



<http://www.ucalgary.ca/hic> • ISSN 1492-7810  
2010/11 • Vol. 9, No. 1

## Whittaker Chambers: The Lonely Voice of Tragedy on the Postwar Right

Hyrum Lewis

### Abstract

In historical discourse, Whittaker Chambers has too easily been lumped in with other midcentury conservative anti-communists. While those on the right have held him up as a hero in the American struggle for victory against “godless communism” and those on the left see him as exemplary of the excesses and damaging overzealousness of the early Cold War, Chambers defies such simplistic categorization. His subtle, nuanced thought differed considerably from that of other conservative intellectuals of the time and drew from sources outside the standard conservative canon. Thus, this despairing existentialist became an inspiration and a model for the America Right even as he differed with those he inspired on philosophical essentials.

Historians commonly remember Whittaker Chambers as the central witness in one of the most important spy cases of the twentieth century and as one of the founders and icons of conservative anti-communism. Born in 1901 and raised in a middle-class Long Island home, Chambers went off to Columbia University as a young man, but then dropped out to join the communist underground. In the late 1930s, disillusioned by Stalin’s purges and the Nazi-Soviet pact, Chambers defected from communism, underwent a religious conversion, moved to a Maryland farm, and took a job as a book reviewer, foreign affairs columnist, and senior editor at *Time* magazine where he became one of the leading anti-communist journalists in America. When the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) called him up to testify on his previous involvement in communism, Chambers charged the prominent State Department official Alger Hiss with being a fellow member of the communist underground and, later, a spy. Because of his role in this controversial case, Chambers became a hero of the right and an icon of conservative midcentury anti-communism.

But Chambers was far from the typical right-wing red-hunter that this image would suggest; he was a complex and subtle thinker whose thought drew on a range of ideas that extended well beyond the conservative canon. While most leading intellectuals on the postwar Right discussed communism using the language of American exceptionalism, godliness versus godlessness, and the urgency of victory, Chambers maintained a nuanced and tragic view of the Cold War that drew on a metahistorical fatalism, existentialism, and romantic anti-modernism. The thought of Whittaker Chambers, then, defies typical conceptions of the left-right categories we are accustomed to and presents a challenging case to Cold War historians: this despairing existentialist became an inspiration and a model for the Right even as he differed with those he inspired on philosophical essentials.<sup>1</sup> Both his followers and historical interpreters

---

<sup>1</sup> Most recently, this includes historians Michael Kimmage (*The Conservative Turn: Lionel Trilling Whittaker Chambers and the Lessons of Anti-Communism* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009]), and Richard Reinsch

have provided only one side of the legacy of Chambers, seeing him as a Cold Warrior who wanted the Godly West to defeat their godless adversaries, when he repeatedly ridiculed such a view.<sup>2</sup>

An examination of the post-communist thought of Whittaker Chambers must begin with his religious conversion. Chambers' disillusionment with communism in the late 1930s led him to search for an alternative source of meaning and purpose. One morning, struck by the intricacy of his daughter's ears, he awakened to the possibility of Divine Purpose in the universe. After months of soul-searching, he sought God in prayer and, he claimed, received a personal revelation — grace took hold of him and his Christian conversion was complete.<sup>3</sup> But even as his belief in God was fixed, he paid little attention to theological particulars. Although he joined a local Quaker congregation, he preferred their association more for aesthetic and temperamental reasons than doctrinal ones.<sup>4</sup>

Since Chambers' religious views were generically Christian rather than theologically specific, he was free to develop a unique theory of history without being bound by orthodoxy. Specifically, he melded his newfound Christian faith with the vestiges of Marxism left over from his communist days. In Marxian theory, the dialectics of class conflict drive history through various stages until final resolution is found in a system without contradictions — communism. But Chambers, now a Christian, turned Marx on his

---

(*Whittaker Chambers: The Spirit of a Counterrevolutionary* [Wilmington, DE: ISI Press, 2010]). Kimmage provocatively sees Chambers as an exemplary intellectual figure in a "conservative turn" that America underwent in the 1950s. This article, on the other hand, argues that Chambers was as an outsider, alienated from the movement who claimed him and completely at odds with their fundamental assumptions. Kimmage sees Chambers as defining the right for his generation rather than the distinctiveness of his anti-communism and how out of step it was with the crusading, nationalistic anti-communism of William F. Buckley Jr., James Burnham, and other Cold War conservatives. For Kimmage, Chambers was a creator of the conservative movement, not a lonely voice who failed to find a place within it. Reinsch ties Whittaker Chambers to the current conservative project, arguing that his ideas have continuing relevance to advancing the right-wing agenda of today. His political approach, however, fails to embed Chambers' thought within the Cold War context and define his relationship to the early conservative movement with which he interacted. Other examples of Cold War historians who see Chambers as an exemplary conservative anti-communist include: George Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America since 1945* (New York: Basic Books, 1976), 98-106; John P. Diggins, *Up from Communism: Conservative Odysseys in American Intellectual Development* (NY: Columbia University Press, 1994), 245-46; and Lee Edwards, *The Conservative Revolution: The Movement that Remade America* (New York: Free Press, 1999). To Edwards, Chambers was "the most eloquent spokesman" and quintessential figure in conservative anti-communism (17).

<sup>2</sup> This view of Chambers includes, most prominently, President Ronald Reagan: "Remarks at the Annual Convention of the National Association of Evangelicals" (Orlando, Florida, 8 March 1983), in *Conservatism in America since 1930*, ed. Gregory Schneider (NY: New York University Press, 2003), 361. The contemporary conservative who proclaimed the "God vs. Godless" approach to the Cold War most vocally was L. Brent Bozell, in articles such as "To Magnify the West," *National Review*, 8 September 1961; and "An Exchange of Views: God and the Cold War," *Commonweal*, 20 October 1961, 95-7. See also James Burnham, *Containment or Liberation? An Inquiry into the Aims of United States Foreign Policy* (New York: John Day, 1953), 207; Lee Edwards, *The Conservative Revolution*, 293; and Jennifer Burns, "Conservatism Reborn: From Reagan to Bush II," podcast audio, 3 May 2006, <http://www.jenniferburns.org/history-podcasts/history-7b>. In her work on Ayn Rand, Burns writes of Chambers as the "attack dog" that Buckley Jr. used to purge Rand from the conservative movement. See *Goddess of the Market: Ayn Rand and the American Right* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 174-75.

<sup>3</sup> Whittaker Chambers, *Witness* (New York: Random House, 1952), 16-18, 75-84.

