The Retreat of the West

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This topic, “The Retreat of the West,” is the name of the first chapter of a book I wrote some years ago entitled, *The Twenty-Five Unbelievable Years*. There is not much value in my just repeating what is in that chapter. It would be of greater advantage if I should enlarge the context of this phenomenon of “The Retreat of the West.”

Defining the West

The West, of course, is a rather silly word. What is west of what on the globe? Everything is west of something. We are talking about a cultural West. Western culture is predominantly a Christianized phenomenon. It does not mean that Westerners are Christians, except in culture. It does mean that a Westerner is a person whose ethical judgments, worldview, philosophy, and cosmology, have been predominantly the result of Westernization. That is, the person has been shaped by the Hellenistic (non-Christian), the Judeo-Christian, and the Western European Christian experience. Eastern Christians are also “Western” in the larger sense of Western culture. In other words, Russians are part of the Western cultural tradition.

When the Russians cross over into China, they are Westerners, even if they are living in Siberia (north of China). China is non-Western, because Chinese thinking and culture, at least prior to Mao Tse-tung, was for the most part unaffected by the West. Communism itself is a Western phenomenon. Westernization has taken place, not only through missionary penetration of the provinces of China, but every single card-carrying communist is a Westerner. His materialism derives from Christianity. That much, and many other things, we have in common with communism.

The ravages of communism across the world, as an atheistic, anti-religious system, are to a great extent just bizarre perversions of a Christian inheritance. Christianity is the most materialistic of all known world religions. In fact, it may have no choice because, as one great theologian said, “God was the first materialist.” He created the unfathomable atom, along with sub-atomic particles which hold together all this complexity that is beyond our comprehension. God created it all! He took that entire molecular, inorganic chemical reality, played a tune on it, whence came a whole new series of chemical combinations, called the organic chemical universe. Then from those chemicals he brought forth life forms of all kinds, like those unimaginably tiny little creatures, the Plague germs that killed off 33 million people in Europe at a time when the population was only three times that large. (Or was this the work of an enemy distorting God’s good intentions for his creation?) All of this is God’s creation; and it is the Christian who understands this and is awed.

The Christian does not worship it, but respects and sees the glory of God in the handiwork which he has displayed for us: “The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament shows his handiwork.”

Christianity: Faith or Religion?

Christianity itself is anti-religious. Read chapter 1 of Isaiah. Read chapter 23 of Matthew. Christianity is not really a religion, according to some theologians; and when it becomes a religion, it is no longer a faith. Now, that is a slight overstatement. I do believe there are some profoundly religious people who are also Christians, but it is Christianity alone—evangelicalism in particular—that allows the possibility of nonreligious people to be Christians.

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Referring to people who do not go through any fancy rituals, who are not beholden to any observable patterns, an evangelical could allow such as Christians. Now even evangelicals eventually fall into patterns; if you walk into the most highly unstructured evangelical service, you can tell exactly what is coming next. So don’t let anybody in a non-liturgical tradition claim that he is non-liturgical in the ultimate sense.

But despite habits, structures being what they are, the fact of the matter is that Christianity, in a certain sense is not a religion—not a religious system. It is a faith. It is a way of life. In this sense it is the only candidate for world faith. All other religions are truly religions, and even Christianity becomes a religion all too easily. Is Westernization to blame for this?

**Christianity: A “Religion” for the World vs. a World Religion**

Christianity is the only world religion, in a certain sense. When people speak of world religions, they only mean long-lasting religious systems; and there are not many of these. Any long-lasting religious system with lots of followers in any certain place is called a world religion. This is nonsense! To be a world religion, that is, to be a religion for the whole world, you have to have some sense of an affinity with the world; and there is no other candidate for that description beside Christianity.

Christianity is the only religion (if you wish to call it that) which is willing to take upon itself the cultural clothes of every tradition in the world.

