Christians.”

Perhaps nothing better demonstrated the mental poverty of Christianity, Gibbon maintained, than the manifest unfitness of the popes to rule a temporal order:

The successful candidate is drawn from the church, and even the convent; from the mode of education and life most adverse to reason, humanity, and freedom. In the trammels of servile faith, he has learned to believe because it is absurd, to revere all that is contemptible, and to

despise whatever might deserve the esteem of a rational being; to punish error as a crime, to reward mortification and celibacy, as the first of virtues; to place the saints of the kalendar above the heroes of Rome and the sages of Athens; and to consider the missal, or the crucifix, as more useful instruments than the plough or the loom.

As for the founder of Christianity, Gibbon pays him a measure of sincere tribute even while he condescends to him this way and that.

He lived and died for the service of mankind; but the life and death of Socrates had likewise been devoted to the cause of religion and justice; and although the stoic or the hero may disdain the humble virtues of Jesus, the tears which he shed over his friend and country, may be esteemed the purest evidence of his humanity.

Of course esteem for his humanity might be thought faint praise for the Son of God, but Christ’s divinity, and the vexed character of the Incarnation, Gibbon leaves to the believers or, as he prefers to call them, the fanatics. The fantastic accounts and tortured

lucubrations interest him strictly as historical phenomena. He is quite certain the truth is not to be found there.

### Most Complete Men

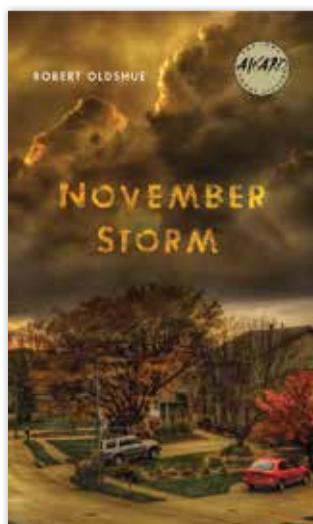
WHAT THEN IS GIBBON’S IDEAL OF civilized humanity? In “the love of pleasure and the love of action” one finds the animating passions of “the most virtuous and liberal dispositions.” “The character in which both the one and the other should be united and harmonised, would seem to constitute the most perfect idea of human nature.” For Gibbon intellectual pleasure enjoys pride of place in humanity perfected. “The acquisition of knowledge, the exercise of our reason or fancy, and the cheerful flow of unguarded conversation, may employ the leisure of a liberal mind.” And these noblest pleasures were naturally condemned by the unnatural “severity of the fathers, who despised all knowledge that was not useful to salvation, and who considered all levity of discourse as a criminal abuse of the gift of speech.”

So who were the best of men in Gibbon’s estimation? There were the Antonines, of course, especially Marcus Aurelius—although imprudent paternal love prevailed over public dutifulness when he allowed Commodus to succeed him as emperor. And there was the

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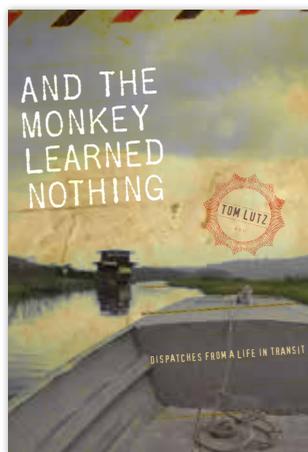


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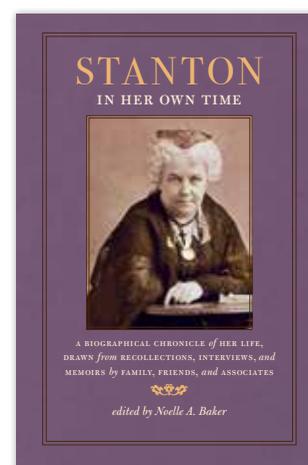


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4th-century emperor Julian the Apostate, who was initiated into the philosophic life at the Academy in Athens, and who “considered every moment as lost, that was not devoted to the advantage of the public, or the improvement of his own mind.” Yet Gibbon derides Julian’s susceptibility to the hocus-pocus of Neoplatonism; and although Julian in his “prudent humanity” restored religious toleration to the entire Roman world, his intemperate zeal for pagan worship caused him to backslide into religious oppression, which infected the populace with Christian-killing fever.

One had to wait until the 15th century and the Renaissance to find princes truly worthy of their hire, who were not only formidable men of action but who also earned lasting glory in the service of learning, art, and philosophy. Such was, quite unexpectedly, a prince of the church, Pope Nicholas V, who overcame plebeian birth and avoided customary papal folly “by his virtue and learning.”

The influence of the holy see pervaded Christendom; and he exerted that influence in the search, not of benefices, but of books.... To his munificence, the Latin world was indebted for the versions of Xenophon, Diodorus, Polybius, Thucydides, Herodotus, and Appian; of Strabo’s geography, of the *Iliad*, of the most valuable works of Plato and Aristotle, of Ptolemy and Theophrastus, and of the fathers of the Greek church.

Nicholas’s contemporary Cosimo de’ Medici, “a Florentine merchant, who governed the republic without arms and without a title...was the father of a line of princes, whose name and age are almost synonymous with the restoration of learning.” Here are Gibbon’s most complete men, the rarest types in the ranks of the mighty, who make the historian proud to have in common with them the name of human being.