<sup>4</sup> Chambers to William F. Buckley Jr., 29 September 1954, in *Odyssey of a Friend: Letters to William F. Buckley Jr., 1954-1961*, ed. William F. Buckley Jr. (Washington, DC: Regnery, 1987), 61; Chambers to Buckley Jr., 19 October 1956, *Odyssey of a Friend*, 117; and Chambers, *Witness*, 88, 130, 167. He was particularly attracted to the simplicity and peace of their meetings, which for him were redolent of simpler times: "The 17<sup>th</sup> [C]entury form was there touched with the sweetness of the middle ages" (*Witness*, 167).

materialist head and argued that ideas, not material conditions, determined the course of history.<sup>5</sup> Mind (which he often equated with spirit) dominated each historical epoch and all material changes existed “first within our minds”; history advanced according to “beliefs which offer[ed] an explanation of the meaning of the world.”<sup>6</sup> Chambers’ conversion to Christianity not only caused an internal change of heart, but altered his historical outlook as well and led him to place ideas, rather than matter, at the center of the human story.<sup>7</sup> While Marx believed that the material determined the mental, Chambers believed that the mental dominated the material — in essence, he unknowingly reverted to Hegel’s original dialectic of spirit.<sup>8</sup>

Chambers’ view of history applied to revolutions as well. Whereas Marx claimed that revolutions began with economic privation, Chambers claimed that social revolutions first began as spiritual and intellectual revolutions. According to Marx, the increasing concentration of the means of production and the resultant immiseration of the working class would produce a final revolution and usher in an era of communism, but Chambers noted that intellectuals such as himself, Alger Hiss, and Arthur Koestler were more likely to embrace communism than poor workers.<sup>9</sup> In contrast to Marx who saw revolution arising from the working classes, Chambers believed that “the forces of revolution in the West are an intellectual proletariat.”<sup>10</sup> For Chambers, a Marxist eschatological view that saw history in materialist terms became a Christian eschatological view that saw history in spiritual terms. Both contemporaries and later historians have claimed that when Chambers converted to Christianity, he had exchanged belief in history for belief in God; in reality, he had synthesized the two.<sup>11</sup>

Unlike Marx, however, Chambers predicted a gloomy endpoint to history. This pessimistic outlook came from his upbringing, the traumas of the Hiss trial, and the intellectual influences of his post-communist phase. Not only was Chambers always an isolated, socially awkward loner, but his family was full of misfortune as well. His father’s inability to provide for his wife and children, and the persistence of homosexual tendencies, eventually led Chambers’ parents to divorce. His younger brother committed suicide and his grandmother, in bouts of insanity, threatened him with a knife as a child.<sup>12</sup>

The ordeal of the Hiss Trial only added to this tragic sensibility. Chambers became famous with his testimony before HUAC in which he accused a respected member of the liberal establishment, Alger Hiss, of being a communist spy. Hiss denied these charges and then sued Chambers for libel, at which point Chambers, feeling his hand forced, produced documents (most famously the “pumpkin papers” — microfilmed documents stored in a hollowed-out pumpkin at his Maryland farm) that seemed to provide evidence that Hiss had not only been a member of the communist underground but had also passed

---

<sup>5</sup> Chambers to Ralph de Toledano, 24 January 1956, in *Notes from the Underground: The Whittaker Chambers-Ralph de Toledano Correspondence, 1949-1960*, ed. Ralph de Toledano (Washington, DC: Regnery, 1997), 219. This also set Chambers apart from the seminal libertarian historian, Isabel Paterson, who argued in her history of the world, *The God of the Machine* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1943) that government policies had determined the course of history. While Marx saw history progressing according to material forces, and Paterson saw history progressing according to political forces, Chambers saw mind as the force that drove history.

<sup>6</sup> Whittaker Chambers, *Cold Friday* (New York: Random House, 1964), 297, 303; and *Witness*, 83. To Marx, those who controlled the means of production would control history. To Chambers, those who controlled the force of ideas, controlled history: “In the war between Communism and capitalism,” he said, “books are weapons” (*Witness*, 79).

<sup>7</sup> Chambers, “Age of Exploration,” *Life*, 22 March 1948, 94. Mind even determined modern destruction since “ruin takes place in men’s souls before it is made visible in the rubble of cities” (Chambers, *Cold Friday*, 92).

<sup>8</sup> Chambers to Buckley Jr., 30 August 1954, *Odyssey*, 52.

<sup>9</sup> Chambers, *Witness*, 8.

<sup>10</sup> Chambers, *Cold Friday*, 12-13, 44.

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, Philip Rahv, “The Sense and Nonsense of Whittaker Chambers,” *Partisan Review* (July-August 1952): 475.

<sup>12</sup> Chambers, *Witness*, 108, 113-14, 119-26, 183.

secrets from the US State Department to Soviet officials. The trial polarized the nation into pro-Hiss and pro-Chambers factions and became a symbol around which ideologues of left and right rallied.

Although the jury had found Hiss guilty of perjury, the smears Chambers endured from many of the country's elites had convinced him of the inability of the West to sustain itself.<sup>13</sup> "How can any community in which toleration and support of Hiss is each time automatic, irrepressible, predictable — how can such a community find the force and virtue to save itself in greater matters?" he wrote to his friend William F. Buckley Jr. It could not, he concluded, and his pessimistic prognostications for humanity were further solidified.<sup>14</sup> To Chambers, the attacks against him revealed a deep malady infecting Western civilization that would ultimately prove fatal.<sup>15</sup>

Chambers' pessimistic historical determinism was further entrenched during his days as a writer and editor for *Time* magazine. At *Time*, Chambers wrote essays on the most important metahistorians of the early twentieth century. Of these, Arnold Toynbee influenced Chambers most profoundly. From Toynbee, Chambers reinforced his view that mind, not matter, determined history and he viewed "civilizations" rather than nations as the most useful units for grand historical analysis. Like Toynbee, Chambers came to view the decline of civilizations as a form of "suicide" as the failure to meet internal challenges left the civilization vulnerable to the destruction finally caused by external pressures.<sup>16</sup> Friend

---

<sup>13</sup> Chambers, "The Hissiad: A Correction," *National Review*, 9 May 1959, 45-46. Although recent research has convinced many previously skeptical historians that Hiss had been involved in some way with communism (see appendix to Sam Tanenhaus, *Whittaker Chambers* [New York: Random House, 1997] and Allen Weinstein, *Perjury: The Hiss-Chambers Case* [New York: Random House, 1997]), some scholars and journalists continue to assert that Hiss had no communist connections. This was visible at a recent New York University conference that revisited the trial (Alger Hiss & History Conference, New York University, 5 April 2007) and in the Summer 2007 issue of *The American Scholar*.

<sup>14</sup> Chambers to Buckley Jr., 22 April 1957, *Odyssey*, 155; and Chambers, "The Hissiad," 45. Chambers to Duncan Norton Taylor, 10 August 1952, in Chambers, *Cold Friday*, 7. For an example of a standard attack on Chambers, see Kingsley Martin, "The Witness," *New Statesman and Nation* (July 1952), in *Alger Hiss, Whittaker Chambers, and the Schism in the American Soul*, ed. Patrick A. Swan (Wilmington: ISI Books, 2003), 101-106. Kingsley Martin used the release of Chambers' bestselling memoir *Witness* to rehash all of the charges the Hiss defense made during the trial — Chambers was mentally unstable, homosexually obsessed with Hiss, and a pathological liar. To Martin, Chambers' memoirs only cemented the conclusions he had drawn previously: Chambers was an archetype of that "disappointed strata of society which hates all those of established reputation" and whose status anxiety and neuroses drove them to irrational hatred and envy of those who had succeeded and belonged to the established order (for example, Hiss) (101-02). Furthermore, said Martin, Chambers' book was dangerous for it would enflame the angry masses that shared his "status anxieties" and give another weapon to the McCarthyite witch-hunters who threatened civil liberties (103-05). Chambers may not have been Hitler, Martin concluded, but *Witness* had "much in common with *Mein Kampf*" (106).

<sup>15</sup> For more on the Hiss trial and Chambers' pessimism, see Chambers to Jr., 5 August 1954, in *Odyssey*, 43; Chambers, *Cold Friday*, 72; and Chambers, *Witness*, 10. "On the one side" of the division in America "are the voiceless masses with their own subdivisions and fractures. On the other side is the enlightened, articulate elite which, to one degree or other, has rejected the religious roots of the civilization" (*Witness*, 616, 635, 793-94). He claimed to have felt the support of "the plain men and women of the nation" during the Hiss trial, while he believed that the members of elitist establishments funded and participated in his defamation. Other historical theorists have proposed their own candidates for the "motor of history": for Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel it was the universal rational spirit; for Alexandre Kojeve (and his follower, Francis Fukuyama) it was the thymotic desire for recognition; for Arnold J. Toynbee, it was the dialectic of challenge-response; and most recently, Robert Wright has seen history moving according to the dynamic of non-zero-sum interactions.

