

Book Review

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Book Review

CIVILIZATION ON TRIAL. By Arnold J. Toynbee. Oxford University Press, 1948.

What kind of an estimate can be put on this, the latest work of the famous historian?

In part it consists of theological discussions so fine spun as to be reminiscent of the age of the Schoolmen.

Like Sorokin's "Reconstruction of Humanity", it is a call for spiritual improvement. But the methods of these two authors and their points of view are far apart. Toynbee believes that we have in us today about as much of the old Adam as did our Neanderthal ancestors (248, 255). He concludes that the Kingdom of Heaven will not be established on earth (241).

Individuality, he says, is a great "pearl", but this individuality is not that as usually understood but it is the individuality of the "soul" (254, 255). His idea of progress therefore is not the individual working for the social development of communities. The individual in making progress for the improvement of his own soul thereby as a by-product improves social life on earth (247, 251).

²¹ RESTATEMENT, PROPERTY (1940) Sec. 162, Sec. 166.

²² *Supra*, n. 14, 118.

²³ *Supra*, n. 14, 119. See also RESTATEMENT, PROPERTY (1940) Sec. 162 where the rule is stated.

The whole effort of the individual is directed towards his passage to the other world through the doctrine of redemption. Yet the endowments of human beings "with original sin and with natural goodness will be about the same on the average as they always have been".

Again redemption will also be the lot of those in the ancient pagan civilizations which did not have the religious opportunities now present (248, 251).

From the above it would seem to follow that there has been little, if any, spiritual progress and that those who knew nothing of the Christian Doctrine of Redemption and perhaps did not practice the Christian virtues will nevertheless achieve passage to the other world. It is an argument which is hard to follow and understand.

Though Toynbee believes in free will he views mankind as static in a spiritual sense and as having at all times about the same content of original sin. This is certainly an unhappy view.

Sorokin urges the use of will power to lead us into better paths. Croce, who is no religionist, is firm in the view that we do make spiritual progress and that the principle of liberty animates all of the activities contributing to this progress.

All through Toynbee's argument goes the thought that man can only improve spiritually by "suffering" (141, 235, 249, 258).

"God's purpose in creating this world was to provide an opportunity to mankind for training through suffering during passage from this world to the other world."

What does Toynbee mean by suffering? Is it that we will suffer because in order to be redeemed we must force ourselves to give up those things which we as human beings desire?

Without more of an explanation on this point Nietzsche's harsh criticism of Christianity as the cult of suffering would seem to have some justification.

Christ sympathized with and comforted the lowly and the oppressed who were neglected by the Hebrew hierarchy of that time. But he did not advocate a cult of suffering.

These views of Toynbee are far from satisfactory and certainly cannot add to his stature as a thinker.

Toynbee points out how parochial is the view of those of us of the Western races who are now dominant in the world and hints that this may be but a temporary condition and that the East may again be dominant (18, 61, 63, 77,

83, 89, 126, 150, 159, 171). But the reasons he gives for this suggestion are not impressive.

One is "the extinction of race consciousness as between Muslims"—which he says is a crying need everywhere. The other is Islam's ban on alcohol (205, 206). The Islamic world was first lead by the Arabs (184, 218, 220) and afterwards by the Turks (186).

The two opposite pulls among these peoples today are Zealotism which holds on to the past and Herodianism which seeks to understand and to adapt itself to the tactics and weapons of Islam's rivals in the West (184).

The complete break made by the Turks with their past, even in part in religious matters, is well described. It is Herodianism in full blast (196). But such an attempt is "mimetic" and not creative (198).

In an industrial and materialistic sense it is hard to see how the Eastern races can ever have the drive to accomplish what has been done in the West. That they took over such things from the West rather than develop them naturally puts a heavy handicap on them.

After suggesting the spiritual conquest of the world by Islam, Toynbee makes an about-face and says that the West is not only superior industrially but—"above all in spiritual culture, the inward force which alone creates and sustains the outward manifestation of what is called civilization" (187).

Yet Sorokin in his "Reconstruction of Humanity" lists in the most impressive way the evidence to show that, at present, we of the West have sunk to our lowest point spiritually.

