adequate for an expanding organization with temporal as well as spiritual concerns? We shall describe later some of the solutions which the church found for these problems.

Christianity became the dominant religion of the western world and transformed its civilization in many ways. If Christianity was not, as Gibbon believed it was, one of the major causes of the decline of the Roman Empire, its victory signified the decline of ancient civilization. When the Empire passed away, the church succeeded and superseded it. Upon the foundation of the triumphant Christian religion the new world of the Middle Ages was slowly erected.
FROM St. Augustine (354-430), in whose lifetime Italy and Rome were overrun by barbarian invaders, to the present, historians, philosophers, and theologians have sought an answer to one of the central problems of history: what caused the decline of the Roman Empire? What were the forces of dissolution? What were the weaknesses in the Roman Empire? What, in the words of the great eighteenth-century historian Edward Gibbon, were “the most important circumstances of its decline and fall: a revolution which will ever be remembered, and is still felt by the nations of the Earth?”

For each generation the question has had a topical as well as a historical interest. Consciously or not, men have sensed in that decline a foreshadowing of the fate of their own civilization and have tried, by seeking the causes of Rome’s decline, to escape the same misfortune. Their own basic assumptions about the meaning of history, their own philosophy of history, have inevitably dictated the answers which men have given to the question.

Historical Explanations of the Decline

To Ammianus Marcellinus (born c.330), the last great Roman historian, a decline in personal morality was the
cause of the ills which afflicted the Empire. The more profound mind of St. Augustine saw in the calamities of his day one act in the great unfolding drama of universal history. In The City of God, (De Civitate Dei), a work which for more than a thousand years continued to mold the mind of mediaeval man, Augustine looked beyond the somber present, beyond Rome, beyond the transitory city of the world, to the eternal City of God. The earthly city of Rome was passing, not because of the abandonment of the pagan gods for Christianity, as some critics charged, but as the necessary and fortunate preparation for the triumph of the heavenly city where man's destiny was to be attained. The events of Rome's history, therefore, were unrolling as part of the general plan of the universe.

In contrast to this interpretation based upon the Christian faith stands Gibbon's explanation, which was rooted in eighteenth-century rationalist thought. The historian saw the decline not as the preparation for something better, but as a tragedy which he sums up in the sentence: "I have described the triumph of Barbarism and Religion."

In our own times there has been an equally wide range of explanations, each reflecting the crises of the twentieth century: Spengler's belief, expounded in The Decline of the West, that history, Egyptian or Roman, follows a predetermined course from birth to childhood and from maturity to old age and death; Rostovtzeff's thesis of the failure of ancient civilization to reach the masses and the resulting conflict between the educated, propertied urban classes and the ignorant and impoverished rural masses to whose level culture declined; and most recently Toynbee's view that a symptom of decay is the failure of a civilization to assimilate its "internal proletariat," those who have no
real stake in society, or its "external proletariat," the barbarians on the frontiers.

Confronted with much the same data about the decline of the Empire, writers have offered widely varying interpretations of their meaning. The problem, therefore, is one of abiding interest, as much for what it reveals about historians and their times as for the light it sheds upon history. No more than others can we presume to offer a definite solution to the riddle, but we must at least present the question and analyze some possible answers.

*Problems in Evaluating the Decline*

The decline of the Roman Empire was neither sudden nor cataclysmic, but was a gradual process extending over several centuries. We have already examined many of the disquieting symptoms of decay and disintegration which appeared during the third and even the second century A.D., and we have seen how successive emperors applied force and compulsion in order to maintain the integrity of the Empire. Important as their achievement was, Diocletian and Constantine succeeded only in postponing the collapse of the Roman Empire, not in preventing it. After the death of Constantine in 337, the signs of decay increased, and the world of the fifth and sixth centuries, while it preserved many elements of ancient civilization, was already recognizably mediaeval. On the soil of the western half of the Roman Empire, Germanic kingdoms were established; while in the East, Byzantine emperors ruled as heirs to the Romans. Trade continued, but on a diminishing scale, and agriculture was increasingly on the basis of large, self-sufficient estates worked by serfs who were bound to the soil. The pagan cults yielded to Christianity, the Christian
church built a strongly centralized administrative system, and classical learning was adapted to Christian needs or was superseded by Christian theology.

