

ARNOLD TOYNBEE AND THE PROCESS OF CIVILIZATIONS

Daniel A. Dombrowski

ABSTRACT: It is now common to hear discourse about “the decline of civilization” and to learn about people’s fears that civilization might even be on the verge of collapse. In one sense, such discourse is nothing new in that at least since the time of Oswald Spengler and World War One there have been concerns and/or predictions about the decline (and perhaps fall) of “the West.” But in another sense, there are more proximate causes for the recent popularity of decline and fall discourse. It will serve us well, I think, to reconsider a thinker who thought long and hard about the rise and fall of civilizations in the past, Arnold Toynbee. It will be the purpose of the present article to argue for the claim that Toynbee can be fruitfully seen as a process thinker who was specifically concerned with the dramatic changes that have occurred historically to various civilizations around the globe. In this regard, he is in many ways a philosopher or historian of civilization, much like Alfred North Whitehead, Henri Bergson, and Teilhard de Chardin, all of whom are cited favorably by Toynbee. He is also similar to the process philosopher Charles Hartshorne in this regard. I will claim that Toynbee can provide valuable insight to us at this moment in history. That is, the sense that civilized life is threatened is not a new phenomenon, hence it will be useful to consider Toynbee’s scholarship so as to help us gain some much-needed historical perspective on civilizational change.

KEYWORDS: Decline of civilizations; Arnold Toynbee; Alfred North Whitehead; Henri Bergson; Teilhard de Chardin; Charles Hartshorne

I. *Introduction.* It is now common to hear discourse about “the decline of civilization” and to learn about people’s fears that civilization might even be on the verge of collapse. In one sense, such discourse is nothing new in that at least

since the time of Oswald Spengler and World War One there have been concerns and/or predictions about the decline (and perhaps fall) of “the West.” But in another sense, there are more proximate causes for the recent popularity of decline and fall discourse. Three immediately come to mind: (1) the rise of Trumpism and other forms of authoritarian rule that lead many reflective people to wonder about the long-term (or perhaps even short-term) prospects for liberal democracies; (2) the Covid-19 epidemic and the inadequate response to it; and (3) the gloomy long-term effects of the climate crisis.

It will serve us well, I think, to reconsider a thinker who thought long and hard about the rise and fall of civilizations in the past, Arnold Toynbee. It will be the purpose of the present article to argue for the claim that Toynbee can be fruitfully seen as a process thinker who was specifically concerned with the dramatic changes that have occurred historically to various civilizations around the globe. In this regard, he is in many ways a philosopher or historian of civilization, much like Alfred North Whitehead, Henri Bergson, and Teilhard de Chardin, all of whom are cited favorably by Toynbee. He is also similar to the process philosopher Charles Hartshorne in this regard. I will claim that Toynbee can provide valuable insight to us at this moment in history. That is, the sense that civilized life is threatened is not a new phenomenon, hence it will be useful to consider Toynbee’s scholarship so as to help us gain some much-needed historical perspective on civilizational change.

Toynbee (1889-1975) was awoken from his dogmatic slumbers, as it were, by World War One. Like Thucydides, he was overtaken by a fratricidal great war in which fully one-half of his school fellows were killed. The longer he lived, the greater his grief regarding these deaths. His magnum opus, *A Study of History*, is a twelve-volume work where his processual view of civilizational rise and fall is developed in detail. The first six volumes appeared between 1927 and 1939, the last of which appeared just before the start of World War Two in Europe. Volumes seven through ten appeared in 1954, with volume eleven (a historical atlas) in 1959 and volume twelve (containing reconsiderations regarding the previous eleven volumes) in 1961. An illustrated one volume summary of the entire work appeared in 1972 and it is this volume that I will cite parenthetically in the present article for the sake of convenience, although obviously there is no substitute for reading carefully the entire twelve volumes in their magisterial splendor (11).

Toynbee originally thought that there were twenty-one civilizations that have appeared historically, but between the 1920s and the 1970s the work of historians, archeologists, and others led him to expand the list to thirty-one. This expansion was primarily due to information unearthed about historical civilizations in the Americas and in Africa. The processual character of Toynbee's own thought led him to suspect that future historians might have to expand this list even further.

2. *A Processual View of Civilizations.* In one sense, history is clearly relative to the perspective of the historian, as Toynbee readily admits. But in another sense, there are good reasons to reject or at least to criticize some historical perspectives, say those that foster the industrialization of historical thinking. Like Whitehead (especially in *Adventures of Ideas*), Toynbee thinks it is disastrous when human beings (and nonhuman animals) are seen as mere sticks and stones. Granted, there are problems with the pathetic fallacy, wherein inanimate objects are described as having feelings. However, there are also problems with what Toynbee (and Hartshorne 2011, 40-41) calls "the apathetic fallacy," wherein clearly sentient beings are seen as mere lifeless cogs or pawns in the historical drama. Industrialism, nationalism, communism, and other "isms" that have motivated some historians have encouraged this latter fallacy (30-38).

It should be noted that the intelligible field of study that Toynbee (and Whitehead) have in mind is not the individual nation or state, in supposed isolation from other nations or states, but nations or states in relation with each other as parts of a *civilization*, say Western civilization as opposed to England or France or the United States individually. Civilizations (or societies, as Toynbee sometimes labels them) involve a vast network of relations, as opposed to the atomization of either an individual, on the one hand, or a nation-state, on the other. As in Whitehead (and Plato), the real is dipolar in the sense that each instance of it has both an "in itself" character as well as an "in relation with others" character and it is primarily the latter that makes historical reality intelligible (39-43; also see Dombrowski forthcoming).

