

A BIOLOGICAL AND MYSTICAL
INTERPRETATION OF HISTORY:
ARNOLD J. TOYNBEE

At first glance it may seem paradoxical that a historian as resolutely idealist, in almost every sense of the word, as Arnold J. Toynbee, could be accused by some of his critics of replacing historical method by that of the natural sciences. This charge has been made, however, and upon reflection we realize that, rather than being overcome with astonishment, we must seek to explain the charge and, if possible, to justify Toynbee's method.

Toynbee was struck like many others before him by a truth whose banality is due to its self-evidence, but which is often overlooked once it has been realized—that the field of history, covering at most seven thousand years, is incredibly small when compared to the duration of the human race, at least half a million years old and, according to the calculations of Eddington, promising to continue for two million more. If we compare the existence of humanity to the life-span of a man, we see that the total of what we call history represents hardly one day of that lifetime.

Now if the historian, like all specialists of the humane sciences, is bound to concentrate his attention on the precise object of his study and to adapt his methods to the special nature of that object, he must never forget that

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all this is inscribed in a much vaster context. In other words, no interpretation of history is valid until it is restored to its true dimensions. This is what Toynbee has tried to do, formulating a basic hypothesis inspired by Bergson, the Bergson, especially, of *L'Évolution créatrice* and of the *Deux Sources de la Morale et de la Religion*.

He compares humanity to a "rope" of mountain-climbers engaged in a very steep ascent. The group has reached a certain level, the present stage of the human species, that of *Homo sapiens*. Five hundred thousand years of pre-history were not too long for the development of man from animality to his present stage of evolution. The object of history is not to study how this first part of the climb was achieved. It may be said, however, that this took place within those narrow and static groups which Toynbee calls Primitive Societies, and which differ radically from the Civilizations which succeeded them.

Man, in these societies, is still at a sub-human level, but certain individuals, superior to their fellows, have already reached the human state. For a long time, no doubt, they were incapable of drawing their fellow-creatures along with them, but a day came when they succeeded and, on that day, a radical change took place in the nature of primitive society. It became a civilization. Thus according to Toynbee two species of societies may be said to exist: Primitive Society and Civilization.

When Toynbee thus speaks of two species, he uses the term in the same sense as naturalists who distinguish between animal and vegetable species. The naturalist is never unaware of the innumerable differences which distinguish one from another the individuals belonging to a single species, but he overlooks these differences in confining himself to a consideration of traits common to all. The historian must proceed likewise when he studies the species "civilization," the proper object of his science, which may be defined as a science of civilizations.

It is clear that such a definition of history must necessarily encounter the resistance of the majority of historians, for this is not the way in which they have heretofore understood and practiced history. Of course Toynbee is not the first to have followed this path. It is hardly necessary to go back to Vico, whose thought seems, however, to have had great influence upon that of Toynbee; to cite Spengler, with whom Toynbee has often been compared, will suffice. This is not the place to point out the differences and oppositions between the two men, especially since these are so obvious. And we might also mention Frobenius and Sorokin among those whose efforts have to some extent paralleled the work of Toynbee.

But most historians, after all, those of today as well as those of yesterday, have placed themselves in an entirely different perspective. They were led by the complexity of their studies to specialize, often in the narrowest way. Most historians of the last century took the national frame as a base. There were specialists on France, Germany or England, and this corresponded to the nationalist wave on which Europe was being carried along. They represented, in Toynbee's words, a parochial point of view, one which we should call provincial. It is not hard to show that a nation can in no way constitute an intelligible field of historical endeavor. It is impossible, for example, to account for the major events of English history: conversion of the Anglo-Saxons to Christianity, the Protestant Reformation or the Industrial Revolution, without recourse to a much vaster ensemble whose limits are precisely those of a civilization, which Toynbee proposes to call the Western Christian Civilization.

Still other historians specialize in the study of a period. And this brings us to the divisions of our school-books and to the wide fields of study in our teaching, even (and especially) in higher education. Thus we have antiquarians, medievalists, specialists of the 16th, 17th or 18th centuries, not to mention those of the French Revolution or of the 19th century labor movement. It is not my intention, nor that of Toynbee, to question the utility or even the absolute necessity of such specialization, even though the cogency of dividing history into epochs may be doubted.