<sup>16</sup> Chambers, "The Challenge," *Time*, 17 March 1947, 81; Chambers, "The Devil," *Life*, 2 February 1948, 82-85; Chambers, "Crossroads," *Time*, 1 July 1946, 58; and Chambers, "In Egypt Land," *Time*, 30 December 1946, in *Ghosts on the Roof: Selected Journalism of Whittaker Chambers, 1931-1959*, ed. Terry Teachout (Washington, DC: Regnery), 140.

and fellow anti-communist James Burnham later credited Chambers with influencing his own use of this term (and many of his ideas) in an influential book on liberalism entitled, *Suicide of the West*.<sup>17</sup>

Chambers departed from Toynbee, however, in certain respects. He employed Toynbee's "organic" metaphor at times, but he more frequently viewed the unfolding of history as a mechanical process and referred to modern civilization as a "machine." He believed that "a mechanizing world . . . is by force of the same necessity, a revolutionary world."<sup>18</sup> Since all politics logically followed the faith a society embraced, modern politics necessarily reflected modern "Faith in Man." In our "machine age," said Chambers, societies rejected Christianity "in favor of a new faith, secular, exclusively rational, and scientific, which set man at the center of man's hope." To Chambers, "Communism, Socialism, and related forms [were] only logical political developments of this revolution."<sup>19</sup> While Toynbee held a cyclical view of history in which civilizations rose and fell, Chambers believed that history would instead have a final "endpoint" in which one ideology would triumph over all others.<sup>20</sup>

Two other fatalist historians also influenced Chambers: Henry Adams and Oswald Spengler. Chambers saw Henry Adams as the pre-eminent historical seer of the previous century but believed that the limits of his nineteenth-century perspective prevented him from taking his analysis to its correct conclusion. Adams had lived long enough to glimpse modernity but not to witness its full forces or tragic fruits. He had seen the potential of the dynamo but did not live to behold the full impact of the age it symbolized. Chambers believed that the added perspective of another half century of history would allow him to further provide answers to the questions that Adams had posed.<sup>21</sup>

Similar to both Spengler and Adams, Chambers questioned the value of "scientific progress" as well. While science undoubtedly created material comforts, Chambers believed that it also created chaos by undermining human traditions and certainties. He shared the historical determinism of Toynbee, Spengler, and Adams, but with the distinctive pessimism and technophobia of the latter two.<sup>22</sup> Similar to Marx, Chambers believed that history moved towards a pre-determined historical outcome, but unlike Marx (and like Spengler), he believed that this outcome would be a dystopian one. Chambers the Marxist and later Chambers the Christian both believed that communism would ultimately triumph, but the former saw this as a system of freedom, the latter as a system of slavery. Chambers quoted Spengler to his friend Duncan Norton Taylor writing: "Only dreamers believe that there is a way out. Optimism is cowardice. We are born into this time and must bravely follow the path to the destined end."<sup>23</sup> Thus, he combined Marxist inevitability with Spenglerian gloom.

Most historians refer to Chambers as a pessimist, but given his view of world history, they might more accurately call him a fatalist. While Chambers was invoked as a symbol and champion of fighting

<sup>17</sup> James Burnham, *Suicide of the West: An Essay on the Meaning and Destiny of Liberalism* (Chicago: Regnery, 1985 [1964]).

<sup>18</sup> Chambers, *Cold Friday*, 61.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 93-95.

<sup>20</sup> Chambers, "Challenge," 74, 76; Chambers, "The Devil," 83-84; and Chambers, *Cold Friday*, 312.

<sup>21</sup> Chambers, *Cold Friday*, 169-70. Kimmage recognizes Henry Adams as an influence on the pre-communist Chambers but this same sensibility carried into his anti-communist phase. According to Kimmage, John Adams, not Henry Adams, was more decisive in Chambers' development: "The tradition into which he fell was that of Christian republicanism, more the engaged, pious conservatism of John Adams than the alienated ironic conservatism of Adams's great-grandson Henry" (*Conservative Turn*, 9). Chambers' historical determinism belies this claim as do his own late writings in which he referenced Henry Adams dozens of times but John Adams not at all. Chambers' historical determinism also set him apart from romantic anti-modernist conservatives of the time such as Russell Kirk or Peter Viereck.

<sup>22</sup> Chambers to Norton-Taylor, 2 April 1954, 214, 223-24; and Chambers, "Crossroads," 58.

<sup>23</sup> Chambers to Norton-Taylor, 2 April 1954, 224; and James G. Miller and Jessie L. Miller, "Review of Witness — Whittaker Chambers," *University of Chicago Law Review* (Spring 1953): 599.

“godless communism,” Chambers’ schema said nothing about the West being godly, nor did he believe the West deserved to be saved. To Chambers (as to Spengler), the death of the West had been foreordained.<sup>24</sup>

Chambers also presented a view of faith that differed from the “godly vs. godless” formulation of some cold warriors. Instead of conceiving of a dichotomy between a civilization based on atheism (communism) and a civilization based on religion (The West), Chambers rejected the very idea of a “faith-free” civilization. Societies lived and died by faith, he said, and humans did not have the choice to live without it, they only had the choice of which of two faiths they would embrace — Faith in God or Faith in Man — both of which promised meaning, hope, and even salvation to believers. The religious choice was inevitable and all-important: every person and every society had to ask itself which it would worship, “God, or man?”<sup>25</sup>

In his belief that humans could not escape faith, Chambers’ analysis of religion in politics approximated that of fellow Marxist-turned-conservative Will Herberg. To Herberg, everyone worshipped something, but the object of their worship was either transcendent and absolute (God) or something relative and contrived by humans (an idol).<sup>26</sup> If humans placed their faith in their own capacities, then they set themselves up as an alternative to God as the creative force in the world. “Faith in Man” differed from atheism in that the former only implied an indifference to God, not an open rejection of Him (Chambers consciously avoided using the term “Godless communism”). Faith in man was not an absence of faith but a positive substitution of faith in a transcendent Supreme Being for faith in human intelligence. The human psyche could not live without either one or the other. Herberg had called humans “homo religiosus” — religious beings by nature — while Chambers maintained that “the human mind tirelessly seeks a reason to live and a reason to die,” meaning that “religious faith is a human necessity”; both believed that humans could choose where to place their faith — in God or Man — but not whether to have faith at all.<sup>27</sup>

In developing these views, similar to many American intellectuals caught in the existentialist currents of the postwar years, both Chambers and Herberg drew heavily on Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoevsky. “Man must worship something,” Dostoevsky had said in *The Possessed*, a book that both Chambers and Herberg listed among their favorites, “if he does not worship God he will worship an idol made of wood or of gold or of ideas.”<sup>28</sup>

The connection to Dostoevsky was an important one in Chambers’ development, and one that friends and critics alike would note. Historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr. and novelist John Dos Passos both remarked that Chambers’ book *Witness* had a distinctively “Dostoyevskyan” flavor; journalist Philip Rahv went further and structured his entire review of the book around the Chambers-Dostoevsky connection. “The influence of the Russian novelist is literally everywhere in the book,” he said.<sup>29</sup> Chambers’ friend Charles

<sup>24</sup> Chambers can be considered a historicist in the sense that Karl Popper used the term: he believed that history moved inexorably towards a determinate endpoint according to certain social laws. Although Chambers threw out the Marxian hope for a better future, he always retained his communist distaste for liberalism. As historian John Patrick Diggins has shown, a commonality in the story of ex-communists who move from far left to far right is their abiding aversion to the liberal center (Diggins, *Up from Communism*).

