Arnold Toynbee’s Study of History

PART I : THE THEORY OUTLINED

When the first six volumes of Professor Toynbee’s Study of History appeared, between the years 1933 and 1939, they were freely spoken of as the most important attempt to express the meaning of history since the De Civitate Dei of St. Augustine. A few months ago, we were given volumes 7 to 10, and (apart from a volume of maps and charts) the whole mighty endeavour, projected so long ago as the year 1921, has been carried through with a surprising measure of fidelity to the original design. There has been nothing like it in the English language, nor in any other language, if we except Oswald Spengler’s Decline of the West—a work more limited in scope but, in an important sense, a forerunner of this study.

If Milton sought to justify the ways of God to men, Professor Toynbee would show us what God’s ways have been, over the last six thousand years, and what are His laws that societies must perceive and obey, if they would not perish. Such an undertaking, if it be possible at all, may, with some reason, be regarded as the most important that a man may undertake. It may also be regarded as the most difficult. That any historian’s performance of it should invite criticism is inevitable because, in the last resort, value-judgments, which are subjective, must enter in—must, indeed, form the foundation of the whole. Toynbee has been told that he is arbitrary, selective, and dogmatic. He has been told that his is no more than a personal view of history. He has been told by some that he is too Christian, by others that he is too enamoured of the Eastern religions. He has been told that he is too religious altogether—but he has also been told that he is too sympathetic with Communist Russia.

Disagreement, clearly, the Professor must have expected; not only disagreement with his central argument, but disagreement over particulars, for it is not possible to write about everything from the hydrogen bomb to the Hejira, about everybody from Ikhnaton to Neville Chamberlain, or about everywhere from Peking to Peru (via Europe), in a manner acceptable to all. But more important remains the broader issue as to whether he is justified, as an historian, in taking a wholly religious view of his subject matter; by no means all scholars are prepared to look at the problem of history from a religious angle, let alone from the peculiar religious angle of the Professor. To this argument, however, we will return next month. It will suffice here, where we are concerned only with stating his theory, to note that Toynbee belongs with Spengler, or with Berdyaev, or, indeed, with St. Augustine, as opposed to Marx or Frazer or H. G. Wells, who treated religion, in their studies of history, as though it were a dope or a poison.

Toynbee’s theory, as he expounded it in the first six volumes, was ably summarized by Mr. D. C. Somervell, in 1946, in one volume, and is therefore familiar to a fairly wide circle of readers. Of the various clues which he put forward as providing the key to the interpretation of history those best remembered are his famous “challenge and response” and his “withdrawal and return.” They were, however, by no means the only ones, and it was the use that he made of them, and of others, in the general pattern that was striking and original.

What was the pattern? Briefly, he insisted that the “intelligible unit of historical study” is the Society or Civilization. Thus, the history of England or of France, he claims, is unintelligible save as part of the history of Western Christendom; so is that of Rome, or
By E. E. Y. HALES

of Athens, save as part of the Hellenic Society. In all, there have been twenty-three such Societies: the Syriac, leading to the Iranian and Arabic, which, in turn, lead to Islam; the Indic, leading to the Hindu; the Far Eastern, leading to the Chinese and the Japanese-Korean; the Minoan, leading to the Hellenic, and so to the Orthodox-Byzantine, Orthodox-Russian, and Western (thus firmly is our own, seemingly preponderant world-civilization put in its place. We are no more than the third of three offshoots of Hellenism!); the Sumeric leading to the Indic, but also to the Hittite and Babylonian; the Egyptian; and, in the new world, the Andean, Yucatec, Mexic, and Mayan.

Toynbee is the first historical philosopher to be in a position to identify twenty-three civilizations. Spengler only dealt with four. Toynbee is able to discourse about twenty-three because of the discoveries, in the twentieth century, of the archaeologists who, besides throwing light upon them all, may be said to have been the discoverers of some, and notably of the Syriac and the Minoan.

Each of these Societies is seen as owing its rise to the vigour of its response to some challenge, such as the need to migrate away from the drying up of the Sahara, or of the Arabian desert, to the different and difficult conditions of the Nile valley and the Euphrates. In general, the sterner the challenge, the greater the height to which the victorious civilization rises. Yet sometimes the challenge is too severe—thus, the Vikings fail before the challenge of the climate in Greenland, and the Chinese fail when they meet the white man in California.

