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TOYNBEE AND SUPER-HISTORY

Judged by low standards, *A Study of History* is an impressive and often interesting work. Judged by the standards which color Toynbee's judgment and have molded his performance, it is supercolossal: a cast of thousands, ranging from churches and civilizations to the author and his family; ten volumes¹ compared to Spengler's two; and forty-eight pages of "Contents," no more analytic than the text but mystifying and titillating. Here is, as it were, a screen larger than Cinemascope, and above all entertainment coupled with religious significance and based on lots of research. This research, to be sure, does not preclude amazing oversights and errors, but the author is not writing for the historians who have by now roundly condemned his work.²

For whom does he write? He writes for posterity, for generations centuries hence who will read him after all the other writers of our time have long been forgotten. Again and again he takes posterity into his confidence with words like these: "As for the writer's use of the traditional language . . . he might say, for his readers' information, that his regular and deliberate practice was to continue to employ traditional language unless and until he could find new words that seemed to him to express his meaning more clearly and more exactly. In the writer's day the resources of language were still utterly inadequate" (VII, 421). But can the inadequacies of Toynbee's style really be blamed on "the writer's day"?

Sir Ernest Barker judges that Toynbee "writes English almost as if it were a foreign language, in long periodic sentences, with one relative clause piled on, or dovetailed into, another"; and he adds: "The

1 Vols. I-III, first published in 1934; IV-VI in 1939; and VII-X in 1954, all by Oxford University Press. Price for vols. VII-X: \$35.00. Vol. XI, still to be published, will contain maps and a gazetteer, and vol. XII "'reconsiderations' (*retractationes* in Saint Augustine's usage of the Latin word)."

2 Pieter Geyl in *Journal of the History of Ideas*, January 1948 and April 1955; A.J.P. Taylor in *The New Statesman*, Oct. 16, 1954; Sir Ernest Barker in *International Affairs*, January 1955; and *The Times Literary Supplement*, Oct. 22, 1954, among others.

reviewer found himself tempted, again and again, to break up and re-write the long rolling cryptic sentences: in particular he found himself anxious to banish . . . the 'ornate alias,' and to substitute, for instance, the words 'St. Paul' for 'the Tarsian Jewish apostle of Christianity in *partibus infidelium.*'" And A. J. P. Taylor, the Oxford historian, remarks that "adjectives are piled on with all the ruthlessness which the Egyptians used when building the pyramids."

If we considered Toynbee as in the main a poet, such criticisms of his style would certainly be pertinent; but is he not really a historian? The enormous difficulty of doing justice to Toynbee is due to his determination to mix genres. If you find fault with him as a historian you are likely to be told that he is really a social scientist who is a pioneer in a new field and out to discover hitherto unknown laws; and it is only when his method has been shown to be a travesty of science that apologists are apt to say he is a poet.

Today "integration" is popular, and its many spokesmen in our colleges sometimes overlook, as does Toynbee, that there is no special virtue whatever in a fusion of fanciful history with unsound science and poor poetry, even if it is spiced with ever so frequent references to God. The fallacy here is exactly the same which leads some people to suppose that five invalid proofs of God's existence are better than one valid proof. The answer to this infatuation with quantity has been given long ago in one of Aesop's fables: when a vixen boasted of the size of her litter and asked the lioness about the size of hers, the lioness replied: *hen alla leonta*—one, but a lion.

Let us then consider Toynbee first as a historian. I shall give two examples of his inadequacy, which could be multiplied at random; both are selected to obviate the objection that I am merely pitting my view against his or dealing with abstruse and remote incidents about which it is easy to make some small mistake. In both cases the author is dealing with material that is well known to millions of his contemporaries; and both demonstrate that he lacks the conscience of the sound historian.