A crucial point of convergence between Toynbee and Whitehead occurs when the former explicitly cites the latter in rejection of the idea that the rise and flourishing of civilizations is primarily due to increases in food production and advances in technology. Rather, civilizations rise and flourish due to "some profound cosmological outlook," as Whitehead puts the point and as endorsed by

Toynbee. Behind every great civilization there is a *vision* (44; also see Whitehead 1967, 13-14; Frankfort 1951, 57-58). As Toynbee suggests:

Following Whitehead's lead, I would define civilization in spiritual terms. Perhaps it might be defined as an endeavor to create a state of society in which the whole of Mankind [sic] will be able to live together in harmony, as members of a single all-inclusive family. This is, I believe, the goal of which all civilizations so far known have been aiming unconsciously, if not consciously. (44)

In addition to the practical benefit that might result from understanding the rise, flourishing, and decline of civilizations, there is also the intrinsic value found in the acquisition of such knowledge. Toynbee is primarily motivated by *curiosity* or Aristotelian wonder. In response to the aforementioned contemporary threats to Western civilization (the threat of authoritarianism, threats from microorganisms, and the threat of ecological disaster), I have frequently of late found myself wondering: Why have these threats occurred? To what extent were they preventable? Toynbee's point would seem to be that such questions require a *comparative* study of civilizations such as that developed in his own *A Study of History*. A civilization is not only larger than a nation-state, it is also more *intelligible* in the sense that it is nearer to the standard of being self-contained, although not even individual civilizations are strictly self-contained in that they are not fully intelligible apart from relations with other civilizations (46-47).

The comparative study of civilizations includes a consideration of previous civilizations out of which contemporary ones develop, as in Western civilization arising out of the compost of the previous Greco-Roman civilization as well as the Syriac civilization that contained the biblical people. There is a sharp contrast between the strong cultural (including religious) unity of the Greco-Roman civilization and its political disunity for much of its history before Alexander the Great. This is quite different from the politically liberal world in which we live, which is characterized by pervasive cultural-religious pluralism, but relative stability in politics, at least at the level of individual states. That is, the spiritual core of Western civilization must, given the widespread pluralism of religious beliefs (or lack thereof), involve toleration of various religious beliefs rather than the imposition of one comprehensive doctrine on many others who do not believe it (52-53; also see Dombrowski 2019).

Herein lies the spiritual crisis that threatens contemporary Western civilization. *Do* we continue to believe that there are alternative versions of the

good life that are different from our own, yet are nonetheless respectful of the rights of others and are compatible with justice? Like the Greco-Roman civilization, Chinese civilization was based for centuries on a remarkable degree of cultural unity with only intermittent political unity. *Our* spiritual crisis is quite different from those crises faced by people in pre- (or non-) liberal civilizations (55).

Of course, no set of criteria for civilization can be completely objective or indisputable, but neither are we entirely in the dark regarding what some of the candidates for civilization are, although their origins may differ markedly. Chinese civilization, for example, is not affiliated with any antecedent civilization, in contrast to Western civilization, which we have seen to be affiliated with ancient Greco-Roman civilization and with ancient civilization in the Levant. Toynbee and Whitehead are skeptical regarding the thesis that civilizations are subject to inexorable laws of nature, like dead matter. As a result, Toynbee is suspicious of any account of civilization based primarily on the concepts of race or environment. Rather, a civilization arises in a successful response to a certain challenge. Challenges that are too difficult, like trying to build a civilization north of the Arctic circle, are not likely to succeed, whereas idyllic conditions might lead to torpor because people are not challenged enough. When there is widespread *mimesis* or imitation of the creative minority that is responsible for the successful response to an optimal challenge, civilization is likely to flourish.

There is a tendency on the part of some peoples to remain in a static state, in contrast to the dynamism that characterizes most of the great civilizations. The peoples who are in a static condition may very well once have been in motion, but they cannot find a successful response to the challenges that face them so as to continue to move forward. These peoples spend their time recuperating from a previous successful (or failed) response to a serious challenge. This stillness is not so much death, but sleep. Other peoples actually die out or are swallowed up by another group. Further, it is possible for a people to alternate between a static condition and dynamic activity, as symbolized in Chinese civilization by the famous tension between Yin and Yang (86-89, 544).

Toynbee's challenge-and-response model is very much compatible with the process concept of creativity when employed at the societal level. This model is at odds with the view which suggests that the rise of civilizations is principally

due to inherent properties possessed by a race of people. Toynbee is convinced by the evidence that suggests that great civilizations have been produced by all of the major races of people around the globe. He is also opposed to the idea that the rise of civilizations is mainly due to the environment, despite what was said above regarding some environmental challenges being too severe and others being too lenient. Within a wide range of optimal environmental conditions, it is not so much environmental challenges that produce a civilization as *responses to* such challenges. The crucial thing is to keep alive the sense that it is human *agents* who create civilizations, enable them to flourish, as well as drive them to decline and fall. Like process thinkers such as Whitehead, Bergson, Teilhard, and Hartshorne, Toynbee did not see human history as an inexorable force like gravity in a Newtonian system (94-95; also see Teilhard 1959, 164).

Soulless forces like biological race or environment are the breeding grounds for deterministic views of history and cognate terms like “inexorability,” “fate,” and “inevitability.” But responses to challenges are not predetermined. The use of the plural “responses” is important when emphasizing the relational character of historical actors and the forces that challenge them. For example, as in the present situation involving the threats of authoritarian rule, pandemic, and climate change, it is easy to feel overwhelmed, but it is also possible to exhibit the famous insight from ancient Greece: *pathei mathos* (loosely translated as learning or being purified through suffering). Indeed, unless we learn from our mistakes, civilizational decline is likely. *How* we respond to challenges, however, is always at least a partially unknown quantity before the responses occur (97, 109, 246).

Even very difficult challenges (so long as they are not overwhelming) can actually be beneficial stimuli toward historical progress, as in the forbidding mountainous landscape of ancient Greece or of Japan leading to a prosperous seafaring economy. Penalization from other civilizations can also provide a beneficial stimulus, as in Byzantine civilization (including Russia) benefitting from pressure from nomadic tribes marauding from Central Asia (114-116, 119, 122).

It seems that civilizations continue to flourish when a successful response to a challenge provokes a fresh challenge, which leads to another promising response, such that a series of such responses becomes habitual. Inevitable progress seems to be an inappropriate goal for fallible human activity, but positive responses to

challenges can in fact become habitual and diachronically empowering. That is, Toynbee is opposed to a substantialist view of civilizations and instead exhibits a processual view of them as series of occasions with a line of inheritance from challenge to response to a new challenge to a new response, and so on (127).

Nomads on the steppes of Central Asia, by way of contrast, although they successfully mastered the problem of adaptation to the harsh exigencies of life in their environment, were so exhausted by the response that they were not able to advance to new challenges and responses. Although birth is a single act, flourishing is a gradual process. This gradual process is continued in some civilizations when, after wild animals are hunted to near extinction in a nomadic life, they take to domestication of nonhuman animals. In this manner, the new challenges posed by a rudimentary form of agriculture can be quite enlivening (128-133).