Creative energy, the energy of individuals or minorities, is the life-blood of growth in civilizations. But there is also the interesting insistence upon "withdrawal and return." The really creative people—St. Paul, St. Benedict, the Buddha, Muhammad—withdraw.
time when creative energy flags, creative minorities turn into merely dominant minorities, the majority withdraw their active and voluntary allegiance, and the unity of the Society is endangered (Toynbee’s debt to Spengler in this diagnosis is obvious and great). We are given an example of this phase with the ending of the creative period in the West, when the Respublica Christiana of medieval Christendom breaks down under the impact of parochialism, exemplified by the Protestant revolution, the notion of the divine rights of kings, and that exclusive patriotism which becomes in modern times a stronger force than Christianity itself. Then comes the “Time of Troubles,” when Church fights Church, and State fights State, within the Society (the wars between the Greek City States, or the religious wars and the nationalist wars of the West) until, at last, the “Dominant Minority” imposes a “Universal State,” by force, as Rome did in the last phase of the Hellenic civilization.

Within this “Universal State,” however, which represents the last phase of a civilization, there is always an “Internal Proletariat,” the mass of subject people; to them belongs the role of giving birth to the new religion, as the depressed classes under Rome gave birth to Christianity, or those of Babylon gave birth to Judaism and Zoroastrianism. And outside it is an “External Proletariat,” which will batter to pieces the tottering structure of the “Universal State.” Already, however, in considering the West, a point of great importance is duly noted by Toynbee, in volume 5, which he will make the starting-point for a new departure in his argument in the later volumes recently published. It is that, although the West is far advanced in its “Time of Troubles,” with State warring against State and no true religious cohesion left, and although the final phase, the Universal State, is evidently due, there is no sign, as yet, of the Internal Proletariat giving birth to a new religion—unless, indeed, Communism be that religion. Toynbee, however, thinks it is not. The victory of Stalin’s version of Communism over Trotsky’s confirms him in his view that Communism is merely a form of State-worship and, as such, just another example of the perennial tendency of Man to idolize the collective. It is not, in
short, a new "Higher Religion," but a regrettable and dangerous heresy of Christianity.

So much, and very much more, will be familiar to readers of the original six volumes or even to readers of the abridged Somervell volume. When the war came, the Professor suspended his work in order to become a temporary civil servant; when it was over, he thought himself back into his theme by giving a series of lectures in England and in America, and in these lectures he developed many of the arguments which form the staple of volumes 7 to 10.

In general, it may be said that the pattern of the whole of history set out by the author in the first six volumes remains substantially the same in the last four, despite an important reappraisal of the purpose of religion. But whereas the first volumes were concerned with the genesis, growth, breakdown and disintegration of civilizations, the later ones are preoccupied partly with a more detailed analysis of particular stages, such as Universal States, Universal Churches, and Heroic Ages, and partly with a lengthy commentary upon the effects which civilizations have had upon each other.

Toynbee does not like Universal States, such as the Roman Empire or the Caliphate. Their overwhelming belief in their own eternity seems to him a form of hubris. Yet he is compelled to a reluctant admiration for their perennial vitality when he finds the successful Frankish king, Clovis, in A.D. 510, anxious to acquire prestige by obtaining from Anastasius, the Roman Emperor at Constantinople, the title of "proconsul," or when he recounts how the Aga Khan and other eminent Muslims protested, in 1924, against Mustapha Kemal's abolishing the Caliphate in Turkey, though that office had ceased to be effectively exercised since A.D. 833! Universal States, he recognizes, are powerful idolatries; moreover, they have their "Ghosts"—witness the Holy Roman Empire, Ghost of the Roman Empire, which survived till A.D. 1806. And they are not without their practical value sub specie aeternitatis; one of their most important uses is that they provide administrative conveniences, and in particular good roads, which enable the wide and rapid dissemination of new ideas. It is, in fact, implied that their chief function is, inadvertently, and against the wishes of their own ruling caste, to be of service to the new religion that has emerged amongst the Internal Proletariat over which they rule—a religion that they
may well be engaged in persecuting, as Rome persecuted Christianity.

Instinctively, the Universal State hates the new Universal Church, which is growing within it, because it is offensive to the pride of a great institution to see itself serving merely as the vehicle for the formation of a new and different society. The State resents the Church which it sees increasing while, itself, it is decreasing, and it proceeds to regard the Church as a "cancer" that is killing it. Hence, the bitter comments of the still pagan aristocracy of Rome, from the second to the fourth century A.D., as they witnessed the multiplication of monks; hence Gibbon's famous description of his own book: "I have described the triumph of Barbarism and Religion"; hence a section of Toynbee's study devoted to expounding the theory of "Churches as Cancers." He has little difficulty in disposing of the cancer-theory, or in administering a coup de grâce to the long outmoded rationalist complacency of Gibbon, or of Frazer, whose Golden Bough had turned upon all the Eastern religions that pitying smile which the Enlightenment had long made it fashionable to bestow upon Christianity.

