
RESEARCH ARTICLE

Broken and Disorienting: An Exploration of Religious Views under Toynbee's Concept of Civilization

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ABSTRACT

Toynbee, a famous British historical philosopher, emphasized the importance of the religious view in historical development in *A Study of History* and attempted to solve the contradictions facing the development of modern Western society through the concept of religious redemption. However, Toynbee's concept of religious redemption is not a perfect solution. The concept of religious redemption is the ideological product of modern Western society in the process of industrialization and modernization. Its religious background is closely related to Western history, aiming to free human beings from the shackles of egocentrism and cultivate universal love so as to enter the world of great harmony. Toynbee's idealized pursuit of the spiritual level also made him ignore the diversity of "love" generated by different freedom ideals, and he was caught in a dilemma of advancing human civilization towards self-determination through universal love. Human beings must achieve the realm of fraternity by promoting the comprehensive development of individuals and then uniting all mankind. Through an in-depth analysis of Toynbee's religious concept, this paper reveals the significance and limitations of the concept of religious redemption in the development of human civilization and discusses its enlightenment to the development of modern social civilization.

KEYWORDS

Thomas Toynbee, Historical view of civilization, Religious view, Egocentrism, Nihilism

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1. Introduction

"The desire of the great mystic is to fulfill the creation of mankind with the help of God The direction of the mystic is the direction of the life force" (Toynbee, 1986, p. 268). The distinguished British philosopher of history, Toynbee, in discussing the grand topic of human civilization, unashamedly put the concept of "God" at the center of the discussion and bravely revealed a key element that many professional historians have tried to avoid exploring under the modern nihilistic trend--namely, the existence and influence of God. This move naturally maps out Toynbee's own undisguised deep religious feelings. Led by his strong religious consciousness, a series of acute questions that are hard to avoid emerged: In the process of civilization, facing challenges and battles, and experiencing the transformation of yin and yang, where is the destiny of mankind heading? To what extent do human civilizations need to reach in order to achieve their proper missions? And what role does God play in human affairs? Toynbee's unique religious redemption program confronts the contradictions and seems to have explored the way to break the deadlock in the development of human civilization, and his spirit of scholarly exploration deserves commendation. However, even William H. McNeill, who praised him highly, did not fully subscribe to Toynbee's classical way of thinking, stating that "the mystical experience of the descent of a spiritual entity cannot be endorsed or resonate in any way" (McNeill, 1988, p. 21). In recent years, many scholars in China have deeply analyzed and reflected on Toynbee's religious and cultural thought. They have combined his religious outlook with materialist thought, disagreeing with the idea of putting the cart before the horse between religion and history and asserting that history is a human revelation, not a divine revelation. The iconic breakthrough strategy proposed by

Toynbee does not, in essence, point in a clear direction. The limitations of this idea have provoked extensive discussion and reflection on the actual state of civilizational development.

2. The Rationality of Religious Redemption

2.1 Religious Belief is an Important Underpinning of the Study of Western History

"Indeed, the reason why there is a crisis in the West today is precisely because the vast majority of people in Western societies have not yet been influenced by Western civilization" (Toynbee, 1986, p. 271). While Toynbee's opening argument in *A Study of History* tends to be free of Western-centered ideas, this is no guarantee that it will be free of the influence of the Western academic tradition. Christianity is a historical vein that cannot be ignored in the development of Western civilization and is inextricably linked to the development of modern Western society. Toynbee's use of the concept of religion as an entry point for discernment is a product of a certain historical time and space; as Prof. Gao Yi said, "Each of us is not only the spawn of history, but also lives in history from time to time, entangled in and immersed in history, and is inextricably linked with history, whether we realize it or not."