Toynbee relies explicitly on the thought of Bergson, specifically regarding his concept of the *elan vital*, to energize creative responses to natural and societal challenges. In this regard, Toynbee contrasts the ancient Greek gods Zeus and Prometheus, with the former symbolizing the static tendencies in history hampering Bergsonian *elan vital* and the latter symbolizing the progressive tendencies made possible by creative responses to challenges. These are contrasting impulses found in every individual and in every civilization, he thinks, once again as also indicated by Chinese civilization's Yin and Yang. For civilizations to continue to flourish there must be, in the recurrent rhythm of conservation and progression, an *elan* that breaks through equilibrium and provides inspiration for fresh responses. This is not so much a progressive realization of a preestablished ideal, however, as a bringing into existence of ideals themselves and an energetic attempt at realization of such. Here Toynbee is more like Hartshorne than Whitehead in that Hartshorne speaks of emergent universals, in partial contrast to Whitehead's eternal objects (135-137; also see Bergson 1932, 55, 188-189; 1921, 164-179; Hartshorne 1970, 58, 63; Whitehead 1978, 43-46).

It should be noted again that successful responses to challenges are not merely, and not primarily, based on technological advances. These can occur even in a static civilization. Mastery of the outer environment can actually leave challenges that face the *psyche* quite untouched. It would also be a mistake, according to

Toynbee, who again cites Bergson favorably, to rely on unconscious or invisible hand-like forces to carry civilizations along, as found in the thought of Adam Smith. It is always *someone*, or a group of someones, who is responsible for the flourishing of civilization and who brings about historical progress. These are the individuals who feel the direction of the *elan vital*, which itself is the result of previous human agency. Equilibrium is reached when the vision of these individuals is translated into the civilization's practice, when the creative mutation in the microcosm is followed by a modification of the macrocosm. However, creative personalities can also (obviously) lead to oppression and tyranny. The recent rise of Trumpism and other forms of authoritarian rule seems to confirm Toynbee's view here. The democratic *elan* at the core of Western civilization can be lost if the general population does not feel in its bones, as it were, the (Whiteheadian) lure of the politically liberal ideal of people with different comprehensive doctrines and different races, etc., living together in justice and hence peace (137, 140; also see Bergson 1932, 73, 251, 333; Dombrowski 2019).

During periods of social crisis it might be tempting to retreat into a deterministic explanation for the flux of life. Spengler did precisely this by seeing civilizations (he called them "cultures") as living organisms that *of necessity* eventually die. But Toynbee, along with Whitehead, Bergson, Teilhard, and Hartshorne, is impressed with the existence of creative personalities in history who *freely choose* their ideals. There is no necessity, say, in idolizing the ghost of some previous rule that distorts social growth and that condemns the civilization in question to sterility. One example of this is the oft-noted tendency on the part of military institutions to prepare to fight the next war on the basis of strategy learned in the previous war, thereby vacating the chance for creative innovation (141-150).

It is one of the perennial infirmities of human beings to ascribe their own failures to the operation of forces beyond their control. Hartshorne, in particular, is a process thinker who, along with Toynbee, militates against this tendency. But in neither Toynbee nor Hartshorne are civilizations viewed as living organisms, as they are in Spengler. They consist in the common ground among the respective fields of activity of a great number of *individual* human beings. Toynbee goes so far as to say that Spengler's view of civilizations as organisms predestined to die is "foolish." Some other unhelpful metaphors are found in seeing

civilizations as clocks that inevitably run down or as races that are deracinated through intermarriage. In Toynbee's alternative view, the goddess with whom we have to do battle is not Necessity, but Probability (154-156, 159).

Although ancient Minoan civilization came to an abrupt end due to a massive earthquake and subsequent tidal wave, civilizations typically meet their deaths not due to an external assassin, but by their own hands. Civilizations are not so much murdered as they commit suicide. One type of civilizational suicide is when the general populace exhibits a mechanical *mimesis* of either a tyrannical ruler or an imagined past. Part of the problem is *mimesis* itself, which is precarious if it altogether lacks self-determination and is purely rote. But some *mimesis*, after all, is itself creative (161, 164).

We should not assume that Toynbee is committed to a nineteenth century-like "great man" view of history. In fact, Aristotle's *peripeteia* or reversal of roles is often exhibited in the history of civilizations, as in the biblical line that the stone rejected by the builders becomes the cornerstone (Mark 12: 10-12). Christians, for example, were an insignificant external proletariat in the Greco-Roman civilization that became the core of Western civilization (167).

If a civilization shows a fatuous passivity with respect to the present, this is probably due to a related infatuation with the past, according to Toynbee. But time itself, on a process view of time as linear and as asymmetrically directional, involves of necessity creative advance. That is, there is a danger in resting on one's laurels, as in Italian culture, as one important part of Western civilization, exhibiting enormous creativity in the late medieval and early modern periods, but contributing to Western civilization in a conspicuously inferior way for the past few centuries. It is the act of idolization itself that is the problem, not any intrinsic quality in the persons or objects or techniques that are idolized. There is something intoxicating about victory in the past (171, 174, 198-199).

It is unlikely that any civilization will match the longevity of the longest-lived of all civilizations, that in ancient Egypt, which survived for two and a half millennia. What kept Egypt going for so long was the fact that it was a petrified civilization with relatively static social relations, economic activities, and challenges. It is not probable, to say the least, that any contemporary civilization could survive in a petrified condition, given the high-speed dynamics required in a world dominated by electronic technology (13, 212).

We have seen that the essence of growth in a civilization (Egypt aside) is a certain *elan* that carries a challenged party through the equilibrium of an originally successful response when faced with a fresh challenge. Disintegration of a civilization is like growth or flourishing of a civilization in being a processual concept. Further, both disintegration and flourishing are, in addition to being processual, cumulative. Even during the painful process of disintegration, however, can be found the spirit of creativity, so long as it is not utterly overwhelmed by chaos. The Roman Empire, after all, spent several *centuries* declining before it eventually fell. But the flexible power of response tends to be thwarted in a period of disintegration. Just as likely is the continued creative activity of a dominant minority, but not in the service of civilizational goals. Rather, the minority increasingly serves its own ends. This sort of greed, not infrequent in the history of civilizations, quite understandably leads to an alienated internal proletariat. This group is to be differentiated from the threat posed by an external proletariat that is resentful, whether rightly or wrongly, of the successes of a given civilization (222-223, 228-240).

