

Arnold Toynbee

History and Religion

Arnold Toynbee's views on religion were conditioned by his world historical theories, as expressed in his monumental *Study of History*. His religious faith intensified in later life after some traumatic life events (most notably the loss of a son through suicide and his divorce from his first wife Rosalind); and also after personal mystical experiences. The later volumes of his *Study* and other works from the 1950s were frankly more mystical than his earlier works. His opinions also became steadily more ecumenical in tone, ultimately embracing all major religions.¹

This can be illustrated from an examination of two works from the 1950s: *An Historian's Approach to Religion* (1956) and *Christianity Among the Religions of the World* (1958). The first, short book was based on the Gifford lectures he gave at the University of Edinburgh in 1952 and 1953. Toynbee was an inveterate giver of public lectures, as well as an incredibly productive (some think over-productive) writer. This dated from his more impecunious early days, and an enduring memory he had of his father's financial difficulties. Toynbee himself achieved his brilliant University career only by winning scholarships, and he never afterwards missed an opportunity to earn money by giving public speeches and lectures (he toured the US many times basically to make some money) and by writing for newspapers and magazines. He never became financially secure until the brilliant success of D.C. Somervell's abridgment of the first six volumes of the *Study* in 1946, and perhaps he was never really secure in his mind about his financial safety. He had an almost visceral anxiety about being poor. (This was a constant source of friction with Rosalind, who as a Carlisle aristocrat, whose family homes included Castle Howard, was – at least in her husband's eyes – too spendthrift).

Although the Gifford lectures were supposed to be about philosophy, Toynbee centred his on religion (he changed the original topic to suit his purpose). *An Historian's Approach* forecast that the future would see, eventually, after the present world's discontents, wars and divisions had somehow been overcome, a more "oecumenical" political regime. Unluckily for liberals, this regime would use the powers of science and technology to restrict freedom in the spheres of politics, economic and even domestic life. He detected signs of this beginning even in the 1950s. (He didn't say so, but the evolving European common market must have seemed such a sign). Toynbee had of course imbibed ideas such as H. G. Wells's world government during the 1930s, when he was deeply involved in international efforts to avert another world war. His basic reasoning was that humankind would ultimately accept an "oecumenical" regime as a security against war, against accidents and against want. Totalitarianism was always a danger, but Toynbee didn't go down George Orwell's path in predicting the horrors of *Nineteen Eighty Four*. He seemed willing, in the final analysis, to accept greater regimentation, hopefully a sort of benevolent despotism, because alongside it he believed would emerge an "oecumenical" religion, and higher human spirituality. This was because great empires historically had done better when they had tolerated religion. So would this new world regime: "...it might be forecast that, in the next chapter of the World's history, Mankind would seek compensation for the loss of much of its political, economic, and perhaps even domestic freedom by putting more of its treasure into its spiritual freedom, and that the public authorities

¹ For details of his life see the excellent biography by William H. McNeill, *Arnold J. Toynbee: A Life* (Oxford, New York, Oxford University Press, 1989).

would tolerate this inclination among their subjects in an age in which Religion had come to seem as harmless as Technology had seemed 300 years back”.²

That modern indifference to religion could somehow facilitate a general revival of spirituality may have seemed implausible to many of Toynbee’s readers. However he believed he had historical backing for that view. Religion, he argued, had been the sphere of activity in which subjects of past ecumenical empires had been allowed by their rulers to seek and find compensation for their loss of freedom in other areas. They dare not be too “totalitarian” (a concept not then invented). People who were oppressed in every area of life would feel a sense of intolerable claustrophobia and were likely to revolt (ancient rulers had not learnt the art of total brain-washing, although they of course used some of the techniques). Religious toleration was a sort of “vent” for freedom, an insurance policy against rebellion. Thus a number of empires allowed themselves to be used as mission-fields by “higher religions”: The Achaemenian empire was a mission-field for Zoroastrianism and Judaism; the Maurya empire for Hinayana Buddhism; the Han empire for Mahayana Buddhism; the Roman empire for Isis-worship, Cybele-worship, Mithraism and Christianity; the Gupta empire for post-Buddhistic Hinduism; and the Arab caliphate for Islam. Even repressive regimes, as most of these were, when surveyed synoptically showed comparative forbearance towards alien, non-official religions.

This was, in hindsight, a wise policy. Toynbee pointed to the disastrous consequences that often followed from the opposite policy. The Mughal Muslim raj in India (he argued) was wrecked “by Awrangzib’s departure from a policy of tolerating Hinduism that had been taken over by the Mughal dynasty from previous Muslim rulers in India. The Roman Empire, after Constantine’s adoption of Catholic Christianity as the imperial government’s official religion, brought crippling eventual losses upon itself when Theodosius I abandoned Constantine’s prudent policy of toleration for all faiths and replaced this by a militant policy of persecuting all varieties of religion except the now officially established one” (*Historian’s Approach*, pp.246-247). Constantine had in fact been faithful to the spirit of pre-Christian Roman regimes. Theodosius’s ban on paganism, like Diocletian’s ban on Christianity, was an aberration that led to calamity.

