

HISTORY UNBOWDLERIZED

by Edward Jayne

The priggish nineteenth century educator, Thomas Bowdler, published Shakespeare's plays expurgated of all vulgarisms he felt were inappropriate for young readers. As far as Bowdler was concerned, Shakespeare resorted to excessive measures to appease the bawdy taste of Elizabethan groundlings, so his obscenity could be weeded from his plays as being incidental to their timeless literary genius appropriate for youthful readers. Others have argued, however, that these portions of Shakespeare's plays are often crucial to their interpretation, as for example in Hamlet, in which much of the scatology helps to clarify its more basic nihilistic vision of human experience.¹ The controversy has persisted ever since, and in fact Shakespeare continues to be taught at the high school level in appropriately shortened editions. In any case, Bowdler's name stuck, and later editors who have performed similar acts of censorship have been said to bowdlerize the texts they have altered.

I want to suggest here that historians sympathetic with Christianity may be said to bowdlerize history whenever they delete, ignore, or willfully misinterpret anything either an embarrassment to Christianity or suggestive of secular alternatives. Of course this particular version of bowdlerism serves belief itself rather than moral scruples linked with belief, but the same process happens: the suppression of unacceptable ideas to protect the sensibilities of supposedly upright readers. In the fourth century, Eusebius first declared this obligation as a theologian, avowing that in his treatment of Christian history he would omit whatever might discredit the Church, and on the other hand would magnify whatever might add to her glory. At least he admitted this effort. This, in fact, has occurred rather too frequently in published histories ever since. One might describe it as the historian's primary occupational hazard, as much as anything because it draws conservative minds with a good memory to its service in preference to other and more lucrative occupations. For the great majority of orthodox historians do tend to be overly generous to Christianity, and to this extent they fall short of adequately explaining western civilization, especially since it entails as much as anything a two-thousand year struggle to achieve secularization in the teeth of Christianity.

Moreover, by assuming that Christianity serves a final truth more basic than history--no less valid today than when Christ lived--orthodox historians in effect deny history. Christian eschatology colors every event, every period of history as if it confirms a time-honored judgment of human behavior relevant to its appropriate Christian rewards.. Good guys (Christians, of course) tend to do good things, bad guys (enemies of Christianity) bad things, and the sacred mission of Christian historians--and it becomes exactly that, both "sacred" and a "mission"--is to tell this particular story without letting the reader be distracted by conflicting evidence.

This kind of bowdlerism is evident whenever histories of the Dark and Middle Ages effortlessly advance from Gregory the Great and Nicholas I to Hildebrand and Urban II without in any way suggesting a two-hundred year interlude of extravagant violence and debauchery by a rapid succession of intervening Popes that fully matches the transgressions of Nero and Caligula

recounted by Suetonius. Bowdlerism is also evident whenever stories of the Crusades laud their dubious idealism without mentioning the Jewish pogroms along the Rhine or the massacre of Jerusalem that culminated the First Crusade, so terrible that crusaders boasted of literally wading through the blood of the city's inhabitants. Again, bowdlerism takes place in histories that ignore or dismiss with a few empty sentences events of such crucial importance as Theodosius's destruction of the Alexandrian library as well as the Serapeum in his successful effort to extirpate pagan culture. Other instances include vague reference, if any at all, to Pope Innocent III's Albigensian campaign that began with the slaughter of the entire city of Beziers, and the four hundred year Inquisition that followed. True, the Inquisition has usually been acknowledged, but only to be minimized as much as possible. Also ignored has been the counter-reformation's dependence on Jesuit chicanery, the St. Bartholomew's Day massacre and failed gunpowder plot, the hideous witchcraft persecutions during the seventeenth century, Gregory XVI's 1832 Encyclical Letter against freedom, the bitter campaign of the Vatican to prevent democracy during much of the nineteenth century, and its later pursuit of the Concordat with fascism during the twentieth century.

Bowdlerization also necessitates minimizing the praise for achievements that have been obtained in the teeth of of religion. These include histories of Periclean democracy that neglect to mention its exuberant skepticism brought to a close by an orthodox populist reaction, histories of the Renaissance and French Enlightenment that neglect to clarify their similar secular breakthrough, and histories of the American revolution that neglect to concede its almost total dependence on financial support by France, at that time notorious for its secular improvisations. All of this happened, and histories that deny it, or ignore it, or gloss it over--simply pervert history's primary objective to tell it like it is.³ Just as lawyers too often break the law and doctors too often destroy one's health, historians engaged in this sort of deception necessarily forgo their responsibility as historians. Whenever they remind themselves, "Can't say that, for it might upset readers," even though they realize the facts they have chosen to suppress are essentially true, they bowdlerize history and thereby fall short of their professional obligation.

