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Recommended Citation

Mahoney, Daniel J. "Whittaker Chambers: Witness to the Crisis of the Modern Soul." *The Intercollegiate Review* 37.2 (Spring 2002): 41-48. <https://home.isi.org/whittaker-chambers-witness-crisis-modern-soul>.

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Daniel J. Mahoney

Whittaker Chambers: Witness to the Crisis of the Modern Soul

Whittaker Chambers' *Witness* was published fifty years ago during the coldest days of the Cold War. It tells the story of a brilliant man driven by despair over the "crisis of our time" into the arms of the Communist Party. After playing a prominent role in the Communist underground in Washington, DC, in the 1930s, Chambers painfully broke with communism in 1938, rejecting all its works and ideological presuppositions. He resurfaced to become a distinguished writer and editor for Henry Luce's *Time* magazine.

The story of Chambers' descent to the Communist underground and return to the human world is told with remarkable eloquence. The most famous part of the book is Chambers' gripping account of the two perjury trials of Alger Hiss in 1949 and 1950, which pitted the cerebral if somewhat disheveled Chambers against the worldly Hiss, a man who had been Chambers' friend and protégé in the Washington Communist underground. The former State Department official and sometime president of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace categorically denied Chambers' allegations that he had faithfully served the cause of Stalin and the Soviet Union

during many years of government service. Chambers provided abundant documentation, including the so-called "Baltimore" and "Pumpkin" papers and the most detailed personal information, to support his charges. Despite everything, Hiss would go on lying for half a century—right up to his death in the late 1990s. The collapse of the Soviet empire and the resulting revelations from Soviet bloc archives and the so-called Venona intercepts, however, would finally make Hiss's guilt clear enough even to his most determined partisans.¹ These recent revelations confirm what Chambers' initial testimony and evidence ought to have made clear: Hiss had been a faithful Communist, a spy for Stalin's tyranny, and an inveterate liar, all of his adult life. Chambers, who despised the role of informer, testified reluctantly and only from a sense of duty to an imperiled free world. He would pay mightily for his witness. Chambers was subjected to calumnies by the sorts of journalists and intellectuals who

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thought—and still think—that McCarthyism was a far graver threat to human liberty than Communist totalitarianism ever was.

But Whittaker Chambers believed that his witness was about much more than an espionage case or the sordid realities of Communist subversion, no matter how much the dramatic details of the “Hiss Case” engrossed his readers. If the Hiss Case were merely about espionage, then “it would not be worth my writing about or your reading about,” he wrote in the “Letter to My Children,” which provided the thematic introduction to *Witness*.² In *Cold Friday*, his posthumously published collection of essays, letters, and book fragments, Chambers wrote that “two points...seemed to me more important than the narrative of unhappy events” which preoccupied his readers. These two capital points dealt with “the nature of communism and the struggle against it.” For Chambers, the “crux of this matter is whether God exists. If God exists, a man cannot be a Communist, which begins with the rejection of God. But if God does not exist, it follows that communism, or some suitable variant of it, is right.”³ This thesis is at the center of Chambers’ understanding of the conflict between communism and western freedom.

The second proposition follows from the first. The West must either “develop or recover” those spiritual and moral resources that constituted its superiority over communism or risk irrevocably losing its soul.⁴ Even if the West turned out to be successful in its secular struggle with totalitarianism, it still risked revealing itself to be a mere *frère-ennemi* of its great rival. For Chambers, this seemingly lucid proposition was no simple matter. He did not proffer a simple-minded religious orthodoxy as the alternative to the secular religion of communism. Nor did he ignore the degree to which the West had already lost its soul and was deeply complicit in the great move-

ment that he, like so many others, called “the crisis of our time.”

According to Chambers, communism itself was symptomatic of a much larger crisis—a “total crisis,” as he called it—that was convulsing the entire world. The crisis was simultaneously spiritual and social. Its defining trait was the West’s loss of confidence in its animating principles. What were the original principles that no longer called forth the loyalty or assent of the enlightened elites of the Western world? Above all, the “advanced” thinkers of the West had forgotten that political freedom presupposed the reality of the soul. Properly understood, “external freedom is only an aspect of interior freedom.” For Chambers, “religion and freedom are indivisible. Without freedom the soul dies. Without the soul there is no justification for freedom”—there is only the positing of *necessity* as the governing principle of the human world. Chambers believed that political freedom “as the Western world has known it” is best understood as “a political reading of the Bible.” Only the Christian account of the soul could make sense of the human aspiration to responsible freedom. There can be no coherent defense of freedom without a recognition of the integrity of the human soul. The soul, irreducible in its mystery, transcends necessity and the understanding of causality put forward by a mechanistic science. And the soul cannot ultimately be explained without an appreciation of the created character of the world.⁵

