

# THE CERTAINTIES OF THE MOMENT

AN ADDRESS BY

DR. CHARLES MALIK

The following is an address delivered by Dr. Charles Malik at the Joint Baccalaureate and Commencement Exercises of the University of Oregon on June 11, 1950.

Ours is a confused age. Many people do not know where they are heading, nor indeed whether they are heading anywhere. Fear, confusion, uncertainty, pervade the very air we breathe.

Has America once and for all abandoned its isolationism in order to take part in the risks and glories of world leadership, or may America still relapse into the peace and quiet of its own self-sufficiency? And if America is in the world to stay, is it prepared to pay not only the material, but above all the political, moral and spiritual price of leadership?

Can Communism be checked and contained, or will it sweep over wider and wider areas of the world, yesterday devouring China, today perhaps encompassing south-east Asia, tomorrow perhaps swallowing the Middle East, after-tomorrow Europe? Since Communism is first and foremost an ideology, an outlook, a philosophy of life, what effective philosophy is being developed in the non-Communist world that will counteract and decisively beat it in the great war of ideas that is now raging in the hearts of men throughout the world?

Is a third world war inevitable, or could it be averted? What is the price of averting it? May not this price be too much, considering the fact that, in this amazingly contracted world, insecurity, lack of confidence and profound spiritual antagonism are likely to continue for a long time to come, with or without war? Are the present defenses of the Western world adequate in face of a possible emergency?

What is the outlook of human existence under the possibility of atomic warfare? I am not thinking of one's life, for atomic death overtakes one before one knows it: I am asking whether with the menace of the atomic bomb one can still rationally believe in a future for one's children, one's family, one's friends, the freedoms one cherishes, the institutions one loves, the type of civilization one holds dear.

In respect to ideas and ideals the present moment is likewise one of confusion and uncertainty. There is a widespread horror of fundamental ideas, a distrust of first principles, a rejection of absolute truths. Flux and relativity rule the contemporary scene.

There is likewise a frightening dissolution of moral standards, a leveling-down of the order of values. The distinction between right and wrong, good and bad, seems to be exceedingly blurred.

As to the God of old -- the God who created heaven and earth, who holds them in the palm of His hands, who searches the hearts of men, who rewards the righteous - He too has become the unknown God.

We seem to live then amidst shattering uncertainties: religious uncertainties, moral uncertainties, intellectual uncertainties, political uncertainties, and uncertainties in regard to war and peace. He who is not assailed by all these profound anxieties does not live in the present moment. These anxieties are the very marrow of thought of responsible men of today. Not by escaping them, but by facing and overcoming them, can we hope to rise to the challenges of the moment. Let us then see if amidst all this uncertainty and confusion there are not ultimate certainties which may still save us.



Concerning the international uncertainties, I believe one thing at least is certain: these uncertainties are here to stay. Therefore we must all learn to live with and under them. Gone forever, I believe, is the day when the United States, or any other nation, big or small, can live apart by itself, in blissful detachment from the rest of the world. Now there are profound differences in the world: differences in level of culture, in political concepts, in economic structure, in religious ideas, in the interpretation of history and the world, and in the natural resources with which each nation is endowed by Mother Nature. So long as the various peoples and continents of the world lived loosely apart when they were not unified by the miracles of modern transportation and communication, these profound differences were not keenly felt. But now when we are, for good or for ill, members one of another, our great differences are forcibly thrust upon our attention, and difference begets strangeness, and strangeness fear, and fear uncertainty. One thing therefore is certain about the present world: so long as these profound differences persist—and they will persist for a long time to come—our physically unified world must remain to some extent pervaded with uncertainty. And we must all adjust to this inevitable fact.

The certainty of the continuance of uncertainty is not a good enough certainty. More substantial than this is the positive knowledge that the Western world, with the leadership of the United States, is speedily organizing itself to meet any eventuality. The political act last year whereby the Atlantic Community came formally into existence was one of the greatest happenings of history. The ten nations of Western Europe, together with Canada and the United States, constitute a strategic and cultural unity. It is certain that the total resources—

material, technological, human and spiritual – at the disposal of the West will prove— provided the West remains united and vigilant, and despite every possible suffering in the process –ultimately decisive in any future contest of strength. This certainty, preserving that the West has the power of standing, and of defending, preserving and promoting freedom, is one of the most important facts of the moment.



