

Review: Toynbee the Prophet

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## TOYNBEE THE PROPHET

BY PIETER GEYL

The last four volumes of Arnold Toynbee's great work have been issued from the press. I confess that at the sight of those 2500 closely printed pages, duly provided with diagrams and tables, my heart sank. But it was inevitable that I should have to find my way through that strange and yet familiar country. Everybody seemed to expect it of me, and I could not refuse reviewing the volumes.

Once I had overcome my initial reluctance I found myself fascinated. The system of the six volumes which I tried to analyze eight years ago<sup>1</sup> is now practically discarded, but the new system springs naturally from it, and if the pretence of a scientific argument leading up to a rationally irrefutable conclusion has been rendered by the change patently absurd, I was never taken in by that pretence so that the spectacle of this subtle mind deceiving itself in so naive a manner was nothing new to me. In spite of that my weariness was shot through with feelings stronger than irritation this time, but also I could not help feeling an admiration—again familiar!—bordering on amazement or awe, for the tremendous intellectual energy which has not flagged under the crushing task of twenty-seven years and which goes on throughout this long and sustained argument juggling with the events, the crises, wars, revolutions, state-formations, religious manifestations of all centuries and all races, drawing effortlessly (or so it seems) on libraries of books in I don't quite know how many languages. If one could only accept the work as a collection of stories, and glimpses of life, and dissertations on aspects and problems, from the history of the world, what a mine of curious and out-of-the-way information (I know that by that word "out-of-the-way" I betray myself as the confirmed "parochial" Westerner I am), what flashes of insight, what instructive juxtapositions even,—what learning, what brilliance!

But in the author's mind it is all subordinated, and intended to contribute, to a system, a message. It is on the relation that the details bear to the system and the message, and on the system and the message themselves, that the work must be judged. The change which these have undergone (as I already hinted) only brings out their nature more clearly. Reading these volumes has confirmed me in the views expressed in my earlier criticisms; it is all as I said it was, only more so.

Toynbee's thinking is revolutionary, "metaphysical" in the sense in which Burke used that word, abstract. To my view, this is as much as to say, unhistorical. For all his wealth of detail, and although the spectacle of the particular obviously interests him in some detached part of his far from simple mind, he is never for one moment captivated by it; not for

<sup>1</sup> "Toynbee's System of Civilizations," originally a paper read for the Annual Meeting of the Utrecht Historical Society and published in its *Jaarverslag*, 1946; reprinted in *Tochten en Toernooien*, 1950; in English in this *Journal*, IX, (1948); reprinted in *The Pattern of the Past* (Boston, 1949). [See below, p. 275 f.n. 1.—Ed.]

one moment does it free him from the obsession of his dream. His dream is the unity of mankind in the love of God. Or rather, his dream is to participate in that loving vision and to see it approach realization. He has pretended to "investigate" the phenomena of communal life, within the framework of "civilizations," throughout the course of history. In reality he is the prophet revealing that one, to him all-meaning, idea and trying by his revelation, accompanied by warnings and denunciations, to contribute to its glorious and blessed consummation.

As for me, I am not speaking against the love of God, although I have no doubt that to Toynbee I must appear to be doing so. What I criticize and oppose is, first of all, the pretence of an empirical investigation.

When I wrote my earlier criticisms on the strength of the incompleting work, this was the aspect that thrust itself most prominently upon the attention and that is why I still give it pride of place. Yet, after my exposure of "fallacious arguments and spurious demonstrations"<sup>2</sup> in the first six volumes, it will be hardly necessary to examine particular passages from the four new ones for the purpose of showing up their insufficiency from the point of view of "scientific" (as Toynbee loves to say), or simply rational, argument. It is enough to say that these new volumes are, when considered from this angle, a further instalment of the same maddening profusion of vastly learned examples, stated in an attractive or impressive, but frequently slipshod, fashion and *proving* exactly nothing. It is enough—and yet I shall give three instances, which will at the same time enable me to make a transition to the second objection I have to offer to the work as a whole.

In describing the plight of contemporary Western civilization (post-Modern, in his jargon), Toynbee mentions the trade-unions. They were, he says, an outcome of the spirit of Freedom, intended to resist the regimentation consequent upon the new industrial conditions. Unfortunately the trade-unions led to the workers regimenting themselves and so we are left with a self-defeating contradiction.—I shall not deny that there is a grain of truth in this observation, but if the matter is left there it is no more than a half-truth like many others forming the stock-in-trade of the cheapest political clap-trap. Yet Toynbee, without saying a word about the improvement of material conditions or about the building up of political power, does leave the matter there and imagines that he has now presented us with another fact by which to judge, and of course to condemn, the present state of our civilization.

