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Author(s): William McNeill

Source: *Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences*, Apr., 1988, Vol. 41, No. 7 (Apr., 1988), pp. 13-27

Published by: American Academy of Arts & Sciences

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3823428>

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Stated Meeting Report

Toynbee Revisited

William McNeill

How should we understand Arnold Toynbee? In terms of intellectual history, how did his ideas develop and how did they differ from or elaborate on existing ideas? In terms of social history, what led to his sudden fame in this country in 1947, to his eclipse after the middle 1950's, and to the rebirth of his influence in Japan in the 1970's—an "after-burn" which still continues?

My interest in Toynbee is both personal and professional. I encountered him in my second year at graduate school and my world has never been the same. He was the writer who awakened me from my dogmatic slumbers, as Kant said of Hume, by the simple recognition that there was more to history than ancient, medieval and modern Europe, with the United States and the rest of the world entering history as Europe discovered them. For this insight, I am greatly indebted to him. Given this background, it is easy to understand that when his surviving son asked me to write his biography, I said yes, partly from a sense of filio piety. Yet the attempt to produce a book creates a professional commitment as well.

Historians have a tendency to explain things away—to find the circumstances, the antecedents, the contributing factors, and thus diminish the individuality and genius of the person with whom they are concerned. Cutting your subject down to your level, I suppose, is the way to describe it. Being aware of that tendency, I will try to be generous when I reach the conclusion of the book. For the present, I hope this lecture will serve as a preliminary attempt to bring that assessment into focus.

First, a few elementary facts about Toynbee. He was born in April 1889 and died

about twelve years ago, in October 1975. He received a classical education at Winchester and Balliol, exhibiting phenomenal success; his memory and his verbal sensitivity were exceptional. At Winchester, he won five out of the seven school-leaving prizes. I am not sure if such a record has been equaled before or since, but it made him a marked man in English learned circles.

At Oxford he began a don's career that was soon interrupted by the outbreak of the First World War. He entered first the propaganda service, then the Foreign Office, but never joined the British Army as all young men of his age and background were expected to do. Toynbee's failure to volunteer constituted a betrayal of his own ideals and self-expectations; however, he was newly married, and his wife wanted him to remain at home. As the war turned into a horror, he sought to allay his feelings of guilt by believing that it would be his task to make a good peace; to prevent future wars which were the great curse and evil of mankind, and to counteract nationalism, that trivial self-worship which was, in his mind, the great heresy of modern times.

After the war, he began an academic career as Koraes Professor of Hellenic History and Literature at the University of London, but soon fell afoul of Greek nationalist sentiment stemming from the Greek-Turkish war in Anatolia (1922-23). In 1925 he moved to the Royal Institute of International Affairs, Chatham House, where it was his duty to publish an annual survey of international affairs—volumes of five to seven-hundred pages. In his spare time, particularly during vacations, he wrote his major work, *A Study of History*. The first three volumes appeared in 1934, the next three in 1939 and the final four in 1954, followed by a volume titled *Reconsiderations* in 1961. He wrote literally scores of books, producing six in one year alone. In addition, from the 1920's onward, articles and book reviews appeared continuously in numerous journals. Every morning

he sat down and began to write; when he finished one book he began another the following day: his pace was a matter of pride.

During the Second World War, he became Director of Research for the Foreign Office. In the same period, his wife left him; divorce and remarriage followed. Then, in 1947, came sudden fame in the United States. By the 1950's, Toynbee was a world figure, achieving a second burst of adulation in Japan in the 1970's. As his popularity increased, he began to make radio and television appearances. He was ready to answer any question at a moment's notice, and even his most casual remarks were likely to reach print, sometimes echoing around the globe. Certainly it is correct to say that Toynbee is one of the few serious scholars to become a public personality in America in the twentieth century.

In trying to understand and appraise Toynbee's career, there are two questions I shall attempt to answer. The first concerns the intellectual quality, the originality of his history: to what extent did he deserve the attention he received, even if much of it was brief and tendentious? The second centers on the factors underlying his extraordinary popularity, initially in the United States and later in Japan.

Toynbee's originality, it seems to me, can be reduced to four major elements. First is the concept that there is something called "civilization," an "intelligible field" of history which extends beyond the limit of any national or less parochial focus of history. Second is the notion that civilizations move in cyclical fashion—from genesis and growth to breakdown and dissolution. Third—and this is not evident in the first three volumes but appears later in the series—is the idea that civilizations, as they continuously rise and fall, serve some larger purpose in the process of God's self-revelation to humanity. By the end of his life, Toynbee had modified this view by superimposing the image of cooperative action between human beings and

what he called “spriritual reality,” an action that entailed a struggle to transcend the self-centeredness, the partiality of feeling and understanding which is the fundamental “sin” of mankind. Fourth, and for me, most important, is the belief that all of the world’s civilizations have histories which are, in a sense, equivalent; thus the history of Europe, the history of our direct cultural antecedents, is not peculiarly blessed: it has no unique historical significance.

