

THE EAST LOOKS TO THE WEST

AN ESSAY BY
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The following essay, written by Dr. Charles Malik, was published in *The Commonwealth* on June 2, 1950.

It is fairly easy to work out a critique of Communism. The doctrine is only a hundred years old, and its effective entrenchment in the Eurasian heartland is barely thirty years old. Besides, its basic literature is fairly compact: you have the writings of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin, which are fairly accessible.

It is far more difficult to elaborate a fundamental critique of the West. You do not have here a handful of masters, as in the Communist world; you do not have a well-marked-out body of official literature. Governmental action is not informed by rigid theory as in the Communist world. There is endless variety and difference, considerable looseness of connection, and a great deal of fumbling and muddling-through and empiricism. Yet a general critique is necessary, because war and peace are not only a function of Communism: they depend also on the state of health or illness in Western culture.

There are many phases of Western life which are repulsively materialistic. The spirit of business and gain, the maddening variety of things exciting concupiscence, the utter selfishness of uncoordinated activity, all this is not something to attract and inspire. To the superficial observer who is not able to penetrate to the core of love and truth which is still at the heart of the West, there is little to choose between the soulless materialism of the West and the militant materialism of the East.

There is a general weakening of moral fiber. One gains the impression that the great fund of moral strength which has been handed down over the ages is not being creatively replenished. There is thus a terrifying waste of substance.

Quality is in eclipse. Quantity and size dominate. Not the better and truer, but the larger and physically stronger: these call forth moral approbation.

I must say in all humility that the leadership of the West in general does not seem to be adequate to the unprecedented challenges of the age. There is a tragic dearth of men, men who are so genuinely in touch with the hearts of their fellowmen as to have only to open their mouths to be loved and followed. The world desperately cries out for masters; for it is only the voice of conviction and truth that is going to save us.

There is a corresponding bankruptcy of fundamental ideas. There is thus in this realm an unequal struggle for the hearts of men between Communism and the West. Communism displays a set of generic ideas—I believe for the most part false—in which it passionately

believes—I believe misguidedly—and for which it is willing to die. There is no comparable ideological passion in the West. The talk about democracy, freedom, representative government, is woefully inadequate: it deals for the most part with pure form, sheer external machinery. It does not satisfy man's deepest cravings for friendship and understanding and truth and love.

Nor does it do merely to reject Communism. A positive alternative must be suggested. The only effective answer to Communism is a genuine spiritualized materialism which seeks to remove every trace of social injustice without loss of the higher values which constitute the very soul of the West. Communism cannot be met by a mere nay; it requires a yea which will do full justice to man's material needs but will at the same time place them in their subordinate position in the scale of values.

The tragedy of the world today is that the traditions which embody deepest truth are not clearly, sufficiently, responsibly, boldly articulated.

Nor is it sufficient in this cruel century to be happy and self-sufficient. The West must step forth and lead and not only in material things. It is not enough to make good institutions and leave it to others to copy them. For man is not merely an ape; he does not only mimic the good example of others. Man thirsts after ideas.

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If the West only exports the silent example of flourishing political institutions and happy human relations, it cannot lead. If the only export is a distant reputation for wealth and prosperity and order, the West cannot lead. Nor can it really lead if it sends forth to others only expert advice and technical assistance. To be able to lead and save itself and others, it must above all else address the mind and soul, Western tradition, rooted in the glorious Graeco-Roman-Hebrew-Christian-European humane outlook, supplies all the necessary presuppositions for leadership. All the West has to do is to renew the sources of life it already has.

The challenge of this epoch is not Communism, but it is whether or not Western society, conceived in the joyous liberty of the Greek city-states and nurtured on Christian charity, can still recover from the worship of false and alien gods and return to its authentic sources. The challenge of the moment is whether modern man, distracted and overwhelmed by himself and the world, can still regain the original integrity of his soul.

Whatever the weakness of the West, it still has one saving glory: the Church is free, the University is free. It is a great thing to preserve unbroken the tradition of free inquiry started by Plato and Aristotle, and the tradition of love emanating from God. Truth can still be sought and God can still be loved and proclaimed in joy and freedom. And this fact alone is

going to save us. It will not be by pacts, nor by atomic bombs, nor by economic arrangements, nor by the United Nations, that peace will be established, but by the freedom of the Church and the University each to be itself. Communism does not know what it did when it subjected the Church and the University to its own dictates.

We must hope and pray that there will develop in the Western world a spiritual renaissance which will rediscover and reaffirm its glorious hidden values, and fulfil mankind's longing for a more just order of things, a more beautiful world, a New Heaven and a New Earth. Modern man sees before him the possibility of universal plenty for the first time in history, and grasps at any doctrine which seems to promise him the fulfilment of his dream. To ask Communism to change its nature without satisfying the need to which it is a response, is to offer the world not bread, but a stone.

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Communism is a doctrine of despair. Its only and complete answer, therefore, lies in the existence of hope. If the Western World can show a way to eradicate the shame and scandal of poverty, of exploitation, of oppression, of greed, without resort to social revolution and class struggle and dictatorship: if it can place these material values in their proper subordinate place within the context of a spiritual renaissance which will be revolutionary without being subversive and which will draw its substance from the infinite riches of the Western positive tradition, then the necessity for Communism will vanish, and the specter which now walks the earth will be laid forever.