For it must be seen that this division into epochs, when it is anything other than a simple convenience for elementary teaching, rests upon one unadmitted postulate, namely, that civilization is one and that it has been evolving for several thousands of years in one unique line of which the Peoples of the Orient, Antiquity, the Middle Ages, and finally Modern Times constitute successive stages. The discovery of parallel histories, those of India, the Far East, and of pre-Columbian civilizations did indeed trouble this fine arrangement, but it has not been rejected for all that, and it is here that debate centers.

Toynbee insists strongly on two points: 1) civilizations are several and have been so virtually since the beginning, since Egyptian and Sumerian civilizations were contemporaneous; 2) no hierarchy whatever can be established among them. Scarcely anyone, I believe, will question the first of these statements; but it is conditioned by the second, which is accepted in sincerity by hardly anybody. In spite of anything we may say, it is almost impossible for us not to consider our own civilization as superior to the others or at any rate—and this amounts to the same thing—

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to take our own as a frame of reference, with the hierarchy of values which this involves. From there it is but one step to a conception of history in its entirety as a function of this favored civilization; the step is readily taken, and almost always was until Toynbee.

Spengler, for example, maintained that the various civilizations could not communicate with one another. Thus he refused them the sense of history. But he was forced to give this sense to "Faustian civilization," from the heart of which he expressed himself and without which his essay would have been deprived of all its value. The Faustian civilization was therefore, at least on this point, favored in comparison to all others. In fact, from the moment that one fails to recognize rigorous equality among all civilizations, one is drawn, whether he wishes to be or not, to construct history as a function of a single civilization: that one in which he happens to find himself.

Toynbee himself recognizes in all honesty that it is not possible for the historian to abstract himself from his time and his personal situation, and if there is one truth universally recognized by historians today it is that objective history, the dream of positivist historians at the turn of the century, is a Utopia. It is necessary, however, to try to approach this Utopia as nearly as possible, and such has been the effort of Toynbee. Not content with forbidding himself all value judgment on various civilizations, he even proclaims them contemporaneous with one another.

This affirmation, surprising at first view, results from a very simple reasoning. For if we consider the total duration of the human species, the time of History is incredibly short. The seven thousand years which have elapsed since the beginnings of Egyptian civilization become a period of time so negligible that we may, in fact, ignore it. It is true that most civilizations are dead and that, according to Toynbee, only five remain alive. But it also happens that among individuals born in the same period and who consequently belong to the same generation some are dead and others still living, which does not prevent their being contemporary with one another.

Now this contemporaneity of civilizations is no less important an aspect than is their multiplicity and their equality. It permits the establishment of a comparison among them which would otherwise make no sense; it helps us to understand that the line of history is not simple but multiple. In other words, there are as many lines of history as there are distinct civilizations. Each has its own history, and these histories may be compared. In the traditional conception, on the other hand, the line of

history is unique, like time itself, which has but one dimension. In short, Toynbee replaces a unilinear conception of history by a multilinear one. Historical time, for him, is two-dimensional.

The consequences of this are important. As soon as history proceeds on several roughly parallel lines, it is no longer absurd to compare analogous events which took place in very different times and places. For if each civilization has its own duration, like each individual, the various moments of that duration remain nonetheless comparable. Every human being, for example, undergoes a crisis of puberty. Its date may vary by several months or even years from one individual or from one race to another; its duration is not always the same, even less its result. But through a comparison of a certain number of analogous crises, it is possible to discover several general traits common to all individuals, which constitute a psychophysiology of puberty. But is it not true that these are the methods of biology and not of history—that history whose object would be just to relate what has never and will never be seen twice?

Toynbee's critics reproach him precisely for misunderstanding the singular character of historical facts. In the history of man they consider everything to have been singular and thus incomparable. But we have seen that Toynbee considers civilizations as so many individuals belonging to the same species, a term which we must take here in its strictest sense, and which is also used by biologists. Living nature, and even inanimate nature, is full of singularities. But there would have been no natural sciences if scholars had not decided to ignore these singularities. Take, for example, the genus *platanus*. I submit that two rigorously identical individuals of this genus will never be found. If two were to be found, it would be due to pure chance, arising from the fact that the number of plane trees is extremely large. The quarrel which traditional historians seek with Toynbee is like that which an overly thorough and near-sighted observer might raise against the naturalists in objecting that so long as there are no two identical plane trees there is no justification for pretending that plane trees are alike nor for determining the laws of their development.

