

# Arnold J. Toynbee: An Introduction, Analysis, and Evaluation (IV)

Agatha Lubbers

The conclusion of our last article on this subject in the August-September issue of the *Beacon Lights* found us making a few preliminary evaluative comments about the theories and the philosophy of this highly imaginative and controversial thinker. Because of the immensity of his theories we are not finished with our consideration. We have made some general comments about his theories in our very first article: our second article discussed the rise and breakdown of civilizations; and our third article discussed some of the ramifications of the theories of Toynbee. In this third article which appeared several months ago we particularly noticed that Toynbee ostensibly rejects the opinions of the determinists. Toynbee remains convinced, as he views the ruins of many wrecked civilizations, and as he stands amidst the smoking ruins of the twentieth century, that the divine spark of creative power is still alive in Western society. If the possessors of this creative power have the grace to kindle it into flame, the stars in their courses cannot defeat the efforts of humans who endeavor to build a lasting civilization. The mistakes of the past will help to prevent the final destruction of Western civilization.

## **The Breakdowns of Civilizations (continued and concluded)**

We have noted that Toynbee considers and rejects various reasons for the breakdown of civilizations. The reason, which for him best explains the breakdowns of civilizations, is the loss of creativity by the creative minority. When the leaders are no longer creative, the masses, who are naturally docile, have no one to imitate and the process of *mimesis*, which is so essential to progress, is destroyed or becomes inert. If the leadership does not have the willing response of the *uncreative majority*, the majority revolts and the leaders just restore order by drastic action. This is an uncreative approach to the problem and the result of this type of action is further breakdown because the military formation breaks down further into mass anarchy. This kind of disintegration and breakdown become evident in the secession of the proletariat (the vulgar class) from the band of leaders who are not the creative minority but have degenerated into a *dominant minority*, which seeks to achieve by force what could only previously be ideally achieved when the masses would willingly accept the leadership of the creative minority.

Toynbee is discussing the loss of harmony and self-determination which is one of the fundamental signs of breakdown. This becomes exceedingly apparent when an attempt is made to introduce into society social forces which the existing set of institutions is not designed to handle. An adjustment must take place. If the adjustment cannot take place, a revolution occurs, which is a violent method of assuring the adjustment for the new social forces, or an enormity of some type assumes the place of that social institution which *mimesis* or natural adjustment should have assured.

*Industrialism* and *democracy* are two social forces set in motion in the last two centuries of the history of the world. The West has been challenged to respond to the challenges of these two social forces. In order to understand and predict the response of the West to these challenges Toynbee tries to show how the West has answered the problems of slavery and war. Toynbee indicates that the West has solved the problem of slavery by abolishing it, but the response to war has been unsatisfactory and is a challenge which no other civilization was able to solve.

Toynbee decides that the failure of the West in conquering war is rooted in democracy's collision with local sovereignty. Toynbee suggests that democratic industrialism has stimulated

war rather than solving it. Political and economic nationalism has resulted in total modern war. Parochial states with little power have become warlike when nationalized.

C. Gregg Singer discusses the theories of Toynbee in *An International Library of Philosophy and Theology* publication entitled *Toynbee*. In this work he says: “This thesis is too neatly arranged to satisfy most of his readers. There is in it, of course, something more than a germ of truth. There is no doubt that modern technology has greatly increased the war potential of even smaller states. But Toynbee draws too sharp a distinction between the old parochial state and the new industrial democracy with its strongly nationalistic overtones. Nationalism can hardly be said to be a product of the era since the Industrial Revolution, and not all the parochial states have become democracies, however nationalistic they may be. This over-simplification of the history of the past three centuries fails to come to terms with the forces at work in modern society which have really produced the problem of total war. If political and social nationalism are truly the enormities which Toynbee considers them, he has failed to offer a satisfactory explanation for their appearance” (p. 27).

Industrialism also has an impact upon private property. The old institution of private property is found in a society in which the single family household is the normal unit of economic activity. When a nation becomes industrialized this normal situation must be adjusted and Toynbee suggests: “The method of pacific adjustment is to counteract the maldistribution of private property which industrialism inevitably entails by arranging for a deliberate, rational and equitable control and redistribution of private property through the agency of the state” (p. 291, Somervell). Toynbee states that the maladjustment of private property promoted by industrialism must be averted by a deliberate, rational, and equitable control and redistribution through the state. He continues by saying: “By controlling key industries the state can curb excessive power over other people’s lives which is conferred by the private ownership of such industries, and it can mitigate the ill effects of poverty by providing social services financed by high taxation of wealth” (Somervell, p. 291).

