

Present, Mother of History: The Religious Explanation for the Fall of Rome

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Abstract

The present paper follows in ancient and modern historiography the idea that the fall of Rome was due to religious reasons. It first briefly discusses the obsession ancient Romans had with the eventual fall of Rome. It then focuses on the late antique theory that the fall was due to the rise of Christianity and in particular to Christian fundamentalism as well as the response of Augustine in the city of God. Finally it traces the thinking of Edward Gibbon and Arnaldo Momigliano, two great historians who similarly thought the fall of Rome was due to the rise of Christianity. For each case the paper argues that these theories are transposition of present fears onto the past.

Keywords

Fall of Rome; Christian fundamentalism; Augustine; Gibbon; Momigliano.

Religious fundamentalism, along with war, meteorites, or pandemics, is one of the greatest fears of our modern, globalized world. When one sees the effects it has had on a country like Afghanistan, one instinctively considers it an enemy of his/her own society. The present paper will explore how, in the past, religious fundamentalism has been given as a reason for the fall of another (seen as) advanced civilization, the Roman Empire, and how those explanations were, just like our fears, born in their present and projected unto our past.

The fall of the Roman Empire is one of the obsessions of scholarly literature. Much more has been written on the subject than can be read in a lifetime and the subject continues to produce volumes and articles at an unabated rate. For instance, Alexander Demandt wrote a book called the *Fall of Rome* in which he discussed the history of the idea of the fall of Rome (Demandt, 1984). Demandt's complex book has not been translated into English except for an appendix in which he listed, in alphabetical order, reduced, to a single word, no fewer than 210 causes given in print for the decline of the Empire (published in English in Galinsky, 1992, pp. 53-73). Among them are the abolition of rights, absolutism, the agrarian question, anarchy, blood poisoning, bureaucracy, Byzantinism, complacency, irrationality, Jewish influence, lack of seriousness, hypothermia, either racial degeneration or racial degeneration, and so on. These reasons are not expressed in the primary literary sources. They stem from modern inquiries, rather than ancient ones. It seems safe to say that any topic that concerns us has been linked to the fall of the Roman Empire.

It is clear that the decline and fall of the Roman Empire matter to us. We connect the demise of Rome with the previous success of the Roman state. Unlike the Lydians or the Dacians, the Romans are an earlier version of modernity, of ourselves, a first

globalization. Therefore, the demise of Rome frightens us as a prefiguration of our own fall.

The Romans themselves were interested in the fall of Rome. The cult of the goddess of Rome, which had begun as a religious form of political loyalty among conquered nations, turned in the Imperial age into that of *Roma Aeterna*, a cult associated with the cult of the emperor. It was extremely popular. A 4th century CE collection of statues found in a villa in Corinth includes a Roma, proof that the goddess was still popular half a century after the emperors themselves had abandoned the cult (Stirling, 2008). Yet while in shrines and temples the Romans worshiped goddess Roma, personifying the eternal city destined to rule the world, in Roman writings they were particularly obsessed with the (future) demise of Rome. We can see this best in the works of two Roman historians, Polybius and Sallustius.

Polybius of Megalopolis was a Greek historian who fought against Rome in the 2nd century BCE. Being taken prisoner by Scipio Aemilianus he became a prisoner in a golden cage in Rome. He was very well treated as a protégé of Scipio Aemilianus and was encouraged to write a great opus, the *Histories* in 80 books. Polybius delineates himself from earlier historians, arguing that universal history cannot be written by peoples, one ethnic group after another (*para taktika*). Rather history should be written organically, around a central subject. In other words, Polybius did not propose to write the history of the Athenians, then of the Carthaginians, then of the Seleucids, and so on. Rather he argued that universal histories must be centered on the rise of Rome and each people dealt with when and to the extent to which they came in contact with Rome. Polybius's historiographical system has been extremely popular, especially in the 19th and 20th centuries. Just as popular was Polybius' cyclic view of history. Every historical state and form of government, Polybius thought, runs through a cycle. Monarchy turns into tyranny, democracy turns into ochlocracy (rule of the mob), and aristocracy into oligarchy. Therefore, every rise will be followed, eventually but inextricably, by a fall. Scipio Aemilianus, witnessing the fall of Carthage, wept holding Polybius's own hands, not for Carthage, but because Rome will eventually fall too:

"Scipio, when he looked upon the city as it was utterly perishing and in the last throes of its complete destruction, is said to have shed tears and wept openly for his enemies. After being wrapped in thought for long, and realizing that all cities, nations, and authorities must, like men, meet their doom; that this happened to Ilium, once a prosperous city, to the empires of Assyria, Media, and Persia, the greatest of their time, and to Macedonia itself, the brilliance of which was so recent, either deliberately or the verses escaping him, he said:

