

THE CULTURAL ASPECTS OF INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION

AN ADDRESS BY

DR. CHARLES MALIK

The following is an address given by Dr. Charles Malik on December 28, 1949 before a meeting of the American Political Science Association at the Hotel Roosevelt in New York City.

There is no real international cooperation except in so far as there is genuine cooperation of the mind and the spirit. All cooperation is formal, empty and superficial unless it is grounded upon or issues into authentic sharing of ideas and real inward appreciation of the same values.

Thus the “cultural aspect” of international cooperation is, in fact, the only real aspect of such cooperation. It is not one aspect among other aspects, but rather at once the foundation, the goal and therefore the measure of the existence of real international cooperation.

Let us not too easily deceive ourselves into believing that genuine international cooperation is a reality. Let not the phenomena of flourishing world-trade, of economic and technological sharing, of political conferences and treaties, of military alliances and pacts, lead us to believe in the actual existence of authentic cooperation on an international scale. For in the final analysis there can be no cooperation save between spirits in their ultimate existence. So-called economic cooperation, as such, is merely mutual utilization; its basis is reciprocal exploitation for the furtherance of the interests of each party. So-called political cooperation, as such, is also a partial and momentary coordination of effort and policy. Both instances deal only with external instruments and means. Unless such modes of “cooperation” emanate from, and conduce to the furtherance of, the deeper reality of a common will, a common understanding, a common vision, they remain “cooperation” only in name. My country may buy the most up-to-date products of your industry; it may sign the most far-reaching defensive-offensive treaties with your country: but if I and my countrymen remain closed to the ideas and beliefs and values which you and your countrymen hold sacred, all this political and economic cooperation is hollow and woefully superficial. Do I rejoice at what brings joy to your hearts? Do I cry for what ails you? Do I laugh with you and suffer with you? Do I love the things you love, admire what you admire, yearn for what you seek? Do we appreciate and crave for the same kind of values? Do we worship the same God, or the same idols? It is precisely these questions that constitute the criteria of the existence or non-existence of genuine international cooperation.



Our conception of culture determines our conception of international cultural cooperation. There is a tendency today to conceive culture as the vague sum-total of all the patterns of human activity, instrumental no less than ultimate. Thus the way the farmers of India plough the soil, or the Indian women plait their hair, or the Russian peasant toasts his guests, is supposed to be part of Indian or Russian culture.

This tendency is, in my opinion, a symptom of the impoverishment and decadence of present-day culture. For when culture is no longer sure of itself as something unique and apart and exclusive, and as certainly also exceedingly fragile, it quickly spreads itself all over the place. Then culture is not itself.

Culture, authentically conceived, is the structure of the basic ideas and judgments and values by which we live. It is a function of the supreme activity of the mind and spirit, and therefore is intimately wrapped up with vision and wisdom and beauty and saintliness. Formally, the two fundamental terms in these two propositions are “basic” and supreme.” Culture is either coextensive with religion, philosophy, art and morality, or is integrally dependent upon them. These are the basic and supreme things in life, and not economics or politics. In the absence of a vigorous religion, philosophy, art and morality, sure of themselves and of their distinctive apartness, there can be no real culture, no matter how flourishing economics and politics might otherwise be.

Corresponding to one’s conception of culture is one’s conception of cultural cooperation. What is in essence a pregnant encounter between mind and mind, a creative confrontation of tradition with tradition, a joyful sharing of fundamental ideas, a communion and mingling of the spirit, is understood by the philistines of culture as at best the interchange of books and films and scholarships and teachers, and at worst the holding of international conferences where well-meaning persons convene in order to discuss, somewhat impressively, but always formally and impersonally, problems of third-rate importance, in an atmosphere charged with unreality, self-importance, propaganda and fatigue, and without any genuine humble craving for the vision of the truth.

If this is culture and cultural cooperation, then we should report that the cultural aspect of international cooperation is exceedingly bright today. Never before have there been so many international conferences on topics of culture, so many attempts, like the “Voice of America,” at interpreting one’s culture to the rest of the world, so much widespread curiosity about other people’s culture, as there is today. International cultural cooperation, as of the essence

of peace, is written in the Charter of the United Nations, and the Third Main Committee of the General Assembly is called “The Social, Humanitarian and Cultural Committee.” An intergovernmental specialized agency, Unesco, is dedicated to the cause of cultural exchange and understanding. And thus an uncritical observer will conclude that culture and cultural cooperation are in full bloom today.

