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The Bridge: A Yearbook of Judaeo-Christian
Studies, Vol. III

The Institute of Judaeo-Christian Studies

1958

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Recommended Citation

Mullaney, James V., "Book Review: 'An Historian's Approach to Religion' by Arnold J. Toynbee" (1958). *The Bridge: A Yearbook of Judaeo-Christian Studies, Vol. III*. 5.
<https://scholarship.shu.edu/jcs-bridge-III/5>

Arnold J. Toynbee: AN HISTORIAN'S APPROACH TO RELIGION *

IN 1933, Volumes 1-3 of Professor Toynbee's *A Study of History* were published by Oxford University Press. Six years later Volumes 4-6 appeared. A one-volume abridgment of these six volumes by David C. Somervell was issued in 1947. In 1954, Volumes 7-10 of Toynbee's *Study* came off the press; with them his monumental work is practically completed, although two supplementary volumes are promised. Three years later Somervell's one-volume abridgment of Volumes 7-10 was made available. In 1956, shortly before the appearance of this second abridgment, Toynbee published, again with Oxford, his 1952-53 Gifford lectures, under the title *An Historian's Approach to Religion*. This volume is a distillation of Toynbee's teaching on the central problem of the last four volumes of the *Study*: the relationship of civilizations to religions.

Toynbee exists, therefore, on different levels for different audiences. For the professional historian and the leisured general reader there is the ten-volume *Study*. In two volumes, Somervell's abridgment provides approximately the same sweep. The one-volume *Approach* enables the reader to see Toynbee grappling with a single, though central, problem of his *Study*. Finally, at the very end of Volume 2 of Somervell's abridgment there is a thirty-nine page "Argument," in effect an abridgment of the abridgment, which seems to obviate the need for any summary here. The over-all purpose of Toynbee's work at its various levels is to determine inductively, by a comparative study of all the known civilizations, the laws governing their genesis, growth, breakdown, and disintegration.

The writings of Toynbee and the abridgment by Somervell attracted popular as well as professional attention. Popular enthusiasm is attested by their unusual sales. In a letter dated September 26, 1957, Fon W. Boardman, Jr., of Oxford University Press, informed me that as of that date, in the United States alone, about ten thousand

* New York: Oxford University Press, 1956.

copies of the ten-volume *Study* had been sold, and about three hundred thousand of the first volume of Somervell's abridgment, including about one hundred thousand distributed by the Book-of-the-Month Club. The second volume of Somervell's abridgment sold about twenty-two thousand copies in six months, the *Approach* over forty thousand copies in less than a year.

The reception accorded Toynbee's work by professional historians has been somewhat less enthusiastic. Criticism of it tends to fall into three main categories. Most historians concede that if a choice had to be made between the Toynbee sweep—an all-embracing comparative study of known civilizations—and a dry, merely factual report of one historical event after another, Toynbee's approach to history would be preferable. But the question is whether these are the only two alternatives. A second group of critics readily grants that Toynbee has an enviable store of unusual information about the various civilizations, but very seriously questions whether the facts he recounts bear out the conceptual superstructure in the light of which he interprets the facts. The most common form of criticism is, perhaps, for the historian to admit that Toynbee has given an impressive interpretation of all of human history except for the period in which the historian himself is a specialist; having made this concession, each historian-turned-critic proceeds to establish that in *his* period Toynbee is guilty of serious misrepresentation.

The cumulative effect of several of these last criticisms is disconcerting, as may be seen from a brief survey of *Toynbee and History: Critical Essays and Reviews* (ed. M. F. Ashley Montagu; Boston: Porter Sargent, 1956). Pieter Geyl, in two essays, vigorously suggests that Toynbee misrepresents modern European history by superimposing on it his particular conceptual scheme of genesis, growth, breakdown, and, possibly, disintegration. Rushton Coulborn judges that Toynbee's conceptual superstructure falsifies Egyptian and Mesopotamian history; W. den Boer seriously questions whether classical history itself bears out that conceptual framework which Toynbee drew from it and then applied to all other civilizations; Wayne Altree protests that Toynbee's treatment of Chinese civilizations is untenable. But it is Pitirim Sorokin who opens up the deepest criticism of Toynbee by suggesting that Toynbee's concept of the nature of civilization is itself defective. If Toynbee's very concept of civilization is as defective

as Sorokin maintains, then Toynbee's guiding principle is suspect; and if several parts of Toynbee's momentous architecture are open to objection, one feels uneasy about the whole structure.

