

**‘WHO CAN REFUTE A SNEER?’  
PALEY ON GIBBON**

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**Summary**

*‘Who can refute a sneer?’ is a famous quotation from William Paley. It was his reaction to Edward Gibbon’s massive The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire with its oblique, ironically delivered critique of Christianity. This article places the quotation in its context in Paley’s works and seeks to show how he addressed the sneer in his A View of the Evidences of Christianity in more than one place. In particular, Paley’s argument for the candour of the New Testament writers as evidence of their integrity (contra Gibbon) is examined and likewise his argument against the view that the rise of Islam is more impressive in some ways than that of Christianity (contra Gibbon). Paley’s response to David Hume’s writings has received some scholarly attention, but his response to Gibbon has been hardly explored. This article seeks to fill that lacuna.*

**I. Introduction**

Against the backdrop of the deistic controversies Bishop Joseph Butler (1692-1752) wrote in 1736 in the Advertisement to his famous *The Analogy of Religion*:

It is come, I know not how, to be taken for granted, by many persons that Christianity is not so much as a subject of inquiry; but that it is, now at length, discovered to be fictitious. And accordingly they treat it, as if in the present age, this were an agreed point among all people of discernment; and nothing remained, but to set it up as a principal subject of mirth and ridicule, as it were by way of reprisals, for it having so long

interrupted the pleasures of the world.<sup>1</sup>

Almost fifty years later, William Paley (1743-1805) could similarly lament:

For these topics [points against the truth of Christianity] being brought together, and set off with some aggravation of circumstances, and with a vivacity of style and description familiar enough to the writings and conversation of free-thinkers, insensibly lead the imagination into a habit of classing Christianity with the delusions that have taken possession, by turns, of the public belief; and of regarding it, as what the scoffers of our faith represent it to be, *the superstition of the day*.<sup>2</sup> (Original emphasis.)

Although both Butler and Paley were alarmed by the ridicule with which some greeted Christianity's claims, the questions asked of Christianity in Paley's day had become even more daring and pointed than in Butler's own.

Butler's great adversaries were deists like Tindal (1655-1733) and Toland (1670-1722) who claimed that Christianity as a religion was rendered otiose by natural religion. All three shared common ground in that both orthodoxy and deism affirmed the existence of God, design in the universe and the importance of morality. The orthodox presentation of the faith (as in Butler) was, however, two-tiered: a tier of natural religion supporting a tier of revealed religion; whereas the deistic presentation settled for the first tier only.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>W.E. Gladstone, *Butler's Works* (Oxford, 1896) Vol. I, 1-2. Butler especially had in mind to counter Matthew Tindal's *Christianity as Old as the Creation; Or, the Gospel, a Republication of the Religion of Nature*, which had been published in 1730. See E.C. Mossner's introduction to Joseph Butler's, *The Analogy Of Religion* (New York: Scribner's, 1961) ix.

<sup>2</sup>R. Lynam (ed.), *The Works Of William Paley, D.D.* (London, 1825) Vol. I, 295. This unlikely place—a discussion of Reverencing the Diety—contains the best summary of Paley's own perception of the challenge facing the Christian apologist from infidelity and free-thinking in the second half of the eighteenth century. On the eclipse of deism on the English scene see Peter Gay, *Deism* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1968) 140-42.

<sup>3</sup>For the deistic challenge and the response of Butler to it, see H.D. McDonald, *Ideas of Revelation: 1700-1860* (London: Macmillan, 1959), especially chs. 3 and 5; Leslie Stephen, *English Thought In The Eighteenth Century* (London: Longmans, 1902) Vol. I, chapters II-V, and V.F. Storr, *The Development of English Theology in the Nineteenth Century 1800-1860* (London: Longmans, 1913) especially chapter III, 'The Legacy of the Eighteenth Century'. And on

Paley's great adversaries on the English scene were no longer Deists like Toland and Tindal (who were so effectively countered by Butler's *Analogy*), but a scepticism far more radical and searching. Here the names to conjure with were those of Hume (1711-1776) and Gibbon (1737-1794), whose writings (especially, of course, Hume's) made religion itself suspect, whether natural or revealed. Scholars have documented Paley's response to Hume's criticisms of Christianity—albeit in a somewhat patchy way—but they have generally neglected his response to Gibbon.<sup>4</sup>

## II. The Challenge from Gibbon

Edward Gibbon has been justly described as 'the greatest historian of the Enlightenment and shares with Macaulay and G.M. Trevelyan the

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varieties of deism see J. O'Higgins, 'Hume And The Deists: A Contrast In Religious Approaches', *JTS* 38 n.s. (1971) 479-80.