Example 1: Part X deals with "Contacts between Civilizations in Time" and is subtitled "Renaissances." On the first five pages we are told, with a wealth of metaphor, analogy, and simple repetition, that "in using the word *renaissance* as a proper name, we have been allowing ourselves to fall into the error of seeing a unique occurrence in an event which in reality was no more than one particular instance of a recurrent historical phenomenon. The evocation of a dead culture by the living representatives of a civilization that is still a going concern proves

to be a species of historical event for which the proper label is, not 'the Renaissance,' but 'renaissances.'” There follows “A Survey of Renaissances” in which these turn out to be a particularly repulsive form of necromancy—a word that is used scores of times, together with the metaphors which it invites. After Toynbee’s indictment has taken up “Renaissances of Political Ideas, Ideals, and Institutions”; “Renaissances of Systems of Law”; “Renaissances of Philosophies” (five and a half pages on China and two and a half on Aristotle); and “Renaissances of Languages and Literatures” we finally do get to “Renaissances of Visual Arts” and *our* Renaissance. At this point I wonder how Toynbee will make good his indictment. You want to see what Toynbee will have to say about Leonardo, Michelangelo, Titian, and a dozen others. But he can’t quite spare five pages for “Renaissances of Visual Arts”; and though he indicts the Italian Renaissance, he simply does not mention Leonardo, Michelangelo, Titian, or the other great painters and sculptors of the period.

I should not dream of challenging Toynbee’s right to dislike these artists and should certainly find an intelligent critique much more to my liking than a conventional appreciation. As it happens, Toynbee is not at all interested in them, and in his whole ten volumes he has absolutely nothing to say about any of them. This too is his privilege, though it certainly diminishes his competence as a student of Western Civilization and raises grave doubts about his critique of renaissances—especially “of visual arts.” But what is irresponsible and unjustifiable to my mind is that he should support his indictment of the Italian Renaissance by passing over in silence what does not readily fit his case.

The second example of Toynbee’s lack of the historical conscience may be found in his discussion of “Contacts between Civilizations in Space (Encounters between Contemporaries)” which constitutes Part IX of his work. I shall confine myself to section 5: “The Modern West and the Jews.” He begins not with the modern West but with antiquity and after that spends some time on the Jews in Spain under the Visigoths and later under Muslim rule. This discussion should be most interesting, seeing that Toynbee had committed himself to all sorts of implausible theses in his earlier volumes: we must make civilizations the unit of study, he had said, because unlike nations they can be studied in isolation from each other; Western Civilization and Islam are two civilizations which are autonomous in this sense, and the Jews are a fossil (the word is his) of a third, so-called Syriac, civilization. What, then, will Toynbee make of the apparent fusion of these three civilizations? What will he say about Jehuda ben Halevy, Gabirol, and Mai-

monides' relation to scholasticism? Alas, he does not as much as mention any of them. He might of course plead that he is mainly concerned with "The Modern West and the Jews," though in view of his implausible theses he ought to say something about events which seem to refute them so clearly. What, then, does he have to say about Spinoza? Again, not a single reference in 334 pages of indices. Perhaps Spinoza is not modern enough. What happens when we come to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries? What will Toynbee say about the remarkable behavior of this fossil after the emancipation, about the scores of Jewish scientists and thinkers, about the way in which the Jews suddenly entered into Western Civilization and made major contributions? Nothing, absolutely nothing. If medieval Spain does not fit his scheme, he ignores it; and if the Jews are a living refutation of his theories, attack is the best defense.

Toynbee tries to establish the word "Judaical," mainly by using it in this fashion, as a synonym of "fanatical" (by way of contrast with "the gentle and unaggressive ethos of Christianity"), as when he speaks, for example, of "a series of anti-Jewish enactments of a Judaically fanatical ferocity"—enacted by Christians, of course. Toynbee likes to use the epithet "Judaical" for elements of Christianity of which he does not approve. If this prejudice, however unworthy of a historian among all people, is at least common, Toynbee also suggests again and again that "Jew" and "businessman"—not to use a less polite term—are synonymous. This, coupled with his failure to mention in this context a single Jewish scholar, scientist, poet, philosopher, or artist, amounts to a grotesque falsification of history and a complete perversion of the relations between "The Modern West and the Jews."

