

THE MEANING OF THE NEAR EAST

AN ESSAY BY

DR. CHARLES MALIK

The following was published in Vol. VI of *The Middle East at Mid-Century* in the Winter of 1952 by the Columbia University School of International Affairs.

The traditional term, "Near East," is becoming gradually replaced by the designation "Middle East." Behind this seemingly harmless, but nevertheless unfortunate, shift in terminology, and the corresponding slight modification of components and frontiers, however, there lies a more fundamental and far-reaching change of emphasis and conception. For the significance of the Near East today is reduced into a function of its economic resources (mainly oil), strategic importance, and political relations; it is these that focus the interest of the world upon that region and that, therefore, have led to the conception of the "Middle East." But it is precisely in this habit of dissolving everything, including the Near East, into oil and strategy and politics that the deepest crisis of Western culture at present consists. For, essentially, the Near East is neither a political, nor geopolitical, nor geographic, nor strategic concept; it is cultural-genetic.

By the Near East I mean the cradle of Western civilization, the region where the fundamental components of that civilization had their origin. Take the following ten cities, which, together with their hinterlands, comprise almost the whole of the Near East: Athens, Istanbul, Antioch, Beirut, Damascus, Baghdad, Jerusalem, Alexandria, Cairo, and Mecca. Western civilization is an offshoot, in diverse modes of relevance, of what was there revealed, apprehended, loved, suffered, and enacted.

To the cultural-genetic, as distinct from the strategic-political, conception of the Near East, two objections at once arise. The cultural-genetic conception of the Near East is of pure romantic or at best historical significance; it has no immediate relevance. The West today is not tied to the Near East (except to some extent in Greece) by any fundamental community of culture. This tie has been cut long ago. The second objection is that the Near East is relevant today only by reason of such simple direct things as oil, strategy, Israel, and the Arab League. Thus, for example, Mr. Ernest Davies, former Parliamentary Undersecretary for Foreign Affairs of the United Kingdom, in a statement in the House of Commons last summer said that the Near East is now "outmoded" and must be replaced by the more meaningful term "the Middle East."

I shall reply to both of these objections together. It is true that the cultural-genetic tie is largely cut. But first of all, Western cultural influence (e.g. in Greece, Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, Israel, Egypt) is far from negligible throughout this region, and I believe it is likely to increase rather than diminish. The present unrest is due in no small measure to the powerful ferment which the impact of Western ideas for a century and a half has brought about. Education is spreading throughout the Near East at a remarkable rate, and, despite every appearance to

the contrary, a goodly portion of its content tends on the whole to re-establish rather than sever cultural ties with the West, not excluding of course the Communist version of the West. The West, therefore, cannot altogether disclaim responsibility for the present state of mind and soul of the Near East.

In the second place, Mr. Churchill, who knows as much about strategy with respect to the Near East as any other person, writes about this question of terminology:

I had always felt that the name 'Middle East' for Egypt, the Levant, Syria, and Turkey was ill-chosen. This was the Near East. Persia and Iraq were the Middle East; India, Burma and Malaya the East; and China and Japan the Far East.

If we bear in mind that Mr. Churchill came to this precise conclusion at a time when the defense of the Near East was the most crucial question, we must conclude that even strategically the Near East cannot be viewed as altogether "outmoded."

In the third place, even the pure concept of oil and strategy requires a certain modicum of cultural community; at least you have to have local engineers, mechanics, technicians, to whom you can talk, with whom you can cooperate - not to mention some broad "general agreement" with the governments and peoples. In the fourth place, there is a far-reaching economic dependence of the Near East upon the West (or, at least, economic interdependence between them), which, if it is going to be just and stable, in turn presupposes some community of ideas. In the fifth place, concepts of strategy may vary from age to age according to shifts in world power and to advances in scientific technique, but that there is such a thing as a well-defined cradle of Western civilization which, irrespective of the history of its checkered relations with its offspring, will never change. In fact, it is in the contemplation of the causes and meaning of this checkered history that the deepest questions facing Western existence today will reveal themselves.

Just as Communism, which is half Western, half Eastern, presents a formidable challenge to the West today, so the Near East, which is "between East and West," has always been the breeding-ground of significant ideological challenges. It is in relation neither to the "wholly different" (the Far East and Asia in general) nor to the "self-same" (its own internal problems) that Western civilization reveals its inner weaknesses, but to its own immediate neighbor, its brother, its place of origin, the impure intermediate ground, that which is not quite "self-same" nor quite "other." It is there that the crisis of the universal first reveals itself. For it is always our immediate relations, especially when they are estranged from us, who try us to the utmost. In fundamental human affairs it is not a simple thing to begin somewhere and then to say you are only externally and utilitarianly interested in your beginning.