Toynbee and History is not the only volume of criticism to appear. Another is Maurice Samuel's *The Professor and the Fossil* (New York: Knopf, 1956)—a scathing Jewish reply to Toynbee's treatment of the Jews, who are for him no more than "a fossil of an extinct Syriac Civilization that had come to be dispersed throughout the World" (*Study*, VII, 393; cf. VIII, 108, 274-275, 301, 599, 627). The effectiveness of this reply is dependent on Samuel's understanding of the term "fossil." Samuel interprets it to mean an uncreative or stagnant culture and proceeds to show that Jewish culture is anything but uncreative. But it may well be that by "fossil" Toynbee understands a civilization that never "had its day" on any significant geographical basis; a civilization that did not become ecumenical, having lost its message to mankind. The question whether Samuel has misunderstood "fossil" or not points to a telling weakness of Toynbee's, his unwillingness to define his key terms. The criticism of Toynbee by his peers has not left him unscarred, for in his last few volumes he is provoked to bitter jibes against his fellow historians—one of them a paragraph of forty-six pages in Volume 9.

As a historian, Toynbee presents several aspects to the critic; not the least of them is that of a philosopher of religion. In the last four volumes of his *Study* and in his *Approach to Religion*, Toynbee claims to have made a signal advance over his earlier concept of the relationship between civilizations and religions. In the first six volumes he held all civilizations to be "philosophically equivalent" and value judgments with respect to the various known civilizations to be invalid (*Abridgment*, I, 42-43). He held, further, that the function of a religion is to beget a civilization; in other words, a religion is to a civilization as is a means to an end.

On this view 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. A church would thus be part of the reproductive system of civilizations, serving as egg, grub, and chrysalis between butterfly and butterfly (*Abridgment*, II, 82).

Toynbee has now reversed that second position. Instead of religion being a means and civilization the end, he now considers religion the end and civilization a means. "Civilizations . . . have ceased to constitute intelligible fields of study for us and have forfeited their historical significance except in so far as they minister to the progress of Religion" (*Study*, VII, 449, 748). Since religion has now become an end and civilization a means, civilizations can no longer be "philosophically equivalent." Rather, one is better than another because of its greater efficacy in serving the "progress of Religion."

We shall have to think of the civilizations of the second generation as having come into existence, not in order to perform achievements of their own, nor in order to reproduce their kind in a third generation, but in order to provide an opportunity for fully-fledged higher religions to come to birth; and, since the genesis of these higher religions was a consequence of the breakdowns and disintegrations of the secondary civilizations, we must regard the closing chapters of their histories—chapters which, from their standpoint, spell failure—as being their title to significance. . . . The descending movement in the revolution of the wheel of civilization [is] the means of carrying forward the chariot of Religion (*Abridgment*, II, 87–88).

Some time, then, after 1939 and before 1954, Toynbee switched his position on the relationships between civilizations and religions, and he dutifully notifies the reader of that switch. But there is another, much more significant, change of position to which he calls no attention whatever. The unannounced change is this: In 1939, all civilizations were "philosophically equivalent," but religions by no means so; in 1954, civilizations were no longer equivalent, but all the higher religions of equal value.

In 1939, at the end of Volume 6 of his *Study*, Toynbee passed in review all of the higher religions, and all of the "saviours" they offer to mankind. He found that all "saviours with a sword," all "archaist-futurist saviours," all "philosopher-saviours," fell away as "shadows and abstractions" until there were left only the "saviours who have presented themselves as gods" (*Abridgment*, I, 534–545). Of this final group, only one, Jesus the Christ, fulfilled three conditions: He alone was the God of love; He alone faced death as a triumph of love, and not as a defeat; He alone had the power of resurrection, of passing through the river of death to rise, living, on the farther shore;

He alone was *the* Saviour. "At the final ordeal of death, few, even of these would-be saviour gods, have dared to put their title to the test by plunging into the icy river. And now, as we stand and gaze with our eyes fixed upon the farther shore, a single figure rises from the flood and straightway fills the whole horizon. There is the Saviour" (*Abridgment*, I, 547).

In 1939 Toynbee unerringly selected the same criterion with which St. Paul proclaimed the uniqueness of Christ and His message—the historically ascertainable fact of the resurrection of Christ. Nor did he stop at this. Under the general heading of "The Disintegrations of Civilizations" he wrote at that time a chapter entitled "Schism in the Soul." One of the symptoms of personal spiritual disintegration was then "the sense of promiscuity," one of the forms of promiscuity "syncretism in religion," one type of syncretism the attempt to make all the higher religions equivalent and amalgamate them into Religion (*Abridgment*, I, 473–482). Toynbee's position at that time was this: Christ is the *only* saviour; Christianity is the *only* true religion; any attempt to treat Christianity as equivalent to the other higher religions, any attempt at syncretism, is a sign of an inner schism, of a spiritual falling apart.