Roman armies had been defeated by Germanic invaders before, but the catastrophic defeat of the Romans in 378 at the battle of Adrianople, which will be treated later, was a dramatic proof that the imperial government was unable to offer effective resistance to invasion. This was underscored in 410, when the barbarians occupied and sacked Rome. Finally in 476 Romulus Augustulus, the last Roman emperor in the West, lost his throne and soon the invaders gained full control of the western half of the Roman Empire. The Empire had experienced other crises in the past and had surmounted them; now it was unable to rally. A government which for centuries had united almost the whole civilized world into one empire was disintegrating. Meanwhile the acceptance of Christianity by the emperors and the vast majority of their subjects was both cause and effect of a profound transformation in the civilization of the ancient world. To this theme Gibbon gave a title which has become traditional: The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire. Closer study has revealed that Gibbon exaggerated the extent of declining; there were elements of vitality as well as signs of decay in the centuries after the Antonine Age. Some historians, indeed, have insisted that there was no real decline, but merely a transformation of civilization. Nevertheless, if from whatever point of view—political, economic, or cultural—we compare the Roman world of the third and fourth centuries with the Empire during the first two centuries, we find indisputable evidences of decline.

Whether we designate what occurred as change or decline, we are concerned with a very complex phenomenon.
Many of the explanations have been oversimplified solutions to an immensely difficult problem. Scholars have sometimes selected one factor, for example, the barbarian invasions or the exhaustion of the soil, and have declared it to be the ultimate cause of the decline of the Roman Empire, or they have looked for one common denominator of decline to which they have reduced all other factors. We shall see, however, that the process of decline was due not to a single cause, but to a variety of interacting factors—political, economic, social, cultural, and psychological. To give priority to any one of them is virtually impossible, since each acted with and upon every other factor. At the outset, therefore, we should recognize the principle of multiple causation.

The Distinction between Causes and Symptoms

A more common error arises out of the difficulty of distinguishing between cause and symptom. Many of the alleged causes are actually symptoms of decline due to antecedent causes or conditions, rather than ultimate causes in themselves. Some of the symptoms of decay are obvious: economic collapse, inadequate revenues, insufficient armed forces to defend the Empire, intellectual stagnation. Each of these factors, however, is itself in need of explanation. Each is a symptom of decline and at the same time a cause of further decline, in other words, an effect of an antecedent cause and a cause itself.

An example or two may illustrate the difficulty of differentiating between cause and symptom and between proximate and remote causes. We have seen how Romans or Romanized elements, those who had the largest stake in Roman institutions, came to form a dwindling minority in the army. The barbarization of the army and the civil serv-
ice and Rome's dependence upon barbarian allies and mercenaries were undoubtedly one of the factors in the decline of Rome. But more and more Germans were admitted into the army and the civil service because Rome desperately needed men to help defend her frontiers and administer her empire. The barbarization of the Empire is, therefore, a symptom of decay, an indication that there was a shortage of manpower in relation to the tasks which had to be performed. What caused that? Was it a declining birth rate, high mortality in wars and epidemics, or increased requirements for men? Each and all may have been remote causes of the barbarization of the Empire, and the process of barbarization was itself both symptom and cause of decline.