The Near East as the cradle of Western civilization appears, therefore, to be a very precise, living, relevant, and stable concept—far more profound and enduring, I believe, than the “Middle East” which strategic pragmatism has conjured up for us today but may have to drop altogether tomorrow.

A more grounded inquiry on the deepest possible level will show that the Near East in general—and certain parts of it more than others (e.g. greater Syria)—is the microcosm of the world in a unique and special way. We are the existential meeting-place of space and time. We are essentially the deposit of the ages. With us problems come to a sharper focus than anywhere else in the world. Things are apt to take on their limiting aspect, to exhibit their clearest instance. He who wants to discern, not the passing excitements of the moment, but the eternal issues of death and destiny and decision and being, let him only try to live our life, not as a spectator from without, but as an actor from within. A Lawrence romantically passing through our region is apt to capture only self-entangled literary aestheticism; he will utterly miss the judgment of eternity which is always being enacted in the Near East. Such an aesthete will indeed make “keen observations,” but in his awful sentimentalism he will never be able to “observe” the tragic significance of what he beholds.

Those who live and die in the Near East (and in certain parts of it more than others), those who suffer our existence from within, are granted the opportunity—which very few of them seize—of beholding something eternal, of seeing right before their eyes the deepest problems of humanity almost in shimmering physical embodiment. Elsewhere these problems certainly exist, but they are usually resolved one way or the other, rightly or wrongly, or else they are judiciously covered-up. But with us they remain in eternal suspension, as though there must be one place in the world to remind us all of the essential problematic character of human existence, of the utter folly of resting in peace when we have cleverly covered up our problems or supposed that we have “solved” them.

Thus I can show at length that the problem of nationalism is not resolved one way or the other (confounding both the nationalists and the internationalists); that so far as race is concerned, the Near East confounds both the purists and the anarchists; that as to language, a Near Easterner must live in at least two language worlds to be effective and “in touch”: that economically, we have relatively meagre possibilities, and yet materialism, the derivation of the spirit from “higher and higher standards of living,” has nowhere been more thoroughly confounded than in the Near East, where God Himself spoke to, or mingled among, men; that no region has seen more civilizations roll over it and perish, as though our existence is a reminder that all strength, all culture, all self-sufficiency and immanence must die, and that glory and honor and majesty are due only to the Imperishable; that the tremendous problem of “the East and the West” is not academic with us, nor resolved one way or the other, but

that we live and are that problem without resolution; that so far as religion is concerned, the Near East not only gave birth to the three monotheistic religions, but is today their unique meeting-place; and that nowhere is the scandal of Western disunity more tragically revealed than in the rivalries of the Great Powers (the eternal Oriental Question) with respect to the Near East.

The Near East in general, and certain parts of it in particular, mirror most sharply the final problems of the world. He who wants to see how human existence, including his own, is perilously hemmed in and riddled by all these issues, let him come to the Near East. These issues are not “solved”; they remain without issue, gaping at us and rendering deeply questionable the whole of our life. We constitute the awful problematic of human existence in the “hidden” way, which requires the eye of faith and love to pierce. Only this meek way is the genuine way.

In being concretely and uniquely the final problems of the world, we are yet thanked therefore by nobody; our tragedy is not counted to us. Our inevitable effect upon the spectatorial Lawrencian eye that happens to glance at us is one of utter bewilderment and disgust; what a confusion, what an impurity, what a characterlessness, what an awful Levantinism that eye meets! But, O hopeless aesthete, thine own life is a confusion, an ambiguity, and a Levantinism, through and through sinful and mortal and questionable. The grace of God alone hath saved thee. Thou art uneasy in our presence only because our spectacle compels thee to remember thy original state, and thou wouldst always feign forget it. Our presence then throws thee back violently upon God as the real author of whatever positive being thou hast; and in place of truly repairing to Him in thankfulness, thou chooseth to retire to thy comfortable society where the problems, which we are, are dissembled with such cunning and sham...

We are in a pre-eminent way the microcosm of the basic tragedies of human existence; we bear these crosses incognito. No wonder, when the concatenation of circumstances in the past threw up a great man in our parts, he turned out a prophet—not a poet, not a scientist, not a philosopher. For only prophetic existence can come to grips with the real tragedy which we essentially are. Such men were deeply ashamed of themselves and their people, and so had to look to an “wholly other” in whom there was rest at last. Amidst the terrible turbulence and ambiguity of their life they craved for unity and absoluteness as no men on earth did. What they were actually denied, they yet saw in faith with absolute singleness of heart. They thus had to look forward to a “beyond”: a “beyond” not only in time, but an “absolute beyond” altogether. They lived here below as pilgrims, exiles. and their citizenship was elsewhere. The final word about the Near East is not political, not economic, not strategic, not cultural: the final word is eschatological—a futural orientation unto the farthest limits of being, and even beyond. To a Christian it can only be the Second Coming of Jesus Christ.