

Accounting Historians Journal

Volume 2
Issue 1 No. 1/4 Winter-Fall 1975

Article 13

1975

It is up to us: Arnold J. Toynbee

Vahe Baladouni

Follow this and additional works at: https://egrove.olemiss.edu/aah_journal



Part of the [Accounting Commons](#), and the [Taxation Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Baladouni, Vahe (1975) "It is up to us: Arnold J. Toynbee," *Accounting Historians Journal*: Vol. 2 : Iss. 1 , Article 13.

Available at: https://egrove.olemiss.edu/aah_journal/vol2/iss1/13

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Archival Digital Accounting Collection at eGrove. It has been accepted for inclusion in Accounting Historians Journal by an authorized editor of eGrove. For more information, please contact egrove@olemiss.edu.

Vahé Baladouni
UNIVERSITY OF NEW ORLEANS

"IT IS UP TO US." - - - ARNOLD J. TOYNBEE

Professor Arnold J. Toynbee, one of the most outstanding intellectual figures of our time, died in October at the age of eighty-six. His vast erudition, accompanied with astonishing industry and magnificent style, made him a prolific writer on numerous and disparate subjects—ranging from works on the Armenian genocide of 1915 to his well-known twelve-volume work, *A Study of History*. Alongside his scholarly achievements, Toynbee worked for his government during both World Wars and was a member of the British delegation to the Paris peace conferences in 1919 and 1945. Showered with honorary degrees both at home and abroad, Professor Toynbee will be remembered as a great historian and a man—in the testimony of those who knew him personally—of extraordinary modesty and humility.

Born in London on April 14, 1889, Toynbee received a classical education at Balliol College, Oxford. After graduating in 1911, he studied briefly at the British Archaeological School in Athens, where, we are told, he first entertained a philosophy about the decline of civilizations. In 1912 he became a tutor and fellow in ancient history in his *Alma Mater*. After World War I, he was appointed professor of Byzantine and modern Greek studies at the University of London. Some years later, in 1925, he accepted a joint appointment: Research Professor of International History at the University of London and Director of Studies at the Royal Institute of International Affairs. While holding this position at the Institute, he issued his annual *Surveys of International Affairs* which soon became well recognized sources of reference. He had travelled and lectured extensively.

Like the German philosopher Immanuel Kant and many others before him, Toynbee, too, believed that there must be an order or design in history. It was repugnant to him to think of the history of mankind as a chaotic, disorderly, fortuitous flux. This necessity for a meaningful view of history assumes in Professor Toynbee's *Study* a moral or religious character. If the religious basis of his work is latent in the first six volumes (the first three volumes were published in 1934 and the next three just before the outbreak of the

Second World War), it becomes abundantly clear in the next four. In an essay, Toynbee presents his view of the historical process in a few brush strokes: "While civilizations rise and fall and, in falling, give rise to others, some purposeful enterprise, higher than theirs, may all the time be making headway, and, in a divine plan, the learning that comes through the suffering caused by the failures of civilizations may be the sovereign means of progress."¹ Stated briefly, Professor Toynbee sees an all-encompassing purpose in history; namely, that civilizations are, so to speak, steppingstones for man to move towards richer and deeper religious insights.

An undertaking of such magnitude—a study of history—called for an appropriate unit of study. Accordingly, Toynbee took for his unit whole civilizations, rather than the traditional "nation-states." He contended that the proper unit of historical study must be a civilization and not the fragmented concept of nationality. His approach to the study of history was an attempt to show the essential vitality and interrelatedness of human affairs or, to put it more succinctly, to bring forth the living and unified process of history. It also served the purpose of widening the limits of our historical knowledge and help us appreciate the importance of a general and comprehensive treatment of events. Professor Toynbee's vision of the philosophical contemporaneity of all civilizations was in itself a repudiation at attempts to treat the past as if it exhibited a single linear progression and to study it on a kind of scholarly assembly line. To try to apply the methods of physical science to the study of human affairs was, in the eyes of Professor Toynbee, like treating living beings as though they were inanimate.