*A day will come when sacred Troy shall perish,
And Priam and his people shall be slain.*

*And when Polybius speaking with freedom to him, for he was his teacher, asked him what he meant by the words, they say that without any attempt at concealment he named his own country, for which he feared when he reflected on the fate of all things human. Polybius actually heard him and recalls it in his history." (Polybius, *Histories*, 1927 ed., pp. 402-409, 434-438)*

While in Rome, Polybius fell in love with the Roman state which offered, he argued, a political model unknown in his native Greece, the so-called mixed constitution. At the time of his writing, the Roman state did in fact appear as the very image of success. He died in 120 BCE, before the Roman civil wars would start to revert this image. The idea of Rome's decay was nevertheless already present in Roman society before any kind of signs of decay had appeared.

Writing right before the battle of Actium and the rule of Augustus, the historian Sallustius was the first that emphasized decay, or as he put it, corruption. Sallustius changed the normal way of presenting history, that is chronologically, starting either from a grand beginning (i.e. the foundation of the city) or from the end of a previous historian's work. He declares that he will record the history of Rome by bites, *carptim*. He started with the Catiline conspiracy (63 BCE), he then related the Jugurthine war (112 to 105 BCE) only to conclude with the aftermath of the dictatorship of Sulla (78 to 65 BCE). His theme was, therefore, not chronologic but monographic. His topic was the corruption of the elites of Rome, in particular of the Senate, and the effects this had on the Roman state. The fact that Sallustius was the only early Roman historian that focused on this topic was perhaps not because the topic was not interesting, but because of the particular time when he was writing. Had he written before the death of his protector Caesar, his subject would have probably been the glory of Caesarian Rome. Had he written one decade afterward, under Augustus, the possibilities of publishing on the theme of corruption would have been even smaller. Augustus was notorious for controlling historians, who, he thought, were politically sensible. He even called Titus Livius a 'Pompeian', that is that he had republican affinities (Tacitus, 3.14.). In the event, Titus Livius stopped his gigantic 142 books of Roman history right before the rule of Augustus.

Sallustius may have been the only one to write about corruption, but he was extremely popular. The magisterial edition of Maurenbrecher (Sallustius, *Historiae*, Maurenbrecher ed., 1891-93) counts over 500 citations of the author until the 5th century CE. This popularity is even more surprising given that everyone was well aware that Sallustius had not led the exemplary life his highly moralistic attitude would have required. Starting his political career in the entourage of Catiline, he shifted his allegiance to Caesar. He was more than once put under accusation for corruption, greed and faulty administration but was each time saved by Caesar. He ended his career extremely rich, suggesting that the accusations of corruption leveled against him were not unfounded. The popularity of his books was not due to his person but to his subject, the corruption of Rome.

The decline could be a long process in the minds of ancient and modern minds alike. Many still believe the Byzantine Empire (which, in fact, called itself the Roman Empire) was already decadent *ex ovo* and enjoyed a particularly long decline between Constantine the 1st's foundation of Constantinople in 330 CE and Constantine the 11th's death on the walls of Constantinople in 1453 CE. Yet in the 5th-century events precipitated the fall itself of Rome. These events started with the Gothic victory in the battle of Adrianople and culminated with the Gothic sack of Rome in 410.

It is true that there were Roman emperors after 410, based in Constantinople and Ravenna, and that the Roman state, even in the West, continued to exist. Yet these were minor facts compared with the fall of the city of Rome. For the Romans, the city of Rome had always remained the heart of the empire. The global community that was the Roman Empire was to them a city with a very large hinterland. When the Gauls or the Greeks were given Roman citizenship, they became citizens of the city of Rome. The loss of a province was therefore to the Romans important, but not an insurmountable problem. The fall of the capital was, however, the loss of the heart of the empire. When Augustine argued that the fall of the city of Rome did not matter he argued against the identity of being a citizen of the city of Rome. Augustine's thesis got help from an unexpected place, the emperor Constantine. When Constantine had moved the capital to Byzantium he made the new capital permanent. Constantinople was not just a temporary camp of the imperial court but was designed to copy Rome, to take over in administration, economic power, and even ideological weight. Augustine cleverly used this *translatio imperii* to argue that since earthly cities move around, they do not matter so much. The fall of the city of Rome to the Goths was to the ancients the Fall of Rome.

A select number of highly educated Romans argued that the fall of the city of Rome was due to the abandonment of pagan gods and in particular to the abandonment of public religious rituals and festivals, performed in the name of the community. The most famous episode in this category is the very siege of Rome by Alaric in 410.