To rely exclusively on building up your material defenses is to ultimately court disaster. For unless you have also a fighting faith whereby you are certain that the values you are defending are really supreme, a fatal germ of uncertainty might begin to gnaw at your heart, before which not even the strongest material defenses can stand.

Now the Communist has a fighting faith. He believes he is riding the band wagon of history. According to him, the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now, that is to say until the advent of Communism. Therefore his cause is bound to triumph. Under this false certainty of impersonal, materialistic determinism, the Communist marches and conquers.

The certainty of the fighting faith of the West, if only it could be adequately articulated, is something much deeper and truer. It will put to utter shame any shallow Communistic certainty. The West, with the Atlantic Community as the central core, is the integral heir of the Graeco-Roman-Hebrew-Christian-Mediterranean-European-humane tradition. For four thousand years profound and sustained interaction between diverse peoples and cultures resulted in this wonderful synthesis. There is no similar cumulative richness of spirit, no comparable internal conscious reflection, anywhere else in the world. Communism has cut itself away from, and has rebelled against, this tradition, and all in the name of material progress; and it is this act of self-separation and rebellion that is going to be its ultimate undoing.

And so I ask now, what are the values and convictions of the Graeco-Roman-Hebrew-Christian-Mediterranean-European tradition, of which America is an integral and authentic heir?

There is a truth to be sought which reason can discover.

There is a natural law and order to submit to, which rational human beings can find.

The other person is never a means only, but always also an end. Therefore his humanity must be respected.

The most sacred thing about man is his freedom of thought, conscience and decision. Take that away from him, and he is immediately dehumanized.

Man, you and I in person, is destined to eternal life.

There is a hierarchy of being, an order of values, a higher and a lower in the scale of things.

There is a God, who is a living person, who created heaven and earth, and who has authentically revealed Himself in history.

God is love, and therefore He suffers and has suffered for our sins.

These are permanent acquisitions of the spirit. Heaven and earth will perish, but this deposit of truth and certainty will never pass away. This is the fighting faith of the West: all that is required is that it be rediscovered and reaffirmed in the face of a cynical and bewildered world. Do you think it is a simple matter for Communism to have rebelled against and rejected these basic findings of the last four thousand years? The fundamental certainty of the moment, from which all other certainty springs, is that not even the gates of hell shall prevail upon this established truth of the ages. Not by impersonal materialistic determinism, does history move, but by the compulsion of freedom and human dignity, and by the knowledge and affirmation of the truth.

## IV

The reason there is uncertainty in the mind of many people today is because they have not yet fully grasped what is really at stake. Let people only realize that what is at stake is not this or that government, not this or that economic system, but the dearest persuasions and certainties of the last four thousand years. What is under ruthless attack today is nothing short of reason, order, freedom, human dignity, God and love. When people take in the concrete significance of their embattled heritage, it is impossible for them to remain any more in doubt: they will rise to the highest pitch of certainty and resolve.

There is a tragic phenomenon today: many people have lost faith in this priceless intellectual and spiritual heritage of the West. The deepest formulation of the present crisis is to say that it is a crisis of faith, faith in the abiding values which have been culled from the sweat and tears of the ages. The fundamental battle therefore is as much against this widespread loss of faith within the Western world itself, as against the foreign enemies. In fact there would be today no foreign enemies if faith in the spirit and the mind had not weakened. The fundamental battle is against cynicism, uprootedness, self-estrangement and despair.

## V

Coming to the personal, moral sphere, it is certain that things are not as much in flux as they appear to be. The Sight of strength and excellence of character is certainly compelling. A man whose emotions are disciplined and whose relations with others are governed by genuine consideration and unselfishness is certainly better than one who constantly treats others as means for his own satisfaction. Purity, courage, self-denial, singleness of purpose, devotion to a worthy cause, a sense of justice and fairplay, faithful performance of duty no matter how onerous—all this still calls forth the approbation of the best men in the world. No, the whole range of moral existence is still as certain, as solid, as rewarding, as ever before. And there is no doubt that this range belongs to the best in the American heritage. Surely there are some who refuse to see the compulsion of the good and the right, or seeing it, they nevertheless rebel against it. But that is part of our inalienable freedom: for man is free either to scale the heights or to descend to the abyss.