I am not unaware that the foregoing comparison is doubly faulty: on the one hand, as I have already said, plane trees are innumerable whereas civilizations, according to Toynbee himself, as yet number but twenty-one. On the other hand, whatever may be the complexity of organization of a plane tree, it is in no way comparable to that of a civilization. It follows obviously that the work performed by the historian on civilizations involves a much greater margin of error than that performed by a natural-

ist on plane trees. But this does not justify calling the historian's work sterile.

Thus it is time to approach the declarations of Toynbee on the birth, growth, pause, decline, and disintegration of civilizations. One of his criticisms of Spengler is that the latter did not attempt to explain the origin of civilizations, and Toynbee admits the incredible difficulty of the problem. He himself found it so difficult that to attempt a solution he had to turn to mythology: that of Goethe's "Prologue in Heaven" in *Faust*. Toynbee's explanation is as follows:

Goethe's "Prologue in Heaven" opens with the archangels hymning the perfection of God's creation. But, just because His works are perfect, the Creator has left Himself no scope for any further exercise of His creative powers, and there might have been no way out of this *impasse* if Mephistopheles—created for this very purpose—had not presented himself before the throne and challenged God to give him a free hand to spoil, if he can, one of the Creator's choicest works. God accepts the challenge and thereby wins an opportunity to carry His work of creation forward. An encounter between two personalities in the form of challenge and response: have we not here the flint and steel by whose mutual impact the creative spark is kindled?¹

Now let us see how this mythology is susceptible of historical application. Let us take the case of Egyptian civilization. During the glacial periods the climate of the two hemispheres was appreciably more humid than it is today. The Sahara was at that time a land comparable to the Sudanese bush. Vegetation was relatively abundant and animals were numerous. Men could live there by fishing, hunting, and gathering. These conditions changed at the end of the last glacial period. What are the inhabitants of the bush become desert to do? Some adopt the easiest solution: faced with this challenge of nature, they retreat to the south where they continue even today their primitive existence. These peoples fled before the challenge and have not passed beyond the stage of primitive society.

Others remained and adapted themselves to the new conditions of life. They became the Bedouins. Their adaptation is nearly perfect, but this very perfection is a weakness because it is motionless. Such societies do not evolve beyond a point midway between primitive society and civilization. They are definitively fixed, like the Eskimos perfectly adapted to nature in the polar zone, or the Polynesians, equally well adapted to the great oceanic spaces where they must live. Toynbee adds to these examples

1. *Civilization on Trial* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1948), pp. 11–12.

of perfect adaptation to certain natural conditions those of the Spartans and the Ottomans who, having adapted too perfectly to a certain human environment, evolved no further.

But some of the inhabitants of what was becoming the Libyan desert, instead of fleeing southward or remaining, turned to the swamps of the lower Nile, which must at that time have been not unlike the Bahr-el-Ghazal of today. There the greatest difficulties were encountered. They had to organize in order to drain the swamps, and this was the origin of Egyptian civilization. Toynbee had no difficulty in showing that all primitive civilization, that is, those which did not develop directly out of a preceding civilization, began in an analogous manner. They have never been known to be born and to have developed under favorable natural conditions. On the contrary, they have always had to struggle against hostile surroundings.

This is, moreover, only the first challenge which a civilization must accept in order to be born. It meets others on the way and it develops in proportion to its repeated success in facing up to them. But there comes a moment when one of these challenges is not picked up. Then there occurs what Toynbee calls the breakdown of a civilization. From this point dates the decline and then the disintegration of the civilization in question.

How is it that after meeting a series of successive challenges every civilization has, up to the present, encountered one with which it has been unable to cope? This is explained by the fact that the elite, the advancing segment of society, has shown itself capable of leading the mass after it, not by force but by free consent. Like Bergson before him, Toynbee here accords an important place to mimesis. There enters unfortunately into mimesis a passive, mechanical element which makes almost inevitable the establishment of a distance, imperceptible at first but ever-widening, between the creative minority and the mass. A moment arrives when the mass no longer follows the impulsive force of the elite. Everything then changes in character. The creative minority, which has heretofore acted solely by persuasion, is obliged to turn to force. Society finds itself divided into hostile classes, one dominant and the other oppressed. A fatal rupture has occurred in the heart of the civilization, which, from this moment unable to pick up the challenges proposed to it, enters into a period of incurable decadence.