Islam is the only competitor that could be remotely compared to Christianity as a world religion, and Islam itself is a heretical variety of Christianity. However, Islam is much more of a religion, in that it requires the Arabic language in its holy book and facing towards Mecca for prayers by its adherents. Islam is what the communists in Indonesia have called an imperialistic religion. The communists, before they fell from power some years ago, said that the Indonesians were dupes to accept a foreign religion. But they were unable to pin this criticism on the Christians. The Christians had churches that were built in Indonesian architectural styles; their Bible was in Indonesian languages; their hymns and music partook, at least to some extent, of the Indonesian cultural tradition. In that sense, Christianity was not as much a foreign invasion as was Islam. And, by the way, Christianity got to Indonesia before Islam did! Islam is a very recent thing in Indonesia.

The Bahai religion is an attempt—which I think of as much too small a movement to be called a world religion—to follow Christianity in this multi-cultural approach. Their problem is their scriptures. You can go around and talk to Bahai people, and they will tell you about these ineffable, ethereal scriptures—but these scriptures are untranslatable!

**The Impact of Westernization**

The point of all this so far is that there are many children of this Westernization process; communism is one of the children. It faithfully reflects many of the ethical concerns of Christianity. The ethical system which the communist society espouses, but which it does not have the power to live up to, is a Christian system for the most part. Their emphasis on the equality of all people, their emphasis on confession, their cell structure—all this was borrowed directly from Christianity. Their sense of history comes directly from Christianity. Communism is a bizarre, heretical, virulent evil, and to a great extent, a mechanism of Western civilization.

This Westernization process produced an immense fertility of mind, of industry, of political and demographic power. There is no example in human history among the annals of mankind throughout the world of any movement gaining such momentum, building up population and wealth and power so rapidly, as that which occurred in Western Europe—precisely where (to some extent) the Bible was unleashed.

That power spilled over in many ugly, tragic ways, as well as in beneficial ways, all across the world. One examples was the Crusades. In some ways the modern colonial movement was far less “holy” and far less Christian than the Crusades, but for most of its early history, under the Portuguese, Spanish, and French colonization was definitely a Christian Crusade. All ships carried priests—missionaries with the intent to convert people to Christ as King.

When the Protestants got into the act, their first large-scale presence on the open seas were pirates! The pirates were Protestants; and you can imagine how easily this fit into the Catholic stereotype of Protestantism. Some of these pirates actually did have chapels in their hideaway-outposts across the Caribbean. They were religious men, with all their cutthroat piracy they were trying to do God’s will. When Protestants got into the act, colonization no
longer had a Christian dimension to it. The Dutch were allowed into the ports of Japan without any problems at all, even after Japan was totally sealed off to all other colonization. The reason for that was because no one would have ever suspected the Dutch Protestants of bringing along Christian missionaries. The Dutch did bring chaplains with them into Taiwan; and at one time there was a fairly promising movement. They eventually did bring chaplains into Indonesia, the so-called Dutch East Indies, but they were simply less religious than other colonizing powers.

Notice that this immense muscular outburst, whether you call it a crusade or not, was largely a result of the help of a community produced by the tincture of Christian faith in Europe. There was a lot of Christian vitality and devotion, of high-mindedness, of social and political reform—the ending of slavery being one of the most obvious reforms brought about by Christianity. Slavery was not something invented by Christians. In fact there have been far more white people enslaved by white people, than black people enslaved by white people to this date in history. Who are the Slavs? They were for centuries—for over a millennium—the great human quarry of slaves, which were taken and sold for use in Africa. So slavery was not the result of Christianity; slavery was there before Christianity ever arrived.

Christianity was what eventually percolated into the higher circles and, through John Wesley and the Evangelical Awakening, into the conscience of William Wilberforce and the Clapham Sect. Clapham was a district of London where these evangelicals lived. They were called a sect, although they were really only a subordinate party in Parliament. They led the anti-slavery movement.