During the siege by the Goths, the authorities of the city of Rome, although almost entirely Christian, the historian Zosimus tells us, called upon the old, pagan priests of the city, the augurs. These were asked to perform rites for the protection of the city. They refused, arguing that the rites would work only if they were performed on behalf of the entire city and not as a private initiative. The gods, it was argued, would only help if the entire community would worship them, and not a handful of citizens. The Christian authorities refused to perform public rites. Shortly afterward Rome fell to Alaric (Zosimus, 5.41.3):

"They (the auguri, n.a.) declared however that what they were able to do would be of no utility, unless the public and customary sacrifices were performed, and unless the Senate ascended to the capitol, performing there, and in the different markets of the city, all that was essential. But no person daring to join in the ancient religious ordinances, they dismissed the men who were come from Tuscany and applied themselves to the endeavoring to appease the barbarians in the best possible manner". (trans. by W. Green and T. Chaplin).

Zosimus was only one of many such Roman intellectuals that had remained pagans throughout the fourth and fifth centuries AD who all give the same reason for the fall of Rome: the abandonment of traditional (pagan) religion. Macrobius in his *Saturnalia* argued that the gods had left Rome because they were no longer worshiped (Macrobius, *Saturnalia*, 2.351). Olympiodorus observed that some city or another was saved from destruction because the citizens had taken care of their (pagan) statues by burying them (and therefore presumably kept them safe from Christians) (Olympiodorus, ed. Maisano 1979, fr. 34). Zosimus made an identical argument about

Athens, saved by a single citizen who cared for pagan gods, Nestorius (Zosimus, *New History* 4.18). In that episode, the Goths (the very same Goths who would conquer Rome) could not plunder Athens because the goddess Athena fought to defend the city, on the walls, in the shape of the statue she had on the Acropolis. The Goddess had been benevolent only because Nestorius kept the cult alive.

Zosimus, Olympiodorus, or Macrobius were all proudly pagan authors who saw their traditional religion as a fundamental part of their Roman identity. They were a minority by the end of the 4th century, but their explanation for the fall of Rome was extremely popular.

The argument of the Christian cause for the Fall of Rome was so widespread that it became the most important point of contention between pagans and Christians. Orosius refuted it in a full-length treatise, called *Against the pagans*. It also provided the fundamental thesis against which Augustine and his city of God were constructed. The main thesis of Augustine's City of God was that it did not matter that Rome fell. That's what empires do. What mattered was not the old Rome but another city, the city of God, the New Jerusalem. The main argument of the City of God was a counter-thesis against the thesis of decline through the abandonment of pagan religion.

Augustine argued that it does not matter that the city of Rome fell because this is what empires always do (echoing Polybius). What mattered was the new Rome, the city of God which was eternal. To build his argument Augustine quoted at length from Sallustius. The work of Sallustius allowed Augustine to answer a key question – when did decadence in the Roman state start? Fifty years before Alaric? One hundred? Sallustius witnesses decay six hundred years and hints that it decay, which in Christian terminology we should read as sin, starts from the very beginning of Roman History. Sallustius, therefore, serves well Augustine's greater thesis, that is that the Roman state, although a glorious construction, was destined to fail from the very beginning, just like any other state. This is what human states naturally do. In contrast to God's plan, the eternal plan for the city of God is eternal. In it, one can see the fulfillment of all history.

So according to Augustine, decay began long before Christianity had been adopted by Constantine. Yet the pagan thesis that the abandonment of traditional religion is the cause of decay was at first sight appealing when we consider the dates. After all, until the 390s when Theodosius forbade pagan cults the Empire was more or less intact. Then in quick succession, Barbarian states start being formed. Rome fell in 410; by the 420s it was clear that Britain, large parts of Gaul, Spain, and then Africa were lost. The pagan thesis was, fundamentally, that the Roman religion, left unchanged for one thousand years, had kept the city safe. In one sentence, the pagan thesis was: when traditional Roman religion was abandoned, the empire and the city fell.

Upon closer inspection, the arguments were, in fact very novel. They were based on an imaginary religious past, which was a projection of their own present. For example, Zosimus and Olympiodorus claimed that buried statues kept cities safe. Yet the idea that buried statues would be 'active amulets' was a novel one. In Roman religion burying statues meant killing them (Anghel, 2022). Buried statues had no power. The

idea that buried statues were active appeared only in a Christian world where people felt threatened by unfriendly demons or devils, who resided in pagan statues, even when these were hidden. In Constantinople in the 8th century, a guide of the city tells us, buried statues often caused accidents to passer-byes until the authorities unburied and destroyed them (Cameron & Herrin, 1984).