None of these notions really originated with Toynbee; in many respects they were anticipated by Spengler, who played a critical role in the formulation of Toynbee’s ideas. After the First World War, the revulsion against nationalism and the reaching for some larger whole was widespread; even before the war, the idea of a cycle—of a repetition of historic experience—was deeply ingrained, both in England and in Germany. However, there were differences of opinion as to what the “moderns” were recapitulating: Were the Roman Empire and Imperial Germany to be equated? Did the West represent a new Hellenistic Age? Were Athens and Sparta at war once again, with Athens being England and Germany being Sparta, depending on one’s viewpoint? Among those educated in the classical tradition, the concept of parallelism between the classical and the modern experience was endemic, and both Toynbee and Spengler built on that tradition. Yet the way in which Toynbee put this together in his history was quite new and his perspective very different from that of Spengler.

I will not enter into a detailed discussion of how Toynbee’s mind evolved. His primary concern was a thrust for wholeness, for new ways of putting things together. In his formal education, he united Greek and Roman history. English classicists had traditionally been taught that there were only two “good” periods: Classical Attic Greek and the Golden Age of Roman literature. The “Silver Latin” of Tacitus was to be avoided. Toynbee him-

self was taught to write prize essays by relying on a dictionary that contained only Ciceronian Latin; inclusion of a word used by Tacitus could disqualify an essay from the competition.

Toynbee's reaction was to assert that all of these periods belonged to a unified whole. Breaking through established barriers of taste, he brought English and German scholarship together and defined the classical age as a single entity, beginning in the ninth and tenth centuries B.C. and ending with the dissolution of the Byzantine Empire in the eleventh, twelfth, and thirteenth centuries A.D.

In addition, Toynbee supplemented the classical core of his education with a concept he called the "East." Interestingly, this idea was derived from a childhood experience. When Toynbee was twelve years old, he suffered a bout with pneumonia and was forced to stay home from school for a term. To pass the time, his mother gave him an historical atlas that contained maps of Alexander's empire and the Roman Empire. Studying these maps led the young Toynbee to surmise that, after Alexander disappeared, various peoples continued to occupy the area. This interest led him to spend the next several years filling in the "East" for every century. He learned about the Armenians, the Georgians, the Sassanians, Turks and Arabs—a marvelous way for a bright schoolboy to confound his teachers. (He could recite the names of the Georgian rulers of the tenth and eleventh centuries and leave his teachers gasping. It was a wonderful example of one-upmanship.)

With his atlas and his inquiring mind, Toynbee laid the basis for a history in which the East would be separate from the West. He was to be the direct heir of Herodotus, producing a history of the East and West and their interaction. The major obstacle for Toynbee was that, at some point, the West had left the East behind. Why? When? How? About 1919, he had the great insight that perhaps the Turkish invasions of the eleventh

century were the equivalent of the Germanic invasions of the fifth century. With such a six-hundred-year gap, no wonder that the East fell behind the West because the Turks came in well after the Germans. The problem in interpreting East and West in this way is that history necessarily becomes political, very largely military, and filled with endless details of one dynasty following another. Toynbee demonstrated tremendous mastery of this sort of knowledge but there was no order, no sub-structure in his thinking. His equation of the German *Völkerwanderung* with the Turkish invasions of the tenth and eleventh centuries was not satisfactory.

It was in this context that Toynbee read Spengler in June, 1920 and suddenly understood that it is at least possible to conceptualize the East as plural. Instead of a single East, there are many Easts: China, India, the Islamic world and more—a plurality of civilizations, each demonstrating a cyclical pattern. This insight presented Toynbee with a vast new agenda; now he would have to learn about all the countries that previously had been visible only on the dim horizon, a part of the East but not really part of its history because they lay beyond the margin of Alexander's empire.

His mind filled with these ideas, Toynbee went off to the war in Anatolia in 1921 as a correspondent for the *Manchester Guardian*. There he saw terrible atrocities inflicted by armed Greeks on helpless Turks. The shock was profound. The Greeks were supposed to be "us"—the civilized West; the Turks were on the other side—the uncivilized East. How to explain this apparent anomaly? Of course, the Turks had already carried out their slaughter of the Armenians; part of Toynbee's work at the propaganda office had been to record the horror of the Turkish attacks on Armenia. Given the availability of the concept of the cyclical movement of a plurality of civilizations, it is not surprising that what Toynbee thought he was seeing in Anatolia was the consequence of a collision of civili-

zations; the breakdown of one of them—the old Ottoman civilization—and the consequent release of both Greeks and Turks from traditional moral restraints. For Toynbee, “civilization” always carried with it that eighteenth-century meaning of restraint. Civilization was a work of art which prevented mankind from exercising potential for brutal behavior.