What is Toynbee's religious position today? Professor Toynbee is no longer a Christian; he is a syncretist. He says of himself: "If the writer were to be asked: 'Do you believe or disbelieve that Christianity or any other higher religion is an exclusive and definitive revelation of Spiritual Truth?' his answer would be: 'I do not believe this. I believe that any such claim is an error which is at the same time a sin'" (*Study*, VII, 428, n. 2). His great religious oracle is no longer Christ; it is the pagan Quintus Aurelius Symmachus. Opposing St. Ambrose, Symmachus said—and this is Toynbee's present motto: *Uno itinere non potest venire ad tam grande secretum*, "The heart of so great a mystery [as Absolute Reality] cannot ever be reached by following one road [one religion] only" (*Study*, VII, 428–429, n. 2; *Approach*, pp. 253, 297). To this Toynbee adds: "We cannot harden our hearts against Symmachus without hardening them against Christ. For what Symmachus is preaching is Christian charity" (*Approach*, p. 299). This is a doubly extraordinary sentence, for in it Toynbee links to Christ not St. Ambrose but St. Ambrose's pagan opponent; and then, having himself renounced the Christian faith, the very basis

of charity, he invokes Christian charity against the Christian faith.

A religious syncretist now, Toynbee holds that all higher religions are "variations on a single theme" (*Study*, VII, 428). In his *Study* of 1954, there were listed only four higher religions: Mahāyāna Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity, and Islamism; they corresponded to the types of human nature described by Carl G. Jung. In his *Approach* of 1956, there are seven higher religions: the four just mentioned plus Hīnayāna Buddhism, Judaism, and Zoroastrianism. Toynbee gives no reason for this sudden change, which almost doubled the number of higher religions in two years. Perhaps the criticism by fellow historians is responsible for the change, but Toynbee acknowledges no such debt. Having declared higher religions to be but "variations on a single theme," Toynbee adds: "If all the four [later seven] components of this heavenly music of the spheres could be audible on Earth simultaneously, and with equal clarity, to one pair of human ears, the happy hearer would find himself listening, not to a discord, but to a harmony" (*Study*, VII, 428).

How can seven different religions constitute harmonious variations on a single theme? Because there is "an endless series of successive avatars of God, bringing revelation and salvation to His creatures in successive cycles" (*Approach*, p. 136). It is only the human institutions known as churches which keep us from perceiving the complementary character of each of the four or seven higher religions. "Either the various churches and religions will snarl each other out of existence until no more is left of any of them than was left of the Kilkenny cats at the end of their strictly similar activities, or else a unified human race will find salvation in a religious unity" (*Abridgment*, II, 90)—a unity of Toynbeean syncretism.

The high point of Toynbee's syncretism is a litany to a motley company of "Saints," and this is its beginning:

Christe, audi nos.

Christ Tammuz, Christ Adonis, Christ Osiris, Christ Balder, hear us, by whatsoever name we bless Thee for suffering death for our salvation.

Christe Jesu, exaudi nos.

Buddha Gautama, show us the path that will lead us out of our afflictions.

Sancta Dei Genetrix, intercede pro nobis.

Mother Mary, Mother Isis, Mother Cybele, Mother Ishtar, Mother

Kwanyin, have compassion on us, by whatsoever name we bless thee for bringing Our Saviour into the World.

Sancte Michael, intercede pro nobis.

Mithras, fight at our side in our battle of Light against Darkness.

(*Study*, X, 143)

Such amalgamation of all gods and religions is identical with the Roman impulse that erected the Pantheon. There is nothing new here, only a reversion to a religious phase long past, an anti-historical archaism. In his effort to build a latter-day pantheon, Toynbee makes a great point of distinguishing between the essential and the accidental elements in a religion, proposing that the higher religions differ only in accidentals and agree in essentials.

In his eyes, the accidental features of any religion are its liturgy, or its power to sanctify; its law, or its power to rule; its theology, or its power to teach (*Approach*, pp. 280-284). Adherence to these accidentals, refusal to give them up, is, on the part of the churches, "a manifestation of the Original Sin which is another name for self-centredness" (*Approach*, p. 267).