When futile posturing regarding a given civilization's challenges is replaced with creative resolve, we are made especially aware of the fact that civilizations are dynamic processes. It is a mistake, Toynbee thinks, to see creative responses to challenges as due solely or even primarily to undisciplined spontaneity. That is, antinomianism is no substitute for genuine creativity. Toynbee is astute to compare the hope for undisciplined spontaneity to solve civilization's problems to the defenders of the contemporary drug culture, who think that through alcohol or hallucinogens we will recover a lost faculty of uninhibited creativity. The implicit assumption in this mistaken view is that individual salvation can be achieved when it is egoistically divorced from a wider social context (241-243).

Because order and disorder are correlative terms that cannot be understood apart from each other, and because freedom presupposes a certain degree of disorder, we should not assume that some disorder is necessarily a sign of civilizational decline. In aesthetic terms, absolute order is actually ugly or monotonous. Both the deification of chance or disorder and the rigid predestinationism adopted by some (not all) Abrahamic believers are aesthetic and political mistakes, hence we should try to steer a moderate course between these two extremes in the effort to have civilizations flourish. Likewise, the

extremes of archaism and futurism should be avoided. Any political slogan of the form “Make X Great Again!” runs the risk of leaning too far in the direction of the former. A slavish *mimesis* of ancestors, in contrast to the sober and difficult effort to understand both their strengths and weaknesses, is a lapse from the dynamic movement of civilization. As Whitehead put the point, the strict conservative is working against the dynamic and asymmetrical character of time: We always move *from* the past *to* the future. The virus of nationalism and the concomitant attempt to recapture an ostensible racial purity is a sign of an unacknowledged archaism. Perhaps the most frightening example of this tendency was the Nazi attempt to recreate a primitive Teutonic society that would have (allegedly) corresponded to an ancient German (or Western) essence without the accretions of the intervening ages (244-246, 378; also see Dombrowski 2004, ch. 2; Whitehead 1967, 274; Bergson 1921, 239-258).

Archaism and futurism are futile attempts to escape from a crushing present where the *elan* of growth seems to have given out. In a memorable phrase, Toynbee puts the point as follows: “It is not, then, by seeking to escape suffering, but by embracing and responding to it, that the soul born into a disintegrating society can win release and regain, on a higher plane, the path...from which...society has strayed” (254). One of the difficulties involved in trying to understand civilizational disintegration is to figure out how to demarcate the line of ascent or descent: Are we going up or down? If we are on the way down, is it the beginning of descent with centuries of flourishing ahead of us or is the apparent summer we are enjoying actually an “Indian summer”? There are many difficulties here, not least of which is the impossibility on process grounds of ever knowing *in minute detail* the outcome to future contingencies. Another difficulty is the implicit assumption on the part of each civilization that it alone is the center of history and has universal suzerainty, at least *de jure* if not *de facto*. This sort of ethnocentrism often gets in the way of making clear-eyed judgments (249, 267, 271).

Civilizations establish a certain sort of peace, sometimes just and sometimes not. Or at least a civilization establishes a *modus vivendi* or Hobbesian truce, if not a more desirable overlapping consensus among different parties and individuals. One way to eliminate opponents is by persecuting them or by swallowing them up, either violently or by persuasion. In this regard neither Western civilization,

Byzantine civilization, nor Islamic civilization has historically been as tolerant as civilizations strongly influenced by Buddhism, Toynbee holds. Quite ironically, the irenic character of political liberalism and democracy arose out of Christian ideas in the early modern period. Despite the persecuting zeal that the world's great religions have often exhibited, neither Toynbee nor Whitehead think that religion can be eliminated from the long-term flourishing of civilization. As Whitehead puts the matter, "The chequered history of religion and morality is the main reason for the widespread desire to put them aside in favour of the more stable generalities of science. Unfortunately for this smug endeavor...the impact of aesthetic, religious and moral notions is inescapable" (Whitehead 1968, 19).

It is at times difficult to admit that we can learn from other civilizations when dealing with our own problems. For example, one of the most significant achievements of Chinese civilization was the establishment of an administrative system based on civil service examinations, which held the civilization together from the time of the Han dynasty, contemporaneous with the Roman Empire, until the early twentieth century. The Roman Empire itself also had an administrative system from the time of Augustus and impartial civil service examinations from the time of Diocletian that had the egalitarian effect of breaking down class barriers. As Toynbee observes: "Westerners should not automatically assume, as they are prone to do, that the values and goals of their own civilization will be permanently dominant" (318, also 309).

The crisis of the West is integrally connected to its spiritual core, according to both Toynbee and Whitehead. In this regard we should not, despite the obvious flaws of organized religions, view them as parasites on dying civilizations, nor merely as chrysalises for the births of new civilizations. Quite apart from their institutionalization and rigidity of stature, they are also embodiments of, for lack of a better word, the *spirit* of a civilization. The very title of one of Whitehead's most famous books, *Religion in the Making*, captures Toynbee's sense of the ongoingness and gradual purification of religious ideas. Religions or wisdom traditions or spiritual practices have a rich past, but they also need to have a rich future in order for civilization to survive and flourish. In fact, Toynbee thinks that wisdom traditions serve the purpose of preserving a precious germ of life through the tumultuous interregnum between periods of civilizational flourishing (319, 332; also see Dawson 1950).

Further, we should not underestimate the degree to which Western civilization is indeed Western Christian civilization (or Western Judeo-Christian civilization), as Toynbee labels it, despite the decline of organized religion since the time of the Enlightenment. The core of the civilization still shows the traces of its religious origin, as in the concepts of human dignity and human rights, rooted as they are in the biblical idea from Genesis that human beings are made in the image of God. As the great scholar in the Marxist tradition, Jurgen Habermas, puts the point, quite ironically in the idiom of the insurance industry, various post-religion thinkers are living off the capital accumulated during the Judeo-Christian ages in the sense that they receive a great deal of insurance without having to pay any premiums (see Habermas 2002).