At the heart of Chambers’ moral vision is a rejection of the fundamental conceit of the Enlightenment: the self-sovereignty of “autonomous” man. This is the “revolutionary heart of communism” that grounds its revolutionary fervor and makes sense of its Promethean desire to remake human nature and society radically. Communism rejects the *givenness* of the world. For Communists, the goal of thought is not to un-

derstand but rather to “change the world,” as Marx famously put it in the eleventh of his *Theses on Feuerbach*. This desire to transform the world, to conquer the soul, to overcome creation, is what allowed Communists to “move mountains.” It gave them what was lacking in the democratic West, namely, “a simple, rational faith that inspires men to live or die for it.” In his “Letter to My Children” Chambers links the Promethean faith of communism both to the enlightenment project of a world directed solely by “rational intelligence” and to man’s original or primordial revolt against the Lordship of God. The promise of the serpent in *Genesis* that “Ye shall be as gods” is older than enlightenment philosophy, older than the so-called modern project. “It is, in fact, man’s second oldest faith.” The Communist “vision of Man without God” is a transformation and intensification of the age-old pride of man, who imagines a world without God. The project of human self-deification is a means of restoring man “to his sovereignty by the simple method of denying God.” Atheism is at the core of radical modernity, a modernity that is broader and deeper than the Communist revolution.⁶

A precondition for Communist subversion is the distinctly modern confidence that rational intelligence can master the whole of reality, that “thought and act” can be united in one Promethean impulse. Communism’s “secret strength” lay in the “positivism” and “materialism” of modern life. Chambers argues in *Cold Friday* that the heart and soul of modernity is “Comtean,” or was at least codified by the nineteenth-century French philosopher August Comte: positive science is the ulti-

mate measure of reality, and the “religion of humanity,” the sovereignty of acting man, is the moral principle of the modern world. It was the stranglehold of this vision on the intellectual life of the democracies that allowed Communists to take advantage of the modern crisis—both by radicalizing the modern principle and by capitalizing on the self-doubts of the Western liberals. The liberal intellectual posits a godless universe but cannot tolerate the means—at least the most brutal revolutionary means—for actualizing human self-sovereignty. In light of this analysis, Chambers shared Ignazio Silone’s view that the great struggle would be between Communists and ex-Communists. Only the ex-Communist could put forward a coherent and truthful “reason to live and a reason to die” which had a fighting chance of rallying the wills of free people. Other-

wise, the West might win its battle with communism while being content with a more moderate but nonetheless insidious version of the claim that “Man is the measure of all things.”⁷

In this case, any defeat of communism would at best be a Pyrrhic victory. The ultimate resolution of the modern crisis would be determined by whether the West could reconnect with the moral foundations of liberty or would be content with a more livable version of “autonomous” freedom. In *Cold Friday*, Chambers went even further than asking if by joining the West he was, in fact, joining the losing side. This question haunts *Witness* and contributes to the pathos that informs every one of its pages. In *Cold Friday*, Chambers raises the more daring question of whether the West deserves to be saved. Is it sure enough of its



Whittaker Chambers

principles to merit victory in its struggle with Communist tyranny? Is its principle in any significant way anything but a less confident and more tepid version of the scientism and materialism, the atheistic humanism, which provided communism with its remarkable sense of purpose? Chambers hoped against hope that the titanic ideological struggle between communism and freedom would remind the West precisely what was worth fighting and dying for. But he had little confidence that such spiritual illumination would result from the protracted struggle.

In a remarkable fragment in the first section of *Cold Friday*, Chambers explores these unnerving questions with great penetration. His discussion is an amplification of the themes presented in the foreword to *Witness* and is, if anything, more pessimistic than the original. Chambers relates a discussion with a Catholic chaplain, Father Alan, in a Maryland hospital after Chambers' first heart attack in 1952. Chambers asked the priest how he should respond to those who wrote him after the publication of *Witness* to chide him for claiming in that work that he had left the wrong side for the losing side. His well-meaning critics chastised him for succumbing to pessimism, for believing "that evil can ultimately overcome good." Father Alan's response stirred Chambers to depths of meditative reflection. The priest quietly asked Chambers: "Who says that the West deserves to be saved?" In Chambers' view, Father Alan's remarks "cut past the terms in which men commonly view the crisis of our time." His remark went beyond questions of geopolitical rivalry or even ideological disputation. His question did not ask whether the West had "the physical power" to survive, but rather if it was justified in doing so. Chambers did not dwell on this question because he had some perverse desire to join the losing side. Rather, he believed that the

question went to the very heart of the modern crisis. In his view, the West had lost a sense of its purpose and could not provide men with a compelling reason to live or to die.⁸