<sup>4</sup>Paley's response to Hume has not always been noted in scholarship. The most blatant example is N. Ferre in his introduction to a selection from Paley's *Natural Theology*, *Natural Theology—Selections* (New York: Scribner's, 1965) 1, where he writes: 'Amazing as it may appear, our author does not even refer to Hume by name.' Also see Leslie Stephen, *English Thought*, Vol. I, 409, where Stephen opines that Paley does not even allude to the metaphysical challenge posed by Hume to religionists. For a third example see B. Reardon, *From Coleridge to Gore* (London: Longman, 1971) 4, '...and Hume's writings, as far as the archdeacon [Paley] is concerned, might never have seen the light of day.'

However *contra* the above see the relevant references to Hume by Paley found in R. Lynam, *Works*, Volume I, 10 (morality); Vol. III, 1-8 (miracles) and Vol. IV, 336 (natural theology). Also see P. Addinall, 'Hume's Challenge and Paley's Response', *Expository Times* 97.8 (May 1986) 232-34. Also see M. L. Clarke, *Paley Evidences For The Man* (London: SPCK, 1974) 60, 91-92, 101-102, 134 on Hume, and D.L. LeMahieu who has a fine chapter on Hume and Paley in *The Mind of William Paley* (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1976) ch. 2. But with regard to Gibbon, Clarke has virtually no reference to Paley and Gibbon, and LeMahieu is little better as we shall see.

claim to be Britain's greatest historian also.'<sup>5</sup> Any challenge from Gibbon to the Christian faith would, therefore, be no light thing. His challenge to the Christian apologist, however, was obliquely delivered. His massive *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1766-1788) contained no direct criticism of either revelation or the New Testament. However, by implication criticism was there and the tone of the work, taken as a whole, was condescending.<sup>6</sup> According to J.M. Robertson:

Everybody saw what Gibbon was driving at; and in a society largely permeated by deism he had the smilers, if not the laughers on his side. That was, in fact, what chiefly exasperated the clerical defence. Who, as the worried Paley asked, can refute a sneer?<sup>7</sup>

Gibbon sought to understand the role of the rising Christian movement in the decline of the Roman empire in terms of secondary causes only: '...to ask, not indeed what were the first, but what were the secondary causes of the rapid growth of the Christian Church?'<sup>8</sup> His historical explanation, therefore, was naturalistic rather than providential in character ('a candid and rational inquiry').<sup>9</sup> As he expressed it:

The theologian may indulge the pleasing task of describing Religion as she descended from Heaven, arrayed in her native

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<sup>5</sup>So states W.H.C. Frend in his, 'Edward Gibbon (1737-1794) and Early Christianity', *JEH* 45 (1994) 662.

<sup>6</sup>See the useful discussion of Gibbon's oblique attack on traditional Christianity in W.L. Craig, *The Historical Argument for the Resurrection of Jesus During the Deist Controversy* (Lewiston/Queenston: Mellen, 1985) 261-66.

<sup>7</sup>'Who can refute a sneer?' is the only quotation from Paley to be found in the *Oxford Dictionary of Quotations* (Oxford: OUP, 1990<sup>3</sup>) 368, whilst Gibbon rates twenty-four quotations, *ibid.*, 224. The quotation from Robertson is found in his introduction to *Gibbon On Christianity* (London: Watt & Co., 1930) xxi. Robertson gives no source for the Paley quotation. For a fine discussion of Gibbon's use of humour to get the smilers on his side see J. Clive, 'Gibbon's Humor', *Daedalus* cv (1976) esp. 33-34.

