

“All Mankind and yet nothing but Mankind”: Arnold J. Toynbee and the World State

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Abstract

This article explores Arnold J. Toynbee's contributions to international thought, focusing on a less examined aspect of his work: the idea of a world state. From the 1920s to the 1970s, Toynbee sought solutions to the crisis of international politics capable of ensuring global stability and peace. In the atomic age, he saw the voluntary unification of humanity as the sole safeguard against nuclear catastrophe. The article traces the evolution of his thought across three phases: a liberal vision rooted in British imperial tradition (1920s-1930s); a cosmopolitan perspective marked by revolutionary political imagination (1940s-1950s); and, in later years, a spiritual and utopian approach.

Abstract (Italiano)

Questo articolo esplora il pensiero internazionale di Arnold J. Toynbee, concentrandosi su un aspetto poco studiato della sua opera: vale a dire, l'idea di Stato mondiale. Dal 1920 al 1970, Toynbee cercò di trovare una soluzione alla crisi della politica internazionale in grado di garantire la stabilità e la pace globali. Nell'era atomica, vide nell'unificazione volontaria dell'umanità l'unica salvaguardia contro la catastrofe nucleare. L'articolo ripercorre l'evoluzione del suo pensiero attraverso tre fasi: una visione liberale radicata nella tradizione imperiale britannica (anni Venti e Trenta); una prospettiva cosmopolita caratterizzata da un'immaginazione politica rivoluzionaria (anni Quaranta e Cinquanta); e, negli ultimi anni, un approccio spirituale e utopico.

Keywords: *Arnold J. Toynbee, World state, World religion, International anarchy, Political order*

1. Introduction: a “superhuman Civitas Dei”?

In the volume VI of *A Study of History*, Arnold J. Toynbee stressed that the “only society that is capable of embracing the whole of Mankind is a superhuman *Civitas Dei*; and the conception of a society that embraces all Mankind and yet nothing but Mankind is an academic chimaera” (Toynbee, 1939c: 10). The English historian and internationalist was constantly preoccupied with the idea of building a society capable of unifying all mankind. However, this endeavour took different forms. During the twentieth century, his intellectual journey was characterised by a keen focus on the critical challenges and looming dangers that shaped world politics. From his service at the Foreign Office during the First World War, to his long tenure as Director of Studies at Chatham House (1924-1954)¹, and later as a global public intellectual, Toynbee examined the dynamics of the international system, its transformations, and its possible futures.

In his works, he insisted that the modern state system had undergone irreversible change, demanding radical reform. During the Cold War, his sense of the instability inherent in international anarchy, coupled with anxiety over the fragility of bipolar balance, led him to advocate the unification of humankind – initially through a “world state,” and later through a (new) “world religion.” As he acknowledged in 1969, looking back on three decades of observation at the Royal Institute of International Affairs: “My study of the World will have been barren and irresponsible if it has not equipped me and spurred me to do what I can – infinitesimal though the effect of my action may be – to help mankind to cure itself of some of the evil that, in my lifetime, I have seen human beings inflict on each other.” (Toynbee, 1969: 81).

At the heart of Toynbee’s thought was the aspiration to politically unify humankind. To understand this ambition, one must consider a frequently overlooked theme in his work: the interplay of historical and internationalist perspectives. While indebted to British liberalism², Toynbee went beyond acknowledging irreversible economic

¹ On the importance of Chatham House in the development of British foreign policy, cf. Bosco and Navari (1994).

² On this argument, cf. Rich (2002), Morefield (2005; 2014), Sylvest (2009), Chiantera-Stutte (2022).

interdependence or advocating broader international cooperation. He argued that the rise of nationalism – and the resulting erosion of the international order – reflected a deeper, enduring phenomenon in political history: the idolization of particular communities and the veneration of the State.

In *Nationality and the War* – although the notion of idolatry was not yet explicitly developed – he clearly regarded the nation-state as obsolete (Toynbee, 1915: 7; 478-481) and identified mutual fear, arising from the anarchy of the international system, as the main cause of war (Toynbee, 1915: 63). His criticism became even sharper in *The Western Question in Greece and Turkey* (1922), where he attributed the instability of the Near and Middle East to the forced introduction of the state and nationalism, both distinctly modern and Western constructs, into a context historically grounded in different forms of legitimacy and organization (Toynbee, 1922: 15-17). This led him to reflect on national self-determination, economic cooperation, and federalist approaches in the Middle Eastern geopolitical arena³.