It is naturally impossible for me here to take up in detail the admirable analyses of Toynbee and I must thus neglect what is perhaps the best part of his work. It is nevertheless apparent that the notion of breakdown is not

without analogy with what may be observed in the history of a living organism which also develops until it has attained a certain fullness of form. At this moment begins the period of decline and decrepitude, followed at last by death. Is it thus with civilizations? This is what has been observed in the case of all those which have preceded ours. But Toynbee does not believe that this is an ineluctable fate, and here lies the optimistic side of his thought.

Thousands of primitive societies lived and died during the long period of prehistoric times without giving birth to a civilization. There probably appeared in each of these primitive societies some individuals who had already attained human stature, but they were incapable of drawing other men after them. And then, in a few privileged cases and under circumstances that were particularly favorable, the decisive step was made. Instead of dying sterile, certain primitive societies succeeded in becoming civilizations. It may likewise happen, indeed one day it surely will happen, that a civilization will itself be transformed into something else. But this day may still be far off, when one realizes that the life expectancy of humanity is two million years, that this gives time for thousands of civilizations to be born and to die, and that so far only twenty-one have been observed.

Within civilizations also some superior individuals have already attained a supra-human level; but they have not so far succeeded in drawing other men after them, and this is why all civilizations of the past have experienced their breakdown. We note the place Toynbee gives to superior individuals and observe how close he is on this point to the Bergson of the *Deux Sources de la Morale et de la Religion*. Moreover, he conceives these superior individuals, analogically, at least, as mystics, and describes, as a common trait of their destiny, the movement of retreat-return. Every superior being withdraws, at a given moment, from the society of men; then he returns, bringing among them all the richness and experiences accumulated during his retreat. What is true of individuals is also true of groups, of which Toynbee cites numerous striking examples.

But let us return to those civilizations which have just broken down through inability to respond to a challenge. For example, that civilization which Toynbee knows better than all others, which he calls Hellenic civilization, and of which, for him, Rome is an integral part. How did it come to break down? Because it was incapable of responding to the following challenge: toward the middle of the 5th century B.C., Hellenic civilization was called upon, in order to continue its development, to break

out of the thenceforth too narrow framework of the city-state. Pericles had understood this need, but he did not have the following of his compatriots, and the tragedy of his existence was to himself direct the beginning, in 431, of the Peloponnesian war which, according to Toynbee, marks precisely the breakdown of Hellenic civilization.

Thus commences a period of four centuries, which Toynbee proposes to name, using an expression borrowed from the history of Russia, the "time of troubles." Inexorable wars break out among the various states which form a single civilization. Within almost all these states there develops a permanent conflict between the exploiting class and the oppressed class. The latter Toynbee proposes to call the "internal proletariat," borrowing a term from the Marxist vocabulary. Because it must defend itself in a universe become a world of wild beasts and also because the oppressive minority must with great effort maintain the oppressed mass in a state of obedience, civilization is invaded by a terrible cancer, militarism.

This may perhaps enable it to gain certain external successes. It will conquer, as the example of Alexander proves for Hellenic civilization. But militarism also results in hostile relations between the civilization and the surrounding peoples, who are Barbarians, or rather, what Toynbee proposes to name the "external proletariat." When a civilization is in a developing stage the surrounding peoples gratefully receive from it the gifts which it offers freely and peacefully. The barbarian is not necessarily the enemy of the civilized man. Barbarism is a zone of mingled light and shade; nothing is opposed in principle to the gradual absorption of darkness and the final spreading of illumination to the ends of the earth, conferring on civilization that ecumenical character which each civilization claims but which none has yet completely realized.

But the breakdown changes all that. Hostile relations between the barbarian and civilized worlds are substituted for friendly relations and the barbarians are transformed into the external proletariat, which menaces the integrity of the civilization as thoroughly as does the internal one. There comes a time, however, when within the civilization itself the fighting ends for want of combatants. One of the militarized states among which the civilization was divided carries the day definitively against all the others and founds that universal state which the Roman Empire was for Hellenic civilization or which the empire of Huang-Ti became, after the period of the fighting kingdoms, for Chinese civilization. Far from indicating progress, as was long believed, the establishment of

the universal state is, according to Toynbee, the last phase in the disintegration of a civilization. Never, in fact, is the oppression of the masses more inhuman within a civilization; never is the external threat represented by hostile barbarians more pressing than at the time of the universal state.