Returning home on the Orient Express, Toynbee noted, on a half sheet of paper, the key headings that would ultimately form *A Study of History*. They also comprised an agenda for the future, for now Toynbee had to apply his mind to all the civilizations he had not yet mastered.

In 1930, Toynbee began to write in earnest, producing his first three volumes by 1934. The rich detail of Toynbee’s work far surpassed that of Spengler although Toynbee followed a Spenglerian pattern—assuming the existence of separate civilizations which have only limited contact with one another. But for the English-speaking world the ideas expressed in these volumes constituted a kind of Copernican revolution. Europe was no longer treated as unique but as one of a group of civilizations, each with its own history. Toynbee was emphatic in stating that all civilizations were philosophically equal. This simple recognition that Europe is an important, but not totally dominant, entity in the world is, in my view, Toynbee’s greatest intellectual achievement.

Following the appearance of the first three volumes, Toynbee was forced to confront a series of personal and professional problems. Difficulties with his wife and children were coupled with a growing sense of unease about the value of his professional activity. When the League of Nations failed to check the Italian conquest of Ethiopia in 1936, it seemed to signify the collapse of the peace-keeping mission which had helped to justify Toynbee’s failure to volunteer in 1914. Family difficulties came to a climax in March 1939 when his eldest son fatally shot himself in the

same week that Hitler marched into the Sudetenland. Sitting at his son's bedside and waiting for death to come, Toynbee had a mystical experience in which he felt he was in the presence of a transcendental spiritual reality. Three years later this shattering experience was followed by the desertion of his wife; although he eventually remarried, the loss of his wife at that critical point was another tremendous shock to him.

These private pains and sufferings affected his world view in a fundamental way. He concluded that civilizations are, in fact, subordinate to religions, that there is a single whole to the human adventure. He formulated a kind of Augustinian vision of the past that centered upon revelation through suffering and the rise of the higher religions. In the final decade of his life, Toynbee also expressed the feeling that this "spiritual reality" this "God," was not omnipotent but rather in need of human assistance in bringing love and goodness to prevail in the universe and among human beings.

Despite this transformation in his view of reality, Toynbee did not abandon the pattern established for his book in the 1920's. Instead, in 1946, he resumed his writing and completed the original outline, even though for him, much of its meaning had altered. For that reason, his last four volumes, which appeared in 1954, seem an unsatisfactory hybrid. Passages which reflect his older point of view—for example, his discourses on relations between civilizations—coexist in an incompatible way with expressions of his new transcendental religious vision of history.

After completing the *Study*, Toynbee continued to develop new ideas. Later in life, he became interested in "ekistics," the study of settlement patterns and their social and psychological consequences. As a result of deep-seated disagreements with Zionists, he also made a serious effort to understand Judaism. In his final four volumes, Toynbee denounced Israel as an example of nationalist imperialism, declaring that it had betrayed prophetic

universalism. He went so far as to compare the actions of the Israelis against Arabs in Palestine with Hitler's actions against Jews in Germany. His views outraged Jews and non-Jews alike, sparked an angry debate, and burst into headlines around the world.

Toynbee was, as we all are, both a creature and a captive of his time and place. His was an evolving, sensitive intelligence, always seeking to comprehend the mystery of man in its totality. Yet he did remake his intellectual heritage in an unusual and significant way. His major accomplishment was the Copernican shift: his notion of plural civilizations, essentially independent of one another except at specified moments of renaissance and as a result of what he termed "apparentation/affiliation." In my mind, this concept represents a halfway house toward the formation of an adequate vision of an interacting world, because I do not believe that civilizations are truly separate. As the years passed, Toynbee himself seemed to acknowledge this perspective. In his spiritual history, he points to the wholeness behind the separate manifestations of the higher religions: the boundaries between religions and between civilizations tended to blur. Indeed, if you read Toynbee's *Recollections*, you quickly realize that by 1961 very little of *A Study of History* remained.

Although Toynbee was moving in what I feel was the right direction, he never reconstructed his history along ecumenical lines; the task would have been overwhelming. Not until he reached the age of sixty-five was he free enough to concentrate on possible revisions and he then elected to use the notes he had accumulated in the past and pursue his original organization. I can forgive him for that—I think we all should.