The “worship of Leviathan,” he emphasized in a 1939 article in *Foreign Affairs*, “is the most dangerous, as well as the most perverse, of the forms that idolatry can take.” (Toynbee, 1939a: 319). This notion recurred throughout his work, especially in his analyses of the international order. For Toynbee, the excessive veneration of human power – whether individual or collective – took the form of nationalism in the transition from the nineteenth to the twentieth century, transforming the State from a cornerstone of modern Western civilization into an obstacle to the further development of international life.

Toynbee’s international thought evolved markedly over the twentieth century, shifting from youthful liberal internationalism to the spiritual utopianism of his later years (Castellin, 2010, 2011, 2016). His works represented a sustained effort to address the crisis of the international order (Hall, 2013; Castellin, 2015; Maggioni, 2013) and to interpret Britain’s decline in both strategic and cultural terms (Hall, 2012). Yet his methodology, rhetoric, and conclusions made him a controversial figure: critics denounced the unscientific

³ Cf. Giannakopoulos (2021). On his interpretation of historical and international dynamics in the Middle East, cf. Di Fiore (2015).

character of his historiography (Sorokin, 1940; Trevor-Roper, 1957) and described him as a visionary prophet (Geyl, 1955). For example, José Ortega y Gasset (1973: 251-252) criticized Toynbee's "ethical attitude of the teacher and the preacher," arguing that "in spite of his abundant knowledge," he was not "a man of reason, of science, of theory," but rather "a man who believes with the faith of a coal miner in certain philanthropic things which culminate in a strange mysticism about history." Proper of this reputation, Ray Bradbury later satirized in a short story first published in *Playboy* (Bradbury, 1988).

This article, rather than delving – as has already been extensively done – into the role of civilizations in the dynamics of world history (Castellin, 2022), traces the evolution of Toynbee's international political thought, focusing on his vision of a "world state" as a remedy for the disorder of twentieth-century world politics. A close reading of his writings shows how the foundations of his idea of human unification shifted over time. In the 1920s and 1930s, he advanced a liberal approach rooted in British imperial tradition; from the 1940s onward, he moved first toward a cosmopolitan vision informed by political imagination and ultimately toward a spiritual and utopian solution.

2. Humana Respublica

Toynbee's fear of a potential collapse of the global order, which first emerged during the First World War, intensified in the 1920s and 1930s. In this period, his reflections attested not merely to a continuity with the British imperial thought of the preceding century⁴ – within which the empire was envisaged as a prototype for the eventual reunification of humankind under a global "republic of humanity"⁵ – but, more significantly, to a profound intellectual affinity with the liberal idealism articulated by Alfred E. Zimmern (1911, 1918, 1926; cf. also Toynbee, 1967: 49-61) and Lionel Curtis (1916, 1935; cf. also Toynbee, 1967: 133-135). With both figures Toynbee engaged in active collaboration, from whom he also derived substantial inspiration, particularly with regard to conceptions of Britain's

⁴ Cf. Bell (2007, 2020) and Tagliaferri (2008, 2012).

⁵ Seeley (1971).

historical mission and global destiny. The idea – intimately paternalistic and subtly imperialistic – of a “republic of humanity,” built upon Britain’s experience, not only shaped the principles and structure of the League of Nations but was also deemed capable of successfully resolving the crucial problems of coexistence among autonomous communities, marked by differing levels of political and economic development. It was further considered capable of inspiring new institutional frameworks for international security and cooperation (Tagliaferri, 2002).

In particular, it is in his 1928 work, *The Conduct of British Empire Foreign Relations Since the Peace Settlement*, that Toynbee – occasionally adopting tones both exalted and almost prophetic – expressed his conviction that the West could have ultimately achieve the political, economic, and cultural unification of the world. From this perspective, the Commonwealth stood out as an exemplary model of free and peaceful coexistence among diverse civilizations (Toynbee, 1928, 1934). As Teodoro Tagliaferri (2008: 36, 38) noted, the Commonwealth appeared to the British historian and internationalist as “the only form of imperial unity” capable of surviving–through transformation–the centrifugal pressures of national aspirations and of advancing toward a genuine “deterritorialized statehood.” By envisaging the subordination of states to the authority of a higher law, it anticipated, in Toynbee’s view, the prototype of a global federation of states capable of addressing the problem of war. The emergence of such an ecumenical society, institutionalized within a framework of multiple affiliations, thus represented, ultimately, an extension of the Western model to the whole humanity. The British Commonwealth of Nations consistently functioned as the principal – or, in many respects, the sole – point of reference for the Great Society that Toynbee delineated throughout the interwar period. For the author, despite the latent crisis of the international system, the vision of a global world society represented a supra-human and post-historical goal, one that could and should have been a new phase in humanity’s political and social development.