The essence of religion, the great truths common to all the higher religions, are, according to Toynbee, reducible to four propositions: The universe is mysterious; there is a presence in this mysterious universe that is spiritually greater than man himself; man's goal is to seek communion with the presence behind the phenomena, and thus bring the self into harmony with Absolute Reality; a human self cannot be brought into harmony with Absolute Reality unless it abandon all self-centredness (*Approach*, pp. 274-275).

Such is for Toynbee the essence of religion. There is here no reference to God, but only to a metaphysical notion of absolute reality. There is no hint that absolute reality is personal; rather has it become, like all metaphysical notions, an abstraction. Every evidence is given that absolute reality is totally immanent in this universe, in no way transcendent. Toynbee has thus substituted the notion of natural being, in all its complexity and depth, for the living God. He has, in another instance of anti-historical archaism, reverted to nature worship, which he himself identifies as the beginning, the infantile stage, of religion (*Approach*, pp. 18-29). More surprising still, Toynbee identifies the essence of religion, for the sake of which all civilizations rise and fall, for the sake of which all history exists, with a few utterances

of elementary metaphysics and ethics. The proposition, for instance, that "the universe is mysterious" ought not be disparaged; it is the beginning—but no more than the beginning—of the metaphysical habit of mind. It is metaphysical rather than religious; so self-evident is it that we hardly need all the civilizations of man, all of history, to have it brought home to us. If history is for the sake of religion, and if Toynbee's propositions are the essence of religion, then history is the sum of futility.

Even a syncretist must account for the "accidental" differences between the four or seven higher religions. Toynbee explains them by declaring that religious truth is "poetic truth," an utterance of the subconscious psyche, and not of the intellect. What kind of "revelation" a man embraces, Toynbee suggests with some hesitation, depends on little else than his psychological type (*Approach*, p. 141).

The pinning-down of the Christian gospel in creeds, in which the words are used in the sense attaching to them in Greek metaphysics, is another instance of the attempt to translate the Truth of the Subconscious Psyche into terms of the Truth of the Intellect (*Approach*, pp. 123-124).

The same word "Truth," when used by philosophers and scientists and when used by prophets [that is, when used in a religious context], does not refer to the same realities but is a homonym for two different forms of experience (*Abridgment*, II, 97).

It [Religion] must be prepared to surrender to Science every province of intellectual knowledge, including those traditionally within Religion's field, to which Science might succeed in establishing a title. Religion's traditional dominion over intellectual fields had been an historical accident, and she had been a gainer in so far as she had parted with her dominion over these fields (*Abridgment*, II, 100).

So speaks again the ancient voice of Averroes as, a generation ago, it spoke through Santayana.

A few pages later Toynbee's religious approach comes to its climax by the identification not only of the subconscious with religion, but also of man with God.

If Science and Religion could seize their opportunity of drawing nearer to God by jointly seeking to comprehend God's protean creature, the Psyche, in its subconscious depths as well as on its conscious surface, what would be the rewards that they might expect to win, if success

were to crown such a joint endeavour? The prize would indeed be splendid, for the Subconscious, not the intellect, is the organ through which Man lives his spiritual life. It [the Subconscious] is the fount of poetry, music, and the visual arts, and the channel through which the Soul is in communion with God. . . . And the final objective, in striving to strike rock-bottom in the psychic cosmos, would be to attain to a fuller vision of God the Dweller in the Innermost (*Abridgment*, II, 102-103).

Elsewhere Toynbee is even more explicit in suggesting at least the possibility that man himself is God. Early in his *Approach to Religion* he writes: "This question whether Man in one or other of his less ungodlike forms is God, or whether the True God is to be found neither in Man nor in Non-Human Nature, was, and still is, one of the great issues confronting human souls" (p. 97). Near the end of the book he cites with approval an anonymous philosopher quoted by Pliny the Elder: "What is God? For a man, God means helping one's fellow-creatures" (p. 295). Hence Hans Morgenthau has well described Toynbee's religious position as "an eclectic idolatry, often blasphemous in man's self-identification with the deity" (Montagu, *Toynbee and History*, p. 198).

Such is Toynbee's present religious position—syncretism, immanentism, Averroism, and self-centered humanism. There is, in the Toynbee vocabulary, only one name for any opposition to his own syncretist position, and that name is "Judaic belief." His aversion to it is so extreme that he sees in it nothing but "self-centredness," "Original Sin," "self-idolization." Wherever there is firm conviction, be it true or false, good or evil, wherever there is the thought of a "chosen people"—no matter whether this people is seen as servant of God's saving will and messenger of His truth or as a master race, a new class, "destined" to rule the world—there is a "Judaic society."