No less suggestive of bowdlerism are the now fashionable histories that focus on trends and events so limited as to justify the neglect of religious issues. Religion might have been dominant in the public mind at the time the story is told, but the historian's exclusive commitment to clothing, or travel, or courtship, or daily expenses, or a particular community's response to modifications justifies the imposition of selective constraints in the use of information that conveniently make religion a non-issue--no threat to the professional status of the historian who conducts such a study. A compromise has been obtained, the historian's miniaturization of history in the most inclusive sense in exchange for status and respectability as a participating member of the profession in good standing.

The problem here is more important here than it might seem, for it's not that orthodox historians diminish their version of history; instead, through their deletions they totally alter it, since, more often than not, its most important ingredients have been omitted. Two lies are involved--both omission itself and the implied assurance that the essential truth has been told--since the use of omission is supposedly irrelevant to their assumptions. The result is both predictable and lamentable. After many pages of busy historical narrative whose deletions turn out to be more important than its inclusions, uninformed readers who do not check it against

other primary and secondary sources, simply become misinformed, all the more entrenched in their ignorance.

Perhaps a few Christian historians are capable of maintaining genuine objectivity in their treatment of western civilization, but for most the issue is too important, and the opportunities for evasiveness are too ubiquitous for any but the most marginal prospects of success. Ultimately, therefore, the essential question in judging histories of western civilization, or any portion of it, is simply enough whether their authors are Christians or non-Christians, believers or non-believers. Of course such an inquiry is absolutely taboo as a matter of professional courtesy, but the issue is too important to be ignored. "Gentle historian," the question must be asked, "Art thou Christian or otherwise?" If Christian, let the buyer beware (*caveat emptor*); if otherwise, perhaps enough of the story can be told. It should be conceded here, however, that popular histories and history textbooks authored by secular historians for broad audiences, especially in the United States, are just as likely to involve heavy bowdlerization despite the candor of their authors in other books and articles published under different circumstances. The only advantage is that the wrong conclusions are less likely to be drawn in summarizing materials that survive deletion.

Christian apologists are of course perfectly justified in replying to my complaint with the *tu quoque* argument that the secularist's approach to history is just as vulnerable to tendentious bias, based on inclusions and exclusions no less colored by the individual historian's hostility to organized religion. To which I must reply, "Yes, of course," but with four excuses that I hope and expect somewhat extenuate my own partiality:

1. I admit it.
2. Let the opposition be heard. History with a Christian bias thrives today, whereas its outspoken secular alternative is seldom encountered, especially in histories written since the Cold War began, when Christianity recovered its intellectual respectability because of its anti-communist principles.
3. My approach is open-minded in the sense that I am perfectly willing to concede any argument if sufficient evidence may be adduced to justify its support. I thrive on apostasy: I have changed my mind many times before, and I expect it to happen again. In contrast, Christian history is locked into assumptions that discourage apostasy with the threat of both hellfire and ostracism.
4. Finally, my approach actually explains what has happened in the history of western tradition on a holistic basis. Everything fits, there is nothing deleted that would change the basic picture. Information is not suppressed because I am afraid to admit it. I don't think this can be said of Christian histories whose credibility is absolutely dependent on their deletions.

Who, then, are the secular histories and historians who represent an alternative viewpoint? First came Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776-1788) as well as Voltaire's piecemeal essayistic histories that added up to a survey of western civilization in its