In the volume IV of *A Study of History*, Toynbee attributed exceptional importance to the experience of the British Commonwealth, portraying it as a political and institutional laboratory capable of

“transcending” national sovereignty and restraining the “idolatrous worship” of statehood. In this context, he observed:

we may expect that our present Western problem of transcending National Sovereignty will receive its solution – in so far as it receives one at all – in some place or places where this institution of National Sovereignty has not been erected into an object of idolatrous worship. We shall not expect to see salvation come from the historic national states of Western Europe – a France or a Spain or a Hungary or a Sweden – where every political thought and feeling and act is bound up with a Parochial Sovereignty which is itself the recognized symbol of a glorious national past. It is not in this Epimethean psychological environment that our society can look forward to making the necessary discovery of some new form of international association which will bring a Parochial Sovereignty under the discipline of a higher law and so forestall the otherwise inevitable calamity of its annihilation by a ‘knock-out blow’. If this discovery is ever made, the laboratory of political experimentation where we may expect to see it materialize will be some body politic like the British Commonwealth of Nations, which has mated the experience of one ancient European national state with the plasticity of a number of ‘new countries’ overseas; or else it will be some body politic like the Soviet Union, which is attempting to organize a number of non-Western communities into an entirely new kind of polity on the basis of a Western revolutionary idea. In the Soviet Union we may perhaps discern the Seleucid Empire of our world, and in the British Empire its Roman Commonwealth. Will these and such like bodies politic, on the outskirts of our modern Western cosmos of sovereign nations, eventually produce some form of political structure that will enable us to give more substance, before it is too late, to our inchoate League of Nations? We cannot tell; but we can almost feel sure that, if these pioneers fail, the work will never be done by the petrified devotees of the idol of National Sovereignty (Toynbee, 1939b: 320).

Toynbee (1948a: 7) linked the crisis of the European system to the intensification of particularism, which turned political pluralism from a resource into a liability, pushing Europe toward collapse. From the late 1930s, he viewed with alarm the expansionist ambitions of Fascism and Nazism. For the English historian, the National

Socialist state appeared as an actor capable of assuming the role of a potential world super-state through the violent seizure of power. Nazism, Toynbee observed in the 1933 *Survey*, was merely the latest and most extreme expression of a political-religious movement oriented toward pagan deification and the idolatry of a particular community, giving rise to a "totalitarian' national state" founded on race and blood (Toynbee, 1934a: 121-122). In this light, his trenchant critique – developed in the two volumes of the 1935 *Survey* – of Benito Mussolini's colonial policy can also be understood. The conquest of Abyssinia, carried out with the acquiescence of the Western powers, represented a "tragic episode in international history" that he described as a "tale of sin and nemesis." (Toynbee, 1936: 1). Drawing a parallel with the Hellenic world, Toynbee argued that the fall of Greek civilization and the violent rise of Rome were rooted in the idolization of local communities, the city-states. By 1939, he feared that the interstate system faced the same fate. Just as Rome restored order after a cycle of fratricidal wars (Toynbee, 1939b: 3), a universal state could have emerged from the turbulence of the interwar crisis. But a *Pax Hitleriana* was, for him, politically and morally intolerable (Toynbee, 1939b: 320). Hence his insistence on transcending, or at least curbing, the sovereignty of the nation-state.

From Toynbee's perspective, it thus became increasingly imperative to move beyond an order grounded in international anarchy and to recognize the possibility of transferring sovereignty to an institution capable of representing the entire international civil society (Toynbee, 1931: 759-760). He stressed the need to establish a stable supranational framework – a "world-wide system of law and order" – endowed with a strong degree of "collective security." Guided by the principles of liberal idealism, Toynbee accordingly supported the League of Nations, initially regarded as a satisfactory means of curbing state sovereignty. Within it, he saw the "first *and last* line of defence" for embedding, in an international assembly, the ideals that underpinned Britain's now waning hegemony (Toynbee, 1938: 317-318). Yet, over the years, Toynbee (1939a: 319) grew increasingly sceptical of the League's actual capacity to act effectively.