When he finally comes to "The Fate of the European Jews and the Palestinian Arabs, A.D. 1933-48" and his thesis that "On the Day of Judgment the gravest crime standing to the German National Socialists' account might be, not that they had exterminated the majority of the Western Jews, but that they had caused the surviving remnant of Jewry to stumble," he shows as much contempt for history as any Hollywood director ever did. It is not the merits of Zionism that are at issue here. An intelligent and honest indictment always deserves a hearing, though what one has the right to expect from a historian is first of all an honest account of what happened. Such an account should make us understand what we previously failed to understand; it should enlarge our horizon and affect our prejudices and valuations.

Does Toynbee explain the origin of Zionism with which he deals at great length? Decidedly not. But it is one of the great oddities of his

work that he prints, in footnotes and appendices, critical comments by scholars who have read parts of his manuscript—and again and again these comments invalidate the text but are left standing without any reply by the author. In the present instance, James Parkes, a Gentile student of anti-Semitism, throws more light on the origin of Zionism in three lines on page 294, not to speak of his two-page "Annex," than does Toynbee in his daydreams and sermons in the text.

I am not advocating a pedestrian approach. A historian should put himself into the place of the men whose decisions he discusses and ask himself what went on in their minds—but naturally after having first used all the available data as the necessary context and clues. Toynbee, however, ignores the most relevant data; and for the sake of his system or sermon he spurns them even after Parkes has called attention to a few of them.

There is no reason why Toynbee should know a great deal about Zionism or Judaism; but as long as he does not, why does he insist on writing about both at such great length? The indices of volumes VI and X (which take care, between them, of all but the first three volumes) contain over four columns of references to the Jews, and a column apiece about "Judaism"—but not a single reference to Hillel or Akiba, not to speak of lesser men or such contemporary representatives as, for example, Buber.

Actually, the name of Hillel is mentioned once in Toynbee's indictment of Zionism: "The image and superscription of this new human coinage was not Hillel's but Caesar's." But a few sentences later, on the same page (311), he pontificates: "This mystical feeling for an historical Eretz Israel, which inspired the Zionist pioneers with the spiritual power to move mountains, was entirely derived from a diasporan orthodox theology that convicted the Zionists of an importunity which verged upon impiety in their attempt to take out of God's hands the fulfillment of God's promise to restore Israel to Palestine on God's own initiative." Clearly, Toynbee does not know one of Hillel's most celebrated dicta: "If I am not for myself, who will be? And if I am for myself only, what am I? And if not now, when?" Nor does Toynbee see the weakness of his own conception of religion which would indeed turn it into a mere opiate by so unhesitatingly divorcing God's initiative from man's.

What is most unjustifiable is surely Toynbee's report to posterity about what happened in Palestine after the British left. In the text he gives the impression that the Jews did to the Arabs precisely what the Nazis had done to the Jews. In a footnote he belatedly admits that "the cold-blooded systematic 'genocide' of several million human be-

ings . . . had no parallel at all in the Jews' ill-treatment of the Palestinian Arabs." But they deprived of "their homes and property" and reduced to the status of "displaced persons" some 684,000 Arabs. In a note this figure is qualified and the Jews are blamed only for 284,000; but these "expulsions," we are told, "were on the heads of all Israel." Did they occur during a war or in the midst of peace? Toynbee does not say, but throughout he gives the consistent, if fantastic, impression that the Jews attacked innocent Arabs to vent the aggressive feelings accumulated during their own persecution by the Nazis. That any Arab had ever fired a shot on a Jew in Palestine before 1948, or that the Arab states had declared war on Israel the moment the British had left their former mandate, and that the Jews were fighting a war in self-defense against armies pledged to exterminate them to the last man, woman, and child—all that is not only not mentioned but brazenly denied by implication.

Judged by high standards, what the Israelis did may well deserve censure, as does, perhaps, our systematic bombing of civilians toward the end of World War II, not to speak of Hiroshima or, worse, Nagasaki. But those who are fighting for their life and liberty can at least plead extenuating circumstances. What can the historian plead who willfully falsifies the history of events with which no man required him to deal?