Toynbee sees this whole procedure to be necessary to prevent a bad situation from developing and for correcting a situation which may have developed. He also notes the advantage that the state is transformed from a “war-making machine – which has been its most conspicuous function in the past – to an agency for *social welfare*” (Somervell, p. 291).

If this method of peaceful adjustment does not succeed, says Toynbee, then the “revolutionary alternative will overtake us in the shape of some form of Communism which will reduce private property to the vanishing-point” (Somervell, p. 291). The impact of industrialism, according to Toynbee, would be so stupendous on a society which is essentially agrarian that the only solution to the problem would be some form of social service by the state and a program of high taxation to make this social service possible.

The revolutionary experiment in Russia might prove less deadly than the disease itself, admits Toynbee, but he also admits that the institution of private property is so intimately bound up with all that is best in the pre-industrial social heritage that its sheer abolition could hardly fail to produce a disastrous break in the social tradition of our Western society. Toynbee seems to be admitting that this program for redistribution of wealth is little different than the program in Communist Russia but he offers little hope for a solution of the problem and appears to suggest that the Communist approach and his approach, which is the enormity now confronting the West, are both fatal, although the former is a bit more fatal.

At this point C. Gregg Singer, who is an economic conservative and an avowed Calvinist, is severely critical of the theories of Toynbee. “It is apparent that at this point Toynbee is

confronted with a tremendous difficulty and to a large degree it is of his own making. It can be noted that the essentially pragmatic character of his philosophy comes to the forefront of his thinking in the assumption that the institution of private property is basically a social convenience, a product of a certain society, but which, nevertheless, has contributed much to our heritage. Thus to surrender the practice of private property is to endanger a set of values derived from a previous age to which it contributed so much. Toynbee's basic failure at this point lies in his ability to recognize that private property is not merely an institution created by man for his own convenience at a particular period in his development but rather that it is a *divinely ordained means* (I underscore, A.L.) for maintaining social order in a sinful humanity. Thus Toynbee does not oppose communism on moral or religious grounds, but simply from the point of view of social convenience, namely, that his program for the seizure of private property could endanger certain attitudes and values deeply ingrained in our Western society" (*Toynbee*, p. 28).

In the Volume entitled *The Breakdowns of Civilizations* Toynbee has discussed the nature of the problem, has rejected the deterministic solutions, has denied the loss of command over the environment as a reason for the breakdowns and has emphasized the importance of the failure of self-determination as the important reason for these breakdowns. The failure of mimesis has been cited as one of the major causes in these breakdowns with the resulting change of the creative minority into a dominant minority.

In the long section on self-determination Toynbee submits: "...it were uncommon for the creative responses to two or more successive challenges in the history of a civilization to be achieved by one and the same minority" (Somervell, p. 307). He claims that the minority group that distinguishes itself in confronting one challenge fails in its confrontation with the next one. Toynbee even calls upon New Testament history to support his contention. "In the drama of the new Testament the Christ whose epiphany on Earth is the true fulfillment of Jewry's Messianic hope, is nevertheless rejected by the school of the Scribes and Pharisees which, only a few generations back, had come to the front by taking the lead in the heroic Jewish revolt against the triumphal progress of Hellenization. The insight and the uprightness which had brought the Scribes and Pharisees to the fore in that previous crisis desert them now in a crisis of great import, and Hews who respond are 'the publicans and harlots.' The Messiah Himself comes from 'Galilee of the Gentiles,' and the greatest of his executors is a Jew from Tarsus, a pagan Hellenized city beyond the traditional horizon of the Promised Land" (Somervell, p. 308). That this is a very naturalistic and strange use of historical incidents surrounding the life of Christ on earth is evident to anyone who has studied the Scriptures and therefore correctly understands the Scriptures. This of course is a very generous evaluation of the theories of Toynbee, but we will have more to say on this in our final evaluation of the theories of Toynbee.