If, then, the Churches are not cancers, are they, Toynbee asks himself, chrysalises? So he had thought when he wrote the earlier volumes—out of the chrysalis of the Church emerged the butterfly of the new civilization. But, as readers of his Civilization on Trial (1948), or those who heard his lecture Christianity and Civilization at Oxford (May 23rd, 1940), will have known already, he no longer sees it as the function of the religion to produce the civilization; the position is rather that the religion performs this office for its own purposes, and to assist it in its own fulfilment. In volume 7 of the Study of History (the first of the new volumes and the one devoted to Universal States and Universal Churches) he recants from his earlier belief that:

240
“Universal Churches have their raison d’être in keeping the species of society known as civilizations alive by preserving a precious germ of life through the perilous interregnum between the dissolution of one mortal representative of the species and the genesis of another... the writer of this Study had to confess that he, too, had been satisfied for many years with this rather patronizing view of the churches’ rôle and nature; and he still believed that this conception of the churches as chrysalises, unlike the conception of them as cancers, was true as far as it went; but he had come to believe that this was so small and unrepresentative a facet of the whole truth about universal churches as to be utterly misleading if it was mistaken for the whole of which it was in reality a minor part.”

In a sense, then, the pattern of history appears the same to the Professor as it did; it is the motive that has changed. Taking his stance about the year A.D. 3000, and looking back upon the present he writes:

“If we cast our eye over the civilizations that were still alive in A.D. 1552 we shall see that every one of them had in its background some universal church through which it was affiliated to a civilization of an older generation. The Western and Orthodox Christian civilizations and the offshoot of Orthodox Christendom in Russia were affiliated through the Christian Church to the Hellenic Civilization; the Far Eastern Civilization and its offshoot in Korea and Japan were affiliated through the Mahāyāna (the developed form of Buddhism) to the Sinic Civilization; the Hindu Civilization was affiliated through Hinduism to the Indic; the Islamic and the Arabic through Islam to the Syriac. All the eight then extant civilizations had churches for their chrysalises...”

But he then notes that the eight civilizations still surviving in 1552, which are listed in this passage with their predecessors, do not appear to be running according to form, so far as their religions are concerned. For, although they are clearly in, or approaching, their last phase (the Universal State), they show no sign of nurturing religious chrysalises which will produce the butterfly of the new civilization. Where are today’s chrysalises for tomorrow’s civilizations? They do not exist. But the four chrysalises, from which the eight surviving civilizations emerged, still exist and still flourish quite strongly, although they should be either dead or dying. These four chrysalises are the four Higher Religions—Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, and the Mahāyāna Buddhism. It is this situation which leads the Professor to say to himself (in rather more words): “I have been seeing this matter the wrong way round. Civilization is the handmaid of religion. There is no reason why religions should go on indefinitely producing civilizations which may serve as the dwelling places of new and higher religions if, in fact, the forms of religion have now reached their highest development.”

However, even if the reader be prepared to accept the view that the purpose of human existence is to produce Churches rather than Civilizations, he may still require to be convinced that the four Higher Religions existing today represent the last word in religion. Toynbee takes the line that, although the four Higher Religions are themselves the product of an evolution from primitive religions (an evolution which it has been the purpose of the successive civilizations to foster), they do represent the end of the evolution because they represent, between them, the main religious needs and the furthest religious vision of humanity, and are destined, now, only to harmonize their versions of the truth. This argument, which must seem to many a rather lofty flight of fancy, he seeks further to substantiate by an appeal to Jung’s psychology: to his use of this, however, we must return in next month’s article.

It seems clear to the Professor that there can, in the future, be only one civilization in the world, because it is no longer possible for civilizations to live their lives in blissful ignorance of each other. The world is already in process of becoming one, because it has been the peculiar characteristic of the Western Civilization, through its scientific discoveries, to penetrate the whole earth. This is, as it were, an historical accident, due to the West’s stumbling upon a “know-how.” It does not mean that the other surviving civilizations have yielded to it as to a superior, or that they do not still live by and cherish, as strongly as ever, their distinctive principles of life. Nor does it mean that the religion of the West, Christianity, is accepted by the others; in any case, though born of Christianity, and though bringing to birth no new religion, the West is, today, in Toynbee’s view, a post-Christian, secularist civilization, in which Christianity still survives. The West is living on a confused remnant of Christian principles, whose source is ignored or denied, and this is dangerous because,
treated so, religion ceases to renew itself and becomes a wasting asset.

