

MATERIALS FOR THE STUDY OF THE WORK AND THOUGHT

OF ARNOLD J. TOYNBEE

By Teodoro Tagliaferri (University of Naples Federico II)

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MINOR WRITINGS ON HISTORY AND HISTORIANS

ARNOLD J. TOYNBEE, *Pluralism versus Monism in World History: The Case of «Byzantine Civilisation»*, review of *The Cambridge Medieval History*, planned by J.B. Bury, 8 vols., edited by J.R. Tanner, C.W. Previté-Orton, Z.N. Brooke, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1911-1936, vol. IV, *The Eastern Roman Empire, 717-1453* (1923), in «History», IX, 35, October 1924, pp. 225-227.

NB: The title is mine.

## PLURALISM *VERSUS* MONISM IN WORLD HISTORY:

### THE CASE OF «BYZANTINE CIVILISATION»

By Arnold J. Toynbee

The great series of Cambridge Histories, as originally planned, seemed likely to consecrate that triple division of the history of civilisations into Ancient, Medieval and Modern, which is derived ultimately from the peculiar *Weltanschauung* of four Middle Eastern religions: Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam. In the light of our present knowledge, however, a logical, or even a comprehensive, history of mankind cannot possibly be written on any plan which assumes that the waters of human life have flowed along a single continuous channel of development, or – to use another metaphor – that all human growths which have struggled up into the light are branches of a single stem. The publication of the first volume of a *Cambridge History of India* was a welcome confession that monism had given way to pluralism in the philosophy of the Cambridge Historical School. We may now venture to look forward to a separate and parallel *Cambridge History of the Far East*, and to see the *Cambridge Ancient History* dissolving, as it progresses, into separate histories of the Egyptian, Mesopotamian, Aegean, Syrian and Hellenic societies. But the most remarkable sign of the times is the present volume, in which the pluralistic view has breached the continuity of the *Cambridge Medieval History*.

As Professor Bury writes in the opening sentences of his illuminating but all too brief introduction:

«The present volume carries on the fortunes of a portion of Europe [and, he might have added, a still larger portion of Asia] to the end of the Middle Ages. This exception to the general chronological plan of the work seemed both convenient and desirable. The orbit of Byzantium, the history of the peoples and states which moved within that orbit and always looked to it as the central body, giver of light and heat, did indeed at some points touch or traverse the orbits of Western European states, but the development of these on the whole was not deeply affected or sensibly perturbed by what happened east of Italy or south of the Danube (...) It is (...) possible to follow the history of the Eastern Roman Empire from the eighth century to its fall, along with those of its neighbours and clients, independently of the rest of Europe, and this is obviously more satisfactory than to interpolate in the main history of Western Europe chapters having no connection with those which precede and follow».

The historical doctrine here stated is clear enough, yet Professor Bury shows a tendency to relapse into the traditional monism in the following pages. Of the four functions which Professor Bury ascribes to Byzantium as a political power and as a civilised State, three consist of incidental services to our Western civilisation, while only one (the education of the Eastern Slavs) represents the independent activities of Byzantium in her own right. Again, while Professor Bury does not omit to mention the gap (which he was himself the first to point out) between the Byzantine and the Ancient Greek traditions of historiography in the seventh and eighth centuries, and the «rapid change» which had been in progress during the century preceding the reign of Leo the Isaurian, he suggests that the break at this epoch was not essentially different in kind or even greater in degree than the transition from the «Hellenic» to the «Hellenistic» period of Ancient Greek civilisation. Thus Professor Bury swings back towards the traditional view of Byzantium (which is inevitable on the "Ancient, Medieval and Modern" Scheme) as spatially an outwork of medieval Western Europe and chronologically a continuation of Ancient Greek civilisation. Yet the possibility of regarding Byzantine civilisation and society as an appendage to something else could never have arisen

but for the abnormal and therefore especially interesting feature of Byzantium, and that is her premature death at an age at which most societies (for example, our own society in the West, which was the sister and contemporary of the Byzantine world) are only just beginning to feel their strength. Had Byzantium grown to her full stature, she might well have overshadowed her neighbours, the West and Islam, until either of them appeared to be no more than a subsidiary branch of the Byzantine tree. Her first centuries were more brilliant than those of the West, her promise greater. What then is the explanation of the apparent paradox that it was Byzantium who succumbed and the waters of Islam and the West that closed and collided above her head?

It is not sufficient to look for an external cause of her premature destruction. Professor Bury, for example, points out with justice that the Western destroyers (the "Fourth Crusade") made straight the way for the Osmanlis; but is there any other known example of a civilisation (except possibly those of the Aztecs and the Incas) which has perished solely by the impact of external forces? That which cometh out of a man defileth him, not that which enters in; and when civilisations perish the barbarians who give the final dramatic *coup de grace* must not be mistaken for the authors of the crime. They are mere maggots breeding in a corpse, or microbes fastening upon an organism still living but already moribund. To find the true cause we must probe deeper and look further back, and then almost certainly we shall find that the case was one not of murder but of suicide.

If anyone wishes to put his finger on the disease of which Byzantium died, he will analyse under the historical microscope first the relations between Church and State in the East Roman Empire (*e.g.* the defeat of Theodore of Studium, the extirpation of the Paulicians, the

subservience of the Patriarchate to the Government in the Photian crisis between the Roman and Byzantine Churches); and then the effect of the subordination of Church to State in the Empire upon the relations of the Empire with the uncivilised peoples and states whom she brought into her orbit by conversion. Perhaps the crucial moment in the history of Byzantine civilisation was the conversion of Bulgaria. The ecclesiastical jurisdiction of the Oecumenical Patriarch over the new Bulgarian Church implied the political suzerainty of the East Roman Empire. Therefore Bulgaria must have a Patriarch of her own and – again by implication – an Emperor, and there was not room for two Patriarchs and two Emperors in the Near East. Hence the death-struggle between the medieval East Roman and Bulgarian Empires (which was precipitated, not averted, by the conversion of Bulgaria), and the orgy of Byzantine militarism in the latter part of the tenth and the early part of the eleventh century, with its attendant social and economic evils, which left the East Roman Empire outwardly aggrandised but inwardly so weakened – through *internal* exhaustion – that it was shattered by the first touch of a foreign invader's spear-point.

These vital points are not brought into relief in the plan of the book, but perhaps that is hardly possible in a co-operative history which inevitably tends to become a collection of monographs and to neglect the unity of the plot. This might have been remedied if Professor Bury had not almost entirely refrained from contributing to the main body of the work. The only consolation is that his fellow-scholars, for whom he has modestly made way, are the leading authorities in their respective branch (save for the absence of German contributors).

The arrangement of the chapters suffers from the consignment to this volume of several elements which, like Byzantine history, are independent of the West but are at the same time

independent of Byzantium. Why, for example, is the history of the Islamic world (including the Monophysite and Nestorian Christians) not presented, like Byzantine history, in a single volume, as the unity which it is, instead of being scattered through Vols. II, IV and V of the medieval histories of Byzantium and the West? In what intelligible sense is Islamic history “medieval” at all? But it would be captious to quarrel with editors who have enriched the present volume with the two contributions from Professor Macler and Sir T.W. Arnold. The bibliography is excellent (with the exception that references to modern Russian works are as conspicuously absent from the section on the Mongols as they are present elsewhere). The maps are disappointing – but here the Cambridge Press will no doubt plead that anything more elaborate would have added to the already formidable price of the book.