The West had once embodied a "certain truth" about God, the soul, and human freedom. But that truth was now at odds with the materialism that was the common faith of East and West alike. Communism was in Chambers' view only "a secondary manifestation" of the modern crisis—a crisis rooted in the West's inability to defend itself with anything resembling principled self-confidence. "The success of communism ... is never greater than the failure of all other faiths." Chambers was no reactionary or obscurantist, and he vigorously defended modern political freedom and the achievements of modern science. But technological progress was strictly speaking soulless—and "unheard of abundance" was "perhaps the sole justification for the existence of" technological civilization. In the long run, this would not do. The West needed to offer itself and the world more than "more abundant bread" or it was "already half-dead." The social crisis marked by disrupted traditions, tentacular cities, inflation, unemployment, and class conflict, needed to be addressed both through economic development and through a renewed sense of spiritual purpose. But the spiritual crisis that accompanied the modern social crisis could not be so readily addressed. Chambers feared that the West stood "under the oldest and ultimate judgment," one "which could be lifted only in terms of more suffering than the mind can bear or measure."⁹ He ended his discussion by citing *Revelation* 3:14-17:

And unto the angel of the church of the Laodiceans write; These things saith the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of the creation of God;

I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor

hot: I would thou wert cold or hot.

So then, because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth.

Because thou sayest, I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing; and knowest not that thou art wretched and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked.

Chambers' vision can appear apocalyptic and far from politics in the ordinary sense of that term. But it is important to recognize that Chambers did not reduce the crisis of the West to a merely spiritual one. In a remarkable letter to his friend Duncan Taylor, dated September 14, 1954, and reprinted in *Cold Friday*, Chambers perfectly expresses the tension between a theoretical critique of modernity and the need for a political response to modernity's discontents. Chambers writes: "Of course, it is the duty of the intellectuals of the West to preach reaction, and to keep pointing out why the Enlightenment and its faults were a wrong turning in man's history. But it was a turning, and within its terms, we must maneuver at the point where to maneuver is to live."¹⁰

Chambers could be a hard-headed social and political analyst. He believed, for example, that a thoughtful conservatism must "accommodate itself to the needs and hopes of the masses." That meant, first and foremost, accepting the imperatives of technological society while trying to moderate and humanize them. A conservatism that cannot accept the dynamism of a market society and the relentless technological development that accompanies the modern revolution was one that was destined to irrelevance. Such romantic or nostalgic conservatism is a "literary whimsy." It is incapable of addressing the modern crisis in any kind of intellectually or politically compelling way. Chambers believed that an active and energetic state was destined to play a significant role in addressing the

dislocations that proliferate in the age of machines. As his biographer Sam Tanenhaus has stressed, by the late 1950s Chambers felt increasingly uncomfortable with the rigid orthodoxies of the conservative movement and what he saw as its relative blindness to the true nature of the modern social crisis. In Chambers' view, it was silly and irresponsible to try to put a stop to history. The relentless modern revolution needed to be tamed, but it could not be stopped or ignored. Chambers feared that his fellow conservatives could not accept the irrevocability of the modern revolution, that they were prisoners of stale political and religious orthodoxies.¹¹

For all his genuine affection for and friendship with William F. Buckley Jr., Chambers felt somewhat uncomfortable with the spirit of orthodoxy that infused *National Review*, a magazine he wrote for between 1957 and 1959. In a letter written to Buckley in September 1954, shortly before the founding of *National Review*, he denied standing within any religious or political orthodoxy.¹² He was, to be sure, a man of genuine Christian faith and of a generally conservative political persuasion. But he had become an unorthodox (i.e., non-pacifistic) Quaker whose Christianity was "paradoxical" and existentialist in character. His theological and philosophical heroes included Dostoevsky, Niebuhr, and Barth, thinkers whose affirmation of God had little or nothing to do with traditional Christian rationalism. It was the absence of God, the dark night of the modern soul, which confirmed the reality of God for Chambers. In Chambers' view, this paradox was beyond any merely doctrinal formulation. As he argued in a moving and elegant tribute to Reinhold Niebuhr published in *Time* in 1947, the smug optimism of modern man, his groundless confidence in human perfectibility through science, politics, or revolution, had led to the great

civilizational crisis of which the Communist threat was the most radical symptom. The failure of modern “progress” was everywhere in evidence. Technological achievement had paradoxically aided the prospects for military destruction. Abundance and mass production had led to spiritual confusion and could not even eliminate scarcities. Science cured diseases, but men killed each other at the service of destructive ideologies. Chambers wisely observed that “Men have never been so educated, but wisdom, even as an idea, has conspicuously vanished from the world.”¹³