I wish I could be as sanguine in appraising the cultural situation. As I see it, there has been an alarming decadence of culture and cultural pursuits, and a corresponding attenuation of the possibility of international cultural cooperation. No relation can rise above the quality of its terms, and therefore unless I am shown that there are vigorous national cultures, a real flourishing of religion, art, philosophy and morality, I cannot but persist in believing that genuine international cooperation in cultural matters is virtually nonexistent.



For some time now there has been a steady decline in cultural creativity in Europe. One can trace the causation of this decline to economic, social or political factors, or to the sheer pressure of the non-European world upon, or its keen competition with, old Europe. But spiritual phenomena cannot be adequately explained by material-social causation. In these realms, moral causation alone is ultimate. European culture has declined because Europe has simply allowed itself to turn away from its authentic gods. There is terrible ultimate moral responsibility in this act, which no ingenious doctrine of sociological causation can possibly exonerate. Economic and social factors did not overwhelm a strong Europe: they ravaged an already morally undermined continent. For if Europe remained true to the highest tested values of its own glorious Graeco-Roman-Christian tradition, there is no doubt that it would have stood its ground against every internal or external attack: there is no doubt that these values themselves would have assured the old continent continued cultural leadership.

The secularization of European life; the replacement of metaphysics and philosophy by science; the development of science into scienticism and technology; the overthrow of culture by civilization; the disintegration of European society into national communities, and of the national community into economic classes; and, last but not least, the rise of the political, economic and social into primacy with respect to the spiritual and moral: all these are related symptoms of the steady despiritualization and depersonalization of Western life. The Christian humane tradition which had been once predominant in every field of Western existence, and which, with its living sense of the “wholly other” and the beyond, summoned forth the deepest creations in European culture, has vanished for the most part from everyday life and shrunk into detached and isolated centers of worship and learning, oases in a desert of spiritual indifference and cultural barrenness.

IV

Europe, which has for two thousand years held undisputed the scepter of cultural creativity in religion, morality, art and philosophy, has turned from its authentic sources in quest of alien gods. This is the cause of its impotence and eclipse.

It is a crucial question whether this eclipse is final and permanent, or whether it is only temporary. I myself believe it to be temporary.

At present, two offshoots of Europe threaten to overwhelm and overlay it—Russia and the United States. The dominant phenomena in international cultural cooperation today are all to be sought in the three basic facts: the eclipse of Europe, and the rise of two European daughters, the Slavic world and the American world. The center has given way to the fringes.

An analysis of the cultural situation in the mighty fringes of Europe is therefore indispensable for the understanding of the position of international cultural cooperation today.

Though the Slavic world is not, in the final analysis, exhausted by Communism, yet the position of culture in it is determined decisively by the Communist conception of culture.

Communism rejects the whole European past, the Western traditions and all that they stand for, in a single sweep, designating as “reactionary” and shunning whatever disagrees with its dogmas or values. It rejects all present reality in which traces of the traditions of the past linger, and isolates itself from the rest of the world with the cautious vigilance of one shuddering from contamination. Communism thus has only two sources of sustenance for its budding cultural tradition: the Communist doctrine and the elemental life of the “people”.

In the presuppositions and goals of Marxism-Leninism-Stalinism, with its emphasis on economics and technology, on positive science, on classlessness and uniformism, on the manipulation of the masses, on the primitive and elemental, on stark materialism, and on the unaided omnipotence of man, the Communist world finds the source and norm of all that is holy, true, good and beautiful. In the requirements of the Cause of the Revolution it discovers all standards of action and all motives and objectives of aspiration. In the hallowed careers of its ideological saints and leaders it finds the image of heroism and the form of perfection.

And yet “the people” are there. The Communist world comprises scores of separate groups, each with its own distinctive cultural patterns. These groups are encouraged to develop their own literature, art, dance, music, folksong. But they are not encouraged to develop their religion, or their independent philosophical thinking. Artistic creation itself, and even scientific inquiry, must conform, or else they are dubbed “bourgeois” or “deviationist” or

“cosmopolitan” or, what is worse, “idealistic.” As soon as culture attains its highest expression in philosophy and religion, with their inalienable sense of freedom and uniqueness, namely, as soon as culture is authentically itself, it is rejected.