Thus, in the Judaic societies [Judaism, Zoroastrianism, all forms of Christianity, and Islamism] Human Nature's innate self-centredness is consecrated by being given the blessing of a God who is held to be not only almighty but also all-wise and all-righteous. This formidable enhancement of self-centredness is an evil that is inherent in the belief that there is a "Chosen People" and that I and my fellow-tribesmen are It. . . . Communism and National Socialism [are latter-day Western ideologies], in which the Judaic belief in being a "Chosen People"

has been retained while the complementary Judaic belief in the existence of an Almighty God has been discarded (*Approach*, p. 13).

What is the philosopher to make of the Christian-Muslim-Zionist version of the Judaic belief, in which the unique and final peak in Space-Time is deemed to be already in the Past: Muhammad the *last* of the prophets; Jesus the *sole* incarnation of God; the return of Israel to Eretz Israel a *fait accompli* (*Approach*, p. 137)?

If a Church believes itself to be the sole repository of the fullness of revelation, this is due to its Judaic element, due to original sin, due to self-idolization (*Abridgment*, II, 116). "Judaic," then, is Toynbee's name for all that is contrary to his own religious position, the great fraternization of all believers, however different, in a new invisible church, the great confounding of all religious beliefs.

But this is not all. Not only the insistence on the exclusiveness of religious truth, but religious persecution too, whenever it occurs, is of Judaic origin. The Maccabean conqueror Alexander Jannaeus is thus said to have been the first religious persecutor in history. And when Christians persecute Jews, the poison at work is Judaic. Doubtless Toynbee is right, the jealous God admitting no rivals, the God who is consuming fire, is a biblical doctrine and thus a Judaeo-Christian heritage. In the ancient Israel was it taught, from the ancient Israel have we learned that the absolute God must be adored absolutely. But Toynbee is wrong in thinking that this absolutism must needs lead to persecution and war, that it is bound to beget hostility and exclude all respect for the followers of another faith. Wherever religious persecution occurs, it is not because of the alleged sinfulness of dogma but because of the real sinfulness of man. Persecution is a human, not a "Judaic" failing, to which the religious syncretist, the leveler of truth, is as little immune as the religious absolutist.

There is still another point in Toynbee's conception of the Jews. If Jews persecute Gentiles, then the normal operation of the law of cause and effect seems to make it inevitable in Toynbee's eyes that Gentiles will persecute Jews. But it is anything but inevitable that persecuted Jews should become persecutors—their suffering should have taught them better.

Of all the sombre ironies of history none throws a more sinister light on human nature than the fact that the new-style nationalist Jews, on the morrow of the most appalling of the many persecutions that their

race had endured [the Nazi genocide], should at once proceed to demonstrate, at the expense of Palestinian Arabs, whose only offence against the Jews was that Palestine was their ancestral home, that the lesson learnt by Zionists from the sufferings which Nazis had inflicted on Jews was, not to forbear from committing the crime of which they themselves had been the victims, but to persecute, in their turn, a people weaker than they were (*Abridgment*, II, 177).

This passage suggests that Jews, much more than non-Jews, are obligated to learn from persecution not to become persecutors; that Jews and Gentiles are bound by a different moral law. It states, further, that the Jews did not "forbear from committing the crime of which they themselves had been the victims"—genocide. But then, having said in the text that the Jews did to the Arabs what the Nazis did to the Jews, Toynbee adds in a footnote that what the Jews did to the Arabs was *not* parallel to what the Jews had themselves suffered in Germany. (*Study*, VIII, 288-291.)

A discussion of the Israeli-Arab war is beyond the scope of this review. Whatever the facts of that war may have been, it is hardly good scholarship to give an impression in the text and mitigate it in a footnote; even if the misery of Arab refugees were the fault of none but the Israelis, even if one utterly condemns, as one must, the isolated massacre of Arab men, women, and children at Dayr Yāsīn by Jewish soldiers run wild, it is hardly exact to imply that genocide and territorial displacement are "the same crime."

Toynbee's verdict on the Jews is, like so much else he has written, self-contradictory. His original criticism of the Jews, their basic sin, was that they rejected Christ as *the* Messiah (*Study*, IV, 263). But so does Toynbee today (*Study*, VII, 428, n. 2). Moreover, he now describes as "Judaic" the belief that Christ *is* the sole Messiah (*Approach*, p. 137). In the face of such contradictions there can only be silence.

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