

History and the Logic of All or None

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HISTORY has become a favorite whipping-boy in recent theology. Reinhold Niebuhr views it as the Satan who robs the modern Job of his pretensions; Arnold J. Toynbee as the slave who serves beings higher than himself. And there are many others who share these attitudes toward history.

I

History is normally defined as the temporal experience of people and the memory or record of their past. It is human history. It deals with a level of existence intermediate between nature and pure Being or some functional equivalent. Since there are many peoples, each with its own related experiences and common or shared memory, there are many histories. History is a collective noun.

This fact of many histories makes necessary terms such as civilization and culture. They refer to groups which share a common character, common value-systems and similar modes of behavior. Western culture may be distinguished from Eastern by comparing these several factors.

Toynbee, as an historian, believes that an history must include all that is necessary to understand the development and status of a given people. Modern England can only be understood by relating it to the thousand or more years of western Europe. Its development was shaped by the challenges it received and the responses made to them. For example, we are now challenged by a "baby boom" which threatens to explode our population. It can reduce our living standards and produce tensions which may disrupt our normal ways of living. What response will be made to this challenge?

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Toynbee believes this is the basic question for the historian.

History is concerned with whole societies, with the life and activities of the English people, not merely with the Elizabethan Age. It is concerned with other peoples whose impact upon England, to continue this example, made a difference in the life and character of English people. This difference is observed in terms of challenges offered and responses made.

Toynbee's views are summarized in his Gifford Lectures published as *An Historian's Approach to Religion* (1956). He was much impressed by the fact that groups of people emerge, come into the spotlight, as it were. They develop as they face specific challenges. Eventually, they fail to respond properly and pass from the scene. The birth-death cycles of past civilizations impressed him very much, as they did Oswald Spengler before him and others since. Is this all there is to man's existence? Do societies, like individuals, have a brief span of existence, then disappear from the scene of action?

This is the truth so far as civilizations are concerned, for Toynbee. But he believes there is more to be said. There is emerging on a world scale a religion which will be a synthesis of the best in all preceding religions. It will be essentially other-worldly, although it will have its effects upon this world. Civilizations will pass away, but in this process of birth and death, they are making possible the slow growth of world religion.

Western civilization has a significant role in the growth of world religion. It is responsible for a "westernizing tendency," namely, the tendency to extend its culture into every part of the world. The interpenetrations of the past were limited in extent. That of the western world has left untouched few if any isolated pockets of humanity. This is

making it possible for Christianity, the religion of the West, to interpenetrate all of the other world religions. The final synthesis, we may assume, will contain a large element of western Christianity.

In ancient Greece, a high level of civilization developed based upon a slave economy. The philosophy of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle was made possible by the toil of unnamed slaves. Ictinus, Callicrates, Phidias and others planned and supervised the building of the Parthenon. Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides and others produced drama which still lives. This and many other achievements of the human spirit were made possible by the birth, work and death of thousands of human beings called slaves. Analogously, for Toynbee, civilizations are born, serve their day, and perish. Their significance, whatever it may be, must be sought in the world religion they supported and promoted by their birth-death cycles.

II

Reinhold Niebuhr defines history in the context of freedom. Human life represents a level of existence intermediate between the realms of natural causation and Pure Being. History in the normal meaning of the term, refers to the records or memories of past events. A more profound meaning is that it refers to that dimension of existence which can be understood only in terms of its past. Niebuhr's interpretation of history so understood is presented in some detail in *Faith and History* (1949). He first reviewed the optimistic hopes for the glorious future of mankind presented by political and religious Liberals of the past century. He then noted that more recent history proves them wrong. They had believed that salvation would be found in historical processes rather than in Jesus Christ. But these "vain illusions" have been thoroughly dispelled by events since 1914.

History for Niebuhr plays the role of Satan in the Book of Job. As Satan

tempted Job to pride and self-centeredness, so history tempts individuals and nations. When men in their pride believed it possible for them to realize the Kingdom of God, history exploded this with two world wars and numerous depressions, to mention the more serious disruptions of the social fabric.