So much for the historian. Surely, A. J. P. Taylor is too kind when he says: "Professor Toynbee's method is not that of scholarship, but of the lucky dip, with emphasis on the luck." But in a recent note on "What I Am Trying to Do," in the same issue of *International Affairs* in which Sir Ernest Barker offers his strictures, Toynbee tells us: "One of my aims in *A Study of History* has been to try out the scientific approach to human affairs and to test how far it will carry us."

What he proposes to show, as is well known by now, is that some twenty-odd civilizations exemplify certain patterns in their development. Taylor has suggested that Toynbee's scheme was, in fact, a generalization from classical antiquity: "If other civilizations failed to fit into this pattern, they were dismissed as abortive, ossified, or achieving a wrong-headed *tour de force*." This criticism is valid as far as it goes, but it does not bring out the full enormity of Toynbee's method.

In the first place, Toynbee's anthropomorphic conception of civilizations is superstitious: the question how many civilizations there are is like asking how many sciences there are, and the question when a particular civilization originated is on a level with the query when art began. Worse still, the conceit that civilizations are not only individual

entities but the only units which can be studied historically one at a time, without referring beyond them, is the height of naiveté. Only a few completely isolated societies can be studied thoroughly without reference to other societies; but any unit whatever, whether a civilization, a nation, a city, a university, or a railroad can be made the object of a historical study in which outside entities are introduced as sparingly as possible. Specifically, no "Syriac Civilization," for example, ever existed, though it may possibly be convenient in some contexts to lump together the many kingdoms that existed between ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia and to give them some such name as this; but this fictitious civilization could hardly be studied very fully without reference to its two mighty neighbors. It should be added that the untenable thesis that civilizations are the only self-contained "intelligible fields of historical study," which Toynbee had argued with much rhetoric and little logic on the first fifty pages of volume I, is quickly, though not pointedly, abandoned at the beginning of volume VII.

Secondly, if you want to verify the presence of a certain pattern in the geneses, growths, breakdowns, and disintegrations of twenty-odd civilizations, the scientific approach would seem obvious. You have to consider your twenty-odd items in turn, admitting frankly where we either lack sufficient evidence or find what does not fit our pattern. But Toynbee spurns this approach. He finds his illustrations in nations and individuals, in Goethe's *Faust* and the New Testament; and he is not beyond illustrating the genesis or growth of a civilization from the fate of a nation, or even a small part of a nation, such as New England, during a period when the civilization to which it belonged was, according to Toynbee, breaking down and incapable of any further growth in any of its parts. His procedure, in short, is unsystematic and inconsistent in the extreme. In this manner no historical laws could possibly be established, even if there were any.

Toynbee's delight at finding several examples of this sort which fit, or seem to him to fit, into his scheme is generally increased by their waywardness. Thus he shows for some seventy pages how civilizations grow, by finding examples of "withdrawal and return" in the lives of Philopoemen, Leo Syrus, Ollivier, Clarendon, Ibn Khaldūn, Kant, and Hamlet, among many others. This sort of thing pleases him so much that he forgets altogether that, to take a single example, Kant, who perhaps lived a withdrawn life, never returned. That students went to Königsberg, which he had never left, is hardly a return; but if it were, what would this prove about the pattern of the growth of civilizations?

That illustrations of this kind could be adduced at random for any

theory or pattern whatsoever, Toynbee does not realize any more than that a truly scientific approach would require him to go out of his way to deal specifically (1) with evidence which on the face of it appears to contradict his theories, and (2) with rival constructions of that evidence which, as *he* construes it, does fit.