entirety.⁴ Then followed *Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind* (1794), written by Condorcet while he was in hiding from the Jacobins of the French Revolution led by Robespierre. Condorcet completed his manuscript just days before he was caught and killed--found dead in his jail cell the very next morning. Indeed, his scholarship was often sloppy, but he may be forgiven under the circumstances. Seventy years later in England came Henry Buckle's two-volume *General Introduction to his truncated History of Civilization in England* (1861) and W.E. Lecky's *Rationalism in Europe* (2 vols, 1865), followed by its companion *History of European Morals* (1869). Sir Leslie Stephen's *History of English Thought in the Eighteenth Century* (2 vols, 1876) remains useful, supplemented by his *Essays on Free Thinking and Plain Speaking* (1873) and *Agnostic's Apology* (1876). At about the same time J.A. Symonds published *The Renaissance in Italy* (7 vols., 1875-86), a highly readable account of this period with much information missing from later studies that presumably superceded it. A generation later came the outstanding classical historian J.B. Bury's two excellent but relatively brief studies, *History of Freedom of Thought* (1913) and *Idea of Progress* (1920). Also at that time were A.W. Benn's two useful histories, *The History of English Rationalism in the Nineteenth Century* (2 vols, 1906) and *The History of Ancient and Modern Philosophy* (2 vols, 1912). After the First World War, the energetic polymath H.G. Wells swiftly wrote his *Outline of History* (1920) in order to encourage the ratification of the League of Nations. However, it is still very worth reading for both its lucidity and its selectivity. And finally Bertrand Russell's *A History of Western Philosophy* (1945) remains useful for its decisiveness.

The American tradition of secular historians is also of considerable interest, beginning with John W. Draper's *The Intellectual Development of Europe* (2 vols, 1861, rev. 1875), followed by *History of the Conflict between Religion and Science* (1874). Draper had already made major discoveries as a chemist, astronomer, & physiologist, and his scientific eye is everywhere in evidence in his narrative. Next came Andrew Dickson White's pivotal text *A History of the Warfare of Science with Theology in Christendom* (2 vols., 1896). White also served as the first president of Cornell University and as a European diplomat in Germany and Russia. At roughly the same time, H.C. Lea published his two monumental studies, *History of the Inquisition of the Middle Ages* (3 vols., 1888) and *History of the Inquisition of Spain* (1906). There has been much effort by Christian apologists to supplant Lea, if not refute him, but his information remains by far the most useful. One topic remains the key to the Christian bias regarding the Middle Ages: the fate of Beziers whose total destruction initiated Pope Innocent III's Albigensian "crusade." Most Christian medieval histories say nothing--or almost nothing--about it. These include, for example, the *Shorter Cambridge Medieval History*, as well as the Kamen, Runciman, and Cantor histories, to say nothing of the college textbooks in medieval history--none of which mention Beziers, as if it never happened.. Lea, in contrast, does tell the story, if not to the extent that Stephen O'Shea does in his recent book *The Perfect Heresy: the Revolutionary Life and Death of the Medieval Cathars* (Walker, 2000). A full generation later came James Harvey Robinson's invention of the "New History." As explained in his collection of essays, *The New History* (1912), his approach to history, then considered radical, extended to include every aspect of human endeavor. His *Outline of History of the Western European Mind* (1920) was seminal, and he and James Henry Breasted, an eminent Egyptian historian, collaborated in a more inclusive two-volume history of western civilization, *The Conquest of Civilization*, by Breasted, and *The Ordeal of Civilization*, by Robinson, both published in 1926.

Just as useful was the scholarship of Robinson's two protégés, Preserved Smith and Harry Elmer Barnes, both of whom were more aggressively secularist. Smith authored the excellent period history, *The Age of the Reformation* (1920) and then on a more inclusive scale, *A History of Modern Culture* (2 vols., 1930). Barnes authored numerous histories, including *History of Western Civilization* (2 vols, 1935), *An Intellectual and Cultural History of the Western World* (1937, rev. 1941), *Economic History of the Western World* (1942), and *A History of Historical Writing* (1937, 2nd ed. 1962). Like Breasted and Robinson, Barnes bowdlerizes to a certain extent, but his secular viewpoint is plain in *History and Social Intelligence* (1926) and *The Twilight of Christianity* (1929). Not to be omitted is Will and Ariel Durant's enormous 12-volume *Story of Civilization*, which began in 1935 and ended in 1975 with the Napoleonic era. The set is well written and wonderfully inclusive as well as a cheap purchase at almost any used bookstore. The Durants are fully able to concede space to the story of Beziers and so much more that is not to be found in presumably more respectable histories. Peter Gay's 2-volume study *The Enlightenment* (1966, 1969) is also useful, but his textbook history of modern Europe, co-authored with R.K. Webb (1973), resorts to heavy bowdlerization.