<sup>25</sup> Chambers, *Witness*, 4, 13; and Chambers, *Cold Friday*, 144, 183-93, 247.

<sup>26</sup> Drew University Special Collections (DUSC), Will Herberg Papers, Folder 182, Will Herberg, “Faith and Existence: An Existential Approach to Religion,” (lecture to Denver University Student Assembly, 19 January 1955), 1-2.

<sup>27</sup> Chambers, *Witness*, 4, 9, 11, 486.

<sup>28</sup> Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Possessed*, trans. Constance Garnett (Cherterton, South Carolina: BiblioBazaar, 2006).

<sup>29</sup> Chambers to Norton-Taylor, 14 September 1954, 229; Colm Brogan, “The Comfort of Cold Friday,” *National Review*, 29 December 1964, 1153; Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., “Whittaker Chambers and His Witness,” *Saturday Review*, 24 May 1952, 40; Rahv, “Sense and Nonsense,” 472; and Chambers, *Cold Friday*, 180, 209.

Thompson even drew biographical parallels between the two writers, noting that Chambers, similar to Dostoevsky, had been an atheistic socialist and revolutionary before having a moment of Christian awakening and turning decisively against his former faith. Chambers claimed to have learned more about communism from Dostoevsky's *The Possessed* than from entire libraries on Marxism. He kept a copy of this book with him during the Hiss trial and gave inscribed copies to friends.<sup>30</sup>

While Herberg was concerned primarily with the political implications of idolatry in the present, Chambers extended his analysis of faith back in time. Chambers believed in an inverse correlation between faith in God and scientific advance: each scientific discovery strengthened human confidence in itself and weakened reliance upon the Creator.<sup>31</sup> As a cumulative enterprise, science inevitably explained ever more aspects of existence, expanding its domain until finally encroaching on the human realm and crowding out all that was mysterious and divine in experience. As science progressed, human regard for the technological, empirical, and material increased while regard for the spiritual, transcendent, and human decreased. When scientific explanations spread to the human domain, said Chambers, individuals become objectified and those with Faith in Man then tend to manipulate humans as they would any other scientific objects. Because the Faith in Man infection spread with science, being a cumulative enterprise, Faith in Man was inherently expansive necessarily crowding out Faith in God with each advance.

Chambers saw this historical determinism working itself out in past epochs. Since he believed that Faith in God declined with the passage of time, the further into the past one looked, the more blessed the age. For Chambers, the Middle Ages was a superior era dominated by God-centered people possessed of childlike sweetness and vitality. Absent the infections of science, they sought their miracles and salvation through God, not in human artifices. The spatial centrality of their cathedrals stood as a testimony of their devotion to God and symbolized the spiritually centered lives they led.<sup>32</sup> But the Renaissance planted seeds of heresy that sprouted and flourished during the Enlightenment — the great turning point of history — when “the belief that man, by the aid of science, can achieve a perfection limited only by his mind” began to spread.<sup>33</sup> During the Enlightenment, this new faith “whose deity was reason, whose ritual was science, and whose high priests were the *philosophes*” had formed and become transnational. Enlightenment science did not exist independent of society but served as the all-encompassing ideal that determined the historical trajectory of all other realms.<sup>34</sup> After the expansion of Enlightenment thinking throughout the nineteenth century, said Chambers, the world enjoyed the “final human party” — the Edwardian Era (1900-1910) — the last stage of history in which humans could enjoy the benefits of science without having to face up to the consequences.<sup>35</sup>

---

<sup>30</sup> Craig Thompson, “The Whittaker Chambers I Know,” *Saturday Evening Post*, 15 November 1952, 121. Dostoyevsky was just one of many Europeans who influenced Chambers. In fact, so dominant were European writers in Chambers’ thinking that Arthur Schlesinger remarked that *Witness* had an “un-American intensity” about it (“Whittaker Chambers,” 9; and Rahv, “Sense and Nonsense,” 472). See also Chambers, *Cold Friday*, 163.

<sup>31</sup> Although Chambers did not refer to it as such, his ideas constituted a form of secularization theory which holds that as societies modernize and increase in education and technology, belief in the supernatural (in other words, that which falls outside the domain of scientific reasoning) declines. While most secularization theorists view secularization as the inevitable “outgrowing” of “the infantile illusions of religion” (see, for instance, Rodney Stark and William S. Bainbridge, *The Future of Religion* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985], 1), Chambers believed it a tragedy in which mechanized, de-personalized humans gave up the mystery and highest values of life for the meaninglessness of Faith in Man.

<sup>32</sup> Chambers, “The Sanity of St. Benedict,” *Commonweal*, 19 September 1952, 575-78; Chambers, “The Middle Ages,” *Life*, 7 April 1947, 67-84; Chambers, “Medieval Life,” *Life*, 26 May 1947, 65-84; and Chambers, *Witness*, 134.

<sup>33</sup> Chambers, “The Glory of Venice,” *Life*, 4 August 1947, 209-16; and Chambers, *Witness*, 9.

<sup>34</sup> Chambers, “The Age of Enlightenment,” *Life*, 15 September 1947, 75, 90; and Chambers, “The Devil,” 80-81.

<sup>35</sup> Chambers, “The Edwardians,” *Life*, 17 November 1947, 75, 92-98.

The internal contradictions of Faith in Man finally caught up with humanity after 1910, though, as modern age technology created more problems than it could solve.<sup>36</sup> In the twentieth century, “the sheer mass and complexity of historical error [was then] too great to be coped with by the mind in the form of good intentions.”<sup>37</sup> Similar to Henry Adams, Chambers saw that human power (represented by Adams’ dynamo) had outrun the control of ordering authority (represented by Adams’ Virgin).<sup>38</sup> In the modern age, said Chambers, Western civilization would see a final transformation from a traditional Christian culture to a secular, scientific culture.<sup>39</sup> Modern humans, holding science rather than God infallible, reduced everything beautiful and meaningful to chemical actions in the brain, thus destroying the transcendent dignity of the individual and making humans indifferent to the deaths of millions.<sup>40</sup> The “nightmare of modern life” would create a total denial of spirit causing a widespread view of humans as only “the most intelligent of animals.”<sup>41</sup> Once humans were reduced to animals, they would prove themselves “to be more beastly than any beast” as the genocidal actions of Hitler, Stalin, and other modern tyrants demonstrated.<sup>42</sup> The world was at mid-century, he believed, on the brink of the culmination of history — a worldwide revolution of which the First and Second World Wars were only the first shocks, presaging even greater destruction and a new dark age.<sup>43</sup>

Beyond this, many of Chambers’ conservative disciples ignored or distorted his metahistorical view of communism. They believed that the Godly West could win the Cold War while Chambers did not believe the West was godly, and he believed that the logic of history had pre-selected it to lose.<sup>44</sup> Chambers repeatedly tried to dispel the myth of a godly west vs. godless communism by claiming that the West was every bit as infected with “faith in man” philosophy as the Soviet Union.<sup>45</sup> “Though I hold Communism to be evil,” he said late in life, “I did not believe that it was simply stipulated that God was on the side of the West.” Indeed, he wrote to Buckley Jr.: “It is idle to talk about preventing the wreck of Western civilization. It is already a wreck from within.”<sup>46</sup> But even while accepting Chambers’ worldview, Buckley Jr. simultaneously opposed “any substitute for victory” in the Cold War, a victory that Chambers had declared impossible.<sup>47</sup>

---

<sup>36</sup> Foremost among these problems were the reconciliation of economic security with political liberty, and the atomic bomb (the threat of total human annihilation). Chambers, “Christmas 1945,” *Time*, 24 December 1945, 56; Chambers, “Problem of the Century,” *Time*, 24 February 1946, 98; Chambers, “Crossroads,” *Time*, 1 July 1946, 52-53; Chambers, “Missiles, Brains, and Mind,” *National Review*, 28 February 1959, 547; and Chambers, *Witness*, 8.