Toynbee sees many dangers to be overcome before there can be a true world civilization, inspired by his harmonious religious quartet. In particular, there is a very sinister attitude which all the contemporary civilizations are coming to share, namely, the shocking heresy of Man’s worship of Collective Man, whether as Communism, or as Fascism, or as any other of the forms in which the virus of tribalism has taken its deadly hold. In the West Nationalism, in this dangerous sense, was an ultimate consequence of the Reformation and the loss of a universal loyalty. It has grown ever deadlier, has infected the whole world (especially Asia and Africa), and threatens, in a third world war, destruction on a scale unprecedented. When true religion flourishes, concerned with the salvation of the individual soul, and thus with free will, such collectivist horrors cannot flourish. The supreme need of the times is, therefore, in all civilizations, to reassert the individual against the collective, and this is the task which one or more of the four Higher Religions will have to undertake.

Since Hinduism and Buddhism place their emphasis upon passivity towards the State, and withdrawal from it, they are ill-fitted to fight this monstrous growth of the political power. Nor is Islam, though a fighting religion, well placed to lead the contest, because her own founder fatally compromised his position as a religious prophet by becoming, himself, a political prince. The fight against the deadly contemporary heresy of the State will have, therefore, to be led by Christianity, which showed, in the days of Hildebrand and Innocent III, the power to win.

This struggle (already taking place in Eastern Europe and, less obviously, in the West) Toynbee expects the Church to find both bitter and cruel; but he also expects to see her win. Then, the monstrosity of tribalism having been slain by Christianity, the new world religion may take clearer shape, embracing the best principles of the four existing Higher Religions, and from this new religion will emerge the new world civilization, both to safeguard it and to provide the soil in which it may grow.

It is an attractive picture, but it is suspect of that Utopianism which the author elsewhere holds in scorn, and it seems to run counter to the explicit teaching of all the four Higher Religions, which see this world as a place, if not always of tribulation, at least of trial, and which look to the life of harmony as belonging to another sphere.

It is not necessary, however, to suppose, as some of Toynbee’s critics have supposed, that, the struggle and the sacrifice of which the author is so keenly aware will cease to be of the essence of individual life, even in his new religion and in his new civilization; he only claims that, with a new Higher Religion, men will be brought into more effective communion with the grace of God, which is the true purpose of their life. Their inner struggle, arising from that original sin whose reality and power he appreciates, may well continue.

A more legitimate complaint against the
Professor may well be lodged by Christians, who will find, to their surprise, that although the Church is expected to lead the fight against the monstrosity of political collectivism she will lose her own soul in the process! For her capacity to fight, while it gives her, ahead of the other three religions, the honour of this rôle, provides her also with her besetting temptation, the temptation to resort to force, and this is likely to lead her astray, spiritually speaking. For Toynbee, though he sees the necessity for "the just war," detests the fighter. To him (as to Mr. Aldous Huxley) it is the honour and glory of Buddhism to be always pacific; she understands better than Christianity how to save her own soul. By contrast, Hildebrand, though his victory over the Emperor Henry IV was necessary to the Church, set Christianity upon militant and ambitious paths that have led her astray. Never can Toynbee approve when the Church takes the sword—not even when she stems the Mohammedan aggressor at Tours, at Antioch, at Lepanto, or at the gates of Vienna. This paradox is bewildering. It leaves the reader wondering, for instance, how the Benedictine monachism which the author so much admires, which he calls, with justice, the very matrix of European civilization, could have survived if the spiritual power had not been willing to allow the temporal power to resist those who sought, by force, to destroy the Faith?

We must defer these and many other problems till next month, having attempted here only to state the outline of the theory. We may take leave of the Professor, as he describes himself to us in a remarkable passage in his ninth volume,—amongst his beloved Benedictines. "He dreamed" (he is writing of himself) "during a spell of sleep in a wakeful night, that he was clasping the foot of the crucifix hanging over the high altar of the Abbey of Ampleforth and was hearing a voice saying to him Amplexus expecta (Cling and wait)."