Again, the insistent needs of the army and the bureaucracy imposed an enormous burden upon the treasury. The high cost of continuous warfare, the shrinking revenues which followed the loss of provinces, the dislocation of trade as a result of civil war, the depreciation of the coinage—all these had a ruinous effect upon the economic life of the Empire. The methods devised by the imperial government to meet soaring expenses reduced men to the level of slaves of the state, straining to support a costly machinery of defense and administration. Individual and municipal freedom was destroyed by the central government, and with the loss of that freedom initiative and enterprise were paralyzed. Was this a cause of decline? Or did the imperial government adopt the Draconian solution of binding merchants and artisans to their callings, farmers to the land, and city officials to their posts because the emperors believed that only by mobilizing all their resources in this way could they save the Empire? Again we have symptoms of decline which
are at the same time causes springing from other causes, each interacting upon the other, each an aspect of the whole causative process. Moreover, some factors, whether they are regarded as causes or symptoms, cannot be measured accurately. By tracing the deterioration of the coinage, we may describe with some precision such physical phenomena as the shrinking supply of precious metal, but we have no yardstick for measuring other aspects of the decline of the Empire, such as apathy or "loss of nerve." We can only infer that they existed both as causes and as symptoms of decline.

Some Unfounded Theories of the Decline

Some alleged causes may be rejected at once. Thus a major climatic change, an increasing drought caused by the diminution of rainfall, has been held responsible for the decline of ancient civilization. Long spells of dry weather are said to have led to the exhaustion of the soil, poor crops, abandonment of the land, impoverishment, famine, and depopulation. This remains, however, a hypothesis for which no valid evidence from the whole Empire has been adduced. A closely related physical factor, the exhaustion of the soil, has also been suggested. In certain districts, for example, in southern Italy, deforestation and other factors undoubtedly reduced the fertility of the soil, but there is no evidence for a general exhaustion of the soil throughout the Empire, despite primitive methods of fertilizing and farming. On the contrary, Gaul continued to produce bountiful crops in the late Roman Empire, and Egypt, largely dependent upon the flood waters of the Nile, had its fertility renewed annually.

Some scholars have explained the decline of Rome on the
basis of biological factors. There are no scientifically acceptable data to support the argument that societies, like individuals, have a life-cycle—birth, growth, maturity, and death—and hence that civilizations like individuals are predestined to die. Nor can we accept the hypothesis that the “best” elements in Roman society were exterminated by wars and revolution or died out because of the disinclination of these members of society to reproduce. We are given neither a satisfactory definition of the “best,” nor proof that only the “best” perished. Similarly, one may dispose of the related argument that Rome succumbed because of “race suicide” or “race mixture,” that is, that the “superior Roman stock” was overwhelmed by “inferior races” who bred freely while the “best” failed to reproduce. Biologists and anthropologists have demonstrated that there are no superior or inferior races. The decline of Rome has also been attributed to malaria or to the great plague which occurred in the reign of Marcus Aurelius, but malaria was not endemic throughout the Empire, and the effects of the plague, however deadly, might have been overcome were it not for other factors which we shall analyze later. In any event, we cannot be sure that Rome would have been saved by a larger population.

Moralists have suggested that the decline was caused by a slackening of personal morality, but most of the evidence they have presented is from the flourishing years of the early Principate. In the Later Empire, under the influence of the religious revival, morals may actually have been elevated. In any case, most people in both the earlier and the later period seem to have lived decent and sober lives. Even if moral standards had decayed, it would still be necessary to seek an explanation for such an historical phenomenon.
The Role of Social Conflict

The decline of ancient civilization has been attributed, by Rostovtzeff, to the failure of the upper classes to extend their culture to the rural and urban lower classes. In the end, according to this argument, there was a prolonged social conflict between the urban propertied classes and the rural masses who made up the bulk of the army. The masses put their leaders on the throne, absorbed the higher classes, and lowered standards in general. But there is little evidence that the army was made up of a class-conscious proletariat which hated the urban upper classes. On the contrary, in its greed the army plundered town and country alike. Yet so much of the argument must be granted: that Roman culture had not penetrated sufficiently into the masses, had not inspired them with devotion to a high ideal to which all alike were committed, and that now in a time of mounting difficulties it failed to evoke their active effort and cooperation in its defense.