<sup>37</sup> Chambers, 17 August 1953, in Chambers, *Cold Friday*, 27.

<sup>38</sup> Henry Adams, *The Education of Henry Adams* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1918), 379-90.

<sup>39</sup> Chambers, *Cold Friday*, 92-93; and Chambers, *Witness*, 449.

<sup>40</sup> Chambers, “The Tragic Sense of Life,” *Time*, 28 April 1947, 104; Chambers, “Peace & Papacy,” *Time*, 16 August 1943, 60-62; Chambers, “The New Pictures: ‘Ninotchka,’” *Time*, 6 November 1939, 76; and Chambers, *Witness*, 769.

<sup>41</sup> Chambers, “The Sanity of St. Benedict,” 578.

<sup>42</sup> Chambers, *Cold Friday*, 147-53, 254.

<sup>43</sup> Chambers, *Witness*, 13, 17-19.

<sup>44</sup> Chambers, *Cold Friday*, 309; and Chambers, *Witness*, 25.

<sup>45</sup> See, for instance, James J. Farrell, *The Spirit of the Sixties: The Making of Postwar Radicalism* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 40; Norman Podhoretz, *Ex-Friends* (New York: Free Press, 1999), 70; and Lance Morrow, *Second Drafts of History: Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 2006), 140.

<sup>46</sup> Chambers, *Cold Friday*, 11, 46.

<sup>47</sup> “The Magazine’s Credenda,” *National Review*, 19 November 1955, 6. Others, such as Tanenhaus, see Chambers as out of step with conservatism because he was too moderate — an Eisenhower Republican. Chambers was a vocal supporter of the president while Buckley Jr. aimed to “read Dwight Eisenhower out of the conservative movement” (Tanenhaus, *Whittaker Chambers*, 487-88). While it is correct, as Tanenhaus says, that Chambers never fit in comfortably on the right, this was not due to his moderation but because his tragic outlook contradicted the fundamental assumptions of the conservatives. He voted for Eisenhower for strategic and pragmatic reasons not because Eisenhower shared his ideology or outlook. Conservative anti-communism and libertarianism were



Despite Chambers' repeated claims, his followers never accepted that not only did Faith in Man increase with time but also that communism was the inevitable culmination of this historical process. Preferring belligerence to theoretical consistency, conservatives at the definitive organ of conservative thought — *National Review* — ignored Chambers' view that if God did not exist, it followed that communism or "some suitable variant of it" was right and since secularism was spreading with history, so was communism.<sup>48</sup> "The basic view of reality is much the same" between the communist and scientist, Chambers maintained, for both saw the world in terms of greater control: one in the material realm, and one in the human realm. Ultimately, the tool of social control — the state — would expand with historical inertia until an omniscient state would come to dominate all human activity; this, by definition, would be communist world control. "The machine ha[d] made the economy socialistic," and it would only become more so as the machine of history continued on its inevitable course.<sup>49</sup> Awaiting modern Americans, then, was an irresolvable crisis: the moment when one historical epoch would inevitably give way to another through violent change. Chambers' conservative followers understood "crisis" to mean a moment of decision: a crucial moment when the West would need to marshal its strength to confront and stem the tide of communist advance.<sup>50</sup>

Those who cited Chambers as a major inspiration and formative influence on their anti-communist thinking included such conservative luminaries as William F. Buckley Jr., William Rusher, Barry Goldwater, and Ralph De Toledano.<sup>51</sup> But most important in specifically developing the conservative strategy of rollback was James Burnham — a friend of Chambers, an ex-communist, and the designated foreign policy theorist at *National Review*.<sup>52</sup> Partially because of Chambers' influence, Burnham conceived of the world in bi-polar terms in which communism, a monolithic entity, was expanding with the momentum of history towards world domination.<sup>53</sup> Through Chambers, Burnham came to view liberals

---

premised on the ability of free individuals to direct their lives and change the course of history. Chambers, on the other hand, saw the individual as fated, even if free, to struggle like Sisyphus against the inevitable course of history.

<sup>48</sup> Chambers, *Cold Friday*, 69.

<sup>49</sup> Chambers to Willi Schlamm, September 1954, in Chambers, *Cold Friday*, 233; Chambers to Buckley Jr., September 1954, *Cold Friday*, 238. "Capitalism, whenever it seeks to become conservative in any quarter, at once settles into mere reaction — that is, a mere brake on the wheel, a brake that does not hold because the logic of the wheel [history] is to turn" (Chambers to Buckley Jr., 24 December 1958, in *Odyssey of a Friend*, 231). The machine metaphor was not unique to Chambers; his friend and fellow ex-communist Arthur Koestler used it previously in works such as *Darkness at Noon* (New York: Random House, 1941).

<sup>50</sup> Burnham advocated this in his book *Containment or Liberation?*

<sup>51</sup> For the influence of *Witness* on Goldwater and Rusher, see: William Rusher, "The Draft Goldwater Drive: A Progress Report," *National Review*, 10 September 1963, 185-87; Rusher, *The Rise of the Right* (New York: Morrow, 1984), 324-28; Barry Goldwater, *The Conscience of a Conservative* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007 [1960]), x; and Rusher, "Publisher's Statement," *National Review*, 27 July 1957. See also Rick Perlstein's recent biography of Goldwater, *Before the Storm: Barry Goldwater and the Unmaking of the American Consensus* (New York: Hill & Wang, 2001). For his influence on Nixon, see Richard M. Nixon, "Plea for an Anti-Communist Faith," *The Saturday Review*, 24 May 1952, 12-13. Conservative columnist Robert Novak has also said that *Witness*, which he read while in the service in 1953, had the greatest impact on him of any book he ever read. Not only was it the "greatest spur to [his] thinking" but he added that he was "not alone" in this, that over the years he had found numerous politicians, pundits, and intellectuals "who had been alarmed, entranced, and always inspired by *Witness*" (Robert Novak, C-Span interview, "Writing Life: Robert Novak," 22 July 2007; and Novak, *The Prince of Darkness: 50 Years of Political Reporting in Washington* [New York: Crown, 2007], 20).

<sup>52</sup> Burnham outlined the strategy in: "The Policy of Liberation," *American Mercury*, January 1953, 3-15; "Liberation: What Next?" *National Review*, 19 January 1957, 59-62; and most fully in his book *Containment or Liberation?*

<sup>53</sup> For the impact of Chambers on Burnham's strategic thinking, see Daniel Kelly, *James Burnham and the Struggle for the World: A Life* (Wilmington: ISI Press, 2002); and Chambers to Buckley, 10 March 1957, 136-37.

as adherents of the same underlying Faith in Man delusion that motivated communists. Similar to Chambers, Burnham believed that both communism and liberalism would eventually put humans into chains of bondage through ever-expanding systems of government compulsion, but unlike Chambers, he believed that conservatives — those set in opposition to Faith in Man — had a crucial role in saving the West, for to conservatives fell the task of fighting Faith in Man both at home and abroad.<sup>54</sup>

These figures later borrowed selectively from Chambers' theory of history to challenge containment on the grounds that the logic of history moved in the direction of Soviet advance. Communism, they would claim, was expansionist by nature and growing stronger with time. This led them to the belief that the threat had to be destroyed before it spread any further: it had to be preempted by decisive, immediate action. This went against Chambers' view that historical laws had already foreordained the outcome of the modern era. Those conservatives at *National Review*, who defined conservatism at the time, advocated immediate action against what Chambers had warned as the "growing threat" of communism but failed to acknowledge that, in Chambers' view, all such action against communism was ultimately futile. Conservative use of Chambers' historical determinism to justify the anti-determinist rollback policy created a paradox between the determinism of Chambers and the reality and efficacy of human will which lay at the heart of their limited-government ideals.