3. Playing for time

The issue of world unification, which took on increasing urgency in the aftermath of the Second World War, led many scholars to explore the most effective means of securing enduring peace through the establishment of a world state – or a world government – capable of containing interstate conflict. From David Mitrany's functionalism to the federalist visions of Lord Lothian, Kenneth C. Wheare, and Emery Reves⁶, a wide spectrum of approaches emerged. Yet, while these perspectives shared certain affinities, they cannot be fully aligned with the proposal set forth by the English historian, which integrated both a political-institutional and a religious-spiritual dimension.

In "The International Outlook," published in *International Affairs* in 1947, Toynbee examined the global situation, highlighting the immediate challenges and the uncertainties posed by the emerging political order dominated by the United States and the Soviet Union. The "big and really formidable political issue today," he wrote, "is not whether the world is soon going to be unified politically," but rather "in which of two alternative possible ways" – coercive or voluntary – "this rapid unification is going to come about." He warned that, in a clearly bipolar system, the outbreak of another world war could have left "a solitary Great Power left to give the world its political unity by the old-fashioned method of the conquest." (Toynbee, 1947: 464). While Toynbee's rejection of the coercive option was to be expected, his early and consistent scepticism about the role of the United Nations was more surprising, though still coherent. (Toynbee, 1947: 468-469).

For Toynbee, the prospect of world unification was inevitable. In an article, originally published in the *New York Times* on 21 September 1947, entitled "Does History Always Repeat Itself?," he argued that humanity needed both "to establish a constitutional co-operative system of world government" and "to put the secular super-structure back onto religious foundations." (Toynbee, 1948b: 39). Accordingly, he wrote, "if the United Nations organization could grow into an effective system of world government, that

⁶ Cf., for example, Mitrany (1946), Lothian (1935), Wheare (1946), Reves (1945), and Schuman (1952).

would be much the best solution of our political crux." Yet he also cautioned that it was necessary "we have to reckon with the possibility of this enterprise's failing, and to be ready, should it fail, with an alternative to fall back upon." (Toynbee, 1948b: 40).

Some of Toynbee's reflections from the 1950s can be situated precisely in the quest for alternative solutions. On the one hand, he contemplated a possible institutional architecture – drawing on the precedents of the *Respublica Christiana* (Toynbee, 1954a: 403) and the Ottoman millet system (Toynbee, 1954b: 313) – for a world state capable of ensuring "multiplicity within unity" (Maggioni, 2016: 136-140). On the other hand, he considered the division of the world into two spheres of influence as a strategy to mitigate tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union. While his references to the *Respublica Christiana* and the Ottoman millet system were consistent with his research from the 1920s and 1930s⁷, the idea of partitioning the *oikoumene* was a more direct response to the sense of urgency he experienced during the early Cold War. In the volume IX of *A Study of History*, for instance, Toynbee (1954c: 525) speculated about dividing the globe into distinct areas of competence:

In these perilous circumstances the best hope for the future of Mankind lies in the possibility that the governments and peoples of the United States and the Soviet Union might have the imagination, wisdom, tolerance, self-restraint, patience, and fortitude to seek and ensue the one alternative to a third world war that, at this stage, was practical politics: that is to say, a pacific partition of the *Oikoumene* between these two surviving Powers for an indefinite time to come.

Toynbee regarded such a solution as essentially transitory rather than definitive. In his view, dividing the international system into spheres of influence was a practicable yet ultimately provisional arrangement. Its primary function was to buy time in order to establish a world state, which remained his ultimate goal. This interpretation is clearly reflected in a lecture that Toynbee delivered at Columbia University in 1948. This lecture was later cited by Hans J. Morgenthau to support his argument about the importance of a

⁷ Cf. Toynbee (1922: 122, 130, 135, 267-268; 1925, 1939: 351-352).

spheres-of-influence policy. However, Morgenthau's views did not entirely align with those of the author of *A Study of History*. In *In Defence of the National Interest*, Morgenthau (1951: 155-156) quoted from Toynbee's Columbia address, underscoring the distinctive breadth of his historical vision:

I suppose that when two great powers face each other one possible alternative is a partition of the world without another war. If you look at the world now, as it has become since 1945, you can imagine it, if things should go rather well, being partitioned by agreement between the United States and the Soviet Union into two spheres. [...] I think this is an important possibility to keep in mind and to work for, because if it succeeded it might give us time; and, though sometimes playing for time merely means putting off something that we ought to settle now, I do not think that in our present circumstances playing for time is a wrong or unreasonable thing to attempt. [...] therefore I suggest a provisional partition of the world into a Russian and an American sphere by agreements between the two. If this could be brought about – if things are not too far gone for that – it would be a very valuable thing for both those great powers and for the world in general. It would give us time, among other things, to try gradually to build these two spheres together and eventually to unite them in a co-operative world government.