Consider Part VI, on "Universal States," with which the last four-volume batch begins. It contains a lot of miscellaneous data, but no survey at all of Toynbee's twenty-odd civilizations. Instead of taking them up one by one, Toynbee offers such chapter headings as "The Doom of Tithonus" and "The Price of Euthanasia." To be sure, in this case he also offers a "Table" of "Universal States," reprinted without change from volume VI. Now this table had been criticized some years ago by Pieter Geyl in a brilliant essay on the fatal flaws of "Toynbee's System of Civilizations"—an essay which was reprinted in a book, *The Pattern of the Past*, together with the text of a debate between Toynbee and Geyl. Geyl is passed over in silence in the last four volumes. The only major critic with whom Toynbee deals at length, in a very amusing "Annex" which, however, shows no understanding at all of his critic's position, is R. G. Collingwood. But to return to the fatal Table: Geyl had called attention not only to the triteness and vagueness of Toynbee's so-called laws but also to the startling fact that, according to this Table, there was universal peace in Western Europe from "A.D. 1797-1814," and in the area of "The Danubian Hapsburg Monarchy A.D. 1526-1918." Yet Toynbee did not see fit to revise these claims; his system takes precedence.

Confronted with this sort of thing, it has become customary to say that Toynbee is really a poet. But is not that rather like saying that Cecil B. De Mille is a poet? The Napoleonic wars don't fit, so Toynbee rewrites history. And how much De Mille there is in such a sentence as this: "In the field of encounters in the Time-dimension an Antaeon rebound that wins from Necromancy an anticipatory communion with the Future has its antithesis in an Atlantean stance in which a Necromancer who has yielded to the legendary Epimethean impulse of Lot's wife is petrified by the hypnotic stare of a resuscitated corpse's Medusan countenance into the rigidity of a pillar of salt pinned down by the incubus of the Past" (IX, 363).

Is Toynbee really a poet? Toynbee himself says: "As a consequence of his fifteenth-century Italian education, the writer's spiritual home was, not a post-Christian Western World, but a pre-Christian Hellas; and, whenever he was moved to put his deeper and more in-

timate feelings into words, they found expression in Greek or Latin verse, and not in the English vernacular that happened to be his mother tongue" (IX, 411). Indeed, volumes I and VII begin with two long poems written, respectively, in Greek and Latin; but "intimate feelings" are also expressed frequently in the vernacular of the text in which the author feels less at home. But is it poetry when the author informs us, after giving a reference in a footnote: "My aunt Gertrude's copy, with my name written in it in her handwriting, dated 'September 1906', is here on my desk in May 1951"? Or doesn't it seem to come straight out of a movie? And there are a great many similar passages.

Surely, people begin to think of Toynbee as a poet only where he has raised other expectations and then failed to fulfill them. At the end of Part XI, for example, after well over 200 pages on "Law and Freedom in History," one expects some resolution of the conflict between those who affirm and those who deny the presence of laws in history. But Toynbee concludes: "Since the God who is Love is also Omnipotence, a soul that loves is liberated by the maker and master of all laws from a bondage to laws of the Subconscious Psyche which Babylonian souls used to project on to inexorable stars in their courses and which Hellenic souls used to personify as malignant *kêres* and daimones; and a liberating truth which had once proved potent to set free (John VIII.32) fast-fettered Hellenes and Babylonians might once again be taken to heart by the children of a post-Christian World which had been vainly seeking to ban those dread psychic principalities and powers (Rom. VIII.38; Eph. III.10 and VI.12) in the name of a Science that was as impotent to exorcize them as any pre-Christian magic." I have moved the footnotes into parentheses and might add that probably more than half of Toynbee's footnotes are of this nature. But is this poetry or merely murky?

It might be suggested that Toynbee is really a theologian. In this capacity, however, I should rank him with the friends of Job. To vindicate the justice of God, he regularly infers, as they did, that misfortune is a proof of a prior moral transgression. From the destruction, apparently by external force, of the Central American Indian civilizations, Toynbee infers that they deserved their fate. Evidence to the contrary does not deter Toynbee. Thus he speaks, for example, of churches which "committed spiritual suicide by going into politics" and forfeited the chance of "playing a church's authentic role"; and he continues: "Cases in point were the syncretistic Egyptian Church . . . Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Nestorianism, and Monophysitism, which had allowed themselves to be used by a submerged Syriac Civilization as weapons in its warfare