This being the position of culture in the Slavic-Communist world, it is no wonder that there is little real cultural cooperation, whether between the peoples of this region itself, or between this region and the rest of the world. For within the Communist world, the component peoples and cultures do not really “cooperate” culturally and spiritually, but simply participate in one and the same enterprise of reiterating what the Communist masters have said and reproducing what the Communist hierarchy imposes. And, between the Communist world and the rest of the world no real cultural cooperation can take place precisely because Communism has initially rebelled against everything that the rest of the world has held or holds sacred, and has withdrawn into its own shell, there to found and to develop its own traditions, in independence and seclusion.

V

I turn now to another pillar in the balance of things in the world today: the United States of America. International cultural cooperation is as much a function of the reality or unreality of culture in the United States as of anything else. There is no evading the tremendous responsibilities that God, in His inscrutable wisdom, has placed on you, and not only in the fields of politics and economics. The one ultimately saving grace in this whole situation is not your exuberant riches, whether material or spiritual, but the pure and almost childlike humility which has characterized some of your finest leaders in the past and the present. For it is not a simple thing to be called upon today to lead in the extremely delicate realm of the mind and spirit. Only the spirit of humility, true to your highest genius, can enable you to face and accomplish your infinite tasks.

The immediate American cultural participation is very impressive. The United States plays an active role in UNESCO. There are numerous American foundations, with budgets of millions of dollars, dedicated to international cultural cooperation. The names of Rockefeller and Carnegie will forever call forth deep gratitude on the part of practically every country in the world. The United States Government itself sponsors a many-sided programme of educational and cultural exchange. American institutions in Europe, in Africa, in South America and in the Middle and Far East are carrying on their splendid traditional mission of service and enlightenment. Thousands of foreign students flock every year to these shores to enjoy the facilities of your universities and institutions. I understand the total number of

academic and non-academic cultural exchanges today is double what it was in the pre-war period. Finally, there are of course the Voice of America and the great possibilities of "Point Four."

No one honestly surveying the tremendous range of this American cultural burden can fail to be impressed. Nor can he, if he is directly acquainted with its character, ascribe its underlying motive to anything but the old, genuine American desire to share and help and bring about mutual understanding. The United States, in its own peculiar way, and despite the other infinite demands on its attention, is definitely endeavoring to respond to the cultural challenge of the moment.

A closer examination of this mighty American cultural enterprise will reveal that it deals for the most part with the instruments and means of life, and sometimes also even of culture, but certainly not with culture itself. To teach people how to read and speak English, how to combat disease, how to produce better oranges, how to hold elections, how to build a dam, and to tell them about the wonders of American agriculture, science and industry, is not to share culture with them. Cultural cooperation certainly must mean that you have an ultimate message in religion, in philosophy, in theory and doctrine, in morality, in art, of which you are so convinced and unashamed that you simply burst forth, in humility and love, but certainly also in joy and confidence, to share it with others. America means today to the outside world for the most part technology and its products, including the atom bomb. I am sure Jonathan Edwards, Thomas Jefferson, Nathaniel Hawthorne and Abraham Lincoln want it to mean much more. It cannot be said that the ultimate productive energies of the United States today are concentrating on the highest goods of the mind and spirit. The crisis in culture and cultural cooperation at the present moment consists precisely in this, that the old centers of culture have declined while the new centers, having devoted their energies so far mainly to the elaboration of the material bases of existence for whole new continents, have not yet risen to full cultural maturity. So far as real intellectual and spiritual leadership is concerned, there is a veritable vacuum in the world today. Consequently, for the present we must be content with living in the penumbra of hope and faith.

One is thus compelled to outline the general conditions under which culture can mature and flourish in the United States, and genuine international cultural cooperation can be realized, to the end that this country, with its infinite vitality and possibilities, may step forth and help fill the awful spiritual vacuum which is, in my opinion, at the base of all our ills today.

The first point to be stressed is that the American tradition already contains all the necessary elements for vigorous cultural leadership. Greece, Rome, the Hebrew-Christian tradition, Latin humanism and universalism, Western European thought and existence, the joyful liberties of the American way, all these wonderful things are internal to the life and

mind of the United States. Destiny is not therefore asking an obscure and barbarous people outside the pale of civilization to fulfil the cultural needs of the moment: on the contrary, the mantle of responsibility has fallen on the rightful heirs of three thousand years of the most intensive, cumulative and, in my opinion, significant, human experience. If these sons and heirs do not fulfil the expectation of the ages, it will certainly not be the fault of their inheritance, which has placed at their feet the most wonderful spiritual riches the world has ever known.