Against “the blind impasse” of optimistic liberalism and rationalism, Chambers turned to the “great religious voices of our time.” Dostoevsky’s powerful novels revealed that the denial of God led to political tragedy and to the self-immolation of the soul. This profound diagnostician of nihilism and prophet of redemptive suffering was perhaps Chambers’ greatest teacher. The German theologian Karl Barth had recovered the radical otherness of God against the complacent this-worldliness of liberal theologians. The American Lutheran theologian Reinhold Niebuhr had highlighted the palpable reality of original sin and the paradoxical faith—beyond all logic and rationality—that could make sense of human suffering and limn the path of redemption. For Chambers, the choice for God against deified Man was not primarily a choice for orthodoxy or tradition. Faith could never abolish the essential solitude of the human soul. An affirmation of paradoxical faith could not stem the modern revolution or provide certainties to rival the Promethean dogmatism of secular religion. Nor could it substitute for the political action by which the dislocations of our time could be addressed and perhaps healed. Chambers was a critic of “progressivism” and enlightenment thinking, but he was not a partisan of the orthodoxies that in his

view had been permanently shattered by the modern revolution. This paradox is not always appreciated by Chambers’ conservative admirers.

Chambers, then, was no doctrinaire traditionalist. But he was a lucid critic of the voluntarism that undergirds almost every current of modern thought—the illusion that the human will, self-sufficient and rejecting all divine and natural limits, could build an earthly home worthy of man. He knew that the modern crisis preceded the rise of totalitarianism and would likely survive its fall. The West, too, was “dazzled” by a “materialist interpretation of history, politics, and economics.”¹⁴ This explains why so many intellectuals were disarmed before the challenge of communism and could not see it for the radical evil that it was. For many, it was simply a more brutal means for achieving the desired ends of industrial modernity and social equality—“the New Deal in a hurry,” in Harry Hopkins’ notorious formulation. That explains in part the divide between ordinary Americans, who tended to side with Chambers in the Hiss case and hated communism for its atheism as well as for its brutality, and elite opinion, which tended toward anti-anti-communism and refused to believe in the guilt of one of its own.¹⁵

Chambers believed that mainstream anti-communism, so-called liberal anti-communism, was superficial because it could not even begin to fathom the nature of the disease that threatened the modern world. This ailment was nothing less than what the French theologian Henri de Lubac termed “atheistic humanism” and what the great Russian writer Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn was to call in his 1978 Harvard Address “anthropocentric humanism”: a vision of human progress that severed faith from freedom and initiated an age of spiritual and moral indifference.¹⁶ Sam Tanenhaus rightly notes the profound kinship between

Solzhenitsyn's and Chambers' analyses of the "modern crisis."¹⁷ Both saw a direct relationship between communism and enlightenment humanism. Both believed that authentic freedom must be rooted in what Solzhenitsyn calls the "moral heritage of the Christian centuries with their great reserves of mercy and sacrifice." Both were convinced that a West that fought communism in the name of "autonomous, irreligious consciousness" could not provide a humanly compelling alternative to the more consistent and self-conscious humanism of the Communist world.¹⁸

It is undoubtedly the case that Chambers and Solzhenitsyn underestimated some of the internal resources of democratic societies. They rightly feared that modern liberalism could not generate or even defend the need for civic courage. But as both recognized, the modern West could still draw on moral resources that predated enlightenment humanism. The West's practice, rooted at least in part in common sense and the moral law, turned out to be better than the modern theory that increasingly defined its self-consciousness. As both Chambers and Solzhenitsyn suggest, modern societies give rise to, and are predicated on, a dangerous emancipation of the human will. But in practice, the tension between a multitude of individual wills and the collective sovereignty of the people prevents the development of tyranny in the Western world. This "neutralization" of competing sovereignties helps explain much of the remarkable energy and vitality of liberal societies.

Yet there is no doubt that our liberal societies increasingly confront a moral abyss: unsure of their purpose, plagued by a debilitating cultural and moral relativism, increasingly contemptuous of moral limits, and faced with scientific and technological innovations, such as cloning, that threaten the very humanity of man. In light

of these challenges, our elites are unable to stand up to the specter of nihilism. As Irving Kristol has eloquently noted, they can give no adequate answer to the simple query, "Why not?"