Extraordinary (but one learns, when reading these brilliant and self-assured dissertations on everything under the sun, to be surprised at nothing) is Toynbee's appreciation of the extermination of the Jews by the National-Socialist regime. Of course, he abhors it. Yet he places the policy of evicting Palestinian Arabs from their homes, to which the Government of Israel resorted in 1948, on a par with it; at least he describes

<sup>2</sup> *From Ranke to Toynbee, Five Lectures on Historians and Historiographical Problems*; Smith College Historical Studies (Northampton, Mass., 1952); "Toynbee Once More; Empiricism or Apriorism?"

this as a more heinous sin than that committed against the Jews, at divers times in the past, by Nebuchadnezzar and Titus and Hadrian and the Spanish and Portuguese Inquisition, for these were not sinning against the light that God had vouchsafed them. As for the National-Socialist Germans, "on the Day of Judgment the gravest crime standing to their account might be, not that they had exterminated a majority of the Western Jews, but that they had caused the surviving remnant of Jews to stumble" (VIII, 290/1). I have personally always regarded the Zionist adventure with misgivings, but is it possible to discuss its unfortunate consequences with a more complete lack of balance or with less sense of proportion? And what is it that has moved the writer to this amazing outburst against the Jews? It is neither the love of God nor a scientific survey of the world's history as a whole. It is his hatred of nationalism in every shape and form. Because nationalism, even when it means no more than the recognition of the fact of nationality, a basic fact in the life of civilizations, is to him merely a stumbling block on the road to his idolized unity.

My third instance has to do with a question even more directly connected with the view taken of Western civilization at this moment.

"It will be seen," says Toynbee (IX, 502), "that Hitler's eventual failure to impose peace on the World by force of arms was due, not to any flaw in his thesis that the World was ripe for conquest, but to an accidental combination of incidental errors in his measures for putting into execution a nefarious grand design that, in itself, was a feasible scheme for profiting by a correctly diagnosed psychological situation. A twentieth-century World, that had thus, in A.D. 1933-45, been reprieved, thanks only to a chapter of lucky accidents, from a fate which Mankind's patently increasing defeatism and submissiveness had almost provocatively invited, could hardly count upon any future would-be world-conqueror's being so clumsy as to let the same easy prey escape for the second time . . ."

"It will be seen." This refers to the preceding two pages in which the Hitlerian attempt and its failure had been described, and it is, as usual, a gratuitous assertion that this description must carry conviction to the mind of the average unbiased reader, for, also as usual, the facts had been marshalled in accordance with the writer's pre-conceived conclusion. "Thanks only," "patently," it all comes out of the bag of tricks, not of the scholar, but of the orator out to persuade or, if need be, to bluff. Toynbee *will* have it that we were ripe for conquest and he *will* have it that we are more so now. He *will* have it that Western civilization is doomed, and indeed, why should he care? Western civilization means nothing to him.

I know the weaknesses of the position of the West as well as anybody. I shall not prophesy that it will be able to beat off another attempt to overthrow its badly organized independence. Toynbee is sure that in any case a World Government will be forced upon us by the dangers inherent to atomic warfare. I shall not dispute the possibility, not even the likelihood, of a development in that direction, but the tone of indifference in which Toynbee discusses the future fate of the "parochial states" under a world

dispensation is significant. He only remarks in passing that these *peritura regna* (their doom is a matter of certainty) "might be ostensibly preserved instead of being overtly liquidated" (IX, 409). I should have thought that from the point of view of Western civilization, or of civilization, the point of view one could still think that he took when only the first volumes of his *Study* were available, the alternative here stated is one of vital importance, although in fact it cannot be said to have been fully or fairly stated unless a third possibility is added: preserved for more limited purposes.

But there is to me one dominant conviction to be affirmed when viewing these large possibilities hidden in the impenetrable future, namely that even in the worst case of a direct overthrow by some world-conqueror on the Hitler or Stalin pattern Western civilization will prove to have sufficient moral and intellectual reserves to continue the struggle for existence and will survive.

I know that I am not now speaking as a historian, although my reading of history comes comfortingly to my support. I am speaking as a son of that Western civilization in which I believe and which I love, and I should consider it base treason to accept with acquiescence this sentence of ignominious extinction which Toynbee, wrapt in his dream of world unity, passes over with so light a heart. Here come into play feelings which Toynbee has throughout his immense work ignored, and he now gives more patent evidence than ever that he is constitutionally unable to recognize their existence.