Gibbon’s own humanity is both common to all decent men—that is, those men he considers decent—and singularly his own. It is the product of the Enlightenment, but runs contrary to some fundamental virtues professed by the Enlightened. One finds the definition of *humanity* written in letters of fire in the Enlightenment handbook, the *Encyclopédie* (1751–1772); the entry is attributed to Denis Diderot:

Humanity...is a benevolent feeling for all men, which hardly inflames anyone without a great and sensitive soul. This sublime and noble enthusiasm is troubled by the pains of other people and by the necessity to alleviate them. With these sentiments an individual would

wish to cover the entire universe in order to abolish slavery, superstition, vice, and misfortune.

The authority of the *Encyclopédie* was solemn gospel among numerous men of good will at the time, yet Gibbon’s humanity departs from Diderot’s in some crucial respects. For Gibbon humanity is not an inflammation or a great-souled enthusiasm, but rather a settled order of the mind and heart, a fundamental decency available to ordinary everyday mankind, though it is not found there as often as he would like. Nor does Gibbon’s humanity enjoin or implore him to bring down and reconstitute the disorderly universe that permits inhumanity to thrive; Diderot’s super-heated call to action, or at least to extravagant sentiment, does not move him. Gibbon knows there are evils so deeply engrained in human nature that no application of benign philosophy will ever eradicate them. His humanity is tender enough to feel acutely the terrible sufferings he describes, yet sufficiently robust to bear the knowledge that inhumanity is here to stay. His austere wisdom is not a *philosophe’s* but a historian’s. The genuinely civilized mind and heart, Gibbon teaches, will never cease being seared by the spectacle of barbarism doing what it has always done, but it will find what comfort and sustenance it can in the company of like-minded men and women, which is as much as we know of salvation in this life or any other.

#### Christianity Has Its Say

**Y**ET GIBBON’S HUMANITY HAS ITS BLIND spots. Richard Porson, sometime Regius Professor of Greek at the University of Cambridge, wrote of Gibbon in 1790, “nor does his humanity ever slumber, unless when women are ravished, or the Christians persecuted.” Surely Gibbon does take more delight than necessary in seeing the Christians get theirs, and he ignores almost entirely any moral excellence the faith might possess—a matter quite apart from the question whether the Christian revelation might be true, which Gibbon was satisfied it was not. For the inhumanity of pagan Rome is patent, in his own telling, and the appeal of Christianity can be felt in perfectly warranted revulsion from imperial profligacy and glorious blood-letting. In *The City of God*, begun in 413, three years after the sack of Rome by Alaric and the Goths, Augustine of Hippo homes in on the viciousness of Roman virtue: “I should like first to inquire for a little what reason, what prudence, there is in wishing to glory in the greatness and extent of the empire, when you cannot point out the happiness of men who are always rolling, with dark fear and cruel lust, in warlike slaughters

and in blood, which, whether shed in civil or foreign war, is still human blood.” Gibbon of course is never so vehement, not to say violent, in his distaste for bloodshed, but one recalls his aversion for “the thirst of military glory” in the opening chapter of *Decline and Fall*. This disaffection with warlike manhood, of which there are other examples in his book, might indeed be considered the distillate of centuries of Christian sentiment. So while the greatness of Gibbon’s masterwork, and of his humanity, is secure beyond all doubt, Christianity too must have its say; and there is more to the triumph of religion and its civilizing mission than one will gather from Edward Gibbon’s brilliantly incendiary pages.

One feels obliged, before taking leave of Gibbon, to mention the scholarly monument that J.G.A. Pocock, professor emeritus of history at Johns Hopkins, had under construction since 1999 and that reached completion last year: *Barbarism and Religion*, in six volumes, from the Cambridge University Press. The monument stands, not so much in honor of Gibbon, as witness to Pocock’s unrelenting scholarly industry. It is not a work written to attract readers to Gibbon, who is and will remain among those great writers of history rarely read any more; Pocock writes for a highly select audience of Gibbon experts, who study Gibbon as a professional duty. The announced intention of his series is to establish “contexts in which [*The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*] may be studied.” Very little of Pocock’s work concerns itself directly with Gibbon’s masterpiece. Many hundreds of pages are devoted to Appian of Alexandria, Orosius, Otto of Freising, Flavio Biondo, Pedro Mexia, James Harrington, Anquetil-Duperron, Antoine-Yves Goguet, Thomas Carte, and numerous others, to establish the context for Gibbon studies without actually studying Gibbon’s relation to the context established. And Pocock ends his work having treated only the first three volumes of *Decline and Fall*; to study the remainder is such a complicated affair that it must fall outside the purview of his long and elaborate enterprise.

In his 1856 essay on Gibbon, Walter Bagehot tells of the reaction to *Decline and Fall* of Richard Brinsley Sheridan, the comic playwright and member of Parliament, who was heard to speak of his friend’s “luminous pages.” Sheridan was known to avoid all serious reading, and someone questioned him on this unexpected response. “I said,” he replied, “voluminous.”

Re Pocock: exactly.

*Algis Valiunas is a fellow at the Ethics and Public Policy Center and a contributing editor to The New Atlantis.*

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