<sup>8</sup>D.A. Saunders (ed.), *Edward Gibbon, The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985) 261.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, 260.

purity. A more melancholy duty is imposed on the historian. He must discover the inevitable mixture of error and corruption which she contracted in a long residence on earth, among a weak and degenerate race of beings.<sup>10</sup>

In arguing in this way, Gibbon's own position was very similar to that of David Hume in the latter's *The Natural History of Religion* which was one of his *Four Dissertations*, published in 1757. Hume's naturalistic approach to religion in general (whether polytheistic or monotheistic), Gibbon adopted similarly towards Christianity (and Islam) in particular.<sup>11</sup>

The implication that might be drawn from Gibbon's history—especially the now celebrated, but then notorious, fifteenth and sixteenth chapters of the first volume—was that the naturalistic explanation of early church miracles and success could be taken back even into the New Testament period itself.<sup>12</sup> Gibbon's savage use of irony is particularly apparent in this passage on the miraculous in the apostolic period:

But how shall we excuse the supine inattention of the Pagan and philosophic world, to the evidences which were presented by the hand of Omnipotence not to their reason but to their senses? During the age of Christ, of his apostles, and of their first disciples, the doctrine which they preached was confirmed by innumerable prodigies. The lame walked, the blind saw, the sick were healed, the dead were raised, daemons were expelled, and the laws of Nature were frequently suspended for the benefit of the church. But the sages of Greece and Rome turned aside from

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<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, 261.

<sup>11</sup>On Hume see D.L. LeMahieu's *Paley*, 45-46 and 112-13.

<sup>12</sup>Gibbon's work attracted over a half a dozen written replies from Oxford beginning with James Chelsum in 1776 and climaxing with Whitaker in 1791. Likewise the Cambridge fraternity responded critically to Gibbon's masterpiece beginning with Richard Watson in 1776 through to Bishop Hurd in 1781. For an account of the controversy, including the Oxford and Cambridge replies as well as others see S.T. McCloy, *Gibbon's Antagonism To Christianity And The Discussions That It Provoked* (Chapel Hill: University of N. Carolina Press, 1933) especially chs. II and III. Gibbon himself was shocked at the reception of chapters 15 and 16 of the second octavo volume, so much so that in retrospect he might have softened them if he had known: see W.H.C. Frend, 'Edward Gibbon', *JEH* 45, 670-71.

the awful spectacle and, pursuing the ordinary occupations of life and study, appeared unconscious of any alterations in the moral and physical government of the world.<sup>13</sup>

A particular case in point for Gibbon was the alleged ‘praeternatural darkness of three hours’ that surrounded the death of Jesus. He writes: ‘Even this miraculous event, which ought to have excited the wonder, the curiosity, and the devotion of mankind, passed without notice in an age of science and history.’ He refers to Seneca and the elder Pliny as cases in point since the alleged phenomenon supposedly took place in their lifetimes. He writes of them: ‘But the one and the other have omitted to mention the greatest phenomenon to which mortal eye has been witness since the creation of the globe.’<sup>14</sup> Indeed, who can refute a sneer?

Gibbon’s naturalistic explanation for the rise of Christianity had five strands. First, Gibbon drew attention to the inflexible and intolerant zeal of the Christians. Second, he accented the importance of the doctrine of the future life in early Christianity. Third, he pointed to the Christian appeal to alleged miraculous powers. Fourth, he spoke of the appeal of the purity and austerity of Christian morals. Lastly, he cited the disciplined unity of the movement in an age of both uncertainty and human credulity, which gave the new religion its impetus.<sup>15</sup>

As the Christian movement progressed to its triumph—according to Gibbon—more and more its progress became a story of the uniting of the wisdom of the serpent with the innocence of the dove. In the case of the ecclesiastical governors of the church, however, Gibbon believed the more the wisdom of the serpent was refined, the more corrupt became the doves.<sup>16</sup> So a priesthood and priestcraft emerged zealous and active in pursuit of power and entangled in its love.<sup>17</sup> Men who would ‘fight’ over the difference in

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<sup>13</sup>*Decline*, 323. For Gibbon’s deliberate use of irony, which he learnt from reading Pascal, see J. Pelikan, *The Excellent Empire: The Fall of Rome And The Triumph Of The Church* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987) 37-38.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, for the quotations in this paragraph.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, 261-62, 273, 283.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, 292.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, 300.