We may find some significance in history from this point of view. It teaches us that our hope does not lie in this life, but in some transhistorical future. It also saves us from pride based on confidence in our ability to do something about life's ultimate problems. It also teaches us that even the good we attempt in history must be called sinful.

This attitude toward history and civilization has a familiar sound. The present age has been contrasted with the New Age to come, and men urged to place their values and hopes in the latter. The New Order, the Kingdom of God, cannot be identified with the slow growth of mankind to more humane levels of existence. It comes from beyond history and finds its consummation in the transhistorical.

This pessimistic attitude toward history is reminiscent of the attitudes of physical scientists of the nineteenth century. Since 1824, the theory that energy tends to dissipate itself, to move toward a state of stable equilibrium, was formulated as the second principle of thermodynamics. Assuming that energy was concentrated in relatively small bodies surrounded by vast empty spaces, it was noted that it tended to spread out from these centers into the areas of lower concentration. Eventually, the universe would consist of nothing but an even distribution of energy. Since the production of usable energy depends upon the movement from areas of high concentration to those of lower, the state of energy equilibrium meant there would be no energy available to produce changes or to support life. This would constitute the "heat-death" of the universe.

This may be indicated by a simple

illustration. Power from water is available only so long as there are differences in the levels where it is located. The great dams which produce so much energy use water falling from one level to another. If the time ever comes when all of the water is at the lowest levels on earth, water falls become impossible. So with the energy of the universe. Once it is distributed equally throughout all space, the concentrations necessary to produce usable energy will have disappeared. According to the physicists of the past, this would happen within a relatively short time.

More recent experiments in nuclear physics have changed the interpretations of the "heat-death" of the universe without changing the predicted outcome very much. It is now asserted that the present cosmic epoch began with an explosion some three to five billion years ago. During the first half hour after the explosion, all of the elements and structures of the universe came into being, as well as the impetus which is driving the suns off into space away from the common center. But the elements, centers of the terrific power unleashed in nuclear fission, are in process of change. They are being transformed into elements of lower potential. During the next twenty to twenty-five billion years, this process will reach its limit. What will happen then? One thing appears certain. The high energy elements will have disappeared. They will have lost the energy received from the explosion which started this epoch on its way. The result, from the layman's point of view, is another version of the heat-death of the universe.

Variations have been introduced into this theory in very recent years. It is now suggested that stars lose their energy from the inside first. This energy-exhaustion gradually works its way to the outer shells. Escaping heat expands the outer shells producing what astronomers call "red giants." After a certain point is reached, the shell collapses and the "red giant" becomes a "white dwarf."

In this theory that the surfaces or shells become terrifically hot under the impact of heat escaping from the centers of stars, the sun is expected to become so hot several billion years from now that it will burn everything on the surface of the earth. This means the "heat-death" of humanity, assuming it survives to that time.

This conclusion must be taken with the well-known grain of salt. It is based on evidence derived from relatively small bodies of data when compared with the vast cosmos to which it is applied. And, as has been observed, very small errors in the data used may make enormous differences when the theory is applied to the totality. Theories have been changing so rapidly in recent years that one is tempted to think that the last word has not been said as yet.

Even a two-billion year future for the human race provides some basis for enthusiasm in living. We listen to prophets of doom and perhaps agree with them, but refuse to act as if it made any difference. We marry and beget children, save money for their education, and hope they will become better parents than we were. We lay up for ourselves treasures on earth, and condemn the improvident. In these and countless other ways, we affirm our conviction that life is good, that there is significance and worth in history.

Since our major voices in theology share in this practical affirmation of what they deny in theory, their derogatory views of history and civilization are subject to question. Why is history condemned as it is? The answer to this question would require the combined wisdom of seer and saint. Unfortunately, I cannot qualify for either. But there are two relevant facts which throw some light on the question. The first is that the contemporary pessimism is based on an "all-or-none" logic. The second is that modern man has learned to hate himself.

Aristotle formulated this logic as one of his Laws of Thought. It is called The Law of Excluded Middle. In more pop-

ular language, it has been stated as follows: Between contradictories there is no middle ground. Two terms are contradictory when the truth of one means the falsity of the other, and vice versa. By this logic, contradictory propositions may be proved either positively or negatively. By proving one of the contradictories false, the other must of necessity be true.