Nothing, furthermore, is more important than the certainties of personal existence. We attain our highest certainty in personal relationship with others who love us despite our faults. The quiet disclosure of friendship, the joy and peace of transparency, the transformation of character in the presence of something transcendent, the rapture of truth, the tears of love and repentance, the power of forgiveness, the communion of friends, the effortless certainty of being—if these do not signify certainty, then the sun has never risen from the east.

## VI

Nor is the Lord our God left without powerful witness. The skeptic who denies God does not know the facts; for the facts are that there are many excellent people throughout the world who have an immovable faith in God, people who in every respect—in character, in power of mind, in the knowledge of the world, and even in looks—are better than the skeptic himself. I think this fact ought to furnish the skeptic with much food for thought.

Numbers here do not count. They never counted in the past. Always it was a remnant who saved the world. And Sodom and Gomorrah could have been saved by ten righteous people. There are more than a thousand righteous people in the world today. It is certain that a faithful remnant seeks, worships, knows and loves God and His Christ. I know some of them. When I am encompassed by tempests and doubts and profound anxieties, the fact that there is a faithful remnant devoted to God restores my strength. Also this fact impels me to know more about this remnant and its ways with God.

## VII

It has pleased God to place on the shoulders of the United States a tremendous historic responsibility. It seems that the purely technical problem of producing an abundance of material goods has been solved by the United States. American industry and American technology are a monument to the triumph of the American spirit over the forces of nature. It seems that the problem of free representative government, deriving from and responsible to the people, is also solved by America. The world cannot be thankful enough to America for these two great achievements.

But beyond all government and all technology, and conditioning their real success in the long run, there lies the great problem of man, of you and me in the first person, the problem of our dignity and worth, the problem of what constitutes our real humanity, the problem of our place in the scale of things, of our proper relationship to one another, to the beings below us and to the beings above us, including of course God. America is called upon also to face and answer that complex problem, and not only for herself.

There is already in the great American tradition, grounded in Christian freedom and charity, and in faith in the infinite worth of the individual human soul, the necessary elements for a satisfactory solution. All that is needed is bold articulation, conviction and leadership.

Now leadership does not mean imposition. That is why it should not be feared. Leadership means vigorous companionship, rational guidance, unflagging interest, willingness to discuss and consider, clarity of fundamental aim, certainty as to the possession of the truth, sticking out one's neck at critical moments and accepting the consequences, bearing and forbearing one's fellows. Under the banner of her deepest Christian traditions, and with the proper humility befitting the historic moment, America is able to rise to the required quality of leadership.

For it can be shown that America owes everything to the deep persuasion that man is truly himself and his highest self not in the possession of material goods, not in the satisfaction of his lower nature, but in personal freedom under God, a freedom which he possesses by nature, and which enables him, by love and by reason, and above every determination of the past and of his social group, to seek, find, embrace and proclaim the truth.

And thus the challenge of the second half of the twentieth century is not Communism, nor is it the rising East; the challenge of our times is whether America, having completed the tremendous century-old task of taming and integrating a whole continent, will now

turn, with the same zeal which characterized her material adventure, to the intellectual and spiritual foundations of her own life, to the end that, rediscovering and reaffirming them, she might mediate them to the whole world. Nothing is more certain today than that the supremely needful thing is leadership of the mind and the spirit, whereby the deepest certainties of the last four thousand years are unmistakably brought out and made a living reality.

## VII

Never has youth anywhere faced greater opportunities and responsibilities than the educated American youth of the present moment. It is an exceedingly humbling thought to realize that on what you, young men and women, feel, think and do, will depend to a large extent not only the course of future events, but also who the abiding certainties of the past will be preserved, protected and passed on.

Consequently, the deepest prayer that can be uttered today by an American or a non-American is this:

May you be granted from above

the grace to accept the role of leadership, knowing that He who designed it for you is able to grant you the power to fulfil it;

the wisdom to fulfil your appointed task;

the humility to learn and to obey, knowing that He who willed your leadership has the power to withdraw it from you if you do not prove faithful;

the courage to shoulder your responsibilities with the vigour and sense of humour characteristic of your best American heritage;

a genuine world-consciousness, whereby you will identify yourselves with the suffering condition of man everywhere; and

a divine spark of unrest, whereby, touched by love and fired by the vision of the truth, you will never rest until justice and righteousness have ruled the earth.