There were lessons here for the modern western world. State tolerance was useful to religions if they wanted to survive. But of course more was required. The realm of the spirit was freedom’s citadel. But spiritual freedom must also be alive in the hearts of people themselves: “true spiritual freedom is attained when each member of Society has learnt to reconcile a sincere conviction of the truth of his own religious beliefs and the rightness of his own religious practices with a voluntary toleration of the different beliefs and practices of his neighbours” (p.249). The motives for toleration historically had varied. Negative motives ranged from prudential policies against rebellion, fears that religious conflict was a public nuisance that could easily become a public danger, to the “lowest negative motive” for toleration”, which was that it was of no practical importance, or was an illusion that could be disregarded.

Toynbee saw the age of the Enlightenment, when science and materialism were embraced in the west, as predominantly motivated by an essentially negative reaction against the seventeenth century Catholic-Protestant wars of religion. (He tended to accept uncritically this prevailing labelling

² Arnold Toynbee, *An Historian’s Approach to Religion* (London, New York, Oxford University Press, 1956), p.244.

of those wars, ignoring research that revealed the political and nationalistic factors at work). Such toleration was precarious, as had been shown by the rise of nationalism, Fascism and Communism in the twentieth century. At this point Toynbee departed from strictly historical analysis (if he ever had been exclusively engaged in it). He gave as his belief that religious conflict was not just a nuisance, but was a sin. It was a sin “because it arouses the wild beast in Human Nature”. (This was something of a throwback to end-of-the-century thinking, when wild beast theories flourished, *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* being only one manifestation. Toynbee after all was born in 1889). Religious persecution was sinful because “no one has a right to stand between another human soul and God” (p.250).

Toynbee believed that the west, after it had gone through its phase of disillusionment with religion – a phase still in full swing as he wrote – would ultimately have to face up to its discarded religious heritage. It would have to come face to face again with its ancestral Christianity. At the same time the churches were changing and needed to change. The fact was that the world’s religions were coming closer together as science and technology achieved “the annihilation of distance” (a phrase that Toynbee repeated endlessly). As a scholar of the “higher religions”, he knew the substantial differences that separated them in terms of doctrine, liturgies and practices. The great challenge was to overcome these differences in order to make an overarching ecumenical religion. The task for our society (or the next) was to winnow the chaff from the grain in mankind’s religious heritage. The task was to retain the essential counsels and truths of the higher religions – he believed that at their core they held to the same essential spiritual truths – while getting rid of the “accretions” that had built up within and around those religions as a product of historical accident or necessity. Toynbee spent much time elaborating on the circumstances in which such accretions had arisen.

In his perspective, the innermost religious impulse, the intimations of a spiritual presence accompanying humans on their life pilgrimage, had been coeval with humankind. It had been with us from the evolution of early humans: “In this presence, Man is confronted by something spiritually greater than himself which, in contrast to Human Nature and to all other phenomena, is Absolute Reality. And this Absolute Reality of which Man is aware is also an Absolute Good for which he is athirst” (p.263). However this spiritual light reached mankind, whether by discovery, intuition, or revelation, it was indisputable that it shone in all the great religions. And it was the cause of their success and longevity.³

However those religions all became institutions and had to adapt to the historical environment in which they lived in order to survive and flourish. This meant accommodating themselves to existing beliefs and customs, earlier religions and cults and cultural forces generally. Inessential and alien practices became attached to the churches: “These historical accretions are the price that the permanently and universally valid essence of a higher religion has to pay for communicating its message to the members of a particular society in a particular stage of this society’s history” (p.264). This adaptation may have been necessary at the time, but it had perils. Such accretions could prove extremely difficult to eradicate, became ossified within church traditions, and threatened disaster when more modern circumstances required the development and reform of doctrine and customs: “...if a higher religion is unable or unwilling to change its tune when it is carried by the current of

³ Toynbee’s perceptions of ultimate mysteries and absolute reality, human nature as a union of opposites (reason and passions, greatness and wretchedness), the need for tolerance and charity were influenced by his knowledge of the Bible and classical texts, and on these issues especially Symmachus, Pascal and Thomas Browne.

History to new theatres of social life in other times and places, its undiscarded adaptation to a past social milieu will put it even more out of tune with the present social milieu than if it had presented itself without any accretions at all" (p.264).