Then a strange phenomenon occurs: the oppressed masses seek to render their condition less intolerable by adhering to a religion of salvation, and thus one sees the development of a universal church within the internal proletariat. While the foreground is occupied by a universal state brandishing the sword, in the depths of the disintegrating society is built the vessel of a church which will survive the state and transmit to some future civilization a part of the values of the disappearing civilization. It is thus that, through the intermediary of a universal church, a new civilization is born out of the debris of another.

On their side, the barbarians assaulting the moribund civilization from without live the epic age. This meeting of epic and church, of external and internal proletariats, gives birth to a new civilization. One readily sees how exactly this explanation fits the passage from Hellenic civilization to western Christian civilization, which is ours, or to eastern Christian civilization which is, according to Toynbee, that of Russia. Toynbee may have forced things a bit in trying to apply the same scheme to other series of civilizations. If, for example, in the passage from Cretan to Hellenic civilization, the place of the epic is readily visible, a matter of nothing less than the Homeric poems, the universal church of the internal proletariat of decadent Crete is much less easily discernible.

This may be the defect of a possibly premature attempt at universal explanation. Despite his systematizing mind Toynbee is not unaware of this difficulty, and he even stresses it with great honesty. But it was inevitable, and simply had to be faced. Inevitable because his inquiry could only apply to twenty-one individuals of the species "civilization," which is obviously very little for the valid drawing of general laws. But it also had to be faced because we live at a time when history can no longer recoil from the problem of a comparative study of civilizations, even if such a study can for the moment produce only questionable and provisional results. Even a false hypothesis is likely to be more fruitful than the refusal of any total explanation.

The most debatable part of Toynbee's work is certainly not in the errors of detail for which specialists have made a fine game of reproaching him. I doubt that anyone has ever employed a more astonishing erudition than

that which is shown throughout his volumes. On many points, surely, it will be said that his information is merely second-hand. This could not have been otherwise and, if the specialists consider it unfortunate, they have only themselves, as the sources of the second-hand information, to blame. For whom are they writing, if one cannot use their works without falling into error or approximation?

But now that the work appears to us complete, since the last volumes have finally been published, it is possible to seek another quarrel with Toynbee. First of all, his classification of civilizations seems questionable on certain points. A great part of his analyses rests, for example, on the statement that there are two civilizations "affiliate" to the defunct Hellenic civilization, namely, western Christian civilization and eastern Christian civilization, which is another way of saying that an impassable gulf separates Russia from the West. The consequences, of all kinds, deriving from such premises are obvious. Thus Toynbee will say that bolshevism is merely a heresy of orthodox Christianity and will fail to recognize the influence of Marxism upon the evolution of Russia. But if it is relatively easy to criticize from without, so to speak, the statements of Toynbee, it is on the other hand singularly difficult to escape from them when one places oneself within his system.

If then certain statements seem arbitrary and rather inconsistent with reality as we grasp it, does this not indicate that the whole system rests on a questionable base? Otherwise, we must be deceived by appearances, as men were for a long time by the apparent immobility of the earth. If, in fact, we admit that since the origins of history humanity has been divided into a certain number of grand ensembles called civilizations, that each of these ensembles has its own history and that they have in no case mingled one with another, then it is difficult to doubt that the eastern and the western parts of what used to be the Roman Empire have had an absolutely dissimilar destiny and that this does not seem to be due to simple historical chance. Everything distinguishes and almost everything opposes this Orient and this Occident. We are then indeed faced with two different civilizations, and Toynbee has every right to draw almost ineluctable conclusions.

Now, it seems to me difficult to question the comprehensive idea on which Toynbee's entire construction rests. It came to him—as he himself says—from a reading of Thucydides undertaken during the First World War. Toynbee then realized that his situation was exactly that of the Athenian historian. Thucydides was writing, as a matter of fact, just after

the breakdown that had been, for the Hellenic world, the outbreak of the Peloponnesian war in 431, and Toynbee was reading and explaining him just after the breakdown represented for the western world by the outbreak of war in 1914. In the light of the events which his civilization was experiencing, the English humanist understood better than he had hitherto been able to the preoccupations of the Greek historian. This then was proof that history can repeat itself up to a point, and a new and fruitful field was opened to historical investigation.