They do exist nevertheless. I remember the summer of 1940, when Holland had just been occupied by the National Socialists and when after the defeat of France the war seemed to hold out very little prospect for the one ally still holding out. There were many Dutchmen then who urged us to judge the facts coldly and realistically and to draw the inevitable conclusion, however unpalatable, that we were in for a period in which Germany would rule Europe if not the world. "We shall have to come to terms," they said; "the Dutch people must live." And at the same time many Frenchmen were saying the same. But there were many others who refused to accept the evidence because they were judging the situation by a faith. And these men felt that they must so judge, that this was the sacred duty laid upon them by the hour. Why should not there be such men again, in every country of the West, if the trial came to be imposed upon our world once more? "Mankind's increasing submissiveness and defeatism" may be patent to Toynbee, and indeed he sets an example of these weaknesses by so blatantly proclaiming them. But there will be resisters upheld by a more manly faith, and as long as there are, it will be premature to talk about the dissolution of Western civilization.

This, then, is the second reason why, after my initial reluctance, I feel an irrepressible urge to testify against this false witness and indeed to criticize and oppose a system productive of such pernicious counsels.

Western civilization, I said, means nothing to Toynbee. This is a new development (although by no means a new departure) in his mental attitude towards his subject, and it must be more closely examined.

The preface to the seventh volume, that is, the first of the four now published, is illuminating on the point. According to the scheme drawn up as long ago as 1927-9, this volume deals with Universal States and in a second part with Universal Churches. When he was at liberty to resume his interrupted task in 1946 the writer, so he tells us, felt constrained to recast his notes.

"The world around me and within me had, indeed, met with a number of challenging and transforming experiences in the course of the nineteen years and more that, by the summer of A.D. 1946, had already passed since the first of the original notes for the book had been written." He then mentions "further discoveries in the field of Archaeology," but also "the horrifying practical demonstration of the moral depths to which the heirs of a Christian civilization were capable of dragging themselves down"; besides, there was the work of the psychologists and that of the atomic physicists. "An Einstein and a Rutherford, a Freud and a Jung, and a Marshall and a Woolley, as well as a Gandhi, a Stalin, a Hitler, a Churchill and a Roosevelt, had been changing the face of the Macrocosm." But moreover: "my inner world had been undergoing changes which, on the miniature scale of an individual life, were, for me, of proportionate magnitude."

We shall see in a moment that the resultant change in the structure of the system was a momentous one; the whole view of the significance of civilizations is modified. First, however, a somewhat disturbing reflection, but which does not seem to disturb Toynbee, imposes itself. Does it not follow that the empirical investigation as set out in the first six volumes had not, after all, led to any reliable conclusions about the laws of mankind's historic life, with the help of which the future might be forecast? This was the purpose for which we were assured that investigation was undertaken. Toynbee is still convinced that he can tell us something about the future. He admits the speculative nature of all predictions, he is careful not to be dogmatic either about the period needed for the process or about the exact modalities. Yet the twenty years between 1929 and 1950, so he repeats when starting in his twelfth Part to deal with the Prospects of Western Civilization (IX, 406 seq.), make it possible for the historian to speak with much greater confidence about the inevitable merging of parochialism into universality. The Wall Street collapse, the break-down of France, on the whole "the experience of twenty-one sinisterly illuminating years" makes "relatively sure prediction" (IX, 400) possible.

It is startling to see with how little ado the author himself brushes aside the labor devoted to his first six volumes, and in effect bases his concluding wisdom on his observations of the world's vicissitudes during the last twenty years, observations such as are indeed the source of innumerable pronouncements on our condition and our prospects in newspaper articles,

political speeches and sermons. To these experiences common to his generation must, in Toynbee's case, be added, to explain the views he is now expounding, changes in his own inner world. So he admits in this same preface to volume VII.

*Habemus reum confitentem.* I said eight years ago that the study of history cannot supply us with forecasts having universal validity. Toynbee's refreshingly frank confession now implies agreement with that view. I say "implies" for in spite of his refreshing frankness he does not go so far as to admit that his work is not really the scientific investigation for which he has all along tried, and is in the face of his change of front still trying, to pass it off.

What does this change in the writer's inner world amount to? Mr. Martin Wight, who read the chapter on Universal Churches before publication and whose remarks are printed in the book—sometimes but not always having caused the author to modify his text—, expresses in an Annex his profound gratitude as a Christian critic to Toynbee for having "abandoned (his) original judgment that all civilizations are philosophically equivalent and for having found that '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'" (VII, 748). But although grateful, Mr. Wight is not entirely satisfied. Toynbee, while distinguishing religions into higher and lower, is not prepared to grant to the Christian religion a unique place of pre-eminence. "The writer of this study" (as he puts it, for he always uses the third person to describe himself) "ventures to express his personal belief that the four higher religions that were alive in the age in which he was living were four variations on a single theme, and that, if all the four 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" (VII, 428).