While conservatives misapplied Chambers' historical theory, his political opponents subjected it to critical examination. Conservatives, preoccupied with taking the high ground in the Cold War, were more apt to latch onto the views of Chambers as justification for that position, while liberals, more concerned with avoiding the absolutist mentality that they believed characterized totalitarians, were more apt to criticize it. Many liberals believed that, similar to Marx, Chambers erred in viewing history in such simplistic terms: faith worked no better for explaining the entirety of historical movement than did class warfare. A crude reductionism that saw all historical variables as a function of one underlying principle was inadequate to explain the infinite complexity of the totality of human events. If the modern world came down to a mere contest between evil Faith in Man and good faith in God, then how was one to explain the numerous unbelievers fighting against Soviet communism and the numerous believers who acquiesced? The anti-communist, atheist philosopher Sidney Hook, appreciated Chambers' courage and sided with him in the Hiss Trial but ultimately rejected the theoretical basis for Chambers' anti-communism because it recklessly lumped all unbelievers together, whatever their particular political position. Similar to literary critic and *Partisan Review* contributor Irving Howe, Hook pointed out that both religious and unreligious persons had spoken out against tyranny throughout history, and faith in God appeared to have no bearing on one's anti-communism in practice.<sup>55</sup> Religious people, said Hook and Howe, were no more likely to be anti-communist than secular people.

---

<sup>54</sup> If his fellow conservatives misinterpreted Chambers' theory of history, later scholars have ignored it altogether. Recent writers have attempted to revive Chambers' reputation as an important thinker but none has yet addressed the continuing centrality of historical determinism to his thought and the ways that this formed the backbone of his anti-communist philosophy. Sam Tanenhaus' excellent biography, although definitive of Chambers' life, is not an interpretive historical study, but a standard chronological account which focuses primarily on the Hiss Case. Hence, Tanenhaus does not fully engage Chambers' thought or his role in shaping the ideas of the postwar right (see Tanenhaus, *Whittaker Chambers*). Art critic Hilton Kramer claims that Chambers has been denied his proper literary standing because of his role in the Hiss case (Kramer, *The Twilight of the Intellectuals: Culture and Politics in the Cold War Era* [Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1999]). While the attempts of each of these historians to expand scholarly interest in Chambers as an intellectual has had the salutary effect of persuading many to look beyond Chambers the witness to recognize Chambers the writer, they confine their studies to his literary gifts while largely ignoring the substance, implications, and context of what he was writing.

<sup>55</sup> Sidney Hook, "The Faiths of Whittaker Chambers," *New York Times*, 25 May 1952; and Irving Howe, "God, Man & Stalin," *Nation*, 24 May 1952, 503. Many "left-intellectuals" said Howe, "fought a minority battle against Stalinism at a time when both [Chambers] and Hiss were at the service of Yagoda and Yezhov."

*Partisan Review* editor William Phillips expressed similar sentiments. He denied Chambers' assertion that "religious faith [was] the only force genuinely opposed to Communism" since the struggle against communism both at home and abroad had "been effectively carried on by many organizations and dedicated individuals whose primary appeal has not been as representatives of established religion." He, like Hook, pointed to the dedicated anti-communist work of such notable agnostics as John Dewey, Max Eastman, and Arthur Koestler to refute Chambers' God vs. Man dichotomy.<sup>56</sup> Thus, the historical thesis Chambers put forward seemed to have been falsified by history.

Liberal historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr. criticized Chambers on slightly different grounds. Schlesinger saw value in Chambers' ideas to the degree that one could equate Faith in Man and human hubris, but he agreed with other liberals in his view that conservatives and Christians were just as likely to be seduced by overweening pride as were liberals or atheists. Schlesinger conceded that Faith in Man may indeed have been the problem of the modern age, but he also believed that Faith in God was not necessarily the solution.<sup>57</sup>

Chambers responded by writing that his critics simply did not understand the starting point of communism. In connecting communism to Faith in Man (which he, in turn, connected to materialism), Chambers claimed that he had only reiterated what Marx and Engels themselves had taught: their whole system rested on the materialist foundation they learned from Ludwig Feuerbach, Marx's atheist mentor. Chambers' critics could point to particular atheist anti-communists, but this did not change the fact that materialism remained the underlying philosophy upon which communism was based. Marx had asserted that materialist premises led to communist conclusions, and Chambers simply agreed with him.<sup>58</sup>

But this rebuttal did not address the main point of his critics. Hook, Phillips, Howe, and Schlesinger had not claimed that Chambers misunderstood Marx nor that Marxism demanded materialism. What they had challenged was the idea that rejecting faith in God necessarily led one to embrace Marxism and that this simple view could explain the totality of history. True, all committed Marxists were materialists, but it did not logically follow that all committed materialists were Marxists. Chambers had answered his critics by re-asserting the former but his theory implied the latter.

Even as liberals rejected the categories upon which Chambers' historical theory rested, they also rejected his determinism. Chambers' historical view had not only conceded defeat to totalitarianism, but, even worse, it marginalized the significance of individuals and their moral agency. Because history moved according to predetermined laws, Chambers said, people were like "flies clinging to the walls of a cyclotron" — their actions were largely determined by historical laws and could not change their eventual fate.<sup>59</sup> When playwright Sol Stein wanted to dramatize *Witness* for the theatre, Chambers refused to allow the production on the grounds that Stein saw the story as one of persons instead of forces.<sup>60</sup> In the end, individual actions were irrelevant and futile, as humans acted only within the constraints of the particular faith that dominated their epoch.<sup>61</sup> For Chambers, the march of history was analogous to a machine and individuals were mere cogs within it.

According to his HUAC testimony, Chambers never even begrudged Alger Hiss his actions since Hiss was, like all humans, "caught in the tragedy of history."<sup>62</sup> Both he and Hiss were justified in their actions, he said, because tragedy did not arise from a conflict between right and wrong but from human

---

<sup>56</sup> William Phillips, "In and Out of the Underground: The Confessions of Whittaker Chambers," *American Mercury*, June 1952, 97.

<sup>57</sup> Schlesinger, "Whittaker Chambers and His Witness," 40-41.

<sup>58</sup> Chambers, *Cold Friday*, 206.

<sup>59</sup> Chambers to Ralph and Nora de Toledano, 2 January 1956, *Notes from the Underground*, 209.

<sup>60</sup> Chambers to de Toledano, 27 December 1955, 202.

<sup>61</sup> Chambers, *Cold Friday*, 38.

<sup>62</sup> For this quote and a report of the trial, see "Burden of Proof," *Time*, 6 September 1948, 17.

suffering as the forces of history played out.<sup>63</sup> In the 1950s, he even lamented Russia's program of de-Stalinization for fear that it would lead to a belief that Stalin, rather than Faith in Man, was responsible for Soviet totalitarian atrocities (a position that James Burnham also adopted).<sup>64</sup> If, indeed, Marx had trivialized the value of individuals and their choices as incidental to the material forces of history (as Buckley Jr. and Herberg would claim) had not Chambers done the same?