The impact of Christianity, unknown and undetectable in secular books, accounted for the rise of Western civilization, its vitality and its military power. It is a strange thing that the very muscle wielded by the Crusaders in cutting off people's heads was muscle produced by Christianity. Christianity makes people healthy. It "turns the hearts of the fathers to the children." There is a lower infant mortality immediately when a population becomes Christian. Orphanages, hospitals, and insane asylums appear, and other unfortunate conditions are ameliorated because of Christianity. The benefit produces power, even for those who do not acknowledge it; and it eventually spills over across all the world.

The impact can either be called colonialism (with an adverse twang to it), or it can be called a blessing. I do not know of any clear thinking citizen of a former colonial country who would not be able to tell you how ambivalent the people are about the former colonial presence. John Philip from India, who was in my class last year, will tell you that there are many people in India today who, if they had their choice, would ask the British back. Now, they would probably have to think twice! There would be lots of people who would be opposed to it; and there would be terrible results. The British are a bunch of bigots and snobs, hopelessly tyrannical, almost as bad as the Americans!

It is incredible that any one nation would rule another nation. Allan Moorehead wrote a book on the South Pacific called The Fatal Impact. These imperial ambitions literally were fatal to thousands of people as the European diseases flowed in and killed off thousands within those populations. It was fatal in another way, too, as their cultures were destroyed.

It may be found hard to believe that at some point in history, after four hundred years of this massive, muscular, irreversible outreach controlling every square foot of the world, this vast and, for most people, irreversible movement of Westernization began to crumble and retreat.

### The Only Source of Merit in Western Society

I do not think that there is the slightest intrinsic virtue or superiority in Western man. I do think that there is a great deal of superiority in Western culture insofar as it has been affected by the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. And I will not give one millimeter of credit to any other source! It is Christ.

As I hear about the unbelievable atrocities in modern-day wars and ethnic conflicts in different parts of the world, such as East Africa, I am just as aware of the orgies of brutality and bestiality among the tribal people of my own past. Consider, for example, the Irish. They were headhunters. They would sail their boats up the Irish Sea, go into a little village thirty miles away and kill every man, woman and child in it. Then they would pile all those heads into their boats and come back—almost sinking—to hollow them out, process them, and drink out of them. Irishmen were drinking out of skulls as late as the sixteenth century!

Whom are we kidding? Satan is the god of this world. We all come from a background of satanically-controlled cultures; and there is no intrinsic merit in
Western society apart from the impact of the gospel of Jesus Christ, direct and indirect. Science itself is a result of the cosmology that is unique to the Judeo-Christian tradition. You cannot be a scientist if you do not believe in the laws of nature. You cannot be a scientist if you are merely a Hellenistic philosopher.

Plato believed in a pantheon of quarrelsome gods, whose quarreling decided whether it rained or did not rain. You could not possibly have been a scientific observer of the weather if you were a Plato. There is nothing about the Hellenistic tradition that would ever have allowed science to develop. The so-called Greek science, about which many books have been written, is in a totally different category than Western science. The latter is due to God-conscious reflections by Christian people upon the orderliness and beauty of a creation which God designed.

The Unbelievably Good Result of the West’s Retreat

There came a time when God obviously said, “Time’s up” for Western societies. The crumbling of that vast worldwide empire is the story of the Retreat of the West. The retreat of the West is the retreat of Western political and military power. It is not a retreat of the cultural or economic power, or of the religious influence of the West. Many people assumed—and maybe hoped—that with the withdrawal of the troops and the colonial offices of the Western powers, they would have withdrawn all other influences. But, as you see in my book, in many cases the cultural impact of the West actually escalated in the absence of the stuffy, censorious, and condescending colonial rulers.

After the British had been gone from Ghana for ten years, the Ghanaians actually became more pro-British than they had ever been with the British still present! The other important thing in this story is that, in most cases, the gospel of Jesus Christ actually was given freer reign. It was not the gospel that retreated! The Twenty-Five Unbelievable Years tells the story of the unbelievable fact that the church of Jesus Christ, after that period of Western retreat, emerged stronger, more powerful, more deeply rooted, and more indigenous than before!