Mr. Wight would be completely satisfied only if the writer had come to the conclusion "that the higher religions in their turn cease to be intelligible fields of study and forfeit their historical significance except in so far as they are related to Christianity." It is instructive to see that the admiring critic wants to confine the concept of "historical significance" within still narrower bounds than Toynbee in his changed state of mind is willing to do. Even to him, nevertheless, civilizations are no more than "the handmaids of religion" (VII, 445), and he writes, for instance, that "we have to think of the civilizations of the second generation" (e.g., the Babylonian, the Syriac, the Hellenic, the Indic and the Sinic), "as having come into existence, not in order to perform achievements of their own, and not 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 in the secondary civilizations' histories—break-downs which, from their standpoint spell failure—as being their justification for existence and their title to significance” (VII, 422).

The consequences for his appreciation of Western civilization are set forth uncompromisingly in the Part on its Prospects in volume IX. The change of heart subsequent upon the completion of the first six volumes led him to discover, as we saw, that the civilizations, between which he had until then assumed a philosophical parity, were unequal. This, by the way, is how he puts it himself: he found them to be unequal “*as a matter of historical fact* on the evidence of an essay in which the touchstone had been the part played . . . in the history of Religion”. Can anything be clearer than that the selection of that touchstone was an arbitrary decision, governed by personal or subjective feeling, and that the slipping in of the words “*historical fact*” is therefore an act of naïve, but very characteristic, presumption? When the civilizations were (on that test!) found to be unequal, “the result was,” says Toynbee, “not to reexalt the Western civilization to the pinnacle on which it had once been placed by a naïvely vulgar native Western egocentric prejudice.” By comparison with, for instance, the Indic and the Hellenic civilizations which had given rise to, respectively, Hinduism and Christianity, “the Western civilization and its contemporaries of the third generation had been ‘vain repetitions of the heathen’ (Matth., VI, 7),” and this time he has the grace to add: “from the standpoint of an observer who saw the guide-line of History in a progressive increase in the provision of spiritual opportunities for human souls in transit through This World” (IX, 411).

Western civilization does not, it will now be realized, interest Toynbee; I should perhaps add: any more. It is for this reason that he is ready with so much complacency to insist on its defects and weaknesses. He proves to himself, by doing so, his freedom from that “blight of egocentricity,” which “had been the nemesis of an act of *hybris*”; from that “intellectual effect of Original Sin.” What he seems to overlook entirely is that it is *his* civilization, and *our* civilization, and that he and we can work and think to any purpose only on the lines issuing from it. This is no reason to ignore what has been or is being wrought and thought outside it (in fact no civilization has been so catholic in its interests as this Western civilization which Toynbee singles out for the reproach of egocentricity); it is no reason either to exalt it above others (and in so far as we are apt to indulge in that somewhat sterile habit it is good to be reminded of the special virtues of other civilizations); but it *is* a reason why we are perfectly justified in giving it special and loving, though not uncritical, attention; indeed, this is one of the conditions for creative work in the present, and one of the tasks of history as I understand it is to entertain a living sense of tradition.

Toynbee, however, tries to escape into a non-existing world unity, which he sees as God's idea and purpose. The energy with which that concept



has inspired him is impressive; it is indeed almost superhuman. But his vast, global knowledge of history has tempted him into what strikes me as a prideful and sinful, an inhuman and at times slightly ridiculous ostentation of detachment from his own heritage, to which his work nevertheless owes so many of its most admirable traits.

Often one cannot help suspecting the detachment of being spite masquerading as detachment, so incredibly biased is his treatment of Western civilization when he comes to discuss its prospects. Every sign of crisis or of decadence, every flaw, every incidental infidelity to its professed principles, is by him eagerly displayed as evidence of its approaching dissolution. On the other hand there is hardly more than a grudging word, now and then, about its positive achievements. And indeed, how can one make much of these when the last four centuries at least are regarded as "a vain repetition of the heathen"? The great European thinkers and poets and artists and scholars serve Toynbee to decorate his pages or to strengthen his ideas; but as far as his estimation of Western civilization is concerned they might as well never have existed. The scientists, of whose contribution he makes so much use in his explanations and interpretations, are never valued for what they helped to make of Western civilization; the atom bomb seems at times to outweigh all their merits.<sup>3</sup> The great advance made during that period in the countries of our civilization in the matter of social security and material prosperity (which also have their importance when it comes to "spiritual opportunities"), in humanity coupled with more stable order and more equitable law, weighs as nothing in his scales. The deficiencies in these respects of the centuries when civilization had in Toynbee's view a more real significance are ignored or condoned. The study of history is not to concern itself with men as they lived and strove. The system requires that it should all be viewed and "assayed" by the one test which Mr. Arnold J. Toynbee discovered a few years ago: religion.