In his massive *Study*, Toynbee poses the existence of twenty-one developed and five "arrested" civilizations and proceeds to analyze them empirically and comparatively. He does this by utilizing his vast and lively knowledge of the history of man very expertly. It must be added that his style of writing contributes in no small measure to the overall engaging atmosphere of his work. Special mention should be made of Toynbee's footnotes which often lead to significant observations. In this staggering one-man task, Toynbee attempts to explore the whole of human history and to give us a synthetic view of it. While the ultimate meaning Toynbee ascribes to the general direction of human civilizations is essentially of moral or religious nature, the kernel of his theory explaining the recurrent rise and fall of civilizations seems to lie in two, basic ideas.

Civilizations, Toynbee holds, develop in response to environmental challenges of special difficulty. The challenge should be

neither too severe to stifle progress, nor too favorable to inhibit creativity. Such challenges find response among the creative minority who provide leadership to a passive majority. We find the creative minority to be generally mystically inspired. It must be underscored here that Toynbee, unlike nineteenth-century historians minimizes the importance of geographical and racial qualities as germinal challenges. For Toynbee, the breakdown of civilizations is as a result of the inevitable commission of the sin of arrogance (hubris, over-weening pride or self-confidence) manifested in such things as nationalism, militarism, and the tyranny of a dominant minority. This moral breakdown brings with it its own retributive justice (*nemesis*). Thus civilizations break down because they fall prey to the nemesis of creativity. The creative people having become reactionaries, no longer constitute an "elite creative minority" but simply an "elite dominant minority."

Toynbee was not the only major speculative historian of the twentieth century. A decade or so before him, another historian of the cyclical theory, the German scholar, Oswald Spengler, had published his erudite *Decline of the West*. The title of Spengler's work was itself symptomatic of the widespread pessimism of the times. To whatever extent Toynbee was influenced by his predecessor, there are important points of divergence between the two which can hardly be overlooked, nor should they be. Spengler presented the history of mankind as a succession of self-contained cultures, each expressing its own special character. By comparing classical antiquity with its modern Western descendant, the author of the *Decline* claims to be able to discern in all cultures biologically-conceived life cycles (birth, youth, maturity senescence, death), resembling that of an organism. Moreover, such cycles follow a fixed timetable. In the absence of any explanation why this should be so, one is left to infer that this is a law of nature. This mechanistic interpretation had a certain appeal at a time when behaviorist theories were gaining in popularity. Concerning our own Western civilization, Spengler believed that it had already reached its zenith and was now in a state of rapid decline.

In contradistinction to Spengler's view of history, Toynbee does not regard civilizations similar to animal organisms, inexorably condemned to decline and die. Toynbee tries to temper a predominantly deterministic mode of thought with reservations: allowing a place for human free will and the possibility of divine intervention. As regards our own civilization—Western Society—Toynbee indicates that it does not have to be necessarily doomed to extinction.

To quote: "We are not doomed to make history repeat itself; it is open to us, through our own efforts, to give history, in our case, some new and unprecedented turn. As human beings, we are endowed with this freedom of choice, and we cannot shuffle off our responsibility upon the shoulders of God or nature. We must shoulder it ourselves. *It is up to us.*"² (Italics supplied.) It is indeed up to us to respond creatively to the challenges of our time.

In a climate of scholarship which had become skeptical of speculative system-building, the breadth of Professor Toynbee's views and generalizations could not have gone uncriticized. Nor did they. Yet, Toynbee's singular work remains a stimulating answer to the ever-increasing tendency of specialization in modern historical research.

FOOTNOTES

¹Arnold J. Toynbee, *Civilization on Trial*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1948, p. 15.

²*Ibid.*, p. 39.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- "Toynbee, Arnold Joseph," *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Volume 22, 1973, p. 121.
- R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History*. Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1951, pp. 159-165.
- Pieter Geyl, *Debates with Historians*. New York: Meridian Books, [c. 1958].
- Ashley Montagu, ed., *Toynbee and History: Critical Essays and Reviews*. Boston: Porter Sargent Publisher, 1956.
- Arnold J. Toynbee, *A Study of History*. London: Oxford University Press, 1934-1961, Volumes I-XII.
- _____, *A Study of History*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1947. Abridgement of Volumes I-VI by D. C. Somervell.

(Vol. 2, No. 4, pp. 1, 2, 1975)