‘a diphthong’ was how Gibbon summed up the semi-Arian debates with the Catholics of the fourth century.<sup>18</sup>

For Gibbon the decline and fall of the Roman Empire was, at the very same time, ‘the triumph of barbarism and religion’.<sup>19</sup> Religion, of course, meant the Christian religion. And as Leslie Stephen rightly comments:

And yet it is true, not merely that Gibbon struck a heavy blow at Christianity, but that he struck by far the heaviest blow which it had yet received from any single hand. What he did was to bring the genuine spirit of historical enquiry for the first time face to face with the facts.<sup>20</sup>

Under Gibbon’s scrutiny the supposed triumph of the Christian religion appeared to have been a rather unimpressive and all too human affair.

Moreover, Gibbon contended that the rise of Islam and the credentials of its Holy Book, the *Qur’an*, were, in some ways, more impressive than those of Christianity. Indeed, in his account of the Roman Empire’s demise he also was confident enough to assert that:

The metaphysical questions on the attributes of God and the liberty of man have been agitated in the schools of the Mohammedan as well as in those of the Christians, but among the former they have never engaged the passions of the people or disturbed the tranquillity of the state.<sup>21</sup>

Gibbon further argued that, although Mohammed was unable to provide his followers with an apposite moral and political system, he did inspire ‘among the faithful a spirit of charity and friendship’, did encourage social virtues, did check revenge and the oppression of widows and orphans.<sup>22</sup> The positive social consequences, then, of

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<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*, 397.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*, x. See F. Furet, ‘Civilization and Barbarism’ in *Daedalus* cv (1976) esp. 215-16 for a discussion of Gibbon’s distinction between barbarism and religion.

<sup>20</sup>Stephen, *English Thought*, Vol. I, 449-50.

<sup>21</sup>*Decline*, 660.

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*, 661.

Islam were far more impressive by implication than those of Christianity. As Bernard Lewis sagely notes, one way Gibbon engages in anti-Christian polemic is ‘by praising Islam as an oblique criticism of Christian usage, belief, and practice’.<sup>23</sup>

Paley was well aware of the challenge posed by Gibbon and in both his *The Principles of Moral and Political Philosophy* and *A View of the Evidences of Christianity*, Paley tackles Gibbon’s treatment of the nature, progress and effects of Christianity.<sup>24</sup> Though Gibbon is only mentioned by name sparingly in the main text of Paley’s *A View of the Evidences of Christianity*, the tenor of Paley’s argument and the footnotes referring to Gibbon, bring the argument of Gibbon’s *Decline and Fall* to mind in a number of places.

With regard to the famous quotation concerning the ‘sneer’, Paley writes in his discussion of ‘Of Reverencing the Deity’ in his *The Principles of Moral and Political Philosophy*:

An eloquent historian, beside his more direct, and therefore fairer, attacks upon the credibility of Evangelic story, has contrived to weave into his narration one continued sneer upon the cause of Christianity, and upon the writings and characters of its ancient patrons. The knowledge which this author possesses of the frame and conduct of the human mind, must have led him to observe, that such attacks do their execution without inquiry. Who can refute a *sneer*? Who can compute the number, much less, one by one, scrutinize the justice, of those disparaging insinuations which crowd the pages of this elaborate history? What reader suspends his curiosity, or calls off his attention, from the principal narrative, to examine references, to search into the foundations, or to weigh the reason, and force, of every transient sarcasm, and sly allusion, by which the Christian testimony is depreciated and traduced; and

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<sup>23</sup>B. Lewis, ‘Gibbon on Muhammed’ in *Daedalus* cv (1976) 98.

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*, Vol. II, 308-313 and Vol. I, 406-414.

by which, nevertheless, he may find his persuasion afterward unsettled and perplexed?<sup>25</sup> (Original emphasis.)

Although Paley does not refer to Gibbon by name, we learn from his son, Edmund's memoirs of his father, that Paley senior had used that very question, 'Who can refute a sneer?' when asked of his opinion of Gibbon's *magnum opus*.<sup>26</sup> Clearly, then, the 'eloquent historian' whom Paley had in view was Gibbon. How did Paley respond to Gibbon's formidable challenges?