Strictly atheistic scholarship is of course ignored by academic historians, but it should not be ignored. Four authors dominate the field: John Draper, J.M. Robertson, Joseph McCabe, and Gordon Stein. Draper's *The Intellectual Development of Europe*, 2 vols. (1876) and *History of the Conflict between Religion and Science* (1874) are superb, if without footnotes. Robertson's *History of Free Thought* (2 vols, 1915, rev. 1936), augmented by *A History of Freethought in the Nineteenth Century* (2 vols, 1929) remains the standard history of western secularism. McCabe's *A Rationalist Encyclopaedia* (1948) offers an excellent summing up of his 250 books & pamphlets since the turn of the century. Gordon Stein's *The Encyclopedia of Unbelief* (2 vols. in one, 1985), with a large variety of contributors, effectively augments McCabe's information from a new and different perspective. Stein's bibliography, *God Pro and Con: A Bibliography of Atheism* (1990) is also valuable as a list of atheistic publications (though it only includes fifty-seven of McCabe's publications). James Haught's *2000 Years of Disbelief* (1996) also deserves to be mentioned as a wonderful collection of sayings and pronouncements in the atheistic tradition.

Other scholars in the field of atheism include--despite his status as a Christian--George Buckley, author of *Atheism in the English Renaissance* (1932), David Berman, author of *A History of Atheism in Britain* (1988), and Alan Kors, author of the meticulously researched *Atheism in France: 1650-1729* (1990). I also draw upon Frederick Albert Lange's *The History of Materialism* (1873), Richard Popkin's *The History of Skepticism* (1979), and two extremely insightful collections of essays, *Doubt and Dogmatism*, edited by Malcolm Schofield et al (1980), and *The Skeptical Tradition*, edited by Mikes Burnyeat (1983). Also beneficial has been Leo Groarke's *Greek Skepticism* (1990).

Among the many secular histories of Christianity I have consulted for this project the following may be singled out as having been especially insightful from a secularist perspective: Franz Cumont's *Mysteries of Mithra* (1903) and *The Oriental Religions in Roman Paganism* (1911), Francis Legge's *Forerunners and Rivals of Christianity* (1914-15), Salomon Reinach's *Orpheus: A History of Religions* (1930), H.L. Mencken's *Treatise on the Gods* (1930), and Homer Smith's *Man and his Gods* (1952).

Several books and pamphlets by Joseph McCabe relevant to the history of Christianity can also be mentioned, including his full-length biographies Peter Abelard (1901) and St. Augustine and his Age (1903), both published before his conversion to atheism, and Candid History of the Jesuits (1913), and Crises in the History of the Papacy (1916), both published later. His pamphlets include Pagan Christs (1911) and The Papacy in Politics Today (1937, rev. 1951), as well as three pamphlets in The Forgery of the Old Testament and Other Essays (including The Myth of Immortality and Lies of Religious Literature), and three pamphlets in The Myth of Resurrection and other Essays (including Did Jesus ever Live? and How Christianity Triumphed). Both volumes were published by Prometheus Books in 1993 and are still in print. As a former Franciscan monk who published in Catholic history preceding his rejection of Christianity, McCabe offers marvelous information simply not available elsewhere.

Finally a word about encyclopedias. The eleventh edition of The Encyclopedia Britannica (1910) remains an extraordinary repository of information not found elsewhere, and The Encyclopedia of Philosophy, edited by Paul Edwards (1967), offers a marvelous supplement. The outstanding current philosophical encyclopedia, Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy (1998), edited by Edward Craig, is too expensive to purchase, but it may be consulted by those who do not yet enjoy the blessings of retirement.

© 2005 by Edward Jayne. This document may be reproduced in any non-profit form without permission of the author; however, for-profit reproduction requires written permission.

<http://www.edwardjayne.com>

FOOTNOTES

1. I myself explore Hamlet in this vein in chapter four of *Negative Poetics* (1992)--also included in the piece, "Up Against the Mending Wall," in the *Critical Theory* section.
2. See John W. Draper's *The Intellectual Development of Europe*, vol. 1 (Harpers, 1875), p. 360.
3. I also pay close attention to historians' discussions of the executions of Bruno, Vanini, Servetus, Huss, Dolet, and Savonarola, among others, as well as the malevolent practices of such figures as St. Cyril, Torquemada, and the Duke of Alba.
4. J.B. Bury explains how to recombine Voltaire's chaotic piecemeal history of civilization as a coherent linear narrative in *The Idea of Progress* (1920), pp. 148-49.