4. A World State

Toynbee sought precisely the interval required to deliberate on the construction of human unity. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, his reflections on the necessity of establishing a world state deepened considerably, resulting in an increasingly radical political imagination.

In Volume XII of *A Study of History*, Toynbee warned that the “human race” has condemned itself to “choose between committing universal genocide and learning to live as one family.” The dilemma stemmed from the “unprecedented advance in technology,” which has shrunk military, political, and economic distances but failed to bridge the “cultural differences” that kept people “divided from each other” (Toynbee, 1961: 579). He observed that “all mankind seems to be moving towards a future common cultural standing-ground,” yet two facts remained stark: “the pace of cultural change is much

slower than the pace of technological change," which appeared "to know no limits to its capacity for acceleration," and "the time-lag of cultural change behind technological change, which has always been greater, seems likely to grow greater" (Toynbee, 1961: 580).

At the beginning of the 1960s, as he was drafting these pages of his *magnum opus*, a crucial theme resurfaced that had consistently marked Toynbee's thoughts on international affairs. He believed that achieving some form of global unification was the only way to preserve peace among nations and the survival of humankind in the face of the possibility of mutual destruction between the two superpowers in a thermonuclear conflict. In the atomic age, Toynbee (1966: 138) emphasised once again that humankind was faced with a stark choice: "political unification" or "mass-suicide."

In *Change and Habit*, interrogating both the meaning and feasibility of such a project, he defined the "world state" as a polity able to "include the whole living generation of the human race among its citizens" and to govern effectively over "the whole habitable and traversable surface of this planet, together with its air-envelope and the adjacent reaches of outer space." He further underscored that such a state "has never been established so far," noting that, up to that point, "there have only been would-be world-states". Throughout history, Toynbee identified within various civilizations the rise of political communities which – through culture or religion – were capable of "uniting large parts of the Earth's surface and of the human race, but not yet ever the whole," precisely because "most of these incomplete world-states failed to perpetuate themselves" (Toynbee, 1966: 115).

Indeed, he argued, "all the would-be world-states of the past have succumbed in the end to the habit of divisive feeling," while "those of them that have not broken up have preserved their existence at the cost of abandoning their world-mindedness." (Toynbee, 1966: 116). According to him, this was hardly surprising, since an oscillating movement from multiplicity to unity (and back again) has marked the whole trajectory of human history (Toynbee, 1966: 54-87, 90-100; cf. also Castellin, 2010: 79-85).

It would be a mistake from the failure of past would-be world-states to maintain themselves as such, that there is no prospect of our

being able to establish a world-state that would not only be literally world-wide but would also be permanent (Toynbee, 1966: 116).

Accordingly, he saw a voluntary and federal union of states as the only alternative to an armed struggle for global dominance that would inevitably lead to mutual nuclear destruction. Toynbee (1966: 139-140) observed:

The functions of the world authorities that are urgently required today will be, not maximal, but minimal, and that for two good reasons. The first reason is that the peoples of the World are going to accept world government only reluctantly, and therefore the statesmen are not going to go out of their way to try to persuade the people to swallow larger doses of world-government than are strictly necessary at the moment. The second reason why world government will be minimal, at least to start with, is that, in the Atomic Age, world-government cannot be imposed by force, which is the way in which the world-states of the past have all been established. Force in the form of the atomic weapon could not be used for any constructive purpose; the effect of its use would be wholly destructive. Therefore, today, the only practicable way of getting any world-authorities established is to win the consent and co-operation of the powers that be. [...] We may therefore assume that the world-state of the future will not have the structure of the would-be world-states of the past, which have been imposed by conquest. It will have the structure of those states, past and present, that have been brought into being by a voluntary union of a number of previously separate and independent smaller units, and the structure of states that have originated in this peaceful way has usually been, not unitary, but federal. This has been usual because the first concern of any government is to keep itself in being, and a government that has voluntarily surrendered part, or the whole, of its sovereignty will not go to the length of surrendering its existence as well, so long as it is a free agent. It will prefer to retain its identity and its local autonomy and to limit the powers of the union government to fields in which a unitary administration is patently in the constituent states' own interest.

In order to realise a world state, Toynbee (1966: 156-157) emphasized the indispensable role of a "common culture" capable of

reconciling and uniting political and social differences. He also emphasised the necessity of a "command effective power" capable of imposing and enforcing decisions, even through the use of force if necessary. Furthermore, he speculated on China's potential historical involvement in the creation of such a world state. (Toynbee, 1966: 158).