2.2 Religion is an Effective Means for Human Beings to Escape from the Dilemma of Egocentrism

Once the external challenges of the physical environment had been overcome by Western civilization, the focus shifted to the internal challenges that were emerging. The great technological triumphs of the Industrial Revolution led, consciously or unconsciously, to a myriad of economic and social problems. Toynbee could not help but lament that "before our society, today is a moral challenge, not a material one" (Toynbee, 1986, p. 260). The central driver of human civilization's march toward self-determination is the need for humanity to cultivate a strong capacity for self-restraint, or else humanity will step into the abyss of self-destruction. The wave of the industrial revolution has deepened the chronic problem of human egocentrism, which makes human beings lose the suppression of the "other" in the absence of a strong external crisis check and balance, which makes them prone to encounter the dilemma of imbalance in the path of civilization development. The ecological crisis is a typical and serious reflection of this imbalance. In the face of such a challenge, Toynbee utilized the transcendent other concepts, such as "God" in religion, to construct a moral code that is superior to human desires. He hoped that by strengthening the quality of self-restraint in religion to curb human greed and indulgence, he could lead human civilization to self-redemption and alleviate the crisis of civilization.

The concept of religious redemption was not pioneered by Toynbee but is fundamentally linked to the industrialization of contemporary Western society. The development of modern cities has notably reflected this concept, with the social consequences of the 1871 Chicago fire serving as a significant example. Many in Chicago believed that "This catastrophe, like all catastrophes, had a meaning, and its purpose was to fulfill the unchanging will and benevolent design of God" (Collyer, as cited in Goodspeed, 1871, p. 37). This is the perspective that suggests that natural occurrences convey a divine intention, embodying the belief that disasters can serve a greater good, which the author refers to as the "liberal paradox of suffering." The author notes that "Those terrible fires, now commonplace, should be a lesson to the American people The country is moving too fast. Things rush by with lightning speed, and their end seems to come in similar proportions. It might be good for the country if the brakes could be stopped a little" ("Chicago," 1874). Nature's constraints on human progress are seen as essential for teaching arrogant humans to confront the delicate effects of modern civilization. However, they argue that natural disasters do not harm people's lives to bring suffering to them but rather serve as a means for God to invigorate modern society. For instance, the populist Ignatius Donnelly claimed that destructive events such as the Chicago fires were actually a blessing. The external catastrophic phenomenon of fire seems to have been internalized into the invisible and powerful hand of God, giving a blow to the complacent human beings. This phenomenon profoundly maps out the deepening tendency of human egocentrism in modern society, who, while pursuing material progress and civilization, have neglected the possibility of harmonious coexistence between human beings and nature. Following the disaster, people's renewed respect for nature and their optimistic outlook on reconstruction further illustrate their religious belief in redemption—acknowledging that God oversees everything, instilling a sense of fear towards nature that can lead to a mutual agreement on peaceful coexistence in urban development and ecological preservation.

2.3 Religion Empowers Humanity with Universal Love and Establishes the Fundamental Way to Unify the World

For Toynbee, the highest level of human social development is the realization of an ecumenical society that synthesizes the four existing religions (Zhao & Niu, 2011). Under such a social situation, people generally recognize the existence of a spiritual being in the universe that is higher than human beings themselves, thus establishing an effective mechanism by which human beings can get rid of the dilemma of egocentrism. The degree of human initiative and mastery over the world is not positively correlated with the rank of human egocentrism. In fact, human beings need to strive to reach a point of equilibrium with the world, prompting society to continuously move from fragmentation to a commonwealth, which must rely on their harmony and unity in faith. By referring to religion as an attitude towards life and a belief that inspires people to overcome all kinds of difficulties in life, Toynbee emphasizes the infinite power that a strong faith gives to human beings. Therefore, the establishment of universal love emphasized by Toynbee is of great positive significance, which not only preserves the main and most valuable desire of human nature-- unique

individuality and freedom of consciousness (Ding, 2020) but also promotes the need for human union, which spontaneously makes human beings converge from a small stream to a big river.