Since such a view directly contradicted the premise of free will that underlay many conservative political convictions, the leaders on the Right once again drew selectively from the Chambers in support of their policies. Viewing communism as expansive by nature allowed them to advocate rollback, but viewing individual will as ultimately insignificant would have trivialized the very foundation of their Lockean rationale for limited government. Anti-statists like Buckley Jr. justified a Christian individualism on the grounds that state expansion infringed upon God-given will, but never criticized Chambers for trivializing this theological core upon which their religious anti-statism rested.<sup>65</sup> Chambers based his whole theory on determinism, the uselessness of individual decision and the inevitability of defeat. Yet, conservatives who drew on his legacy based their domestic and foreign policies on the reality of individual will and the possibility of victory. Chambers ridiculed Burnham's "immortal will to win" as naïve, for, in the West, this "will [did] not exist."<sup>66</sup> Conservatives ignored the fact that Chambers' actual ideas worked contrary to some of their most cherished assumptions, but they needed both Chambers' historical determinism and freedom of the will to mobilize a wide range of intellectuals to their side and build up the movement. Theoretical consistency would have forced them to sacrifice one or the other.

Even if conservatives would not criticize or fully accept the implications of Chambers' historical determinism, his ideological opponents would. According to *Partisan Review* editor Phillip Rahv, one had to preserve the domain of free will to hold persons accountable for their actions. Chambers left no room for this; his theory enthroned doctrines (the two brands of faith) and trivialized individual decisions. Rahv believed that communist ideals alone could not account "for the behavior of real live Communists" any more or less "than the original idea of Christianity [could] account for the behavior of real, live Christians." For Rahv, ideas did not exist independently of people who believed in and acted upon them. Neither communists nor Christians were good or evil by virtue of the doctrine they espoused, as Chambers implied, but by the good or evil they did. One would be foolish to try to "deduce the practices of the Holy Inquisition from the Sermon on the Mount," said Rahv, and by marginalizing the individual in his historical schema Chambers had "absolved the very worst men of responsibility for their crimes in order all the more justifiably to implicate the values and ideas they profess."<sup>67</sup>

Left-wing journalist Irving Howe agreed. In Chambers' religious view of history, societies were judged according to the faith they upheld, but we should judge a society instead "according to its actual treatment of men."<sup>68</sup> In Chambers' view, said Howe, "Voltaire, Jefferson, Lenin, Roosevelt, Hitler, Stalin" were all equally responsible for the modern crisis, for they were all equally "indifferent to God."<sup>69</sup> In his zeal to implicate Faith in Man for human misery, Chambers had seemingly made individuals morally neutral — mere pawns in the game of independent historical forces.

<sup>63</sup> Chambers to de Toledano, 27 December 1955, 201.

<sup>64</sup> Chambers, "The End of A Dark Age Ushers in New Dangers," *Life*, 30 April 1956, 148-68; and Burnham, "The Third World War," *National Review*, 11 April 1956, 24.

<sup>65</sup> Buckley Jr., *Overdrive: A Personal Documentary* (New York: Doubleday, 1983), 217; and Buckley Jr., *Up From Liberalism* (New York: Bantam, 1968 [1959]), 176.

<sup>66</sup> Chambers to Buckley Jr., 23 January 1957, *Odyssey*, 128.

<sup>67</sup> Rahv, "Sense and Nonsense," 476-77.

<sup>68</sup> Howe, "God, Man & Stalin," 502-503.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 503-504.

Chambers' dichotomous view of history led him and other conservatives to reject the liberal foreign policy strategy of containment. Formulated by diplomat George Kennan in the famous "long telegram" of 1947 (and later the "X article" published in *Foreign Affairs*), containment proposed to counteract Soviet aggression by applying counter-pressure at strategic and constantly shifting points of engagement. But Kennan's containment rested upon the assumption that, although Soviet communism was expansionist, it was also a complex phenomenon combining cultural, historical, economic, and national-interest considerations with Marxist ideology.<sup>70</sup> Kennan rejected the concept of containment when countries were "described in terms that refer to some vague 'Communism' in general and do not specify what particular Communism is envisaged."<sup>71</sup> For Chambers, there was only one communism — the fully developed Faith in Man ideal that existed independently of national, cultural, and economic factors. Indeed, this was the very idea that determined history. For Kennan, *Communisms* were many, but for Chambers communism was monolithic: the universal, logical endpoint for any society that embraced Faith in Man. This view rendered trivial the differences among the particular manifestations of communism, whether in Russia, China, Cuba, or Vietnam.<sup>72</sup>

Kennan's realist view held that the Soviets would act according to a mix of self-interest and ideological considerations, but to Chambers, the logic of history drove communism inexorably outward as Faith in Man expanded its domain. Thus, the Soviets were bent on world conquest whether they knew it or not — the individual decisions and rational choices of leaders and diplomats did not matter. The communist nations, in spite of their differences, were all of one mind, and the activities of any communist nation were, by nature, connected to that of all others. Whereas Chambers believed that communism acted with a force of its own — the force of history — Kennan's containment saw communist countries as autonomous strategic threats independent of their ideology.<sup>73</sup>

Their differing views led Chambers and Kennan to make different predictions. Chambers saw the strength of communism winning out over all ideological competitors, while Kennan believed that, on the contrary, the Soviet Union would buckle under the weight of its own contradictions. To Kennan, containment would keep the Soviets at bay until their ideology imploded, but in Chambers' mind, the West would collapse after Faith in Man had rotted civilization from within. For Chambers, it was not a matter of *if* the West would fall to communism, but only a matter of *when*, for communism posed a threat that was inevitable and implacable.<sup>74</sup> Liberals who adhered to containment, said Chambers, misunderstood the nature of totalitarianism, and this misunderstanding was reflected in their mistaken foreign policy.<sup>75</sup>

---

<sup>70</sup> George F. Kennan, "The Sources of Soviet Conduct," *Foreign Affairs*, July 1947. Note that Kennan's article was entitled "The Sources of Soviet Conduct," not "The Sources of Communist Conduct." In Kennan's mind (but not in Chambers'), this made a significant difference for policy.

<sup>71</sup> Kennan, *Memoirs 1925-1950* (Boston: Little, Brown, & Co., 1967), 366-67.

<sup>72</sup> Chambers to Buckley Jr., 16 April 1957, *Odyssey*, 149-50; Chambers to Buckley Jr., 21 March 1957 and 6 November 1956, *Odyssey*, 119-20; and Chambers, "Some Untimely Jottings," *National Review*, 27 September 1958, 200; Chambers, *Cold Friday*, 289-92, 297.

<sup>73</sup> This view of communism led Chambers to see Mao Zedong as necessarily "a Moscow-directed Chinese Communist," while Kennan (and later Chambers' best politician-friend, Richard Nixon) saw Mao as a man with interests and nationalist goals that could set him at odds with the Soviets (Thompson, 116).

<sup>74</sup> Chambers, "To Temporize is Death," 470.

<sup>75</sup> For more on Kennan's vision of the Cold War, particularly as it relates to the Hiss Case, see Robert L. Beisner, "SHAFR Presidential Address: The Secretary, the Spy, and the Sage: Dean Acheson, Alger Hiss, and George Kennan," *Diplomatic History* 27, 1 (January 2003): 1-14. In this article, Beisner teases out the complexity of the Acheson-Kennan relationship and revisits the unwarranted historical stereotypes attached to these men. For more on divergent approaches to the Cold War more generally, see John Lewis Gaddis, *The Cold War: A New History* (New York: Penguin, 2005).