### III. Paley's Response To Gibbon

Paley's response to Gibbon is twofold. First, in his *A View of the Evidences of Christianity* he explicitly responds to Gibbon by name. The particular Gibbon argument he has on view maintains that the genuineness of the *Qur'an* is seen in 'the confessions which it contains to the apparent disadvantage of Mahometan cause.'<sup>27</sup> Put another way, the *Qur'an* presents the Muslim cause with considerable candour. Paley argues that the same line of argument 'vindicates the genuineness of our Gospels.'<sup>28</sup> He then offers a parade of New Testament passages, which starts with John the Baptist expressing a doubts about Jesus' messianic status (Mt. 11:2 and Lk. 7:18). He concludes the list with the non-triumphalistic story of Paul's reception upon arriving in Rome, as set out in Acts 28, where we read that some of the Jews believed Paul's message, but other Jews did not.<sup>29</sup> Paley's point is that if candour indicates genuineness then the story in the Gospels and the history in Acts are both credible.

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<sup>25</sup>Lynam (ed.), *Works*, Vol. I, 296. Pelikan (*The Excellent Empire*, 37) refers to 'literally hundreds of examples' where by the deployment of ambiguity, irony and inference Gibbon applies his critical method to the New Testament itself.

<sup>26</sup>See the discussion in LeMahieu, *Paley*, 113.

<sup>27</sup>*The Miscellaneous Works Of William Paley, D.D.* (London: 1821) Vol. I, 275-76.

<sup>28</sup>*Ibid.*, 276. Gibbon's argument is found in Vol. IX, ch. 50, n. 96 of his *magnum opus*.

<sup>29</sup>*Ibid.*, 276-78.

Second, Paley responds to Gibbon's implied criticism of Christianity by providing his own analysis of the rise of Christianity, but he does so without any explicit reference to Gibbon by name.<sup>30</sup> Starting with the death of Jesus itself and rapidly surveying the rise of Christianity to the conversion of Constantine, Paley concludes that the success of the Christian movement is 'without a parallel'.<sup>31</sup> By way of contrast recent Christian missions had experienced singular difficulties in penetrating pagan cultures.<sup>32</sup> The experience of the East India missions amongst the Hindus and the Dutch amongst the Greenlanders provided two cases in point. Paley accounts for the success of early Christianity from New Testament times to Constantine and the lack of success in more recent times with the suggestion that the earliest Christian 'possessed means of conviction which we have not, that they had proofs to appeal to which we want.'<sup>33</sup> He clearly means miracles.

There was, however, one possible parallel as far as the successful rise of another religion was concerned. Islam, too, had conquered a world in its own way.<sup>34</sup> But Paley insists that the success of Islam was different to that of early Christianity. For example, Mohammed made no appeal to miracles to support his claims. But, more significantly, the Prophet conquered by the sword; whereas the Christ succeeded through non-violent means. Paley writes:

For what are we comparing? A Galilean peasant accompanied by a few fishermen, with a conqueror at the head of his army. We compare Jesus, without force, without power, without support, without one external circumstance of attraction or influence,

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<sup>30</sup>J. Paxton, *Works*, Vol. I, Pt. 2, ch. 9.

<sup>31</sup>*Ibid.*, Section 1, 'Of the Propagation of Christianity', 317-37.

<sup>32</sup>*Ibid.*, Section 2, 'Reflections upon the preceding Account', 334-37.

<sup>33</sup>*Ibid.*, 334.