The objection will perhaps be raised that Toynbee was merely beating down a door that had long been open, since so long as men have been writing history they have never stopped looking for precedents, for examples to follow or errors to avoid, and historians themselves have often pretended to be writing only for the practical instruction of their contemporaries. But Toynbee understood it otherwise. For him it was a matter not of drawing from Thucydides instruction which twentieth-century statesmen might turn to their profit, but rather of determining scientifically the repetition of certain sequences. Thus he arrived at a relatively new conception of universal history. This history was to be not the chronological recital of a unique series of events, but the study of analogies and recurrences which might be observed among several parallel series.

So he encountered the opposition of a historico-philosophical school eminently represented in England by Collingwood and according to which the history of man is specific in that it tells us of what will never be seen twice. These historians thus oppose history proper, which can be nothing but human, to natural science, which is not a history precisely because its facts do repeat themselves and because the scholar is interested not in their singularity but in their repetition.

In the last volumes of his study Toynbee set out to answer them, and he did so in attempting to show that as in economic history one observes greater or lesser cycles of development and depression, one may observe analogous cycles in political history. With this aim he made a comparative study of three "troubled times": that which split the Chinese world at the time of the fighting kingdoms and ended in the establishment of the Han empire; that which, from 431 to 31 B.C., split the Hellenic world and ended in the establishment of the Roman Empire; finally, that which has rent the western world since the opening of the Italian wars in 1494 and whose end we do not yet know—whether or not it will result in the establishment of a universal empire, covering the entire habitable world.

Thus the historian is led to examine the perspectives of the western world. Has it already experienced its point of breakdown? This seems probable, and Toynbee himself has indicated the date of 1494. But was that breakdown of the same nature as those which affected the Chinese and the Hellenic worlds? It must not be forgotten, and Toynbee is careful not to forget, that the date 1494 falls between two others: 1492, when Columbus discovered America, and 1498, when Vasco da Gama discovered the maritime route to India. Thus, at the very time when the West was being torn apart, it was procuring the means of extending its influence over the entire planet, something which had been given to no preceding civilization. Would not the one event compensate for the other? Nor does Toynbee fail to inscribe on the credit side of the West's ledger the prodigious technical advances and the economic and political transformations which followed, since the Industrial Revolution which began in England in the middle of the 18th century. He observes, it is true, that other civilizations have known remarkable technical progress, though on a much smaller scale.

So he cannot exclude the possibility, though it seems rather a slim one, that we as the twenty-first individual of the species Civilization may know a different fate from that of our twenty predecessors, and a better one. For this we should have to meet victoriously a certain number of challenges: that of militarism and war, which cannot fail to ruin us definitively unless we renounce the idolatry of national sovereignties; that of the class struggle, which will be no less deadly unless we find the way to a more equitable distribution of riches; finally that of religious wars, which will draw us into the abyss unless we rise to a conception of the plurality of religious truth.

It must be admitted that the prospect is not very favorable in any of these three domains. Toynbee, however, has not lost hope, and his strongest reason for hope is that western civilization is impregnated with Christianity. In fact, the universal religions have, as we have seen, the singular strength that their fate is not linked with that of a given civilization. They developed at the moment when one of these civilizations was disintegrating and assured the passage from the dying civilization to that which was to succeed as its heir. Why should not one of these religions play a still more decisive role in permitting the civilization infused with it to rise above itself and be transformed into something entirely new, into a type of society which would be to civilizations what Civilization itself was to Primitive Society? Then, in that climb which humanity has pursued

from the level of animality, we would have reached another landing.

These views, which Toynbee presents simply as hypotheses, are open to question. He is particularly open to the reproach—and materialist historians will not fail to make it—of failure to understand the importance of economic factors in historical evolution. Not that he does not make frequent reference to them, but they are for him not essential. Toynbee is resolutely spiritualist and he believes that a characteristic of human history is to be dominated and governed by spiritual needs. This is why he attaches great importance to psychology, and particularly to depth psychology. The evolution of the latter is infinitely slow and we do not understand its laws very well. It is to be feared, for example, that technical progress may be too rapid and that a sudden thrust of the collective subconscious may at any moment be capable of utilizing progress for a suicidal enterprise. Here again we meet certain views of Bergson, as when he spoke in his last work of an insufficiency of soul.