Western civilization can hardly expect to pass with honors when it is called before an examiner to whom neo-paganism, beginning with the Renaissance, suddenly blossoming out in the eighteenth century, has no other than the negative significance of a departure from the one vital principle of the West, Christianity. Toynbee consistently refuses it any value or any strength of its own, except for evil. A high-powered enormity, the Abomination of Desolation, are some of his names for it, and he holds it responsible for the deadly menace of a third world war waged with atomic weapons. "But this appalling prospect was merely the unveiling of a goal towards which a secularized Western Society had been heading ever since it had erupted out of a medieval *Respublica Christiana*." Can the simplification, and one might say distortion, of history be carried farther? The *Respublica Christiana* was never more than an aspiration.

<sup>3</sup> He has, it is true, a passage where he distinguishes between the beneficent possibilities inherent in a knowledge of the laws of nature and the destructive effects due to human sin: IX, 172.

The people of the Middle Ages waged war, without atomic means it is true, but with no less ferocity for that, every day of their lives. And neo-paganism has as little to do with the atom bomb as has Christianity or Buddhism or Mohammedanism. A world in which all these spiritual states are mingled together is striving to avert the disaster with which the purely mechanical intrusion of this wonderful as well as awful invention is threatening it; more cannot be said in A.D. 1955 than in A.D. 1950.

But neo-paganism is Toynbee's butt. Occasionally, in so far as he can represent it as a pale reflection of the religion which it denied, he will condescend to say something for it. As to admitting that among its adherents, too, there may be allies for the building up of a firm defense against the deadly dangers with which he sees our civilization threatened,—never! In this single-minded judge of the civilizations' view, it would be absurd to look for moral strength in any principle divorced from positive religion.

Toynbee loves to talk about humility; "a contrite humility the first of the Christian virtues," he reminds us on the very last page of his *Part on the Prospects* (IX, 644). He rejects Mr. Wight's plea for a recognition of the Christian religion as (to use Toynbee's own words) "possessing a monopoly of the Divine Light," and he rejects it on the ground that in making such a claim, "a church seems to me guilty of hybris" (VII, 428, footnote). But in making the claim on behalf of the four higher religions collectively, or on behalf of his own personal conviction supported by ten volumes of eloquent and biased interpretation of history, it seems to me that he makes himself no less guilty of hybris.

I give one instance of the demagogic fashion in which the impression of Western civilization being undermined by neo-paganism is supported. Toynbee quotes a long passage from Frazer's *Golden Bough*, in which the Renaissance is described as the period marking the weakening of "the obsession" with "a future life" and "the return of Europe to native ideals of life and conduct, to saner, manlier views of the world. The long halt in the march of civilization was over. The tide of Oriental invasion had turned at last. It is ebbing still" (VII, 384). It is a passage which bears the mark of the time when it was written, fifty years ago. But now listen to Toynbee's comment.

"It was indeed still ebbing when the present lines were being written on the 4th March 1948, and, in the act, the present writer was wondering what that gentle scholar would have had to say" if he had lived to see "some of the ways in which Europe's 'return to native ways of life and conduct' had manifested itself" since. Frazer, Toynbee asserts, has been proved to belong to "the last generation of Western neo-pagans of a rational, unenthusiastic, tolerant school . . . By A.D. 1952 they had been swept off the field by demonic, emotional, violent-handed successors who had suddenly emerged, unheralded, out of the unplumbed depths of secularized Western society. The words of Frazer had been reuttered by the voice of Alfred Rosenberg with a different ring."

But is Alfred Rosenberg now in occupation of the field from which he has swept these gentle scholars? Is Western Civilization really dominated

by National-Socialist theories of race and culture? One might also ask: Has no non-secularized civilization ever known outbursts of human devilry?—and recall the Crusade against the Albigeois, or the Inquisition (which when he wanted to belabor Jewish nationalism was excused by Toynbee because the Inquisitors naïvely believed themselves to be carrying out the behests of religion), or the Anabaptists, or the burnings of witches. But the point I want to make here is that once again we see Toynbee making capital of the National-Socialist aberration at the expense of Western civilization. To me it seems the height of irresponsibility to speak as if in the Western world at large the spirit of Frazer had been ousted by that of Rosenberg. But it is all grist to Toynbee's mill.

Once one has grasped the spirit and purpose of the last instalment of the great work, one feels that demonstrations of fallacious arguments, of perversions of the significance of historical data, or of their complete irrelevance for the thesis, demonstrations which seemed worth attempting in connection with the first six volumes, have indeed become utterly superfluous. These volumes, especially VII and VIII, again testify to the enormous learning of the writer. Only, learning, even when assisted by an acute mind and a sensitive as well as powerful imagination, is not enough to produce history. What is needed, unless all the rest is to go for nothing, is an attitude of mind from which Toynbee's is as far removed as can be.