As a pioneer, an opener of vistas upon the past, he offered a heroic demonstration of what a single person, a single mind can do, by addressing itself to the whole history of humankind and making sense of it. He did it more impressively than Spengler because

he was less *a priori*, less abstract, less dogmatic, less philosophical and more historical. I wish to urge upon you the thought that *A Study of History* is a great work, although to my taste the first three volumes are greater than the later ones, because I do not sympathize with or resonate to his mystical experience of transcendental spiritual reality. But that is my personal limitation.

In the 1950's, the historical profession, motivated by a number of factors, emphatically moved away from Toynbee. In part, there was jealousy of his fame and a deserved criticism of his willingness to give easy answers to the impossible questions of the journalists who pursued him. There was also a justified critique of the errors of fact and implausible suggestions evident in his volumes. His religiosity was countered by a defense of secularism and Western values. How can one accept personal mystical experiences as a path to truth. Finally, there was a reaction against his attack on nationalism, his deprecation of the West vis-a-vis ex-colonial peoples.

In a 1957 caricature published in *Encounter*, H.R. Trevor-Roper summed up his reaction by portraying Toynbee as a silly prophet who has founded a new era termed "A.T.," as against A.D. Amidst the ridicule, there was just enough truth to hurt. Once an individual is open to ridicule, he can be easily dismissed. There is no need to worry about him or to read his books; you can simply call him silly. The purpose of my biography will be to attempt to adjust the balance and to redeem Toynbee's reputation from what I think is unjustified, dismissive ridicule.

In the time remaining, I would like to turn to the second theme of my talk: the factors underlying Toynbee's tremendous popularity in the U.S., Japan, and the world at large after World War II. At the outset I should emphasize that timing was an absolutely critical factor. In 1947, an abridged version of the first six volumes of *A Study of History* appeared. The circumstances surrounding its

publication were unusual. D.C. Somerville, an English public school teacher, prepared the abridgement without consulting Toynbee. Somerville's immediate motivation was to interest his son who found that reading the full text of Toynbee's volumes was too much work. However, after completing his task, Somerville decided to write to Toynbee, asking if he would be willing to review the manuscript. Toynbee was quite irritated, indeed snippy, since he had planned to write his own summary, but only after completing all ten volumes. A year passed before Toynbee finally read Somerville's work, but when he did, he found it acceptable and agreed to its publication.

The abridgement and the Truman Doctrine burst on the American scene in the same week. On the 17th of March 1947, five days after Truman's speech asking for aid to Greece and Turkey, Toynbee and his book became the subject of a cover story in *Time* magazine. Such public attention was not entirely accidental. Toynbee had met Henry Luce, publisher of *Time-Life*, in 1942 when Toynbee visited the United States on a mission from the World Council of Churches, to discuss a just and durable peace. Luce was impressed with Toynbee's notion that the United States had to succeed Great Britain as the leader of the world. Even before meeting Toynbee, Luce had written an editorial in *Life* in which he extolled the second half of the twentieth century as the "American century." What he saw in Toynbee was a man who could bring intellectual respectability, depth, and persuasiveness to this idea.

Luce assigned the task of writing the cover story to Whittaker Chambers, a reformed Marxist who would later become famous for his role in the Alger Hiss trial. Setting out to read all six volumes of *A Study of History*, Chambers came to regard Toynbee as an antidote to, and substitute for, Karl Marx—a viewpoint which is made explicit in the story.

Response to the article was overwhelming. It came at the moment when American opin-

ion was hardening against the Soviet Union, and the Cold War loomed on the horizon. Many people feared that something dreadful was happening against their will and beyond their control. Toynbee's ideas could be used to explain these anxieties and to place them in historical perspective: we were in a "time of troubles," moving toward a world empire that would be ruled either by "us" or by "them."

Henry Luce very much wanted Toynbee to state this view publicly, but Toynbee declined, insisting that there was an openness to the future while personally believing that a world empire would indeed emerge. Toynbee both welcomed the prospect of a world empire and feared the process required to bring it about. He always shrank from war and brutality which, he thought, were the only means by which a world empire could be created. So, despite the desires of Henry Luce, he refused to make any predictions.

Nonetheless, the *Time-Life* publishing empire stood behind Toynbee until some time in the 1950's. Even after Toynbee had criticized the US sufficiently to make Luce and others distrust him, he continued to play the role of court jester to the Republic—a public figure with more and more outrageous ideas but always worth a quote. There is a bittersweet quality to a court jester; he tells his audience things it does not want to hear in a way that leaves the listener uncertain whether what is said is truth or folly. This was the role thrust upon Toynbee in this country from the 1950's onward.