In two posthumously published works, *Choose Life* and *Mankind and Mother Earth*, both released in 1976, one year after his death, the British historian reaffirmed his emphasis on the unification of humankind through a voluntary act, which he considered both possible and desirable. This perspective emerged particularly clearly in the former, which presented a dialogue between Toynbee and the Japanese intellectual Daisaku Ikeda. As he observed (Toynbee, 1976a: 191):

I hold that the local states ought to be deprived of their sovereignty and subordinated to the sovereignty of a global world government. Even then, national states would still have a useful, and indeed indispensable, municipal role to play as units for local administration – the role played in a federal state by its constituent states. As the scale of all operations continues to increase, I expect to see more of the former administrative powers of local states pass into the hands of the world government, but there will probably be an irreducible residue of functions for which it will be convenient to retain administrative decentralization. The cumulative weight of these considerations makes me agree that the world's present 140 local states ought not to, and cannot, remain political units with the sovereign right to make war and at the same time have the last word in human affairs of nonmilitary kinds.

Preventing the outbreak of future conflicts was precisely the aim that prompted Toynbee (1976a: 212) to emphasise the necessity of endowing the world state with an "armed police force," thereby rendering it impossible for the national states that comprise it to wage war.

In his second posthumous work, *Mankind and Mother Earth*, Toynbee (1976b: 37) reaffirmed his prophetic conviction that "in the next chapter of the Oikoumene's history, the lead might pass from America to Eastern Asia," and restated the urgency of establishing a world government, conceived as a federation of regional or

local constituent units. Once again, he regarded both anarchy and the state as contingent features of the international order. Toynbee (1976b: 593) remarked, albeit with a distinctly pessimistic ecological undertone:

The present-day global set of local sovereign states is not capable of keeping the peace, and it is also not capable of saving the biosphere from man-made pollution or of conserving the biosphere's non-replaceable natural resources. This ecumenical anarchy on the political planet cannot continue for much longer in an Oikoumene that has already become a unity on the technological and economic planes. What has been needed for the last 5,000 years, and has been feasible technologically, though not yet politically, for the last hundred years, is a global body politic composed of cells on the scale of the Neolithic-Age village-community – a scale on which the participants could be personally acquainted with each other, while each of them would also be a citizen of a world-state. However, the Oikoumene cannot be united politically by the barbarous and ruinous traditional method of military conquest. In 1945 an Oikoumene that was still un-unified politically was overtaken by the invention of the nuclear weapon, and the Oikoumene could never be united by the use of this deadly weapon; annihilation, not unification, would be the inevitable outcome of a nuclear world war.

Yet, in Toynbee's view, averting the destruction of the global system required more than the federalist hypothesis, which he considered inadequate in many respects. According to the English historian, the only effective response to the international crisis of the twentieth century could be found in religion, not politics. In *Choose Life*, he argued that, in the event of "a future voluntary unification of mankind on a global scale," a decisive role should be played by "the worldwide spread of some kind of common religion" (Toynbee, 1976a: 265).

5. The wheels and the chariot

Religion has always played a crucial role in Toynbee's personal and public life. Throughout his life, he frequently expressed deep spiritual anxiety (Castellin, 2010: 40-58). Although he was educated in the Anglican Church, he lost his faith at Balliol College,

Oxford, proclaiming himself an agnostic. In the 1930s, different circumstances prompted his temporary acceptance of Christianity. However, he never converted to Roman Catholicism as his first wife, Rosalind Murray, had wanted. In the 1940s, Toynbee began to alter his historical perspective. A fundamental turning point was marked by his Burge Memorial Lecture, *Christianity and Civilisation*, delivered in May 1940 at Oxford. For the first time, Toynbee overturned his earlier work's presentation of the relationship between civilisations and religions. He rejected the notion that religion was the social link between two civilisations. Instead, he asserted that civilisations were the chrysalises of religion and that they granted humanity a deeper spiritual understanding of itself through their rise and fall. As Toynbee (1948b: 235-236) noted:

If religion is a chariot, it looks as if the wheels on which it mounts towards Heaven may be the periodic downfalls of civilizations on Earth. It looks as if the movement of civilizations may be cyclic and recurrent, while the movement of religion may be on a single continuous upward line. The continuous upward movement of religion may be served and promoted by the cyclic movement of civilizations round the cycle of birth, death, birth.