This logic is employed in proving that history is non-redemptive. It is asserted that Liberalism found God and the meaning of life in growth. But growth is always limited, among other things, by the fact of human mortality. The argument takes this form: If we cannot have unlimited growth in history, there is no growth in history. Or it may take the form of an evaluation of goods as partial. The production of nuclear fission made possible the release of tremendous power. This power is either good or evil. Since it has been used for evil purposes, it cannot be good. The reasoning takes the form of an "all-or-none" logic. Inventions must be wholly good if they are to be good at all. Since most inventions can be used for evil, and many of them are, technological developments can be condemned as "vanity."

This logic cuts both ways. It may be argued: Atomic power is either good or evil. There is some good in it. It can be used to reduce the need for back-breaking labor, to treat certain diseases, to mention two of many potential uses. Since it has good in it, it cannot be called evil. Here again, attention must be directed to the application of this logic in living. What person will condemn another as an absolutely evil person because of one moral failure? Or call another absolutely good because of one good deed? Judgments of others are normally based upon their behaviors over a period of time to determine the general direction of their development. Morality is an art of the possible, not of the perfect. We judge ourselves and others by what is done under present cir-

cumstances, and then observe what occurs in the future.

An "all-or-none" logic has little relevance in the world of human activities. We do not speak in terms of "all-or-none" in matters of health. We deal in approximations. Every person conforms more or less closely that what is considered normal health given age, heredity and other factors. We may call one farmer "good" and another "poor," but we do not assume that the first gets maximum production every year and the second the minimum. One may produce ten, twenty or even thirty percent more than the other under conditions which are approximately equal. "Good" and "Poor" are approximations, suggesting discernible differences in the capabilities of those to whom applied. It is time this "all-or-none" logic be eliminated from historical interpretation. It is not accepted in practice; why should it be accepted in theory?

This method of reasoning may be observed in Toynbee's judgment of history. In his *An Historian's Approach to Religion*, he contrasts man's control over nature with "spiritual values." Man has been highly successful in the first, and a dismal failure in the second. What are these "spiritual values?" In his Gifford Lectures, he means man's capacity to suffer and to love. No one would deny that the capacity to suffer without losing faith and hope is central to religion. Nor that there is need for unselfish love. But does this mean that there are no values in our scientific conquest of nature?

The discovery by Dr. Jonas Salk and his associates of a vaccine developed to immunize persons against poliomyelitis was another step in man's increasing control over nature. It was a scientific discovery, another in the long line in man's battle with the factors that threaten health and shorten lives. Is this contribution to human welfare to be condemned because it is "scientific" and not spiritual? Of course the whole impact of research in psychosomatics is against

such reasoning. What happens to the "spirit" of persons forced to live truncated lives because of this debilitating disease? Many of them can and do maintain hope and some buoyancy of spirit in spite of its crippling effects. At the same time, life can be much more significant if bodies are and remain healthy. If man's control over nature is called "vanity," then the discovery of the Salk vaccine and its beneficent effects must be called vanity, too.

The effects of an "all-or-none" logic upon thinking may be noted in the case of agriculture. Over the past seventy-five years, developments in agriculture and industry have transformed our economy from one of scarcity to one of abundance. We are told by Bertrand Russell and Arnold Toynbee, that these developments merely made possible the baby boom. Russell made his comment with reference to the industrial revolution of the eighteenth century, and Toynbee about the twentieth. When the people of the eighteenth century became accustomed to the new situation, the baby boom of that era levelled off. It is to be hoped that the people of the twentieth century show the same common-sense and restraint. The present increase in births will also run its course and reach another plateau.

New developments often lead to selfish ends. Certainly, they do not serve as panaceas for human ills. Yet it was worthwhile that the industrial revolution occurred. It introduced mechanization into an industry carried forward on the backs of men, women and children. It had its evils, and still has. But it has good effects in terms of human welfare. Millions who formerly starved can now be fed. Millions who suffered from malaria may now live more normal lives untouched by this debilitating and enervating disease. The achievement of nuclear fission was first used for human destruction, but even this use probably saved many times the number of lives lost in the process. We are now living under the threat of further destructive

use, but it cannot be said that its total impact on the human race will be evil. The evidence for that conclusion is by no means all in.