So the historian finds himself on the edge of the future and unable to prophesy, for, although natural laws with their implacable regularity govern human history and its recurrent cycles, they never exclude a sovereign intervention of liberty. Long pages would be needed for an analysis of the chapters which Toynbee devotes to the dialectic of necessity and of liberty, of that liberty which seems to him founded on the incomprehensible love of a personal God for his creature. Here it would not be difficult to discover analogies between Toynbee's thought and that of Teilhard de Chardin. There is the same movement in each and, in a way, the same appeal toward what Father Teilhard called Point Omega.

It may be said that we are now entirely outside the realm of history qua history, and in a domain which goes singularly beyond scientific analysis. This is true, but it is hard for a historian who gives such breadth to his study not to discover the metaphysical foundations of his research. Be that as it may, the comparative method of Toynbee seems to me, from a strictly scientific point of view, of a singular fecundity. The chief characteristic of our civilization—as I have already remarked—is that it has become practically universal, and this in more than one sense. On the one hand, western man has discovered the total surface of the planet and has imposed his influence, by very questionable methods moreover, upon all of humanity. On the other hand, the discoveries he has made in time are no less important than those he has made in space. Toynbee recalls that during the past hundred and fifty years we have discovered several civilizations disappeared in the past and whose very existence we did not

even suspect two centuries ago. In almost the same period we were discovering the immensity of prehistoric times. Has not the time come then to attempt the synthesis of all this knowledge? This is what Toynbee has been trying to do.

In doing so he has attempted to be as objective as possible. There are certainly a few flaws in this objectivity, and it could not have been otherwise. When we read, for example, in 1955, the last volumes, which were written—as the author takes pains to remind us several times—in 1952, we find readily the trace of a certain number of prejudices. Toynbee seems in particular to have failed to perceive clearly all the importance of the Chinese revolution. He views it as a success of the Soviet Union insofar as the latter is, with the United States of America, one of the two dominant states of the postwar world. But it may just as well be something else—at one and the same time a resurrection of Chinese power in a new form, and the signal for the liberation of all the peoples which have been, through recent centuries, under the domination of the west. In this case, we should be in the presence of a conflict of civilizations on a planetary scale with, on one side—to use Toynbee's own categories—western civilization and, on the other, still living civilizations which would have borrowed from the west its own arms in order to fight it. Such a conflict may be peaceful or violent. If peaceful, all would be saved, and humanity would then enjoy the spectacle never yet seen of a synthesis of several rival civilizations, constituting, I suppose, in Toynbee's own mind, an absolute advance.

But after all, whatever the inevitable weaknesses of an endeavor as daring as that of the great English historian, I believe it must be hailed as one of the landmarks of our time. Henceforth it will be possible to measure the services which his work has rendered to contemporary thought. Toynbee shows first of all that the era of national histories is gone and that only universal thought is now valid. In this regard, he has achieved a veritable Copernican revolution in the field of history. If the historian cannot detach himself from the civilization to which he belongs, he has at any rate a duty not to take it as a unique center of reference.

Of course this historical relativism poses more problems than it solves. But the most fruitful hypotheses are just those which raise the most problems. Among other things, this relativism takes us back to the notion of the unity of knowledge. Whatever the diversity of objects, and, therefore, of methods, the human mind is one. The field of history, extended to its widest and fullest sense, is not limited to the last seven thousand

years. It embraces everything that is susceptible of development in time, not only human pre-history but the entire history of life on our planet, and the history of the planet itself, of the star system of which it is a part, and finally of the entire universe.

The peculiar greatness of Toynbee is in never excluding any of these perspectives from his consideration. They are discouraging only for those who do not believe in the possibility of triumphing over time, for those who do not think that history herself in a way invites us to go beyond her. Toynbee is not among these; for him certain spiritual experiences are of greater value than all of history, because through them we may gain access to a realm beyond time. And once again we may marvel at the singular analogies between the developing thought of Bergson, of Teilhard de Chardin, and of Toynbee. Biology and mysticism are not mutually exclusive, they are complementary; it may be that the one invokes the other. And for that reason a thinker who earns reproach for applying the biological method to history actually goes beyond history and postulates the triumph of man over time, which is, after all, the very limit of our hopes.