The historian should take an interest in his subject for its own sake, he should try to get into contact with things as they were; the men and their vicissitudes should mean something to him in themselves. I do not mean that the historian should not have a point of view, that he should be indifferent to the problems of his own time; nor that he, having a point of view, and caring about the present and the future, should try to tell about past events as if they bore no relation to either. But when a man comes to the past with a compelling vision, a principle, or dogma, of such magnitude and emotional potency as Toynbee's unity in the love of God; with a system which causes him to reduce the multitudinous movement of history to one single, divinely inspired current, and to judge civilizations and generations by one single criterion, rejecting most of them, and incidentally his own, as unimportant; that man can write a work full of color and striking theories, glowing with conviction and eloquence, but no history. The *Study of History* is no history. The Student of History, as Toynbee calls himself, may know more of history than I shall ever do, but he is no historian. He is a prophet.

There has never been any love lost between prophets and historians. Toynbee devotes a paragraph of 46 pages of a chapter on Law and Freedom in History (vol. IX) to criticizing and ridiculing Modern Historians as a class, and as the air resounds with the scornful reviews that historians are writing of his last volumes<sup>4</sup> (I was the first in the field in 1946, but I have

<sup>4</sup> I have read the front page article (anonymous) of the *Times Literary Supplement*, 22 Oct. (1954); articles by A. J. P. Taylor in *The New Statement*, 16 Oct.; Geoffrey Barraclough in *The Listener*, 14 Oct.; Hugh Trevor-Roper in *The Sunday Times*, 17 Oct. Only Noel Annan in *The Manchester Guardian Weekly*, 21 Oct.,

long lost the feeling of doing something adventurous or audacious), it might seem that we are quits. Historians, however—I believe that, although an interested party, I am stating an objective truth—have a better understanding of the rules of the game of polemics than prophets. And at any rate, this attack on the Modern Historians and their Antinomianism is a piece of very spirited, but at the same time very questionable, polemics.

Toynbee in this chapter maintains, not only that the course of history is governed by laws, but that these laws can, and therefore should, be discovered and defined. He had of course long been aware that modern historians regard this thesis with suspicion and are on the contrary accustomed to stress the infinite complexity and intangibility of the factors of the historical process; and he had also found that they were inclined to criticize his practical attempts in the *Study of History* as utterly unconvincing. So he now denounces them wholesale as purblind worshippers of technique and *minutiae*, indifferent to the great problems of the present and the future, and deaf to the call to action, which is the essence of Life (X, 35).

There are, no doubt, and always have been, historians whom this description fits. But when applied to the profession as a whole it is no more than a caricature. Because we do not swallow Toynbee's generalizations and systematizations, are we to be charged with lack of interest in the meaning of the facts of history? Because we try to solve problems of less world-wide proportions on the basis of a close attention to the sources, do we bury ourselves in technique? I need only point to the work of the three English critics of Toynbee mentioned in my footnote 4 to confound that ill-directed counter-attack. Are we not interested in the world around us, are we not aware that our scholarship has a function in civilization or society at large to fulfill? The very criticisms levelled against Toynbee are often inspired by that feeling: these grandiose and impassioned, wrong-headed and one-sided prophesyings and pronouncements offend against the spirit of scholarship which the scholar must feel it to be his first duty by the community to uphold.

The real truth of the matter is, of course, that there is an incompatibility between Toynbee's mental attitude towards the past and that of "the historians." They would not care if he wrote as a prophet, but they feel that the best traditions of their profession are insulted when the prophet poses as a historian. I have already indicated the difference. It is not only, not in the first place even, the looking for laws, the generalizations, even the faulty reasonings, that offend; it is the vision itself in which every age and every civilization is judged by a standard foreign to it and its importance restricted to what it contributed to the progress of an arbitrarily chosen principle. The historian believes that history can enrich the civilization of his own age especially by trying to enter into the habits of thought and the relationships of past generations and that only thus can

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takes the work seriously and seems to regard the strictures passed on it by "the academic" or "professional" historians with distrust.

these be understood. He believes, too, that the discipline of transferring oneself into strange surroundings and states of mind has in itself an educative, a broadening, a moderating influence, which should be a valuable component in the spiritual life of his own community. To see a self-styled historian reducing the whole of the wonderful and mysterious movement of history to one single motif, rejecting whole centuries as uninteresting, forcing it all into the scheme of a presumptuous construction, strikes him as going against all that history stands for. This spate of moral judgments, too, this highly-strung sense of impending disaster and contempt for vital currents of thought, does not seem to the historian "humble," it denotes a hectoring and censorious attitude towards the social phenomena which to him seem an integral part of life, to be explained, but, with life, to be accepted first of all. The modern historian, in other words, is intellectually the descendant of Burke<sup>5</sup> rather than of Rousseau; with Toynbee it is the reverse. His speaking of modern historians as taking refuge from larger views in the sands of technique is therefore doing less than justice to the far-reaching philosophic difference involved.