Ten years after the collapse of Soviet despotism, few appear to have learned the real lesson of totalitarianism. The profound insight of a host of thinkers such as Dostoevsky, Chambers, de Lubac, Kolakowski, and Solzhenitsyn is that all efforts at human self-deification necessarily lead to what Aurel Kolnai called "the self-enslavement of man." "Progressive democracy," like communism and National Socialism, is one of the "Three Riders of the Apocalypse": it is, in fact, the precondition for the totalitarian adventures of the twentieth century.¹⁹ Chambers may have been too pessimistic about the West's prospects in the Cold War, as some of his critics have charged over the years. His deepest fear, however, was not that the West would lose the military and political struggle with the Soviet Union, but that it would win it while losing its soul—by forgetting the reasons why victory was desirable in the first place. It would be premature to pronounce Chambers unduly alarmist in this regard.

After reading *Witness*, André Malraux famously wrote to Chambers that he had not "return[ed] from Hell with empty hands."²⁰ Malraux was one of the few who appreciated the spiritual depth that accompanied Chambers' witness against communism. Chambers was not only a courageous fighter against Soviet communism; he was, more profoundly, one of the few serious writers and thinkers of the age to bear clear witness to the nature of the modern crisis and the path of temporal salvation. He knew that there could be no enduring faith in freedom without faith in God and belief in the irreducible mystery of the human soul. As with Solzhenitsyn, Chambers' defense of faith in God and freedom

was too often confused with political reaction. He was despised by most intellectuals (although he had impressive defenders such as Lionel Trilling and William F. Buckley) and his message was too often dismissed as irrelevant, or pathetic, or both.

With few exceptions, Chambers' critics missed the subtlety and depth of his reflection. He transcended the usual political and intellectual categories. Like Solzhenitsyn, Chambers recognized that there could be no turning back from the modern world. Instead, there could only be an *ascent* from modernity, one that accepted its principal achievements while rooting them in a more truthful account of God and man. As Solzhenitsyn suggests in his magisterial Liechtenstein Address, delivered in 1993 on the eve of his return to a post-Communist Russia, "human knowledge and human abilities continue to be perfected: they cannot, and must not be brought to a halt." Solzhenitsyn wisely adds that progress must be seen not "as a stream of unlimited blessings" but rather "as a gift from on high, sent down for an extremely intricate trial of our free will." Our task in a post-totalitarian age is to "harness" progress "in the interests of the human spirit...to seek or expand ways of directing its might towards the perpetration of good."²¹ These words perfectly capture Chambers' message to a post-totalitarian world. Fifty years after the

publication of *Witness*, Chambers now belongs to that small group of modern witnesses who combine spiritual wisdom with political judgment and provide invaluable insights about the nature of the modern crisis. These insights will endure long after the world has forgotten the details of the most controversial espionage case of the twentieth century.

1. See Sam Tanenhaus's excellent *Whittaker Chambers: A Biography* (New York: Modern Library Paperback, 1998), 518-520. Hereafter cited as *Tanenhaus*. 2. Whittaker Chambers, *Witness* (Washington: Regnery Gateway, 1952, 1980), 3. 3. Whittaker Chambers, *Cold Friday* (New York: Random House, 1964), 68, 69. 4. *Cold Friday*, 70. 5. *Witness*, 7, 16. 6. *Witness*, 9, 10. 7. *Witness*, 10, *Cold Friday*, 157-158, *Witness*, 462. 8. *Cold Friday*, 11, 12. 9. *Cold Friday*, 12-16. 10. *Cold Friday*, 227. 11. *Cold Friday*, 232-236, *Tanenhaus*, 499-501, 506, 512. 12. *Cold Friday*, 236-238. 13. "Faith for a Lenten Age" is summarized in *Witness*, 505-507, and reprinted in *Ghosts and the Roof*, ed. by Terry Teachout (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1996), 184-193. 14. *Witness*, 17. 15. See *Witness*, 793. 16. *Witness*, 17. 17. *Tanenhaus*, 469. 18. See Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, "A World Split Apart," in *East and West* (Harper Perennial, 1980), 66, 69. 19. See Aurel Kolnai, "Three Riders of the Apocalypse," in Kolnai, *Privilege and Liberty*, ed. by D. Mahoney (Lexington Books, 1999), 105-118. 20. *Tanenhaus*, 502. 21. All quotes are from Solzhenitsyn's Address to the International Academy of Philosophy, Liechtenstein, September 29, 1993. The speech is printed as an Appendix to Solzhenitsyn, *The Russian Question at the End of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1995), 112-128.