The idea that Rome would be made great again if ancient religion were restored is just as fake as Trump's 'Let's make America great again'. It was a worry of the present transposed upon the past. Why were writers such as Macrobius or Zosimus worried about Christianity? The key issue was Christianity intolerance. Christian clergy pushed rigorously for interdiction of all other religious cults. Confiscations of sacred property were also habitual. Not only pagans were concerned but also Christian branches that lost confrontations with the *catholic one*, such as Arians or Valentinians. Yet the thesis of Macrobius, Olympiodorus, and Zosimus although clearly popular lost the war of historians to Christian optimism.

The last pagans of Rome disappeared, but their ideas did not. In the second half of the 18th century, Edward Gibbon published the first installment of his *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (Gibbon, 1776). Today, more than two centuries afterward the book is still a best seller. The main thesis of Gibbon's work is that the Roman Empire declined because of the introduction of Christianity. Gibbon's argument was centered on intolerance and religious hatred. Yet Gibbon's view of Rome was influenced by the Reform and the religious wars that followed, by an England torn apart by the conflict between Catholics and protestants, between liberals and puritans. To Gibbon, the Decline of the Roman Empire was a mirror of his world. Gibbon was projecting the fears of his contemporaries on the Roman world. His book is a cry to make Europe great again by renouncing intolerance and religious conservatism. The French revolution and subsequent decline of the influence of the church only served to immortalize Gibbon's work (for a more in-depth look at the impact of Gibbon see Watts, 2021).

One of the greatest historians of the 20th century, Arnaldo Momigliano, wrote an appraisal of Gibbon's work. He thought Gibbon's thesis was still valid: Christianity led to the fall of the Roman Empire. Yet Momigliano was not concerned with intolerance but with the community (Momigliano, 1970, pp. 19-21). For him, Christianity destroyed the cohesion of Roman society. Leading Romans no longer cared about the state but the church. For Momigliano one of the main differences between pagans on one side and Christians or Jews on the other was the amount of effort it took to fulfill the needs of religion. He was trained as a child to read 'the Bible in Hebrew, Livy in Latin and Herodotus in Greek' and he understood that it took enormous efforts to understand Christian and Mosaic religions if only that it took huge amounts of time to read the necessary religious texts. On the contrary, pagans did not need to read anything on religion and could focus on civic writings: theater, philosophy, or history. Momigliano observes that in paganism there is almost no text that was trying to formulate religious beliefs. Questions of religious belief or dogma overall did not exist outside of Jewish and Christian circles (if we exclude the specifically anti-Christian Julian the Apostate) (Momigliano, 1989, pp. 181-199). Nor were pagans concerned about the religiosity of fellow pagans. For example, even though we know from his own

writings that P. Aelius Aristides, a 2nd century CE rhetor, was a religious freak. Seriously sick he spent the last decades of his life in the sanctuary of Asclepius at Pergamon. There he was constantly either undergoing treatment or worshipping the god (which for the ancients were one and the same thing). He fasted, undertook unusual diets, bloodletting, enemas, vomiting, and either refrained from bathing or bathed in frigid rivers (P. Aelius Aristides, Behr ed., 1986, vol. 1, pp. 1-2). Clearly for P. Aelius Aristides religion was the central issue of his life. Yet nobody mentions religion when talking about P. Aelius Aristides (See for example his life in Diogenes Laertius's *Lives of Philosophers*, 581). It was the spread of Jewish and later Christian preoccupations with religious beliefs that changed this situation. This new importance of religious thought led to an abandonment of the Greek and Roman civic thought. Christianity was, for Momigliano, a substitute to healthy, active civic implication and was the reason for the fall of the Roman Empire.

Just like Gibbon, Momigliano's thinking was very much influenced by his own society. He was a profound yet non-practicing Jew. His religious identity had followed him his entire life. He developed a healthy skepticism of religious fundamentalism. His preoccupation with ancient Christian religious fervor was a mirror of his preoccupation with modern Jewish fervor.

More recently, in the wake of September 11 and of the subsequent wars in the Middle East, the number of books giving as cause for the fall of Rome religious (that is Christian) intolerance have also risen. We feel under siege not only by Islamic but also by homegrown religious fundamentalism, which fuels a lack of trust in science and medicine. Books such as Catherine Nixey's recent *the Darkening Age* have again argued that Christian intolerance and the destruction of paganism led to the fall of the Roman world (Nixey, 2017). Nixey's worries do not stem from ancient sources, but contemporary lenses. She has a strong disgust of religious fundamentalism, of statue destruction in Afghanistan, of religious martyrdom in the name of intolerance.

The religious explanation for the fall of Rome has been, throughout history a project of the present on the past. As Benedetto Croce used to say, history is always contemporary. To paraphrase Cervantes' famous 'history, mother of truth', our interpretations of history are always interpretations of the present. The present is the mother of history.

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