In his more direct defense of his thesis about historical laws Toynbee is little more to the point. Here too he follows a well-known, though far from admirable, method of debate. The only professional historians whom he permits to state the case which he intends to demolish, do so in a way which few of us will accept as a fair representation of the position. (One marvels, by the way, at the insularity, or parochialism, of Toynbee's reading on the subject: both the historians quoted are British, and so are most of the other modern writers mentioned in this chapter either in support or for refutation. No notice is taken of the important German contributions to the theory of history.)

H. A. L. Fisher's saying that there can be no generalizations, and that the main thing is to recognize in the development of human destinies the play of the contingent and the unforeseen, is patently an overstatement. E. L. Woodward, on the other hand, took up a somewhat too apologetic attitude when he argued that for "a final synthesis" "the difficulty at present is that the *data* are insufficient." The real and permanent difficulty is rather that the *data* are so unmanageably abundant. The chance is too good for Toynbee to be missed and he pokes fun at adversaries who excuse themselves with two diametrically opposed pleas. But in the meantime he fails to advance any effective arguments against the really serious objection.

It is true that he deals with it at some length, but the argument, when examined, turns out to consist of an assertion, endlessly repeated in that inexhaustible wealth of language and of metaphor which he has at all times at his disposal, and enveloped in scientific and biblical and mythological allusions and parallels. The assertion is that the complexity by which historians allow themselves to be paralyzed is of their own making;

<sup>5</sup> One might, of course, also mention Ranke and his famous dictum about every epoch being immediate to God.

it is the result of their own nihilistic technique. "While the shivered splinters had become unmanageably numerous and complicated, the intact bones remained intelligibly few and simple . . . . The significant known integral events in the history of Man in Process of Civilization were, not awkwardly abundant, but awkwardly scarce" (IX, 210), (until new archaeological finds added to their number).

An amazing statement! There is, to begin with, the familiar confusion in Toynbee's mind as to what constitutes a historical fact. He qualifies his "known events" in this passage by the words "significant" and "integral," but apparently without realizing that he thereby introduces a speculative or subjective element, which must make all generalization on the basis of these *data*, not valueless, but uncertain and hypothetical. And the bones of the structure of history simple! If any work is apt to make the reader doubt the truth of that bold assertion, it is Toynbee's *Study of History*. For the feeling created in the mind of the beholder by the picture drawn even by this "terrible simplificateur,"<sup>6</sup> is one of bewilderment. One searches one's way desperately through this jungle of arguments, metaphors, digressions, hypotheses, one tries to follow the eloquent (at times one is tempted to say, loquacious) demonstrator, but inevitably one loses the thread. The non-sequiturs and the contradictions, the far-fetched comparisons, the dizzying assumptions, are too confusing. And if conclusions are all along drawn with that glowing conviction, with that unshakeable self-confidence, one feels that they spring from another source altogether than that of the preceding exposition, which has seldom succeeded in covering up the unruly and indomitable complexity of historical reality.

The simplifications are at their most "terrible" in the Tables (at least they are nowhere so glaringly patent. One of Toynbee's laws is the recurrence in history of a War-and-Peace Cycle in so many phases. In a table on p. 255 of volume IX he shows these phases—"Premonitory Wars (the Prelude), The General War, The Breathing-space, Supplementary Wars (the Epilogue), The General Peace"—in an Overture and four Regular Cycles between 1494 and 1935. It looks beautifully "simple." I shall say no more than that I have rarely seen a more arbitrary juggling with the known facts of history.

Toynbee, meanwhile, also holds up to the historians the example of the sociologists and the economists, and twits them somewhat laboriously for ignoring the activities of these searchers for laws in human affairs. He never mentions the fundamental difference presented by history, which deals, not with one more or less confined and homogeneous sphere of man's communal life, but with the whole of it. It is not only the large number of data (all this talk about the "shivering" or "splintering" effect of "technique" and archival research is largely beside the point), but their belonging to the most diverse and mutually incomparable spheres, including that of events, which makes it so difficult to embrace them all in one fixed and balanced survey. In fact, even the sociologists in their restricted sphere are not finding it easy and are becoming cautious.

<sup>6</sup> Jacob Burckhardt, *Weltgeschichtliche Betrachtungen*.