Again I must add that though Toynbee is a famous historian his thoughts are far from clear in some of the major points made in this his latest work.

Much more interesting is his discussion of the spread of Greek thought and life and of the founding of the great monotheistic religions when contact was made by the Greeks with the East. In the time of Augustus, the Graeco-Roman world looked longingly back to the classic age in Greece and neglected Hellenistic culture (45).

In this connection reference is made to the great work by John Pentland Mahaffy (called the greatest man in Dublin of the time) in his book entitled, "Greek Life and Thought". The Greeks lacked any real religious thought but when Hellenism came into contact with the East two great monotheistic religions resulted. The Christian religion came into being as a fusing of Greek and Syrian

thought (49, 53, 75, 76, 84, 87, 94, 155, 156, 202, 219, 235). And Buddhism was a fusing of Greek and Indian (Mahayana) thought (73, 100, 203, 219).

This part of Toynbee's book is full of historical and religious interest and will no doubt be fruitful in suggesting fields for further labor on the part of other scholars.

Chapter 12, "Christianity and Civilization" is one of the most interesting chapters in the book. It is especially so because the author, I understand, is a member of the Church of England. Here he takes up the suggestion of the further development of the Christian religion through contact with Eastern thought and especially—"by the infusion of Chinese philosophy into Christianity" (239).

And from this, he says, "What may happen is that Christianity may be left as the spiritual heir of all the other higher religions" (240). Yet he is firm in his view that this will not mean that the Kingdom of Heaven will then have been established on earth.

The nature of man with his original sin remains about the same and therefore there must be a church with not only the spiritual appeal but with the institutional strength sufficient to discipline its members and to survive, no matter what the conditions may be. He says therefore that the Catholic Church—"in its traditional form thus stands forth armed with the spear of the Mass, the shield of the Hierarchy and the helmet of the Papacy—" and may well outlast—"the toughest of the secular institutions of this world, including all the civilizations."

In this connection it is interesting to read in the Virginia Historical Magazine for July, 1948, a review of "Virginia's Mother Church" of which the Rev. George MacLaren Brydon is the author. The review was written by President Walter H. Stowe of the Church Historical Society, New Brunswick, New Jersey. Dr. Stowe takes sides with Commissary James Blair who undertook to establish Ecclesiastical Courts in Virginia to bring erring clergymen and laymen to book and the feeble discipline of the Episcopal Church is referred to.

With reference to the Catholic Church, it is interesting to read the views of Benedetto Croce in his "History as the Story of Liberty". "Our history (he says) is the history of our soul and the history of the human soul is the history of the world." Again he says, in the middle ages a new spirituality was achieved through Christianity and the people were gradually called to the—"deepest life of the soul". But he is critical of the Catholic Church with its

“systematic conversion of piety into a mechanical complex of beliefs and laws—” leading to the mystifying of—“the intellects and oppressing the wills of men”.

Another important and interesting part of this book discusses “Holy Russia” as the heir to the Greek Orthodox Church. Moscow succeeded Constantinople as the home of the Orthodox Church and that church, it is important to know, has always been subordinate to the State. This Chapter 9, “Russia’s Byzantine Heritage” is one which we should study carefully.

It is paradoxical to envisage the atheists, Stalin and Molotov as the leaders of a movement called “holy”. Yet we should be warned of the deep feeling of the Russian people for Russia and how this feeling can be played upon and used by those in control.

Toynbee says, “It will be evident that this sense of orthodoxy and sense of destiny which have been taken over by the Russians from the Byzantine Greeks are just as characteristic of the present communist regime in Russia as they were of the previous Eastern Orthodox Christian dispensation there” (172).

In the early middle ages the salient features of Byzantium were—“that Byzantium is always right and the institution of the totalitarian state” (173). That sense of superiority and rivalry towards the West still persists and it is a definite danger. Unlike the development in the West the church there is virtually a department of the state.

“In this Byzantine totalitarian state the church may be Christian or Marxian so long as it submits to being the secular government’s tool” (179, 182). Hence we seem to confront a ruthless and atheistic secular power in control of a vast horde of patriotic people, many of whom are Orthodox Greek religionists who are inspired by the love of “holy” Russia!