Thus, Toynbee's *Weltanschauung* reveals a gradual shift in perspective from viewing religion as subordinate to the reproduction of secular civilisations to viewing the rise and fall of civilisations as potentially subordinate to the growth of religion. This shift in perspective affected not only his historical work, but also his analysis of the international order. Consequently, he envisaged the unification of humankind under a single politico-religious institution.

For Toynbee (1948b: 245-252), the world and history had become "a province of the Kingdom of God", in which progress could not be solely technical, social, or political because it had to be religious first and foremost. Thus, the possibility of avoiding imminent nuclear annihilation, or "the future of mankind", lay only in the "higher religions". (Toynbee, 1948b: 159). He believed that the major higher religions – namely Christianity, Hinduism, Islam and Mahayana Buddhism – were the only way to solve the international crisis triggered by twentieth-century politics. As he had previously

observed in Volume VII of *A Study of History*, the union of these four religions was intended to establish a “new ‘commonwealths of nations’”, and provide “the statesmen and administrators required for the government of secular polities” (Toynbee, 1954a: 403).

“The sickness of modern society,” Toynbee reiterated in *Choose Life*, “can be cured only by a spiritual revolution in the hearts and minds of human beings”: the “social maladies,” he insisted, “cannot be remedied by organizational changes,” for “the only effective cures” for them are “spiritual.” (Toynbee 1976a: 129). The principal disease to be eradicated was, as he had written in *Hellenism* twenty years earlier, “Man-worship,” that has always been “the characteristic religion of man... at all times and places,” and above all it was “manifestly the dominant religion, in fact though not avowedly, in Western World” (Toynbee, 1959: 7). The veneration of human power, whether personal or collective, led to the worship of the Leviathan. This force lay behind the breakdown of the international order in the twentieth-century, prompting Toynbee to hypothesise and yearn for the establishment of a world state founded on religion. Consequently, he entrusted the creation of a new world religion with the task of curbing humanity’s natural tendency to idolise itself or its collective power.

Anticipating “a future voluntary unification of mankind on a global scale”, he attributed a pivotal role to “the worldwide spread of some kind of common religion”, whose fundamental tenet would be to encourage individuals to “self-mastery”. “To master oneself,” he emphasized, “is the essence of religion as I see it, and I think a future religion that preaches this traditional religious precept will win the allegiance of mankind, because this precept is, I believe, the only effective response to the challenge of human beings.” (Toynbee, 1976a: 265-266). Ultimately, humanity had to overcome egocentrism and the cult of individual and collective power in order to dedicate itself fully to loving others. (Toynbee, 1969: 154-158). For this reason, as Jacques Maritain (1957: 176) critically observed, in Toynbee’s reflections “mankind’s unity – to be achieved in this world – were the essential and primary aim of religion.”

The main limitation of Toynbee’s thinking lies not in the importance he attributed to religion, but in the conclusions that his personal spiritual quest ultimately led him to. Drawing on his Anglican background, which at times leaned towards latitudinarianism,

he developed a conception of religion that blended elements of Gnosticism, Deism, and relativism, viewing it both as personal faith and as reflection on the public role of the sacred. This conception gradually acquired decisive weight, shaping a philosophy of history in which religious development became the key to interpreting international dynamics. From the mid-1950s onwards, Toynbee's focus shifted away from historical religions. Rejecting the exclusive truth claims of any one tradition after the example of the Roman senator Quintus Aurelius Symmachus, he advanced a personal, humanitarian religion based on an uncertain cosmopolitanism. Consequently, his later writings replaced historical analysis with prophecy, adopting the utopian tones of pacifism.

In the mid-1950s, while reviewing the long-awaited final four volumes of *A Study of History*, Hans J. Morgenthau emphasised the significant challenges they presented – and would continue to present – to critics aiming to provide a thorough evaluation of the work. At the same time, he identified religion as a significant departure from the earlier volumes (Morgenthau, 1962). The author of *Politics Among Nations* noted the increasing importance of religion in Toynbee's worldview, not only due to the attention given to the subject, but also because of the role assigned to religion in historical dynamics. This repositioning of religion within Toynbee's theoretical and scientific framework gave rise to all subsequent modifications in his view of history and the methods appropriate to its study. (Voegelin, 1961).