The thesis that religions are not the causes of the disintegration of civilizations is meant to contradict Edward Gibbon's famous view that it was largely the pusillanimity of Christianity that ruined the virile Roman Empire. But Rome became corrupt and fell from the inside out, Toynbee thinks, much like termites eating away at a wooden structure from within. It is true that religion can foster archaism, but theologies of hope can also lead the way to a future that escapes ancestral mistakes (333-334). Nor is Toynbee convinced that religion is necessarily xenophobic and exclusive: "Hinduism and Buddhism originated within the Indic Civilization, Judaism within the Syriac Civilization, Zoroastrianism within the Iranian Civilization, and Christianity and Islam in a 'culture compost' in which elements of the disintegrated Syriac and Hellenic Civilizations were mingled" (335).

It is true that religions historically have often lapsed into authoritarianism (as have political leaders!), both as a tactic in self-defense and as a reflection of the belief that they were depositories of valuable truth. But the better angels of religious believers' natures, to paraphrase Abraham Lincoln, have also been inspired by St. Francis of Assisi, Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Dorothy Day, and others. A civilization is a network of relations, including relations with religious ideas and institutions, not an organism that is bound to die. An example of an influential religious idea, original sin, reminds us that human frailty is not a temporary symptom, but a permanent feature of human life. Although this idea can, and historically has, been distorted through overemphasis, rightly understood it helps us to grasp what Toynbee and Whitehead and all the great

religions suggest: that human nature is “amphibious” (340, 349). “A human being is both an animal and something more; he [sic] is both a social animal and a person endowed with a conscience; he has some knowledge and some power, but both his knowledge and his power are limited” (349). The spiritual power toward which the great religions point is not necessarily omnipotent, as Toynbee sees things and as process thinkers have emphasized throughout the twentieth century, as in Hartshorne’s book titled *Omnipotence and Other Theological Mistakes*. Indeed, Toynbee is in agreement with Whitehead and Hartshorne that, due to the obvious evil that exists in the world, an omnibenevolent God *cannot* also be omnipotent (349).

“I believe that civilizations have always been brought to grief by their own faults and failures, and not by any external agency” (351), claims Toynbee (once Minoan civilization is set aside). In addition, “A growing civilization may be defined as one in which the components of its culture are in harmony with each other and form an integral whole; on the same principle, a disintegrating civilization can be defined as one in which these same elements have fallen into discord” (360). Among the sources of discord in a civilization are debates about how to assess the past, debates that are ripping us apart at present. Toynbee thinks that it would be hubristic to altogether deprecate the achievements of the past, all the while admitting the mistakes made in previous civilizations and in previous stages of our own. For example, we should all be grateful for the discovery of the alphabet in Syriac civilization by the Phoenicians and others in the eastern Mediterranean region, which produced an enormous effect on Greco-Roman civilization and in turn on Western and other civilizations. The alphabet, which was discovered only once and which was spread to Asia through Alexander the Great, aids in the development of abstract thinking more than the use of the pictograms and ideograms that preceded this discovery. It would be presumptuous of us to devalue this discovery (416, 419).

Nonwestern civilizations for several centuries have been forced to deal with the challenge of the West. Two quite different types of response have been prevalent: the Herodian response and that of the zealot. The former consists in an obsequiousness before the West or in a *mimesis* of the West so as to “catch up” with it. The latter consists in the adoption of an attitude of hostility toward the West in an attempt to preserve local culture, power, and influence. The models

for both of these are to be found in two quite different approaches in ancient Israel's reaction to the Roman Empire. Modern examples of each are easy to find, along with some hybrid approaches, as when Japanese civilization initially adopted a zealot's approach and then became masterful Herodians. Other civilizations adopted a Western heresy as a way to respond to threats from the West, as when Byzantine civilization (through Russia) and Chinese civilization adopted Karl Marx's views, even if these civilizations eventually turned toward a different Western thinker: Adam Smith. Further, it is hard to underestimate the degree to which Peter the Great and Mustafa Kemal Ataturk changed their respective civilizations in response to the West (422, 436-442).

Ever since the voyages of discovery in the early modern period, Western civilization has exhibited an explosive dynamism to which all other civilizations have had to react, in contrast, say, to the relative petrification of Chinese civilization in the same period. Now China exhibits Western dynamism, due to the influence of both Marx and Smith. It is hard for any traditional, pre-industrial way of life to flourish in the shadow of Western dynamism, indeed Western explosiveness. Toynbee hopes for a felicitous mixture of Western dynamism and traditional Chinese stability. The meeting (or clash) between contemporary Western and Chinese civilizations occurs across space, just as the various renaissances (in the plural) that have occurred in different civilizations happen across time. The two meetings (or clashes) might be connected: response to the challenge of a rising Chinese civilization might lead the West to more highly prize its greatest achievements from the past in terms of democratic government, human rights, and a commitment to the dignity of each person, achievements that are rooted in its religious heritage (443-444, 456-476).

It is as integral to Toynbee's worldview as it is to that of process thinkers that human beings are free to make choices within the limits of their capacities and their historical backgrounds. The "absolutely unique" is a limit concept, as Plato realized long ago and as affirmed by both Toynbee and Whitehead. That is, human beings are ones-in-relation-to-others, hence their choices can be compared and contrasted with each other. Whereas a one-in-itself is unintelligible, a one-in-relation can in principle be understood, whether the one in question is an individual or a civilization (477, 485; also Whitehead 2021, 100-106; Dombrowski forthcoming):

Change, novelty, and creation in human affairs are manifestations of the element of uniqueness in them, and one of the most cherished aims of historians is to catch change, novelty, and creation in their mental grasp, but they have to employ an instrument of thought which can analyse and classify points of likeness, but cannot cope with elements in phenomena that display no relations with any others. In seeking to apprehend what is unique, historians are, in fact, trying to swim against the current of the operational movement of the intellect....We assume that reality makes sense, even if perhaps not completely....[T]he general assumption that underlies all social science: *History is not exclusively chaos or chance: a degree of observable order and pattern, of partially predictable regularity, exists in human behavior.* (486)

History is thus a combination of the unique and the general, with neither term expendable. The study of civilizations is necessarily comparative in nature, as mentioned previously in Toynbee's consideration of twenty-one (and then later thirty-one) instances, comparative work that includes the scholarship of thinkers from several civilizations, including the Islamic historian Ibn Khaldun, who was one of the pioneers of the study of the morphology of civilizations (491).