<sup>34</sup>*Ibid.*, Section 3, 'Of the Religion of Mahomet'. Paley's knowledge of Islam and of its rise was based on his reading of Sale's *Koran* (an English translation). There are some twenty references to it in his footnotes. It is in regard to the secondary literature on Islam that his debt to Gibbon becomes plain with seven footnotes to Gibbon's *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. Gibbon too had worked with translations of the *Qur'an* in various languages. The English translation he used was also Sale's. See the discussion in Lewis, 'Gibbon on Mohammed', 91.

prevailing against the prejudices, the learning, the hierarchy, of his country; against the ancient religious opinions, the pompous religious rites, the philosophy, the wisdom, the authority, of the Roman empire, in the most polished and enlightened period of its existence; with Mahomet making his way amongst Arabs; collecting followers in the midst of conquests and triumphs, in the darkest ages and countries of the world, and when success in arms not only operated by that command of men's wills and persons which attends prosperous undertakings, but was considered as a sure testimony of divine approbation.<sup>35</sup>

Paley concludes his comparison with the claim that Christianity's success is therefore unique—'A Jewish peasant overthrew the religion of the world.'<sup>36</sup>

Another of Gibbon's implied criticisms of early Christianity had to do with the way it disturbed the tranquillity of the state in his view.<sup>37</sup> Indeed, the decline and fall of the Empire was the obverse side of the triumph of barbarism and religion. Tolerant paganism gave way to persecuting Christianity is the thrust of his narrative. In other words, the real effects of Christianity were not beneficial, but deleterious. Early Christianity and high culture were at odds with one another.

Again, Paley seeks to counter this line of argument in his *A View of the Evidences of Christianity*. In his chapter on 'The Supposed Effects of Christianity', Paley argues that critics of these effects make two mistakes. First, they look for the effects of Christianity in the wrong place: namely in the public world of princes rather than in the private world of domestic life. The real effects of Christianity are to be seen in the latter, rather than the former. Second, the critics charge

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<sup>35</sup>Lynam (ed.), *Works*, Vol, III, 344-45.

<sup>36</sup>*Ibid.*, 345. Paley was on safe ground in comparing Mohammed to Christ. But if the comparison were between Islam and Christianity post-Constantine, the subsequent history of both religions shows that some members of them have used force on occasions to spread their respective faiths. For Christianity see D. Brown, *Choices: Ethics and The Christian* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983) 133-59; for Islam see N. Smart, *The Religious Experience of Mankind* (New York: Scribner's) 474-542.

<sup>37</sup>See fn. 21 above.

the Christian religion with effects for which it is not responsible.<sup>38</sup> For example, argues Paley, nine-tenths of intolerant and persecuting laws to be found in different countries' attempts to establish Christianity are more about power than religion in their motivation.<sup>39</sup> And as for 'the applauded intercommunity of the Pagan theology', Paley questions whether it preserved the peace of the Roman world, by preventing oppressions, proscriptions or massacres. Although Gibbon is not mentioned by name in the chapter, it is his line of argument that is clearly Paley's target.<sup>40</sup>

Mention should be made at this stage of Paley's *Horae Paulinae* (1790). Paley refers to it in the argument of *A View of the Evidences of Christianity*. In its brief chapter on 'Undesigned Coincidences', Paley's aim is to show, that the existence of such coincidences between Paul's history as related in the Acts of the Apostles and his own letters, rules out fiction or fraud as plausible explanations of the phenomenon. He writes: 'This argument appeared to my mind of so much value... that I have pursued it through St. Paul's thirteen epistles, in a work published by me four years ago, under the title of *Horae Paulinae*.'<sup>41</sup>

He goes on to explain how he attempted to abridge the work for the chapter but with great difficulty. So much so he refers the reader to the *Horae Paulinae* itself, rather than to attempt any abridgement. Clearly, for Paley the argument of the *Horae Paulinae* integrates with the argument of *A View of the Evidences of Christianity* and the two should be read together.

The *Horae Paulinae* contains Paley's chief conclusions concerning the authenticity of the Acts narrative as it pertains to Paul, the Pauline letters and the character of Paul himself. The Paul who emerges from the study is a man of 'liberal attainments' and 'sound judgement', who suffered for his faith and who did not come—contrary to 'the representations of infidelity' (presumably, Gibbon)—

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<sup>38</sup>J. Paxton, *Works*, Vol. I, Pt. 3, ch. 7, especially 406.

<sup>39</sup>*Ibid.*, 411.