3. Diversity and Dilemma in Religious Redemption

3.1 Soul Diversity and the Challenge of Spiritual Communication

"Eliciting creative spiritual activity from direct soul-to-soul contact is undoubtedly the most desirable route, but relying exclusively on this approach is an unattainable pipe dream" (Toynbee, 1986, p. 273). Souls are diverse, and the spiritual realm varies between individuals. Human society does not seem to be ready for direct communication on a spiritual level and remains trapped in the dilemma of self-interest. The essence of human transcendence of greedy love lies in self-restraint and altruism. However, in modern Western society, with the rapid development of nihilistic thinking, this force of love has been questioned and challenged as never before. Under the judgment of Nietzsche (2007), "God is dead." (According to Nietzsche, the fact that God is dead is not only man's loss of faith in the rule of the universe or the material order but also man's denial of absolute values. This loss of absolute morality marks the beginning of nihilism); it has not only gone through a bleak baptism in the new era together with the traditional value of "freedom", but has also been forced to face a profound reflection on the meaning of existence.

3.2 The Nature of Love Under Different Views of Freedom

In the context of the turbulence of the 19th century, Russian literary giant Dostoevsky undertook an in-depth analysis of the issue of freedom in religion as a means of articulating his concept of the ideal love. Some scholars of Dostoevsky's work, in their examination of the concept of freedom in *The Chancellor of the Universe*, propose a categorization of freedom into three distinct types: "freedom of faith," "freedom of conscience," and "freedom of the Tower of Babel." The concept of human love, as presented by the various forms of freedom, is distinct. In light of the profound shifts in the environment of human existence, individuals have increasingly sought solace in the "Tower of Babel" type of freedom and the freedom of conscience at the expense of basic necessities. These freedoms, which are embedded in modern science and technology, originate from human beings' awareness of their own vulnerability and contribute to the fragility of the human will. The "Tower of Babel" was founded on the dissolution of the fortress of God by the rationality that is highly esteemed by mankind, while the "freedom of conscience" is the freedom of faith, which the weak-willed are tamed by bread, and which the multitude of men have taken over to defend to the death in the person of Christ Jesus. All these freedoms are based on a love of human nature that emphasizes the vulnerability of the human person, but none of them is without its ephemeral egoism. These freedoms are predicated on the relinquishment of human rights to pursue their individuality and freedom of consciousness. Instead, they advocate for a form of union that is devoid of roots, which they believe is preferable to the pursuit of individuality and free will. The "Tower of Babel style" eliminates the foundations of self and God, and crawling through the frenzied development of science and technology, it seriously destabilizes the spiritual order. There is only a cold need for association between human beings, and there is no longer any involvement of spiritual entities, making it difficult to maintain the balance between human power and other forces. "Freedom of Conscience" establishes God's legitimate rule in the secular world by telling people that God recognizes miracles, establishes authority over mankind, and satisfies all of mankind's material needs in a Tower of Babel-like manner so that mankind will become complete idolaters of God. In this way, mankind cultivates egoistic love in rootless freedom and heads down the path of self-destruction.

What, then, are the requisite elements needed to motivate humanity to cultivate universal love? The question thus arises as to whether the will of God should act as a deterrent or a guide. In order to feed and clothe humanity on earth, the Church exercises its authority to persuade those who are weak-willed to comply with its demands, to deceive them in the name of God, to provide them with a moment's peace of mind, and finally to unite them into a superficially harmonious whole. It is, therefore, incumbent upon humanity to acknowledge its inherent vulnerability and to seek solace in religion as a means of ensuring its continued existence rather than exploiting its potential. If individuals are permitted to exercise their right to freedom of belief yet continue to experience the pain and suffering inherent to the human condition, and if they pursue a spiritual commonwealth to the exclusion of specific concerns, it becomes challenging to cultivate a universal love in its broadest sense. In the context of the Tower of Babel-style revelry, human beings are enjoying the conveniences brought about by technological innovations while simultaneously experiencing a sense of alienation. This has resulted in a situation where the self and God have become detached from their foundations, making it challenging for the love of relief to flourish.