As long ago as 1912 Toynbee realized that the British Empire was falling apart, as had the Venetian Empire centuries before. But he held out hope for Western civilization nonetheless in that the British Empire was only one part of a greater civilization. As the *Pax Americana* wanes, perhaps we can have an analogous hope (495).

3. *Methodological Concerns and Defense.* I would now like to consider three relatively recent articles that deal with some of the methodological concerns that have been raised about Toynbee's scholarship. What unites the work of these three scholars is that, despite the fact that they have criticisms of some aspects of Toynbee's method, they nonetheless think that there is much to be gained by a consideration of Toynbee at his best, which I am locating in his view of civilizations as processual.

a. *Gordon Martel and Particular Origins.* This author notes that Toynbee's *A Study of History* was a phenomenal publishing success in its day, but Toynbee came under severe criticism from academic historians. Further, Martel emphasizes the fact that Toynbee's global concerns arose out of a very particular background in the intellectual world of pre-1914 Great Britain, especially in terms of Toynbee's education at Winchester and Oxford. Martel concentrates on *both* the methodological concerns historians had with Toynbee (in terms of his alleged overreliance on the Greco-Roman world, his vague definitions, his reliance on

secondary sources, etc.) *and* the fact that he is one of the fathers of a major contemporary intellectual movement: world history. The latter is commendable, according to Martel, due to its critique of the self-centeredness, parochialism, and overspecialization in the way academic history has been written for quite some time. Not to mention the nationalism and jingoism of much historical work. That is, Toynbee's insistence on comparative history should become imperative (Martel 2004, 344).

The underlying reality of mutual interdependence is a commonplace in the process-relational thought of Whitehead and Hartshorne, in particular, such that Toynbee should be seen as applying this process-relational view to history in addition to its use in Whitehead and Hartshorne in physics, biology, and metaphysics. Further, it is hard *not* to take seriously Toynbee's seminal idea that civilizations typically fall not due to external contacts. Rather, they commit suicide when a group that profits from the status quo, the dominant minority, gets in the way of creative advance and selfishly protects its own interests. In order to avoid becoming an "arrested" civilization that preserves "fossilized remnants" of previous greatness, either the dominant minority must change or be replaced by a new dominant minority (Martel 2004, 345).

Even if Toynbee put too much confidence in his overall method, it is arguable that he nonetheless made valuable contributions in discerning patterns in the classical past, as when he noted that when Roman proconsuls got used to despotic rule in Spain, Africa, or Gaul, they then harmed Rome a great deal when they brought these despotic habits back home. These habits eroded the inner life of the civilization. Toynbee's own habit of analogical thinking is at the core of the comparative method he used to counteract aforementioned parochialism (Martel 2004, 346-351).

The important thing, as Martel rightly states, is to face directly the problem of change and to realize that change is the core of reality and remains stubbornly real. From his time at Oxford Toynbee had embraced this insight, which he derived from the thought of Bergson. But change does not occur haphazardly, hence the need to understand how it has played out historically on a comparative basis. In early adulthood Toynbee spent a year in Greece and wondered how it was that in one age the Greeks had established a great civilization and in the contemporary period had fallen into dissolute decay. This question hardly arises

without a synoptic view that uses a wide- angle lens, both spatially and temporally. In this regard he was not served well as a student by a curriculum that assumed the permanence of the Greek genius (Martel 2004, 352-354).

What Toynbee found sobering at the time of World War One is what we might find sobering today: that we might be facing the decline and fall of Western civilization and perhaps of civilization itself. In this regard we ignore Toynbee at our peril and we would be well served to try to improve his project rather than to abandon it altogether (Martel 2004, 355-356; also see McIntire and Perry 1989).

b. *Ian Hall and the Time of Troubles*. This author is astute to note that much of the ire that was directed at Toynbee was due to the view he held from the 1930s on that religion or a worldview or a cosmological outlook or a vision are at the core of a civilization. This is much like the criticism that Whitehead attracted when, like Toynbee, he abandoned a youthful religious skepticism and defended a version of theism different from the traditional one. Religious skeptics never forgave him for “going over” to religion, and religious traditionalists were angered by the processual character of his neoclassical theism. This interest in processual or Bergsonian open religion and metaphysics in both Whitehead and Toynbee is precisely what led them out of the academic mainstream more than their globalism or their liberal internationalism in politics (Hall 2014, 24-29; also see Dombrowski 2017).

This turn to religion, broadly conceived, was no doubt influenced by existential crises: in Whitehead’s case by the death of his son in World War One and in Toynbee’s case by the suicide of his son in the 1930s. But it is also due in Toynbee’s case to the belief that Western civilization was beyond its genesis and growth phases and that only a resurgence of Bergsonian creativity would prevent it from decay and possible fall. In short, for the past century we have been in a “time of troubles.” Yet there is a very strong sense in Toynbee that we *can* avoid becoming one of the fossil civilizations like the Sumeric, Hittite, Babylonian, Andean, Mayan, Yucatec, and Mexic. The schism between the dominant minority and the internal proletariat and the threat of an external proletariat that have typically been found in previous civilizations does not of necessity have to condemn our own (Hall 2014, 30-31; also see Dombrowski 2017, 90).

Toynbee was convinced that the time of troubles is largely due to political leaders, and the citizens in democracies who elect them, who are unable to move

beyond the interests of local or parochial sovereign states. A thoroughgoing internationalism is the only viable alternative, he thinks, to the breakdown of modern civilizations. It would be a mistake, he also thinks, not to learn from the Romans that suppression of an internal proletariat and war against an external one are not long-term solutions to the problem of bringing about civilizational flourishing. As the title to one of Toynbee's many books puts it, civilization at present is *on trial*. Toynbee's internationalism and his turn toward religion are connected in that he thought that Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, and Buddhism, etc., are different paths up the same mountain, at the summit of which are to be found cognate ideas like: God is love, compassion is the key, and so on. The presence of Buddhism in this list indicates that there can be versions of nontheistic religion that are conducive to the sort of spiritual renewal that Toynbee has in mind (Hall 2014, 32-34).