<sup>40</sup>Gibbon may also be one of Paley's targets in his discussion of the rejection of Christianity and its miracles found in Pt. 3, ch. 6. Compare *ibid.*, 372-73, dealing with Jewish rejection, and 378-88, dealing with Gentile rejection, with Gibbon's *Decline*, ch. 15, *passim*, especially where Paley deals with the silence of 'men of rank and learning' concerning Christianity.

<sup>41</sup>*Ibid.*, 310.

from ‘the barbarous, the mean or the ignorant set of men.’<sup>42</sup> Paul did not live and suffer like a man whose message was false.

For Paley, then, Revealed Religion is supported by the miracle stories of the New Testament. These stories are believable, chiefly because those who told them were prepared to suffer, even die, for their testimonies. The stories they tell are to be found in authentic histories and letters as the *Horae Paulinae* shows in the case of St. Paul. Other lines of evidence support the Christian claim as well: prophecy and its fulfilment is just one example. And popular objections to the Christian story can be rebutted. The infidelity of a critic like Gibbon can be answered. It is rational to be a believer.

#### IV. Conclusion

The genius of the Christian religion, according to Paley, lay in its founder. And its founder, Jesus Christ, displayed in history the proper credentials of a divine agent. Miracles attested to his authority and provided proofs of the truthfulness of his message. Those who reported these divine doings are to be trusted because they were prepared to suffer for their testimony as can be seen supremely in the careers of the apostles. The Apostle Paul’s labours and sufferings, for example, cannot be accounted for more plausibly on any other theory than that of the truth of the Scripture history (the argument of the *Horae Paulinae*). A naturalistic account of the rise of Christianity simply won’t do (*pace* Gibbon). Christ’s revelation and the success of

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<sup>42</sup>*Ibid.*, Vol. III, 242-53 for the substance of this paragraph. The *Horae Paulinae* inspired a number of subsequent scholars. For example, T.R. Birk’s own *Horae Apostolicae* which he added to a reissue of Paley’s *Horae Paulinae* in 1849. See *Horae Paulinae* and *Horae Apostolicae* (London, 1849) especially V-VI. Another example is J.J. Blunt’s *Undesigned Coincidences in the Old and New Testaments* (London, 1856) who describes his work as ‘an extension of that of the *Horae Paulinae*, IV’. Blunt has an appendix that extends the argument to the Gospels, Acts and Josephus. Interestingly, the *Horae Paulinae* was translated into German by Henke at Helmstadt in 1797 and into French by Levade at Nimes in 1809, and then republished in Paris in 1821. See J.S. Howson’s preface to a new edition of Paley’s *Horae Paulinae* (London, 1903) xiii, nn. 4 and 5.

the movement to which it gave birth stand without parallel in the history of the world. The rise of Islam does not compare (*pace* Gibbon). Moreover, the candour with which the *Qur'an* speaks about Islam is more than matched by the candour of the New Testament writers (*pace* Gibbon).

Paley's own understanding of Islam bears the limitations of his eighteenth century context. (He, of course, could know nothing of the use of the phenomenological method to understand another religion.) Even so, Paley's approach to Islam is worth noting. He read the *Qur'an* for himself and used the English translation that Gibbon himself had used. Put another way, he did not rely merely on secondary literature. Moreover, he realised that the question of the alleged genuineness of the *Qur'an* in contradistinction to the New Testament had to be addressed, which he endeavoured to do. Still further, he also realised that the most crucial issue, from the religionist's point of view, had to do with the comparative worth of the credentials of Jesus and Mohammed as putative agents of the divine purpose. This issue he addressed too according to his lights. Both Paley's willingness to read the *Qur'an* for himself, rather than rely on hearsay, and his analysis of the issues and questions that Islam raises for the Christian religion, remain instructive in the increasingly crowded religious marketplace of modern Western societies.

Lastly, the proposition that Paley's apologetic writings cannot be properly understood without understanding the challenge posed by Hume is not contested. But the further proposition, that Paley's apologetic writings in defence of revealed religion in particular also needs to be understood with reference to the work of Gibbon the 'eloquent historian', has not had the scholarly recognition that it deserves. Perhaps in between the publication of his *The Principles of Moral and Political Philosophy* (1785) and the publication of his *A View of the Evidences of Christianity* (1794), Paley had come to believe, that a sneer could be refuted after all.