Situations such as those cited above are called by Toynbee the *nemesis* of creativity. This *nemesis* he says can bring on social breakdown in two distinct ways. In the first place it reduces the number of possibilities for playing the creator's role in the face of any possible challenge, since it would rule out those who had successfully responded to the last challenge. On the other hand this disqualification of those who had played the creator's part in the former generation would range these same ex-creators in the forefront of the opposition to whoever may be making the successful response to the new challenge. (Those who are familiar with the Hegelian dialectic will recognize a similarity with these theories of Toynbee.) Toynbee says in fact that the opposition to the new leadership is caused by the sin of idolatry. Men who oppose the new leaders are infatuated with the leaders and deeds of the past.

The nemesis of creativity can take two forms: - the idolization of an ephemeral self or the idolization of an ephemeral institution. Toynbee finds a sufficient number of historical illustrations for his present theme. He suggests that the Hews of the Old Testament are the most notorious example of an idolization of an ephemeral self and that this is exposed in the New Testament. I must concur with C. Gregg Singer, who says: "This is, to say the least, a novel view of the New Testament indictment of the Hebrews as a people" (*Toynbee*, p. 29). This charge also seems to be similar to the charge by Marcion, the Anti-Judaistic Gnostic of the Ancient Period of the Church. Toynbee also says that Athens, Virginia, and South Carolina are guilty of idolizing themselves. Toynbee exonerates North Carolina of this charge. The nemesis of creativity in the idolization of the ephemeral institution is to be found in the Hellenic society and the most classic case of this type of idolization is the fatal infatuation of Orthodox Christendom with the ghost of the Roman Empire in the Middle Ages.

Toynbee also suggests that societies can be destroyed by idolizing an ephemeral technique. He charges the nomads and the eskimos with an excessive concentration on techniques used in the care of sheep and in hunting. Because of this concentration they find themselves retrogressing rather than progressing. He also accuses the British industrialists of this kind of retrogression because they idolized obsolescent techniques in the twentieth century just because their grandfathers had become wealthy with these techniques.

In a section entitled "The Suicidalness of Militarism" Toynbee discusses the active forms of the nemesis of creativity. The other forms previously discussed were the passive forms. He uses three Greek words to describe and discuss the active aberrations of the nemesis of creativity. They are *Koros*, which means sinful, *hubris*, which means outrageous, and *ate*, which means disaster. These objective meanings of the words are also enriched by Toynbee with his subjective equivalents. *Koros* means the psychological condition of being spoiled by success; *hubris* suggests the consequent loss of moral and mental balance; and *ate* means the blind, headstrong, ungovernable impulse which sweeps the unbalanced soul into attempting the impossible. The theme involved in these three terms was derived by Toynbee from the fifth century Athenian tragic drama by Aeschylus concerning Agamemnon. He also quotes the *Laws* of Plato to indicate his point: "If one sins against the laws of proportion and gives something too big to something too small to carry it – too big sails to too small a ship ... - the result is bound to be a complete upset." Toynbee selects examples of this kind of misproportion from the military history of Assyria, and Charlemagne. He concludes that the fatal chain of *koros*, *hubris*, and *ate* throw light on the misuse of military power and skill which can inflict injuries on those who misuse them. "They that take the sword shall perish with the sword."

The intoxication of victory is the most fatal form in which the tragic chain presents itself. Toynbee says: "Both variants of this drama could be illustrated from the history of Rome: the intoxication of a military victory from the breakdown of the Republic in the second century B.C. and the intoxication of a spiritual victory from the breakdown of the Papacy in the thirteenth century of the Christian Era" (Somervell, p. 349). He confines himself however to the Holy See. Hildebrand or Gregory VII, the great reformer in the Roman Catholic Church of the 11<sup>th</sup> century A.D., is assessed by Toynbee. Toynbee says: "Hildebrand himself had set the Hildebrandian Church upon a course which was to end in the victory of his adversaries – the Word, the Flesh, and the Devil – over the City of God which he was seeking to bring down to Earth..." (Somervell, I, p. 353). By the 14<sup>th</sup> century, says Toynbee, the "Papacy became possessed by the demon of physical violence which it was attempting to exorcize." (to be continued)

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