against a dominant Hellenism." Elsewhere too Toynbee sharply condemns the Jewish uprising of 135 A.D. But, I wonder, did not Islam and Christianity go into politics and wage wars—and not merely to defend a threatened way of life, but aggressive wars? No, says Toynbee in the very same passage from which I have just quoted: "Islam alone had partially succeeded in retrieving a false step into which it had been led in its infancy by its Founder." (VII, 532) Islam has flourished; so Toynbee infers, after the manner of Job's friends, it must have been virtuous. And when our gentle scholar comes to the Crusades, only thirty-five pages after his indictment of the Zionists, he develops all the enthusiasm of a Sunday-morning quarterback as he pictures the victories that might have been, if only the Crusaders had followed his strategy.

In his footnotes Toynbee carries on a prolonged theological discussion with one Martin Wight, a Christian, who eventually draws from our author an admission that he is no longer a Christian. Toynbee's position is developed in an "Annex" on "Higher Religions and Psychological Types." The types are those of Jung (Freud is not listed in any of the indices), and the "higher" religions are the four with the largest following. Toynbee's religious outlook also finds expression at the end of Part XIII (the last Part of his work) when, after piling up quotations in different languages for several pages, he concludes with a long prayer of his own which alternates between Latin and English. I quote two of its twenty stanzas:

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 Savior into the World.*

It would be hard to guess whom this will offend more: Catholics or Protestants? But if hitherto syncretism usually meant an attempt to offend no religion, consider Toynbee's bow to Islam:

Sancte Petre, intercede pro nobis.
*Tender-hearted Muhammad, who art also one of the weaker
 vessels of God's grace, pray that His grace may inspire us. . . .*

For any who might wish to commemorate the event, Toynbee finished this prayer in "London, 1951, June 15, 6:25 p.m., after looking once more, this afternoon, at Fra Angelico's picture of the Beatific Vision."

Immediately before this prayer, Toynbee refers the reader twice to the New Testament, but understandably not to those words in the

Sermon on the Mount: "But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret. . . . But when ye pray, use not vain repetitions, as the heathen do: for they think that they shall be heard for their much speaking."

Toynbee's religiousness, like the rest of his work, has something of Hollywood in it: it is spectacular, has a huge cast, and is, for all its ostentatious humility, charged with self-importance. And his conceit is essentially different from the self-stylization of Socrates in his *Apology* or of Nietzsche or Shaw. It is more like that of a movie star: there is neither sarcasm in it nor any discrimination between what is representative and what is trivial. In the first two indices, little space was given to the author, and hardly more to God. In the new index both have attained to two whole columns, and many references to "Toynbee, Arnold Joseph" are on the level of "walking, liking for."

There are of course many good things in these volumes, including not only some of the contributions of Toynbee's critics, which he had the good grace to print, but also occasional thought-provoking judgments, many fascinating quotations and observations, and several good anecdotes. More's the pity that it all does not add up to a great work. Far from being more scientific than Spengler, whom he calls a "pontifical-minded man of genius," Toynbee is more pontifical, less original, and endowed with an essentially eclectic and digressive mind. What suggests the possibility of greatness in Toynbee's case is mainly the lavish expenditure and sheer size of his undertaking. Beyond that, the fashionable taste for a mixture of almost any kind of religion with erudition has helped to make Toynbee one of the idols of our new illiteracy.

This illiteracy does not know the distinction between erudition and scholarship, between irresponsibility and poetry, between assurance and evidence. One reads Toynbee's indictments and is impressed by the wealth of footnotes, and one does not notice that they sometimes refer to nothing but other passages in which the same unfounded claim is made, supported by similar cross-references—or that a spectacular figure is cut down to less than half its size in a note; or that a splashy fifty-page claim is unostentatiously dropped in a few sentences, much later. In an age in which similar techniques beset us so sorely, the scholar bears a greater responsibility than ever. I have no quarrel with the virtues Toynbee advocates. "The voice is the voice of Jacob, but the hands are the hands of Esau."