One major problem was that the people who ran churches were prone to make an idol of their institution. Toynbee here sounded very like Alec Vidler when criticising the flaws in church institutions. To administrators and devotees, the church was often seen as more important than the beliefs it enshrined, although the church ought in truth to be merely an agency for the radiation of essential spiritual truths and counsels. Power and wealth corrupted churchmen just as it did ordinary mortals. But even the most righteous of churchmen feared change and tended to insist that their religious heritage must be treated as an indivisible whole. There were psychological and prudential reasons for this also. Priests were afraid of alienating the weaker brethren, afraid that small changes might lead to wholesale ones: "they are afraid that, if once they admit that any element in the heritage is local and temporary and therefore discardable, they may find themselves unable to draw a line or make a stand anywhere, till the very essence of the religion will have been surrendered" (p.267). Toynbee had surely put his finger on a vital point here. But he strongly believed such obduracy was wrong: both bad psychology and bad statesmanship. Essentially it was an admission that their central faith, the innermost truths of their religion, was inadequate. It was a failure of faith. And modern people sensed this as hypocrisy.

How to separate the chaff from the wheat? Toynbee admitted that this was a hazardous task. No wonder ecclesiastical authorities flinched from their duty of undertaking it. Any religious heritage was made up of a complex compound of essential elements and accidental accretions. It was a delicate and difficult job to dissect this composite body so accurately that it would distinguish accretions from essence. The surgeons themselves were products of their own time. In trying to correct mistranslations of the past, they risked making mistranslations of their own time. Accretions could also be in the eye of the beholder: for one eye, a blinker shutting out the light, for another a lens letting in the light. He compared the theological critic's task with that of an expert cleaning a painting. One could go on cleaning the painting, stripping off successive coats of varnish and paint until – horror of horrors – one was left with only the bare canvas. The best restorer went only so far, until the masterpiece was revealed under the dirt, but no further.

Despite these warnings, Toynbee then proposed the most draconian of reforms to the major religions. Among the "accretions" he proposed to abolish were: holy places, rituals, taboos (such as fasting in Lent), celibacy, myths (which he saw as mere poetics) and theology. Hopefully believers would be left with enough of the essential truths to form the basis of a newly synthesised religion. Lovers of places like Jerusalem, Lourdes, Mecca and Varanasi, devotees of the Passover, Christian and Buddhist liturgies, even theologians at Oxford and Cambridge were hardly likely to embrace this prospect with much enthusiasm.

His likely support might come from those involved in the ecumenical movement and those who were disquieted by modern materialism and scientific scepticism, and opponents of nuclear warfare. Toynbee was no fundamentalist-style opponent of science. As an enlightened man of his age he accepted the great achievements of science and saw no problems with issues such as evolution. Science had certainly been spectacularly successful in widening the human understanding of the universe. Science (he argued) occupied one sphere of knowledge about nature, religion another. It

was as reasonable to explore the universe in terms of one as of the other: "Human Nature will not account for the aspect of the Universe that mathematics and physics reveal; but then these will not account for the aspect that is revealed in Human Nature. There is no ground except caprice or prejudice for treating the mathematico-physical aspect of the Universe as being real in any fuller measure than the spiritual aspect is" (p.288). Even the supposedly objective physical reading of the universe was in fact no more objective than our reading of ourselves. (He may have been aware of the implications of theories of relativity and quantum physics for this issue). His point about the hubris of science, and of scientists who contemptuously dismissed things spiritual and religious, would have touched a nerve in the age of looming atomic warfare.

The book concluded on a note of generous ecumenism. Every great religion aimed to help its adherents, indeed humans generally, to overcome the central human sin, "Man's Original Sin", of self-centredness. Every effort in that direction deserved respect. It ill behoved those of one religion to dismiss out of hand the attempts of other religions to divine man's inner truths and the vision of absolute reality. No one religion had a monopoly on truth. Religious intolerance and hatreds had caused immense suffering in human history. As Symmachus had declared in ancient times (when his ancestral religion was being persecuted by the Christians), the heart of God's mystery could never be reached by following one road only.

Toynbee looked forward to a time when the local heritages of different nations, civilizations and religions would have coalesced into a common heritage of the whole human family: "We are perhaps within sight of this possibility, but we are certainly not within reach of it yet" (p.296). Indeed not. As he warned, the present age was undergoing a searching practical test: "The practical test of a religion, always and everywhere, is its success or failure in helping human souls to respond to the challenges of Suffering and Sin. In the chapter of the World's history on which we are now entering, it looks as if the continuing progress of Technology were going to make our sufferings more acute than ever before, and our sins more devastating in their practical consequences. This is going to be a testing-time, and, if we are wise, we shall await its verdict" (p.296).