Another unsatisfactory hypothesis is that the lack of any clear constitutional provision for the succession on the death of an emperor led to military usurpation of power, anarchy, and all its concomitant evils. The method of adoption of an heir to the throne by the incumbent, haphazard as it may have been, worked well during most of the Antonine period. Indeed, the choice of the ablest man available, regardless of family affiliation, worked better than Marcus Aurelius' solution of designating his own son Commodus as emperor.

Finally, the Empire was not suddenly destroyed by the barbarians, although their attack contributed to Rome's

1 Rostovtzeff, *op. cit.*
Decline and Fall

Decline and eventually they took possession of the western half of the Roman Empire. The pressure of barbarians had been felt by the Romans from very early times, and the invasions of the fifth century were not much more formidable than previous ones which had been repelled. If Rome had not already been weakened internally and demoralized, she might have put up an effective resistance, as she had to earlier onslaughts.

Political Factors

We have rejected certain explanations of the decline of ancient civilization. What factors remain? Among the political factors may be counted the failure of the civil power to control the army. We have seen how the troops were preoccupied with making and unmaking emperors and how ambitious generals fought for the throne. The result was military disorganization, which facilitated the advance of the barbarians. We have observed both as a symptom and as a cause of decline the decay of civic vitality, as the emperors interfered more and more with municipal freedom and thus undermined a civilization which had been based upon an association of self-governing city-states. The municipal aristocracy, the backbone of that civilization, was crushed by a harsh and arbitrary despotism and old loyalties were weakened. Cities decayed and eventually many of them disappeared.

What lay behind these changes? It has been suggested that Rome acquired a larger empire than she could control effectively, that imperialism was the basic fault from which stemmed all other weaknesses: an insubordinate army, a top-heavy bureaucracy, political corruption, oppression of individuals and cities, class warfare, the growth of slavery, the
influx of alien ideas. The difficulties of defending and governing too large an empire, it has been said, were complicated by primitive methods of transportation and communication. Should the Romans have stopped at the borders fixed by Augustus (31 B.C.—A.D. 14), or at the borders of 133 B.C., or 272 B.C., or 509 B.C.? Each acquisition of territory obviously posed fresh problems, but it was a measure of Rome's greatness that for centuries she solved many of these problems, and a measure of her decline that ultimately she was unable to do so. We must seek if we can some explanation for her failure other than the paradox that her rise caused her decline.

The End of Expansion

It may be argued, on the contrary, that a basic factor of decline was not overexpansion, but a cessation of expansion. Within the geographical limits set by the emperor Hadrian (117–138), Rome quickly attained the maximum possibilities of exploitation under existing techniques and economic stagnation set in. Since her wealth was no longer replenished by the plunder and resources of new provinces, there was a shift from an economy which had grown with the Empire to a static economy. Meanwhile pressures on the frontiers increased, and the government was compelled to maintain more armed forces and administrative officials than she could afford. Higher taxes, bureaucratic and autocratic controls, and the whole machinery of compulsion followed. Further expansion, however, would have been neither feasible with the resources of manpower which Rome had available nor immediately profitable. As an alternative the Romans might have extended their domestic markets. But the purchasing power of the mass of the people was always
limited, and the requirements of the rich were not sufficient
to compensate for the limited demands of the majority of
men. It has been suggested that an abundance of cheap slave
labor prevented the invention and use of labor-saving
machinery which might have produced cheap products
and thus stimulated the economy by extending the internal
market. Long before the fourth century, however, with
the cessation of expansion, slaves were neither readily avail-
able nor cheap and there was, in fact, a labor shortage. A
more valid explanation of the failure to produce a machine
technology was the inability of the impoverished masses to
purchase its products. The civil and foreign wars of the
third century further dislocated the limited markets, and
the economic structure of the Empire was badly shaken.
The very measures taken by the government to preserve
the Empire weakened and finally paralyzed initiative and
enterprise.