If Toynbee is today somewhat unfashionable, there might be some good reasons for this, given the understandable concerns on the part of those historians who see the benefits of staying close to the evidence without undue speculation, but there are also some really bad reasons for Toynbee (and Whitehead, Bergson, Hartshorne, and Teilhard) being out-of-step with contemporary academe. Desire for spiritual renewal does not have to be associated with supernaturalism in the pejorative sense, with a belief in miracles, or with denigration of the body. Thankfully, there are also aspects of Toynbee that have now become common wisdom and that might help us see our way through this time of troubles: that Western imperialism is not to be defended, that there are great civilizations in addition to that of the West, etc. (Hall 2014, 35-36).

c. *Krishan Kumar and the Return of Civilization*. This author argues that "civilization" in recent years has made something of a comeback, which bodes well for Toynbee studies in that Toynbee was the greatest historian and analyst of civilization in the 20th century. The criticisms of Toynbee's work that surfaced in the 1950s themselves now look a bit dated. The return of civilization studies noted by Kumar is due at least in part to the work of Samuel Huntington on the *clash* of civilizations, most notably the clash between Western civilization and Islamic civilization, but also involving Byzantine civilization as embodied in Russia and Chinese civilization. That is, the "return of civilization" forces us to look East, to literally "re-orient" ourselves in order to understand where we are

at present. The threats not only to Western civilization, but to civilization itself, are also highlighted in Jared Diamond's influential scholarship (see Kumar 2014, 815-818).

In addition to the clash of civilizations revitalizing the study of the sort of subject matter treated by Toynbee, there is also the impetus that comes from environmental studies wherein an ecological mode of thinking seems to be welded to an equally expansive civilizational mode of thinking, in contrast to thinking at the level of national prejudice. Global history is quite understandably "in," as is (unfortunately) the explosive reaction against globalization (Kumar 2014, 819-820).

Of course, the very idea of civilization is controversial. The word was apparently first used in 18th century France, a use that had a moral and prescriptive sense and, it should be noted, a *processual* sense of gradually moving away from barbarism. But the odious character of this conception of civilization may very well be due to the ethnocentric way in which the concept was been applied, rather than to the concept itself. The word "barbarism" itself is derived from the Greek *barbaros*, a word that mimics how those who spoke languages other than Greek sounded to ancient Greek speakers: ba ba ba. It is precisely this sort of ethnocentrism that Toynbee's synoptic view is meant to counteract. One can admire Norbert Elias's related work *The Civilizing Process* without giving in to ethnocentrism or to Western exceptionalism.

Or again, defense of the civilizing process does not necessarily entail unfair or oppressive treatment of other cultures or of "arrested" civilizations, as post-colonial followers of Jean-Jacques Rousseau might think in their defense of indigeneity. Of course, there are uses of "primitive" and "savage" that are very bothersome, but there are other more literal uses where "primitive" (from the Latin) means first, as in the honorific Canadian designation of indigenous people as "First Nations." Likewise, when Henry David Thoreau says, with the approval of environmentalists everywhere, that in wildness lies the preservation of the world, it is noteworthy that in French "wildness" would be rendered as *sauvage* (Kumar 2014, 821; Thoreau, "Walking").

It is of paramount importance that in reference to Toynbee we speak of civilizations in the plural and that we avoid any suggestion that the Western variety exhausts the historical evidence. Even as the term "civilization" fell into

disfavor, in several disciplines it was transmuted into “culture” and clearly there are a great number of cultures in the world. As Kumar puts the point, “anthropologists were digesting civilization and regurgitating it as culture” (Kumar 2014, 825). “Society” is another cognate term that is used by Toynbee himself. What is crucial is that civilizations (or cultures or societies) be seen in flux and as liable to degeneration and that some sense be made of how to reverse the degeneration. One of the reasons why history is needed (and not merely sociology, political science, and other social sciences) is that only by studying previous civilizations are we able to see how the plots of civilizations work out their conclusions. Further, civilizations do not merely die, but they also in the process of dying prepare the way for their successors. Civilizations are not static conditions, but dynamic movements of an evolutionary kind, movements that can (but not necessarily) come to an end (Kumar 2014, 826-831).

Civilizational analysis, especially of a comparative kind, always seems to involve disputes regarding the units of analysis, but the fact that these units can arise, flourish, decline, and fall is a given. Kumar also wishes to defend the thesis that collective memories and practices in a civilization can be traced back to an ancient past, a tracing that eludes the grasp of interpreters whose units of analysis are too small. Such a tracing is obvious in the case of longstanding civilizations like the Indic or the Sinic, but it is also in evidence in the history of Germany, where the extent of the flourishing of Catholicism in the southern part of that country covers roughly the same territory as the advance of the Roman Empire into that part of the world centuries before. Affection for (or disaffection from) Rome is historically conditioned by forces deep in the past. One wants, indeed one needs, a unit of analysis with a long reach.

4. *Conclusion.* We would be well served to view Toynbee not only as a process thinker, in general, but also as a process philosopher of religion, in particular. One indication of this was noted above when Toynbee gives evidence of moving away from the traditional theistic belief in divine omnipotence, a rejection he shared with Whitehead and Hartshorne. The obvious evil Toynbee saw in history means that God could not be both omnibenevolent and omnipotent and, given the forced choice between these two divine attributes, the logic of perfection requires that we retain the former and reject the latter. This is due to the primacy of the good that Toynbee realizes can be traced back as far as Plato.

History looks quite different when there is no all-controlling God hovering over it so as to be responsible for its outcome, including the evils exhibited in it. That is, belief in divine omnipotence entails that when evil occurs, it is either sent by God or is at least permitted by this omnipotent being. It is much more intelligible to view God as a final cause or as an ideal lure than as a Grand Puppeteer who pulls all the strings in human history (162, 169, 244, 349; also see Dombrowski 2006; Hartshorne 1962).