A few items remained to be jotted down. Does history repeat? Croce is emphatic that it does not though Vico and Burchardt whom he admired thought it did. Toynbee’s view apparently is that civilizations do rise and fall in cyclic movements. He plays with the words “may” and “must” (30). He is not a determinist but believes in free will (27, 39, 63, 88).

“It looks as if the movement of civilizations may be cyclic and recurrent while the movement of religion may be on a single continuous upward line. The continuous upward movement of religion may be served and promoted

by the cyclic movement of civilizations round the cycle of birth, death, birth" (29, 236, 244).

Here again he suggests that it is through "suffering" that our vision is enlarged and—"it is the historical function of civilizations to serve by their downfalls as stepping stones to a progressive process of the revolution of always deeper religious insight"—(15, 236). This thought just quoted however is appended to an "if".

After reading Justice Douglas' recent address at the University of Florida, extolling democracy as the answer to all things, it is refreshing to note the author's view. "Democracy is another leaf from the book of Christianity, which has also I fear been torn out, and while perhaps not mislead has certainly been half emptied of meaning by being divorced from its Christian content and secularized" (236).

And Croce is dubious of plans to improve the world by economic reforms. He says that even if matters improve because of economic reforms—"evil has not for that reason been rooted up, it remains in the heart in its ancient or in some newer form. It cannot be conquered with economic means but solely with moral means".

We come at last to "Social Justice" and to the author's curious appeal for it (26). Technology, he admits, has progressively improved the material lot of the masses and indeed anyone who has read Ortega's "Revolt of the Masses" knows that (25). He adds that man cannot live by bread alone, which is true.

Then like most Englishmen he harps on the "classes" and winds up by saying that modern man's "soul" is not cured because of the unequal distribution of goods. And that I say is the crassest kind of a materialistic argument and nowhere does he suggest that the cure of souls would be helped by a philosophy of learning how to do without so many material things.

His argument is confused and contradictory and such so-called thinking is at the bottom of much of our modern unrest. He is certain that—"the regular pattern of social disintegration is a schism of the disintegrating society into a recalcitrant proletariat and a less and less dominant minority" (13). And this minority is the Western middle class (21).

So of course he wants to start us gently on the way to socialism—"in economics it would be something that was neither unrestricted private enterprise or unmitigated socialism" (27, 29, 41, 145, 148).

But every step into socialism is certain to result in cutting down production and in adding to the power of the State, i.e. the politicians. The result therefore of the author's suggestion would be to make it more difficult to distribute the smaller quantity of goods fairly or otherwise.

If we assume that we can hold some sort of a middle ground and not have "unmitigated socialism", it is hard to see where we benefit at all. But the great probability is that we will start to slide and at last like the Gadarene swine rush down the hill into the Hell of the police state.

The wise men, with a knowledge of the past, who framed our constitution, sought to divide the powers of government. The states were given a large part of the total power and the doctrine of the separation of the powers in the Federal Government was a further separation of power. Our constitution as it was expounded by the Supreme Court protected both private property and personal liberty. Yet in our time we have seen the great edifice of our constitution completely shattered. The Federal Government first took over much power from the States, the Federal Congress then by blank check appropriations, and other devices transferred a large part of its power to the President.

At last we look back to the ancient times in Greece which had been studied by our constitutional fathers and we are reminded of the words of Polybius who said that man, apparently the wisest, is really the silliest of all animals because he is always being deceived by the same snares and devices, they still have their effect and delude men as perfectly as if they were never used before. Shades of Lord Acton?

A proper educational system ought to help enlighten our people so they can get a true grasp of the realities. But our public schools have made no progress whatever in such enlightenment. Public school teachers are employees of the State and it seems to be natural for them to suppose that the political entity called the State can supply all the needs of the people.

As for the churches, instead of inspiring their members with the Christian spirit they too are dabbling in politics and always along socialistic lines. The whole dreary story is one of confused economic thinking on the one hand and the failure to improve the moral character of our people on the other.

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