But there are impediments and pitfalls and possibilities, and I shall now proceed to indicate them in all sincerity and love.

You must recapture the sense of tradition and history. There can be no real culture except where there is real reverence of the past; except where history is taken seriously. The past, you know, has not been all in vain. Authentic culture always sums up, absorbs, feeds upon an onrush of living tradition. There have been real people, real epochs, in the past which were in certain respects infinitely better than we are. The strength of culture is the volume of real spiritual communion which the living have with the dead.

I do not believe it is possible to realize the highest good of the mind and spirit without the reestablishment of order and hierarchy and rank. Just as there are masters and authorities in the field of science, so culture cannot be a question of counting heads or consulting the whims of the "common man." But this means that in matters of culture the spirit of respect and obedience must once again walk the earth. And it means also that the aristocracy of culture can only bear its tremendous responsibility in humility and love.

We must pray for the revival and strength and peace of Europe: Europe, the spiritual mother-continent of us all. Every act that revives the spirit of Europe is an act of incalculable service to the cause of culture. For it may be that the United States cannot fulfill her destiny in cultural matters apart from Europe. And why should you hope to supplant Europe? Why should you not rather wish to form a continuous cultural community with Europe, so that if Europe produces better saints or philosophers you feel as though you had produced them yourselves, and so that if it should turn out that Europe can mediate culture to the rest of the world better than you can, you gladly let the old and experienced continent perform this function in your behalf?

It is doubtful whether religion, philosophy, art and morality can flourish so long as pragmatism, instrumentalism, utilitarianism, dominate as a final outlook. Action and movement cannot be an end in themselves; else, the fish of the sea would all be supermen. There must therefore be moments of vision in which the soul can rest. In such moments the soul quietly beholds absolute, real norms of truth and being; and in beholding them, it

is moved. Unless I am mistaken, the soul of America deeply groans for peace and rest. And when America is granted the peace of being, eye hath not seen, nor hath the ear heard the forms of truth and beauty which this country will then create.

So far as the less fortunate peoples of the world are concerned, I believe nothing can help develop their intellectual and spiritual potentialities better than the great classics of culture. If only this country, or enlightened institutions in it, can help translate the fifty or hundred classics into certain key languages which do not yet possess them, who can measure the incalculable consequences for understanding and culture of such an act? The Bible has been put into all languages; but there are two hundred other wonderful classics which constitute the backbone of feeling and thought in Europe and America but which the rest of the world, now rising and seeking spiritual food, know nothing about. There you have a concrete proposal for international cultural cooperation, big with possibilities.

The highest known cultures have matured under the impulse of something objective and independent of man. There is no reason to believe that culture can truly develop in any other way. Consequently, what is stunting American culture today is, in my opinion, all this subjectivism and relativism of psychoanalysis. When have dreams and primitive impulses measured the truth except in our day? To be entangled in self is ultimately to lose it; but to forget the self and to lose it in something healthy and true and objective, is ultimately to find it. And when the object in which the self hoses itself is truth and being, it soon confers upon the self a stature of creativity amazing in its scope and quality.

The highest known cultures have flourished in the presence of eternity. There is no reason to believe that the mind and spirit can attain their highest good in any other way. I say in all humility that the secularization of life in America has had the most baleful effect on culture. To confine existence to space and time and our immediate activity, and to have all reference within this dreary dimension, is absolutely to strike at the root of all enthusiasm and hope. No wonder the soul withers away in fatigue and disgust. When the frame of comparison is only the goods of this life, obviously there will be unending social unrest; for the innate pride and greed of man are boundless. But when one stands face to face with what is holy and pure and true and forgiving, earthly comparisons lose their sting. One then cannot envy the rich, with the authoritative image of the camel and the needle's eye in one's mind. There is, you know, a God, and there is a beyond which is open to our vision here and now. If true, this is an awful fact; and in its terrible presence the soul is drawn to the highest creativity. America was founded under God and developed under the love of Jesus Christ, and therefore who can snatch it away from its origins? The ultimate condition of the highest flourishing of American culture is an authentic return to America's creator.