Toynbee's indictment of the historians, then, is a disappointing performance. But the worst remains to be said of this chapter in which he tries to dispose of them. It is that, while obviously seething with resentment, he limits his counter-attack to this more spectacular than solid exposition in the field of theory and avoids coming to grips with the concrete criticisms made against his earlier volumes. The proof of the pudding is in the eating. These theoretical discussions have their importance, but after all the theory in the world I should try to preserve an open mind when someone comes along with a work of even suspiciously large synthesis, and judge it on its merits. It is what I did with Toynbee's six volumes in 1946, and if in the end I rejected them, it was not because they offended me in any dogmatically held theory, but because I had found them wanting.

Toynbee makes an allusion to the essay I then wrote, when he says that "these distracted latter-day Western historians were appalled" by "the novel universe of an incomprehensible complexity," which they had conjured up themselves, and which "made the sheltering sands of technique look like the only practicable refuge from the mental hell of being compelled to play an eternal game of croquet with the unmanageable implements prescribed for the luckless players of the game in Lewis Carroll's fantasy *Alice through the Looking-glass*." It was indeed to that game with continually changing and unexpectedly moving implements (the description occurs, by the way, in *Alice in Wonderland*) that I had compared the method of *A Study of History*, and the comparison still seems to me a very apt one. But no other reference to my criticisms is to be found in Toynbee's defense, and I am not alone in thinking that his position is untenable unless he refutes a good many of my precise and cogent demonstrations of the fallacies and inconsistencies and misinterpretations to be found in his "empirical investigation."

This is a good deal more than a question of "technique." If the historical foundations, which Toynbee assures us securely support his theories about the destinies of civilizations, are proved to be unsound, as I believe that I have proved them to be, the whole imposing structure becomes a dream-like fantasy—not unlike (since Toynbee has reminded me of the parallel) the Wonderland through which Alice wandered, with, I must say (and in so far the parallel seems to be defective) her critical faculties very much awake.

But I am afraid that it is too late in the day to issue an express challenge to Toynbee to prove that, for instance, his reading of nineteenth century Italian history, which according to my demonstration<sup>7</sup> did not warrant the conclusions he built upon it, was right after all; or to do the same for his reading of North-American history, which I argued was hopelessly wrong, so that his laws and large theories fell to the ground.<sup>8</sup> He has missed the opportunity afforded him by his chapter in volume IX to respond to the challenge implicit in my earlier essays, and he is less likely to

<sup>7</sup> Cf. *The Pattern of the Past*, 41-50; see f.n. 1 above, p. 260.

<sup>8</sup> *From Ranke to Toynbee; Five Lectures on Historians and Historical Problems*, 71-5.

respond to it now than before. He dwells in a world of his own imagining, where the challenges of rationally thinking mortals cannot reach him. Prophets will at most traduce and scoff at their critics. As to showing that their critics are wrong, why should they? They know in their inmost hearts that it is they who are right.

And indeed, prophets have experiences which more earthbound scholars cannot hope to share. In the little intellectual autobiography which is to be found in volume X (and which is from more than one point of view absorbingly interesting) Toynbee relates how on seven occasions, all carefully dated and located, he was momentarily "transported" or "rapt into communion" with historic events or historic personages, generally connected with the outlandish place where he happened to find himself. One of these memorable experiences stands out from the rest. "In London, in the southern section of the Buckingham Palace Road, walking southward along the pavement skirting the west wall of Victoria Station, the writer, once, one afternoon not long after the end of the First World War . . . , found himself in communion, not just with this or that episode in History, but with all that had been, and was, and was to come. In that instant he was directly aware of the passage of History gently flowing through him in a mighty current, and of his own life welling like a wave in the flow of this vast tide" (X, 139).

The book and the man have an importance altogether apart from the achievement or failure in the realm of history or of scholarship. I suppose that a later student of history will regard them and their immense, though unevenly distributed, popularity as a curious portent of our times. Is it not remarkable, for instance, that Toynbee's admirers are to be found, not only among Christians, like Mr. Wight, but among typically "neo-pagan" and at the same time neo-Marxist scholars like Professor Romein of Amsterdam, who took the chair when Toynbee delivered at The Hague the lecture on "World Unity and World History" which I had shortly before heard him deliver in London. The religious garb can apparently be quietly removed and the preaching of the idol Unity, which is, Moloch-like, to devour national traditions, attract a man stricken with a craving for what his friend, the Amsterdam philosopher Pos, has dubbed: "universalist solidarism."<sup>9</sup>

If I have in this essay almost wholly confined myself to destructive criticism, the reason is not that, as I put it before, there is no love lost between prophets and historians. The prophet can be to the historian an exciting and a moving subject. The reason is rather, not only that this prophet usurps the name of historian, but especially that I regard his prophecy as a blasphemy against Western Civilization.

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<sup>9</sup> A shrewd remark on Romein and the mentality that comes under the spell of *A Study of History* will be found in J. G. Renier, *History, Its Purpose and Method* (1950), 118.