Morgenthau (1962: 60) argued that Toynbee did not call for a "return to a particular established religion," but instead proposed "a kind of intellectual and aesthetic eclecticism which open-mindedly accepts and receives all that is congenial in the different historic religions." However, he argued that the main limitation of Toynbee's theoretical proposal lies precisely here, as this "new syncretic religion" obscured the crucial distinction between "religion and religiosity":

It can well be argued – and I would support the argument – that most of the failures of the modern age and many of its accomplishments stem from one single source: the lack of religiosity. Modern man, as he sees himself, has become a self-sufficient entity who knows

what he sees and can do what he wills. He has lost the awareness of his dependence upon a will and a power which are beyond his understanding and control. To warn modern man against the irreligious self-glorification, which in a sense is his self-mutilation, for it deprives human experience of mystery, tragedy, and guilt, is one thing; to advocate a kind of religious eclecticism is quite another (Morgenthau, 1962: 60).

Accordingly, Morgenthau observed with disenchanted realism that Toynbee's utopian vision of religious unity as a remedy for instability in the world order – a vision in which a unified humanity would find salvation – was a personal failure:

Neither a teacher nor a whole civilization can by an act of will create the symbolic and ritualistic expressions of religiosity thus restored; least of all can they create them out of the fragments of religions, whose decline has made the restoration of religiosity necessary in the first place. What religions will grow from this new religiosity man must leave to fate. He must be content to be ready, and to make others ready, to see the signs and to read them aright when they appear (Morgenthau, 1962: 62).

Within this historicist framework, the inversion of the relationship between civilisation and religion signalled a significant shift, with history yielding to the philosophy of history. Analysis, however debatable, was replaced by prophecy, which placed itself beyond critique. The “end of history”, in a Hegelian sense, was evident in Toynbee's acceptance of religious relativism with syncretic overtones, reminiscent of the latitudinarian Anglicanism of his early years. The aspiration to a new world religion overshadowed the idea of a political world state.

Conclusions: an “academic chimera”

In many respects, the idea of a world state is not only idealistic and intellectually challenging, but also a political project and a way of speculating about the future. Confronted with the threat of a thermonuclear apocalypse, Toynbee believed that the only way to avoid the collapse of the international order and the extinction of

humankind was through the voluntary unification of political communities. Although the idea of world unification was not unusual during the Cold War, even among proponents of the realist tradition (Scheuerman, 2011), it was in the path first tentatively sketched out, and then resolutely pursued, by the English historian that the main dilemmas of his thinking emerged.

During the 1920s and 1930s, Toynbee's outlook bore close affinities, and perhaps even organic connections, to liberal internationalism. Like its proponents, he emphasised the importance of fostering economic and commercial interdependence, as well as strengthening political and military cooperation. Throughout the interwar period, the author of *A Study of History* – much like Alfred Zimmern, Gilbert Murray, James Bryce and Lionel Curtis – openly expressed his desire to revive and adapt aspects of nineteenth-century British imperial thought. While this was often free from overt racism, it still had paternalistic undertones. During this initial period, Toynbee's goal was to establish a "republic of humanity" capable of uniting diversity.

Disillusionment following the failure of the League of Nations, the devastation of the Second World War, and the terror of the Cold War caused a paradigm shift in Toynbee's vision of the international community. This led him to consider two possible avenues: politics and religion.

From the 1950s onwards, in the shadow of potential nuclear annihilation and disillusioned by the United Nations' limited effectiveness, Toynbee could see only one alternative to humanity's destruction: its voluntary unification. Demonstrating remarkable political imagination – simultaneously cosmopolitan, idealistic and admirable – he envisaged world unity as the foundation for survival. Initially, he considered dividing the globe into spheres of influence as a temporary measure that might allow humanity to establish a federal "world state". However, his confidence in political means, and thus in the world state, eventually waned. Following a trajectory already discernible in the late 1930s, he increasingly turned to religion.

In this spirit, Toynbee embraced a spiritual and utopian approach to the crisis in world politics. Hoping for the union of the four great world religions, he envisioned the creation of a new "world religion", rooted in mutual love and capable of eradicating the cult of personal power and the worship of the collective Leviathan. Consequently,

the political voluntarism that underpinned the liberal ideal of a “republic of humanity” and the cosmopolitan vision of a “world state” was replaced by spiritual voluntarism – a blend of deism, relativism, syncretism and gnosticism.

The daunting – and, in many respects, insurmountable – task of addressing the international crises of the twentieth century in the hope of securing peace and preserving human life left Toynbee torn between the demands of politics and the call of religion. Once analysis (however debatable) was supplanted by prophecy (impervious to critique), he entrusted the task of creating a “superhuman *Civitas Dei*” to a distinctly human effort rather than divine intervention. For this reason, he most likely only managed to imagine “a society that embraces all Mankind and yet nothing but Mankind”, that is “an academic chimera”.

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