

## The Rise and Fall of Civilizations

Amid the loose talk about rising powers in Asia and the decline of Europe and the United States, it is instructive to learn from Arnold Toynbee, the author of the monumental *A Study of History*. Although this *Study* may have a great many flaws, Toynbee is said to have “stimulated the minds of countless millions to extend the idea of an intelligent, cause-governed natural world to the domain of world history. In this he was a pioneer, one whose footprints set the path for others to follow. ....He took the collective life of humanity as his field and tried to uncover the mysterious working out of its destiny.” So concludes Philip Grant, author of an insightful analysis of Toynbee’s discovery of Japanese culture and the universality of Buddhist teachings. The full text of his article, ***Toynbee & Buddhism*** is posted on the IWC website, [www.worldculture.org](http://www.worldculture.org); excerpts are offered in this newsletter.

“The question that Toynbee had posed himself, and which occupied his mind throughout his life, was why and how civilized societies have come into existence. Like the Buddha, Toynbee believed that it was life, not death, that had to be explained. Indeed death at all levels, including that of social systems, was merely a reversion back to the more natural state of unity, perfection and inactivity. As both Greek and Indian sages had pointed out for centuries, the greatest punishment is to be born and the most precious gift is to return from whence we have come....

“Similarly, Toynbee felt that the normal condition for society was static, unselfconscious and completely governed by unthinking adherence to tradition. Why then had some cultures taken flight and developed the many arts and sciences we celebrate as coeval with great civilizations? Toynbee suggested, like the Buddha, that such questions were ultimately unanswerable in language and the closest we can come to understanding them is through the use of myth and symbol. In *A Study of History*, he made extensive use of comparative mythology to develop the concepts for which he is most famous, those of *challenge* and *response*.

“... To Toynbee the idea of the adversary was at the center of all movement towards civilization. Without such a challenge he believed there could be no response, no marshalling of human energies and human resources sufficient to lift a people from a condition of inane inactivity to one of creative confrontation with the unknown reaches of human nature.

“As in Buddhism, Toynbee believed that wisdom begins in suffering, *dukka*, and this suffering is heroic. Through the pain and difficulty of trying to surmount the challenges with which the field of history, or *karma*, continually confronts societies aspiring to be

born, individuals within those societies forge new understandings of the essentials of life and new paths towards incorporating these truths into the fabric of their social institutions. As a society successfully meets its challenges they begin to come less from external sources and more from the interior of a society, its very soul, in fact. The level of maturity to which a society may attain is dependent upon the ratio between externally caused and internally derived challenges. Civilizations whose members spend most of their energies meeting the challenges of external aggressors or the environment are much less likely to solve the problems of life than those who use their wisdom to forge nourishing links between their citizens, cut and polish new facets of the human personality and share the surplus of their bounty with as many as can be imagined.”

Philip Grant, Institute of World Culture

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