Yet the same ideas that threatened Toynbee's reputation in the US tended to heighten his popularity in the Third World and, to some degree, in Great Britain and in Europe. After the mid-1950's Toynbee was recognized and received throughout the world by heads of state, prime ministers, and presidents of universities. Everywhere he traveled he was invited to give lectures, but the country in which his presence had a peculiar resonance was Japan, which he first visited in 1929.

I know too little about Japanese society and public consciousness to be confident about my observations, but I believe that an important element underlying Toynbee's resonance in Japan was his—by then—standard denunciation of nationalism. In Japan, where the Shinto form of nationalism was expressly repudiated after 1945, Toynbee's views seemed much more significant than they did in England or America. Moreover, by 1956 and later in his life, Toynbee came to regard Buddhism as one of the higher religions, a major vehicle of spirituality, and superior to Christianity, Islam and Judaism because of its tolerance of multiple paths to supernatural reality. As Toynbee told the Japanese, “through your history, you will be able to teach the West how to transcend nationalism; through Buddhism, you will teach us about a spirituality that is tolerant of other faiths.”

One of the most dramatic demonstrations of Toynbee's popularity in Japan occurred in 1971 when a professor of international relations, Kai Wakaizumi, came to Toynbee and for six days asked him questions for three hours a day, recording the answers on tape. Wakaizumi then published the answers—one each day for ninety days—in a Japanese newspaper with a circulation of eight million. The result was the same kind of overwhelming response that had been evoked twenty-three years before in the US by the *Time* cover story. Toynbee's thoughts on how the Japanese should live, think, and feel seemed to fill a void left by the renunciation of the once powerful Shinto tradition.

As a result, there is in Japan today a highly active Toynbee Society which issues a number of books and periodicals and holds frequent meetings. It is clear to me that for the Toynbee Society and for individuals involved in academia and business, Toynbee's vision of the human past represents a respectable alternative to Marxism; mayhap the only respectable alternative they have readily to hand.

Toynbee's growing influence in Japan can also be attributed to the activities of a Buddhist sect, Soka Gakkai. Starting from small prewar roots, it grew luxuriantly in the post-war era until it now numbers several million members and supports a political party which is among the most important in the Japanese Diet. The sect is headed by a man named Daisaku Ikeda who conducted a taped interview with Toynbee in London in 1973. During another six-day discussion, Toynbee and Ikeda considered a wide range of topics. An American graduate student then arranged the questions and answers into "sutras," and produced a book that became something like instant scripture in Japan: an authoritative statement of the ideas of Ikeda and Toynbee. Toynbee, in effect, acted as a Bodhisattva for Ikeda. Ikeda asked a question; Toynbee answered; Ikeda commented and then asked another question; Toynbee again replied.

For Ikeda, the dialogue with Toynbee perhaps represented a chance to gain respectability for himself and for Soka Gakkai, a group drawn from people of low social status. From Toynbee's perspective, Ikeda and his sect epitomized what occurs during the breakdown of a civilization: in a "time of troubles," old civilizations collide and collapse, new religions emerge. Soka Gokkai started from almost nothing, perfectly recapitulating the history of Christianity. To Toynbee, Ikeda seemed like St. Paul or another important figure in early Christian history. Thus the two very different men fitted together like a handshake, making a strange coda to Toynbee's remarkable career.

Perhaps Soka Gakkai will dissolve in smoke or perhaps it will continue to grow. It is in evidence in the United States, and, to my surprise, when I began inquiring about the sect, I discovered that one of my colleagues at the University of Chicago is a member of Soka Gakkai. It has missionaries in foreign parts, probably in Boston as well as in Chicago. If Soka Gakkai flourishes, it could very well become Toynbee's long-term claim to fame

as well as a very ironic justification of Trevor-Roper's mockery of Toynbee's role as a prophet. He would then become a prophet, not without honor save in his own country.

I prefer to think, however, that Toynbee's reputation among historians and other intellectuals, in his own country and in ours, will be redeemed—the adulation corrected while preserving a proper deference for a man whose labors at his desk rivaled those of Hercules, and who, like Moses, glimpsed the Promised Land of genuinely global human history. To have the opportunity to be an historical Moses and, at the same time, England's first Bodhisattva is a very unusual fate for anyone. Yet that is, I think, what Toynbee's shade faces in 1987.

William McNeill is Robert A. Millikan Distinguished Service Professor of History, Emeritus, at the University of Chicago. His communication was presented at the 1682nd Stated Meeting of the Academy, held at the House of the Academy in Cambridge, Massachusetts on October 14th, 1987.