Some years ago I visited a Pueblo Indian village in New Mexico. Passing a pueblo, I saw a small child seated by a doorway. He extended his hand and spoke in pleading tones. I did not understand his language, but there was no mistaking his gestures. Selecting a coin from my available change, I tossed it toward him. As it dropped noiselessly into the dust beside him, he made no move to pick it up. He was blind, condemned to sightless living presumably because of inadequate medical care. Others live to enjoy the visual pleasures because of man's control over nature. Who will say that saving the sight of even one Indian child through scientific discoveries is a form of "vanity"?

The developments in depth psychology constitute another instance of man's control over nature. In this case, it is control over human emotions. It is true that the knowledge and skills in area of mental disturbances have not transformed "self-centered" persons into saints. Yet any one with a spark of humane feeling would hesitate to condemn this as vanity. If only a few disturbed souls find relief and restoration to self-maintenance and self-control, this is worth-while.

Let me be understood. Those who speak patronizingly about man's control over nature are men of whom Whitehead once wrote: "their hearts were right but their heads were wrong." Their heads are wrong because they affirm that **what is not perfect is evil**. Since perfection is a plant which does not grow on this planet, history and civilization are damned as non-redemptive. The Law of Excluded Middle is not used in the areas where the most productive thinking now occurs. Its retention by religious thinkers threatens to make much current religious and ethical thinking obsolete.

Man is finite. He makes mistakes. He fumbles at strategic points. His approach

to the solution of problems resembles a jagged rather than a straight line. The so-called lag in our social sciences may be glaring instances of this, although here the increase in complexity must be considered. Does the fact that we advance more slowly in complex fields than we do in more simple ones mean we are not advancing at all? What it does mean is that the growth in knowledge and skills is not uniform. Even though we have not progressed as rapidly as we hoped to do in the field of human relations, some progress has been made. We have indicated some of this in the increased control of human diseases, of mental disturbances, and in increasing our food supplies. There is evidence also of changes in man's moral sensitivity.

In the past, slavery was a morally approved institution. The First Letter to Timothy, vi,2, may sound strange to us. The writer urged Christian slaves to honor their masters, and not to take advantage of those who were believers. This was written when the leader of a minority group could do little more than this. During the past two hundred years, mankind's moral revulsion against this institution has practically eliminated it. The speeches of Abraham Lincoln contain some enlightening insights. In his First Inaugural Address, March 4, 1861, he stated he had no intentions of interfering with slavery, although he recognized the fact that there was a difference of opinion in the country as to its moral character. At that time, he faced the threat of secession. His primary problem was the unity of the United States. When war broke out and dragged on, his attitude toward slavery became firmer and on January 1, 1863, he issued the Emancipation Proclamation. But this did not mean immediate achievement of full rights for the Negroes. The struggle of minorities to achieve equality is always slow. But the growth of the moral determination that all men should be free and equal continued. The Supreme Court's decision on desegregation, May 7th, 1954, was but another step in the

implementation of Lincoln's proclamation.

The change in moral sensitivity was indicated in the rapid rise of indignation when Hitler sought to establish a Master Race in central Europe. Granted that many motives, including fear, were involved in this uprush of indignation, the fact remains that his proposal was rejected.

There is evidence that mankind's moral perceptivity is increasing. We no longer view slavery, child labor and drug addiction with equanimity. Yet Toynbee sees no evidence of any change in the human spirit in history. What he means, I suggest, is that man has not yet become perfect. He cannot possibly mean that no changes have occurred in moral attitudes. If one equates perfection with progress, then pessimism is a normal result. But the fault lies in the logic and not in the facts.

III

Those who damn history make rather free use of terms such as "spiritual values" and "spiritual progress." What do they mean by these words? According to Toynbee, spiritual progress means changes in man's unredeemed nature whereby the damage done by Original Sin is removed and the pre-Fall status restored. Or it may mean the deepening of appreciation for the good, the true and the beautiful, and activity directed toward the realization of higher and more humane ideals.