Another similarity between Toynbee and process theists consists in Toynbee's belief that, although the function of religion is to enable human beings to enter into a direct relationship with ultimate reality, this does not necessarily entail commitment to otherworldliness or asceticism. The ascetic assumes that engagement with historical forces will encourage too much of an attachment to "this" world. Although we should avoid otherworldliness, it is also important in Toynbee and in all of the world's great religions to avoid egocentrism. But egocentrism comes in many forms, including the orgiastic cult of Dionysus or Bacchus in Greco-Roman civilization or in hedonistic versions of capitalism, on the one hand, and the cult of self-denial in several religions, on the other, which, when carried to an extreme, is usually due to a desire to escape from a world conceived to be intolerable. This latter approach is as barren and as destructive of civilization as the self-indulgent rites of the ecstasies, Toynbee thinks. God is to be found in *this* world *through* civilization (218-219).

Civilizations flourish when there is widespread evidence of people being both *seized by the inwardness* of the spiritual core of the civilization and willing to *act* in ways that encourage the civilization to respond creatively to new challenges. Toynbee often (along with Whitehead, Bergson, Hartshorne, and Teilhard) castigates reified and fossilized institutions, whether political/economic, religious, or aesthetic, that halt creative advance (547; also see Bergson 1932, 98-99, 177-178, 251).

Finally, it is significant that Toynbee and the process thinkers mentioned in this article were all politically liberal internationalists. Given the famous global village in which we now live and given the enormity of the environmental problems that we face (see, e.g., Henning 2015; Gare 2010; Schulz 2020), the only rational hope for us consists in either the peaceful unification of civilizations around the globe or at least the pacification of relations among them (see Teilhard

1959, 221, 285-290, 308-310). Although Teilhard's prediction of an Omega Point at which there will be a common-consciousness shared by all of humanity assumes an evolutionary goal-directedness and an optimism greater than that found in Toynbee and other process thinkers, in *some* sense all of these thinkers, including Toynbee, indicate the practical necessity and spiritual desirability of *some* sort of unity of the world's civilizations (see Romein 1956, 350). For all of our sakes it is to be hoped that Trumpism and other forms of authoritarian rule, and the deleterious effects such rule has had on efforts to deal with the pandemic and the climate crisis, are temporary impediments in the processual road to the flourishing of all of the world's current civilizations (541, 546, 552).

Professor of Philosophy
Seattle University
ddombrow@seattleu.edu

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bergson, Henri. *L'Evolution Creatrice*. Paris: Alcan, 1921.
- . *Les Deux Sources de la Morale et de la Religion*. Paris: Alcan, 1932.
- Dawson, Christopher. *Religion and the Rise of Western Culture*. London: Sheed and Ward, 1950.
- Diamond, Jared. *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies*. New York: Norton, 1999.
- Dombrowski, Daniel. *Divine Beauty: The Aesthetics of Charles Hartshorne*. Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2004.
- . *Rethinking the Ontological Argument: A Neoclassical Theistic Response*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.
- . *Whitehead's Religious Thought: From Mechanism to Organism, From Force to Persuasion*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2017.
- . *Process Philosophy and Political Liberalism*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019.
- . "The Dipolar Character of Being in Plato and Whitehead." Forthcoming.
- Elias, Norbert. *The Civilizing Process: The History of Manners and State Formation and Civilization*. 1939. Tr. Edmund Jeffcott. Oxford: Blackwell, 1994.
- Frankfort, Henri. *The Birth of Civilization in the Near East*. London: Williams and Norgate,

- 1951.
- Gare, Arran. "Toward an Ecological Civilization: The Science, Ethics, and Politics of Eco-Poiesis." *Process Studies* 39.1 (2010): 5-38.
- Gibbon, Edward. *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. 2 vols. New York: Modern Library, 1932.
- Habermas, Jurgen. *Religion and Rationality*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002.
- Hall, Ian. "Time of Troubles." *International Affairs* 90.1 (2014): 23-36.
- Hartshorne, Charles. *The Logic of Perfection*. LaSalle, IL: Open Court, 1962.
- . *Creative Synthesis and Philosophic Method*. LaSalle, IL: Open Court, 1970.
- . *Omnipotence and Other Theological Mistakes*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984.
- . *Creative Experiencing*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2011.
- Henning, Brian. *Riders in the Storm: Ethics in an Age of Climate Change*. Winona, MN: Anselm Academic, 2015.
- Huntington, Samuel. *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order*. New York: Touchstone, 1996.
- Khaldun, Ibn. *Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History*. 1375-1379. 3 vols. Tr. Franz Rosenthal. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1958.
- Kumar, Krishan. "The Return of Civilization—and of Arnold Toynbee?" *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 56.4 (2014): 815-843.
- Martel, Gordon. "The Origins of World History: Arnold Toynbee before the First World War." *Australian Journal of Politics and History* 50.3 (2004): 343-356.
- Marx, Karl. *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*. 1843. Tr. Joseph O'Malley and Annette Jolin. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970.
- McIntire, C.T., and Marvin Perry. "Toynbee's Achievement." *Toynbee: Reappraisals*. Ed. C.T. McIntire and Marvin Perry. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1989.
- Romein, Jan. *Toynbee and History*. Boston: Porter Sargent, 1956.
- Schulz, Dwayne. "Progress and Civilization in Whitehead." *Process Studies* 49.2 (2020): 188-208.
- Smith, Adam. *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*. 1776. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993.
- Spengler, Oswald. *The Decline of the West*. 2 vols. New York: Knopf, 1926-1928.
- Teilhard de Chardin, Pierre. *The Phenomenon of Man*. Tr. Bernard Wall. London: Collins, 1959.
- Thoreau, Henry David. *Excursions*. Tr. Joseph Moldenhauer. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007.
- Thucydides. *History of the Peloponnesian War*. Tr. Rex Warner. Baltimore: Penguin, 1954.

-
- Toynbee, Arnold. *A Study of History*. 12 vols. New York: Oxford University Press, 1927-1961.
- . *Civilization on Trial*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1946.
- . *A Study of History: A New Edition*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1972.
- Whitehead, Alfred North. *Adventures of Ideas*. 1933. New York: Free Press, 1967.
- . *Modes of Thought*. 1938. New York: Free Press, 1968.
- . *Process and Reality*. 1929. Ed. David Ray Griffin and Donald Sherburne. New York: Free Press, 1978.
- . *Religion in the Making*. 1926. New York: Fordham University Press, 1996.
- . *The Harvard Lectures of Alfred North Whitehead, 1925-1927*. Vol. 2. Ed. Brian Henning, Joseph Petek, and George Lucas. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021.