

THINKERS OF THE PAST AND THE
PRESENT- ARNOLD J. TOYNBEE

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Arnold J. Toynbee & His Philosophy of History

Nineteenth century was "the century of Physics": in the twentieth century the crown rests on the head of History. Ours is an age of crisis, of shattered hopes, bitter disillusionment and abject frustration. Hence the importance of social philosophies.

Arnold J. Toynbee is, beyond any doubt, one of the greatest living historians and social philosophers of our age. He has devoted his life to research and empirical study. He is a great linguist and knows classical Greek, Latin, modern Greek, Turkish, Spanish, German, French and Italian besides English. In short he is a living encyclopedia of history—a Field - Marshall in the army of ideas. His main contribution is a new philosophy of history. He is a master synthesist, who takes a vast number of facts and co-ordinates them into an interpretation the meaning and philosophy of history.

Toynbee was born in London in 1889, studied at Winchester and Balliol College, Oxford and at British Archeological School at Athens. In 1912 he joined Balliol as a Fellow and Tutor in ancient history. During 1915 and 1919 he worked in the Political Intelligence Department of the Foreign Office and later at the Paris Peace Conference. From 1919 to 1924 he was Professor of Modern Greek and Byzantine Studies at the Royal Institute of International Affairs.

Prof. Toynbee has been a prodigious writer and has to his credit a plethora of works. But his fame struck new chords when his monumental research—A Study of History—saw the light of the day. "A Study of History" revealed him as a universal historian of colossal erudition and panoramic imagination. In 1927-28, when he was only 38 years of age, he planned this gigantic work, now at the age of 66, he has completed the work. In 1934 its first three volumes broke in print and 1939 witnessed the publication of another three volumes. War interrupted the work. Now, in 1955 the last four volumes have appeared—thus completing the greatest study of history. A one volume abridgement of the first six volumes has been published by Mr. D. C. Somervell and this more handy book, became widely popular and best-seller in America. Undoubtedly Toynbee's public fame was made by this abridged volume. His other important works are more than a dozen "surveys of international affairs" (nearly 700 pages each) and several volumes of his collected lectures and essays, such as "Civilization on Trial" and "The World and the West." His pen is not yet tired and we expect much more from this monarch of knowledge and learning.

His Philosophy of History

Toynbee starts with the thesis that the proper field of study is civilization as against stray events or just the nation-states. He regards civilization as a "species of society"¹ and studies twenty six such species; five arrested civilizations and the rest full-fledged ones, of which all excepting one i.e. our own have either died and are buried in the pages of History or are petrifying and are in the throes of death, in "their last agonies." Over the western civilization itself, night has now fallen and its doom is approaching.

¹ A Study of History Vol. I, p. 45.

Toynbee has discussed three fundamental problems viz., the genesis of civilizations, the growth of civilizations and the break-up and finally the disintegration of civilizations. He neither believes in the cyclic theory of the Greeks nor in the deterministic interpretations of history. He also rejects the theories of race and environment which dominated the 19th century thought. He has, on the basis of undeniable and unending historical data, declared that:

"Race and environment were the two main rival keys that were offered by would-be scientific nineteenth-century. Western historian for solving the problem of the cultural inequality of various extant human societies and neither key proved on trial, to unlock the fast closed door."

His own answer to the problem of the birth and the genesis of civilizations is that the genesis is due to specific combination of two conditions: the presence of a creative minority and of an environment which is neither too unfavourable nor too favourable. The mechanism of the birth of a civilisation in these conditions is formulated' as an interplay of Challenge and Response. The challenge may come from environment, climate militarism, foreign aggression, religion or the like, but it is the response to the challenge which causes the birth of a civilization. Challenges continue to present themselves 'and the society, through its creative minority, continues to respond. This continuous play leads to the stage of civilization. Toynbee shows that all the twenty one civilizations he has studied emerged in exactly the same manner.²

As to the second problem viz., the growth of civilization, Toynbee holds that it is neither due to geographical expansion nor technological progress: "There is no correlation between progress of technique and progress in civilization."³ The growth of civilization consists in "a progressive and cumulative inward self-determination or self-articulation" of the civilization, and in cumulative "ethrialization" of the society, values and "simplification of the civilizations' apparatus and technique." A growing civilization is a unity and the creative minority is freely imitated and followed by the majority. It is a solitary body and unfolds its dominant potentialities which are different in different civilisations: aesthetic in the Hellenic; religious in Indian scientifically mechanistic the West and so on. As a result, the process of growth represents a progressive integration and self-determination of the growing civilization and a differentiation between the different civilizations in growth.

The third main problem of the study is how and why civilizations break down and disintegrate. Toynobee says that civilizations perish through suicide and not by murder. When the challenge remains unanswered and unresponded the process of disintegration creeps in. his formulation—

"the nature of the breakdown of civilizations can be summed up in three points: a failure of creative power in minority, an answering withdraw of mimesis on the part majority, and a consequent loss of social unity in the society as a whole.

According to Toynobee this declining phase consists of three sub-phases (i) the breakdown of civilization, (ii) its disintegration and (iii) its dissolution. He lays emphasis on the moral conditions of the society and the part religion plays in human life. His thesis knocks the bottom of the Marxist interpretation of history. Toynbee has declared that;

² A study of History vol. I P. 183-338

³ A Study of History Vol. III p. 173-174

"The dreadful thing was not the material crash, but the moral one. The triumph of ignorance, superstition, lawlessness and cruelty over the moral standardThat is what is terrifying in the fall of a civilization, and it is, I believe, the fear of a return to moral barbarism that is haunting us today (From B. B. C. Lecture.)

Most interesting is his discussion on the problem of arresting the disintegration and the rise of a new civilization out of the afflicted one. He thinks that religion alone can work as the invigorating serum in the body of civilization. The words of Sorokin epitomise Toynbee's verdict:

"The only faithful way turns out to be the way of Transfiguration, the way of transfer of the goal and values to the supersensory Kingdom of God,"⁴ "The aim of transfiguration is to give light to them that sit in darkness. It is pursued by seeking the kingdom of God in order to bring its life—into action. The goal of Transfiguration is thus the Kingdom of God."⁵

Thus the whole historical process has become Theodicy—a progressive realization, in his words, "to come to know God better and come to love Him more nearly in his own way."⁶ That is why Toynbee has declared that:—

"Looking back over the twenty one civilizations I have studied, I am not sanguine about man's ability to make a good moral decision if he aims only at a worldly goal. Love of mankind has been a force in history but only when it was a by-product of an intense love of God.

"The great need of the modern world is a re-birth of supernatural belief, without it, man—unregenerate man is hardly to be trusted with the dangerous toys his laboratories have hatched." (World Review, March, 1940)

Note:— In writing this article I have extensively availed from Toynbee's original works particularly Somervell's abridgment of his "A Study of History" his own "Civilization on Trial," and "The World and the West" (Reith Lectures), P. A. Sorokin's "Social Philosophies of an Age of Crises", Fulton J. Sheen's "Philosophy of Religion", K.A. Kirk wood's lectures on Toynbee and Bertrand Russell's article "Where I disagree with Mr. Toynbee" in the Sunday Times February' 15th, 1953, and have tried, as far as I could, to present his views in his own words. I have refrained from criticising his views, because a detailed discussion lies outside the scope of the present article. But what I cannot resist expressing is Toynbee's lack of understanding of Islam which he has very innocently called a "Christian heresy". It is a pity that a historian, of such eminence is not well-informed about Islam!

⁴ A Sorokin Social Philosophies of an Age o Crises . p. 110

⁵ A Study of History vol, IV p. 171

⁶ Ibid, p. 235-36