4. Limitations and Reflections on the Concept of Religious Redemption

4.1 Limitations of the Concept of Religious Redemption

In Toynbee's analysis of the history of civilization, the concept of religion is both a revolutionary and a constrained phenomenon worthy of further investigation. Mack has highlighted that throughout his work, Toynbee consistently posited that the human spiritual will is confronted with an "other" and that this "other" is, in fact, "God." Toynbee was convinced that "the world could not be comprehended at all without the aid of a supreme spiritual entity, which he often called God, even though there was little resemblance between this spiritual entity and the all-powerful 'Lord' of the Christian tradition" (McNeill, 1988, p. 21). Toynbee posits that religion determines history, constructing an "other" spiritual entity with a religious outlook to counteract the disordered

growth of the human will. Such a measure is still essentially derived from the motivation generated by external stimuli rather than the spontaneous behavior of human beings. Consequently, although the concept of religious redemption has positive intentions, its practical application is often limited by the limitations of human beings' self-righteousness and the complexity of the external environment.

4.2 Comprehensive Human Development and the Pursuit of Fraternity

The true advancement of humanity towards self-determination relies on the development of a heightened sense of self, a desire to explore the meaning of life, and an awareness of the ultimate existence or the origin of the universe. Putting aside the superficial aspects of Toynbee's religious perspective, the core of his approach is also to discuss the topic of "comprehensive human development", a theme that has gained prominence in the context of modernization. "All acts of social creation are the work of individual creators or at most of a few; and in every continuing advance, the great majority of the members of society are left behind" (Toynbee, 1986, p. 271). The transformation of a society's institutions cannot be accomplished without the advancement of the human spirit. The true essence of freedom of faith can be seen in the prioritization of humanity's unique individuality and freedom of will in the context of a resolute defense of these values. The union of these two elements represents a crucial aspect of this defence, as it emphasizes the importance of recognizing and upholding the unique individuality and freedom of will of all beings. This, in turn, leads to the perfection of the personality, which ultimately culminates in the attainment of benevolence and the extension of fraternal love to all beings. Once individuals who adhere to the tenet of freedom have accomplished the objective of freedom as conveyed by God, the metaphorical Tower of Babel, which represents the advancement of humanity towards self-determination, will remain intact. Concurrently, this signifies the necessity for humans in the contemporary era to cultivate the capacity to pursue freedom of faith and world peace.

4.3 Religious Concepts and Materialist Thought

Mackay's more "earthly" view of the history of civilization, in comparison to Toynbee's, also offers insights into the diversity and dilemmas of religious redemption. Mackay's historiography asserts that world history is the history of human culture in relation to the material world and that the evolution of human societies is closely related to the evolution of the material environment in which they live (Noble, 2005). He made use of materialist ideas to refute the overly idealistic and mystical coloring of Toynbee's thought. Many scholars in China have also revived the Marxist theory to criticize his rhetoric of unrestricted exaggeration of the role of religion and ignoring the essential meaning of religion, which indeed does not stand up to historical scrutiny. However, on the whole, Toynbee has provided an unprecedented systematic theory and a unique perspective of thinking for human civilization facing a crisis in the modern transition or in a futuristic dilemma.

5. Conclusion

The breakthrough strategy proposed by Toynbee appears to be instructive, yet it encounters significant obstacles in its practical implementation. To this day, numerous scholars remain committed to exploring novel paths in breaking and constructing the boundaries of contradiction, with the aim of gaining deeper insights and inspiration. In this paper, we begin by examining the concept of "what kind of love, cultivate love" as it pertains to Toynbee's concept of religious redemption. We then proceed to elucidate the multifaceted dimensions and possibilities inherent to this concept, ultimately concluding that the true driving force behind human progress toward self-determination can be found in the comprehensive development of the human condition and the unwavering pursuit of fraternity. Furthermore, we assert that religion serves as an auxiliary means, rather than a definitive factor, in this process. This paper is deficient in its citation of sources and lacks an interdisciplinary perspective. It is hoped that other scholars will be able to argue for this innovative viewpoint from different perspectives.

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