The Disintegration of Central Authority

We have traced the growth of an inefficient and oppres-
sive financial system which was both cause and result of
economic decline. We have seen how the normal require-
ments of defense and administration and the extraordinary
costs of half a century of military anarchy led to higher
taxes, depreciation of the coinage, extension of the system
of compulsory requisitions and forced labor, and economic
chaos. The enforcement of the system called for an ever
larger and more elaborate machinery of government and
more repressive measures. As men sought to escape the
insatiable demands of the state, they were regimented and
bound to their classes and callings. The heavy hand of a
centralized bureaucracy lay upon everyone, but especially
upon the townsfolk. Men lost public spirit as well as individual initiative, and the failure of both was a portent of the decline of ancient civilization. These are some of the aspects of decline, but it must be remembered that in taking these measures the emperors were trying to prop up a structure which was already tottering and that these measures were therefore symptoms as well as causes of decline.

Economic decentralization was another factor. The provincials either had their own industrial skills or quickly developed them. Soon they began to manufacture goods themselves for local and even for imperial markets, and the market for Roman and Italian products shrank as competition from new provincial industries increased. Although the Empire was linked by an excellent system of roads and seaways, the methods of transportation were relatively poor. The normal difficulties of movement from one region to another were intensified by the disorders of a century of crisis. Thus high costs and risks helped promote economic decentralization, and provincial autarchy in turn fostered political disintegration.

Related to these economic and political developments was the growth of large estates cultivated by slaves and semi-servile coloni. The free peasantry, once a major element in the strength of the Roman Empire, sank to the status of dependents. As early as the time of the Gracchi (133–121 B.C.) this evil had been apparent; now the whole process was intensified. In the end it led to the development of more or less self-sufficient large estates which in turn advanced economic decentralization.

*Intellectual and Psychological Aspects of Decline*

It is extremely difficult to assess the intellectual and psychological aspects of decline, but certain characteristics
may be noted. Gibbon and others considered Christianity a major cause of the decline of ancient civilization. To be sure, the Christian attitude of resignation to adversity and the Christian emphasis upon a life to come represented a surrender to the material difficulties which beset men rather than a struggle to overcome them. But this is only a phase of the changing intellectual interests of the ancient world. As a result of the chaos and dislocation of life, there was a growing note of pessimism and despair which led to apathy and inertia. A reflection of this was the shift of interest from the here to the hereafter. We have seen how, under the stress of political, economic, and social ills, men turned to other-worldly religions, the Oriental mystery cults and Christianity. As they lost confidence in the Empire and in their own power to alter conditions, they tried to find inner security as compensation for a world which was grim and uncertain. This groping for salvation in new religions is one aspect of the psychological change; another is the resignation to the misfortunes of this world: to a totalitarian regime, a collapsing economy, and the barbarian invaders themselves. There was a "loss of nerve," as it has been called, a breakdown of morale, a defeatist mentality. Even if they had the means, men no longer had the will to maintain the Empire against invasion and dissolution. An intellectual collapse accompanied and hastened the decline of the Roman Empire.

In the final analysis, it was interaction of many factors, some hidden, some only partly discerned, some obvious, which resulted in the decline of ancient civilization. A nexus of political, social, economic, and psychological factors, each both cause and symptom of decline, accounts for the phenomenon. In time we may have more evidence and other historical methods which may enable us to determine
with a greater degree of precision and accuracy the causes of historical events. Meanwhile we may study the facts and seek to establish their meaning, but we cannot always say categorically and definitely how and why great historical phenomena, like the decline of Rome, occurred.

Our description of the maladies which beset Rome must not make us think that all was unrelieved gloom. The foundations of Roman civilization endured and on them mediaeval civilization was built. In the West the Germanic kingdoms inherited many elements of Roman civilization; while in the Byzantine East, ancient civilization, adapted to Christian purposes, flourished for a thousand years. Both in the East and West the Christian church assumed many of the functions of Rome. In the period of transition which we shall now consider much was preserved and much was salvaged from the ruin of the ancient world. A continuous thread linked the old and the new, and out of the chaos and confusion the mediaeval world slowly emerged.