

# “Civilization On Trial”

An Appraisal by

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Members of the historical fraternity approach the writings of Professor Arnold J. Toynbee in the spirit of the Apostle Peter: “Brother Paul . . . hath written some things hard to be understood.” The sentiment has been well expressed by the late Dr. Charles A. Beard in a review of vols. V and VI of Toynbee’s *A Study of History*:

It is highly doubtful whether any scholar in America, or any other part of the world, could control and check the enormous number of references to personalities, theories, events, and facts scattered through many centuries and over a large part of the earth’s surface. Nor will it be easy for readers to discover the meaning of such matters as Mr. Toynbee’s handling of contemporary communism in the light of the fate of other religious or philosophico-religious movements that have turned militant, for example, anti-Hellenic Judaism and Zoroastrianism of the Syriac world in the post-Alexandrine age or the militant Muslim-Hindu syncretistic religion of Sikhism. (*American Historical Review*, April, 1940, p. 594)

Dr. Beard put his finger on the principal difficulties when he added:

Any summary of Mr. Toynbee’s findings, conclusions, or reflection for the purposes of review is bound to be inadequate. Nor is it easy to discover and set forth the spirit and method of his procedure. His erudition is immense; he ranges far and wide in time and space; he employs literature in many languages; and he indulges in metaphors which elude mere positivists. Some fragments of imaginative metaphysics underlie the structures of his chapters, but it is scarcely possible to make a system of these fragments; nor does it appear that the author has made up his own mind on the point of the ultimate design of the universe about which he is speaking at great length. His erudition and his metaphysics, combined with metaphorical language and use of analogies, give a peculiar and elusive character to the whole. There is nothing like it in the English tongue. For a comparison it is necessary to resort to such works as Spen-

gler’s *Decline of the West* and Hegel’s *Philosophy of History*. Yet Mr. Toynbee’s erudition makes Spengler look like a petty sciolist, and his catholicity of thought makes Hegel’s dogmatism sound like the scream of a Prussian drill sergeant (Ibid., pp. 563-594)

It is the purpose of this article to survey Toynbee’s latest volume, *Civilization on Trial* (Oxford University Press, 1948), which is something of a condensation of his larger work, with a view to discovery whether in his study as a whole he may have something to say which is relevant to our contemporary understanding, not only of history, but also of the deeper human problem which history objectifies.

Truly Professor Toynbee’s erudition is immense. Beginning with the priceless heritage of a classical education, he has added to it wide, if not always deep, reading in the history of civilizations, religions, philosophies and nations. Much learning has not made him mad, but it has tempted him into formulating a philosophy - yea, both a philosophy and a theology - of history. He sees history repeating itself, not in specific events, but in a kind of cycle of birth, development and death of civilizations. Civilizations are born. If they meet challenges that are too great or too small, they become stagnant, or arrested. If, on the other hand, they meet those that are just right, they develop into universal civilizations before they disintegrate and give rise to other civilizations. In an early chapter of his recent collection of essays Professor Toynbee put his credo in these words:

Briefly stated, the regular pattern of social disintegration is a schism of the disintegrating society into a recalcitrant proletariat and a less and less effectively dominant minority. The process of disintegration does not proceed evenly; it jolts along in altering spasms of rout, rally,

and rout. In the last rally but one, the dominant minority succeeds in temporarily arresting society's lethal self-laceration by imposing on it the peace of a universal state. Within the framework of the dominant minority's universal state the proletariat creates a universal church, and after the next rout, in which the disintegrating civilization finally dissolves, the universal church may live on to become the chrysalis from which a new civilization eventually emerges. (*Civilization on Trial*, p.13)

But in a later chapter of the same collection he took issue with himself. One view of history, he thought, might consider Christianity, "as it were, the egg, grub, and chrysalis between butterfly and butterfly . . . a transitional thing which bridges the gap between one civilization and another." "I confess," he adds, "that I myself held this rather patronizing view for many years. (*Civilization on Trial*, p. 231) Then he explained his view: "There will be no reason to suppose that Christianity itself will be superseded by some distinct, separate, different higher religion which will serve as a chrysalis between our present Western civilization and the birth of its children." Rather "the truth is the other way round . . . civilization may break up, but the replacement of one higher religion by another will not be a necessary consequence. So far from that, if our secular Western Civilization perishes, Christianity may be expected not only to endure but to grow in wisdom and stature as a result of a fresh experience of secular catastrophe." Another suggestion is that "The Christian Church as an institution may be left as the social heir of all the other Churches and all the civilizations." (*Civilization on Trial*, pp. 238-240)

Theologians and perhaps most historians will find it easy to agree with this last prediction of Professor Toynbee, however much they may question the tortuous reasoning that led him to it. They will be interested in the question that he raises. If, when the ephemeral societies of the civilizations of the past six thousand years culminate in "a single worldwide and enduring representative in the shape of the Christian Church," "would

it mean that the Kingdom of Heaven would then have been established on Earth?" Toynbee's answer is an emphatic "No!" The "reason lies in the nature of society and in the nature of man." "Unless and until human nature itself undergoes a moral mutation which would make an essential change in its character, the possibility of evil as well as good will be born into the world afresh with every child and will never be wholly ruled out as long as one child remains alive. This is as much as to say that the replacement of a multiplicity of civilizations by a universal church would not have purged human nature of original sin." And, says Professor Toynbee, "this leads to another consideration: so long as original sin remains an element in human nature, Caesar will always have work to do and there will still be Caesar's things to be rendered to Caesar, as well as God's to God, in this world." (*Civilization on Trial*, pp. 240-241)

Critics can point out, and some have, errors of fact and interpretation that cast doubt on Professor Toynbee's "thesis of the parallelism, and philosophical contemporaneity of civilizations." Even novelist Kenneth Roberts has devastated the conclusions drawn from a comparison of Maine with other parts of New England. ("Don't Say that about Maine," *Saturday Evening Post*, November 6, 1948) Psychologist Abram Kardiner has been even more cutting in his analysis of Toynbee's "views and methods," (*Scientific American*, August, 1948, pp. 58-59). It would be easy to tear apart the parallels drawn between North Carolina and her neighbors on either side. Latin Americanists find objections to the conclusions drawn from the history of the Incas and the Mayas, and from the history of Spain's expansion over seas. As Dr. Beard had indicated, no scholar is specialist enough in all fields of history to check the errors of fact and interpretation in Professor Toynbee's whole works, but each in his small corner, is beginning to tear apart the philosophy of the most-talked-of historian philosopher of the moment.

I should like to lay criticism aside and thank Professor Toynbee for reminding us that we must look beyond the changing boundaries of individual states to the essential unity of civilization. The civilization of the United States cannot be understood even by a study of the history of the United States and England. The whole field of Western civilization is too small for the purpose. We must transcend that and turn to Greece, Rome, Persia, Syria,

Palestine, yea, we can scarcely omit any of them that have gone before. It is a hopeful sign that Professor Toynbee reminds religious thinkers that man is not essentially good, that in our efforts to bring in the millennium by good works, we must not lose sight of the fact that "original sin" is still with us and will be as long as one member of the human race inhabits this globe.