The first view rests upon acceptance of the doctrine of Original Sin, suggested in the fifth chapter of Paul's Letter to the Roman's. Here he stated that all men were condemned through the sin of Adam, and contrasted this with the work of Jesus Christ whereby the latter's righteous acts removed the Adamic curse. Original Sin presupposes the creation story in Genesis to be true. To avoid the historical problems involved, our major theological voices call the story a myth. Myth or fact, the doctrine presupposes the cursing of mankind because of an act of disobedience. Even

though the Original Sin was the act of some angelic being, the drama had to be reenacted on earth by some human Adam.

The evidence available to us from many fields, including psychology and anthropology, does not support this doctrine. It is time to admit what every well-read person knows, namely, that people of every age interpret their experiences in the images and concepts available to them. The biblical writers of the Old and New Testaments are no exception to this rule. To attempt to restore the credibility of interpretations by calling them myths which are true but not factual is a clear indication that even the defenders of Original Sin accept the generalization that thinking is limited by the images and concepts available to given thinkers. The writers of Genesis interpreted their situation as best they could. Paul did likewise. This means that the doctrine of Original Sin can no longer be maintained on biblical grounds.

It is held by some contemporary thinkers because they are operating in terms of an "all-or-none" logic. If one assumes that man is either perfect or evil, some doctrine such as Original Sin may be necessary. It is interesting to note that K. Kohler, *Jewish Theology* (1918) denied that his people, except for the periods dominated by Persian influence, had any doctrine of Original Sin. But he did accept the view that all men are sinners **when measured against the perfect or the Holy**. Measured against perfection, every man falls short. But perfection is not available to humanity in the large. Life, politics and morality are arts of the possible, not of the perfect.

In this connection, we are reminded of some remarks made by Boethius in his *Consolation of Philosophy*. Imprisoned at forty-four years of age and condemned to death for treason, he argued with Philosophy concerning the injustices of life. In reply, Philosophy informed him that he had been treated well, but suffered because of his mistaken expecta-

tions. This may throw some light upon our attitude toward history. Our ideals are often extrapolations or extensions of certain qualities in persons whom we admire or love, or some period which we value. And they are often compounded with a great deal of imagination.

We live in two worlds, the world of imagination and the world of fact. Everything is possible in the first. In imagination, we can travel anywhere, meet any one, achieve anything and everything. When we enter the world of fact, travel means conveyances, fuel, and everything else involved in the transportation systems available to us. The difficulties men encounter, said Boethius in the voice of Philosophy, rest in part, upon our failure to distinguish between these two worlds. Boethius' mistaken expectations appear to be shared by many contemporary thinkers. They appear unwilling to recognize that man is limited, and that these limitations were built into man and society from the very beginning. They are not the results of sin. Man is responsible for many evils. One who does not recognize this fact is morally blind, to say the least. But to condemn men for not living in the world of fact as in the world of imagination is obviously an instance of intellectual blindness.

There is too much unwillingness to recognize facts. One of these facts is the necessity for patience and labor if we are to make any progress toward a more humane society. Failure to recognize and accept this fact produces world-weariness and pessimism. Women and men with a solid base in common-sense have no time for either world-weariness or pessimism. They are too busy working toward what is possible.

Every normal person views modern war with its horrible destructiveness with deep moral aversion. But if this is all that it means to him, his vision is fractional and needs correction. The willingness of millions of men and women to sacrifice themselves, to place their

bodies between power-mad men and the homes and countries from which they come, is itself an indication of the growth of the human spirit and the development of humane ideals. Measured against perfection, man is a sinner; measured against the baseness of power-seeking groups, man is winning his soul morally. When men recognize the evils of their day and are prepared to take action to remove or alleviate them, humanity is not wholly evil. Man is "man in the making." It may take a long time to clarify his vision and enlarge his sym-

pathies. History as the interrelated lives of men seen from the perspective of the long road travelled may not be redemptive, but it is man doing what is possible to realize more humane levels of existence. As such, it deserves more than condemnation.

The logic upon which the damnation of history by our contemporary major prophets is based is obviously inadequate. What about the self-hatred which is its second support? This will have to wait for another occasion.



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