Although other conservatives never found a way out of the will-versus-necessity contradiction in Chambers' historical determinism, Chambers found his own solution by turning to the then-popular philosophy of existentialism.<sup>76</sup> As early as his days writing for *Time* in the 1940s, Chambers had begun peppering his prose with references to such existentialist thinkers as Albert Camus, Karl Barth, Paul Tillich, and Soren Kierkegaard.<sup>77</sup> He also found a kindred spirit in neo-orthodox theologian Reinhold Niebuhr because of the existentialist tones in Niebuhr's writings in the 1940s.<sup>78</sup>

Camus in particular helped Chambers to reconcile the struggle with determinism. In the *Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus had used the tragic Greek hero to illustrate the necessity of human striving in the face of certain defeat. Chambers claimed that, like Sisyphus, he struggled not because he could alter the outcome of history, but because the struggle justified itself — it was its own end. By combining Christianity with existentialism, Chambers came to believe that even if the redemption of society was futile, one could still find personal redemption by defying fate. The West was beyond salvation, but the individual was not, and Chambers could find meaning and personal ennoblement in that struggle against communism by giving his witness for Faith in God and against Faith in Man.<sup>79</sup>

Chambers often compared his struggle against communism to Jonah's situation in the Old Testament. Like Chambers, Jonah had suffered because of his transgressions, but found personal redemption by bearing witness to those whose destruction was already pre-ordained. The salvation of Nineveh was not in question in the Old Testament story, but Jonah's own personal salvation was. Chambers believed that his struggle might redeem him from his previous sins against God (his years in communism) even if his efforts to fight communism would do nothing to alter the fate of the West.<sup>80</sup>

Chambers not only struggled against fate by fighting communism, he also did so through personal rejection of aspects of modern life. Even if he realized one could not defeat the inevitable advance of "the machine," one could at least retreat from it and thus forestall having to face its manifestations. If modernity and urbanization were the demographic, technological, and economic harbingers of the inevitable advance of communism, then Chambers could at least remove himself physically from its consequences: he did this by purchasing a Maryland farm and living out his days in a pre-modern agricultural setting. His farm was both a refuge from "the machine" and the Faith in Man disposition from which it sprung.<sup>81</sup>

Because farming represented pre-modernity, it became something of a spiritual pursuit for Chambers. He often spoke of a trilateral relationship between God, man, and soil that made his farming

<sup>76</sup> Chambers' existentialism was noted by George Cotkin in his book *Existential America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 57-78. Cotkin shows that the earliest American connections with European existentialism, especially Kierkegaard, influenced anti-communist thinking both among liberals (such as Arthur Schlesinger Jr.) and conservatives (such as Chambers).

<sup>77</sup> Chambers to Buckley Jr., 3 January 1959, *Odyssey*, 233; Chambers to de Toledano, 23 May 1951, 41; Chambers, *Cold Friday*, 325; and Chambers, *Witness*, 83, 506; Chambers to Norton-Taylor, 22 February 1953, 17-18; Chambers to Norton-Taylor, 6 March 1953, 18-20; and Chambers to Norton-Taylor, 17 March 1953, 22. See also Chambers, *Cold Friday*, 194-95, 214, and 280.

<sup>78</sup> Chambers, "Faith for a Lenten Age," *Time*, 8 March 1948, 70-79. Niebuhr would later write Chambers to congratulate him on the article and approve of its content (Chambers, *Witness*, 505-507).

<sup>79</sup> Chambers to de Toledano, 23 May 1951, 41; Chambers to de Toledano, 27 July 1951, 45; Chambers to Buckley Jr., 9 April 1961, *Odyssey*, 295; Chambers to Buckley Jr., 14 August 1958, *Odyssey*, 210-11; Chambers to Buckley Jr., 5 August 1954, *Odyssey*, 43; Chambers, *Cold Friday*, 46; and Chambers, *Witness*, 5, 506, 763.

<sup>80</sup> "Jonah," in Chambers, *Cold Friday*, 265-68. *Witness*, Chambers said, was the effort of a man to hurl himself against the rationalism which must destroy the world and seems to be on the point of doing so. It was a lunge against communism chiefly as the logical, the inevitable epitome of that rationalism [italics in original] (Chambers to Ralph and Nora de Toledano, 31 December 1955, 204-205).

<sup>81</sup> Chambers, *Witness*, 277, 519.

more than a hobby or source of income, but a ritual defiance of the Faith in Man characteristic of the machine age.<sup>82</sup> Chambers also refused to have a telephone or electrical power in his home (until late in life when his editor insisted) because electricity, the physical force by which the modern age operated, symbolized and worked in tandem with the spiritual force that he believed would enslave the world. In his daily habits as well as his chosen vocation, Chambers made subtle protests against Faith in Man.<sup>83</sup>

Similar to Henry Adams, Chambers also saw symbolic resistance to modern life in ancient structures. On a trip to Europe, he contemplated medieval castles as great citadels standing against the forces of modernity. This paralleled Adams's reflections on the Abbey Church of Mont Saint-Michel. As a witness against modernity, Chambers saw in these ancient castles, a symbol of his own life. He also saw the same in a sturdy outcropping of stone on his farm that he named "Cold Friday." This formidable rock had preceded Chambers' coming by thousands of years and would continue to defy the march of history for centuries to come, just as his witness would remain in defiance of modernity long after he had left the earth.<sup>84</sup>

In such existential resistance, Chambers had found a way out of the paradox of choice and necessity, but other conservatives, such as Buckley Jr. and Reagan, never did. They accepted Chambers' view that communism was expansionist by nature but ignored his conclusions about the final outcome: they continued to believe that the Cold War struggle could redeem the world. Buckley Jr. often argued, like Chambers, that "faith in man" advanced along with "machine civilization," but he also believed that the West could triumph given sufficient spiritual will and the adequate application of military force.<sup>85</sup>

Perhaps, in the end, Chambers was merely posturing: playing the role of prophet of doom for dramatic effect. As biographer Sam Tanenhaus has shown, Chambers was not above such theatrics.<sup>86</sup> He may have believed deep inside, with his followers, that victory over communism was possible, but that talk of "inevitability" would create a sense of urgency that would catalyze counterrevolutionary forces into action. Nothing in his writings, however, would indicate that this was the case. At his most optimistic, he advocated policies that might have helped forestall the advance of communism but remained critical of anyone who spoke of victory. For Chambers, apocalypse was nigh, while, for his followers, the threat of apocalypse he presented provided them with an emotional rallying point for a combative Cold War foreign policy.<sup>87</sup> At any rate, Chambers fit into no binary molds — out of place with the left, of course, but also in the right-wing movement with which he is historically identified.

---

<sup>82</sup> Chambers to Schlamm, 1954, 54-60; and Chambers, *Cold Friday*, 3-5.

<sup>83</sup> Chambers to Ralph and Nora de Toledano, 1 February 1950, 11-12; Chambers to de Toledano, 6 July 1950, 27; and Thompson, 118.

<sup>84</sup> Chambers, *Cold Friday*, 14, 284; Chambers, *Witness*, 517; and Thompson, 116.

<sup>85</sup> See, for instance, Buckley Jr., "India and the Perishing West," *National Review*, 21 December 1955, 6.

<sup>86</sup> Tanenhaus, *Whittaker Chambers*, 301, 307.

<sup>87</sup> Chambers' theory looks particularly mistaken in the twenty-first century as Western nations have gone to war not with a "Godless" foe, but with groups whose very religious faith drives much of their animus towards the West. Would Chambers have taken the side of radical Islam in its war against the West because many of them hailed from pre-modern, god-centered societies? Probably not, and yet his theory would have allowed no other position.