In *Christianity Among the Religions of the World* Toynbee examined the rise of secularism more closely, expanding on some of his theses. He saw the unrest in Europe and the western church from the thirteenth century as essentially the product of a number of factors. One was the growing materialism of the church, an almost inevitable side-product of it becoming a large and wealthy institution. This not only weakened clerical spirituality, but the church itself. Its glittering places of worship and its flourishing monasteries became the target of covetous monarchs and others, one motivation behind the Reformation.

More important to Toynbee was the vein of fanaticism and intolerance that he believed was embedded in Judaism, Christianity and Islam (Buddhism and Hinduism were admirable contrasts to this). This spirit led those churches to try to impose their doctrines by persecution and force, when persuasion and genuine conversion were the true paths. Such fanaticism (he said, problematically) was not a feature of "primitive, pre-Christian" forms of paganism. It was inherited from two incompatible concepts of God: God the merciful and compassionate versus God the jealous God. This produced an inner contradiction within the common tradition of Christianity, Judaism and Islam. Duality of vision was accompanied by duality of conduct: "The jealous god's chosen people easily fall

into becoming intolerant persecutors".⁴ From the thirteenth century on, for over four hundred years, Western Christendom was rent by wars, hatred and strife. There were struggles between the Papacy and the Holy Roman Empire, domination of the Papacy by the secular power of the French monarchy, the Babylonian Captivity at Avignon, the Great Schism, conflicts over the Consiliar movement, and ultimately the Reformation, followed by the wars of religion. The eventual consequence of this long series of scandals in the church was a progressive reaction in the west "first against the Papacy, then against the Catholic Church, and then against Christianity itself" (p.75).

As he had argued in previous works, Toynbee saw the eighteenth century as witnessing "a deliberate transfer of spiritual treasure from religious controversy to the promotion of science and to its application for use in technology" (p.76). Initially this was not an anti-religious reaction, far from it. Most of the originators of the movement (such as the founding fathers of the Royal Society in England) wanted, not to kill religion "but to salvage religion by liberating it from the fanaticism that had rightly brought it into discredit" (p.77). Science seemed a useful and harmless field, "a field in which it was possible to ascertain facts, a field in which there were no political or theological parties, a field in which agreement could be reached on the basis of demonstration and experiment, and, above all, a field in which no ill feelings would be aroused". It was calculated that, by diverting public interest from theology to technology, "the temper of the Western World might perhaps cool down to a degree at which it would become possible once again to be religious-minded without being intolerant" (pp.78-79).

Unfortunately this calculation proved erroneous. The attack against religious fanaticism ultimately turned into an attack against religion itself. In the disastrous twentieth century, a century of world wars and totalitarian ideologies, spirituality was weakened perhaps fatally. But fanaticism increased. The utopian hopes of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were dashed. The new ideologies were merely variations on a very old religion, "the religion of man-worship, the worship of collective human power, which is an older religion than Christianity and was, in fact, in the Roman Empire, Christianity's earliest adversary":

"Communism is a worship of collective human power on a world-wide scale, and in this respect it is a modern counterpart of the worship of the goddess Rome and the god Caesar. Nationalism is a worship of collective human power within local limits, and in this respect it is a modern counterpart of the worship of Athens and Sparta and the other city-states of the Graeco-Roman World before the foundation of the Roman Empire. Man worship proved to be evil and destructive in its pre-Christian manifestation, but in its present revival its capacity for evil is evidently greater, because it is now armed with new and terrible weapons" (p.79). These weapons of course were the product of technology. We had for two hundred years devoted ourselves to technology instead of religion. This was the result. And it was the result, not of a technology that was evil in itself, but of a technology that had been employed by humans for evil purposes. The old Original Sin had re-emerged.

The higher religions thus found themselves facing a common enemy: the old religion of man-worship in the form of a Communist-Nationalist ideology, ultimately stemming from Jewish-Christian-Muslim fanaticism. That enemy held an enormously important negative article of faith. That was denial of "the conviction that Man is not the greatest spiritual presence in the Universe, but that there is a

⁴ Arnold Toynbee, *Christianity Among the Religions of the World* (London, Oxford University Press, 1958), p.19.

greater presence – God or absolute reality – and that the true end of Man is to place himself in harmony with this.” (p.81).

In these grave circumstances, Toynbee urged the need for religions to subordinate their historic differences and stand together against the common adversary. He looked forward to a day when peace and social justice should reign. But, as he warned fellow Christians, their urgent task was to overcome their ancient tribal conviction that Christianity was unique. “Exclusive-mindedness” was a sinful state of mind, the sin of pride. If Christians continued to embrace the same Christian arrogance that had led to widespread rejection of religion, there was no hope for the future. What contrite Christians should do was to embrace the central truths in all religions. As Toynbee said: “I think it is possible for us, while holding that our own convictions are true and right, to recognize that, in some measure, all the higher religions are also revelations of what is true and right. They also come from God and each present some facet of God’s truth” (pp.99-100).