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The Great Liberal Death Wish

Malcolm Muggeridge

Muggeridge was one of the few western journalists to recognize the evil of Soviet Communism when most western thinkers were still taken in by the utopian promises of Marxism. For his honest reporting on the Stalinist show trials he lost his job and was blacklisted for a time. He never lost his critical touch.

The Great Liberal Death Wish" is a subject that I've given a lot of thought to and have written about, and it would be easy for me to read to you a long piece that I've written on the subject. But somehow in the atmosphere of this delightful college, I want to have a shot at just talking about this notion of the great liberal death wish as it has arisen in my life, as I've seen it, and the deductions I've made from it. I should also plead guilty to being responsible for the general heading of these lectures, namely, "The Humane Holocaust: The Auschwitz Formula. "

Later on I want to say something about all this, showing how this humane holocaust, this dreadful slaughter that began with 50 million babies last year, will undoubtedly be extended to the senile old and the mentally afflicted and mongoloid children, and so on, because of the large amount of money that maintaining them costs. It is all the more ironical when one thinks about the holocaust western audiences, and the German population in particular, have been shuddering over, as it has been presented on their TV and cinema screens. Note this compassionate or humane holocaust, if, as I fear, it gains momentum, will quite put that other in the shade. And, as I shall try to explain, what is even more ironical, the actual considerations that led to the German holocaust were not, as is commonly suggested, due to Nazi terrorism, but were based upon the sort of legislation that advocates of euthanasia, or "mercy killing," in this country and in western Europe, are trying to get enacted. It's not true that the German holocaust was simply a war crime, as it was judged to be at Nuremberg. In point of fact, it was based upon a perfectly coherent, legally enacted decree approved and operated by the German medical profession before the Nazis took over power. In other words, from the point of view of the Guinness Book of Records you can say that in our mad world it takes about thirty years to transform a war crime into a compassionate act.

But I'm going to deal with that later. I want first of all to look at this question of the great liberal death wish. And I was very delighted that you should have got here for this CCA program the film on Dostoevsky for which I did the commentary, because his novel *The Devils*[1] is the most extraordinary piece of prophecy about this great liberal death wish. All the characters in it, the circumstances of it, irresistibly recall what we mean by the great liberal death wish. You cannot imagine what a strange experience it was doing that filming in the USSR. I quoted extensively from the speech that Dostoevsky delivered when the Pushkin Memorial was unveiled in Moscow, and his words were considered to be, in terms of then current ideologies, about the most reactionary words ever spoken. They amounted to a tremendous onslaught on this very thing that we're talking about, this great liberal death wish, as it existed in Russia in the latter part of the last century. The characters in the book match very well the cast of the liberal death wish in our society and in our time. You even have the

interesting fact that the old liberal, Stephan Trofimovich Verkovensky, who is a sort of male impersonator of Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt, with all the sentimental notions that go therewith, is the father of Peter Verkovensky, a Baader Meinhof character, based on a Russian nihilist of Dostoevsky's time, Sergey Nechayef. To me, it's one of the most extraordinary pieces of modern prophecy that has ever been. Especially when Peter Verkovensky says, as he does, that what we need are a few generations of debauchery - debauchery at its most vicious and most horrible - followed by a little sweet bloodletting, and then the turmoil will begin. I put it to you that this bears a rather uneasy resemblance to the sort of thing that is happening at this moment in the western world.

Now I want to throw my mind back to my childhood, to the sitting room in the little suburban house in south London where I grew up. On Saturday evenings my father and his cronies would assemble there, and they would plan together the downfall of the capitalist system and the replacement of it by one which was just and humane and egalitarian and peaceable, etc. These were my first memories of a serious conversation about our circumstances in the world. I used to hide in a big chair and hope not to be noticed, because I was so interested. And I accepted completely the views of these good men, that once they were able to shape the world as they wanted it to be, they would create a perfect state of affairs in which peace would reign, prosperity would expand, men would be brotherly, and considerate, and there would be no exploitation of man by man, nor any ruthless oppression of individuals. And I firmly believed that, once their plans were fulfilled, we would realize an idyllic state of affairs of such a nature. They were good men, they were honest men, they were sincere men. Unlike their prototypes on the continent of Europe, they were men from the chapels. It was a sort of spillover from the practice of nonconformist Christianity, not a brutal ideology, and I was entirely convinced that such a brotherly, contented, loving society would come to pass once they were able to establish themselves in power.

My father used to speak a lot at open air meetings, and when I was very small I used to follow him around because I adored him, as I still do. He was a very wonderful and good man. He'd had a very harsh upbringing himself, and this was his dream of how you could transform human society so that human beings, instead of maltreating one another and exploiting one another, would be like brothers. I remember he used to make quite good jokes at these outdoor meetings when we had set up our little platform, and a few small children and one or two passers-by had gathered briefly to listen. One joke I particularly appreciated and used to wait for even though I had heard a hundred times ran like this: "Well ladies and gentlemen," my father would begin, "you tell me one thing. Why is it that it is his majesty's navy and his majesty's stationery office and his majesty's customs but it's the national debt? Why isn't the debt his majesty's?" It always brought the house down.

Such was my baptism into the notion of a kingdom of Heaven on earth, into what I was going to understand ultimately to be the great liberal death wish. Inevitably, my father's heroes were the great intellectuals of the time, who banded themselves together in what was called the Fabian Society, of which he was a member - a very active member. For instance, Bernard Shaw, H. G. Wells, Harold Laski, people of that sort. All the leftist elite, like Sydney - and Beatrice Webb, belonged to this Fabian Society, and in my father's eyes they were princes among men. I accepted his judgment.

Once I had a slight shock when he took me to a meeting of the Fabian Society where H. G. Wells was speaking, and I can remember vividly his high squeaky voice as he said - and it stuck in my mind long afterward - "We haven't got time to read the Bible. We haven't got time to read the history of this obscure nomadic tribe in the Middle East." Subsequently, when I learned of the things that Wells had got time for, the observation broke upon me in all its richness.

Anyway, that for me was how my impressions of life began. I was sent to Cambridge University, which of course in those days consisted very largely of boys from what we call public schools, and you call private schools. Altogether, it was for me a quite different sort of

milieu, where the word socialist in those days - this was in 1920 when I went to Cambridge at 17 - was almost unknown. We who had been to a government secondary school and then to Cambridge were regarded as an extraordinary and rather distasteful phenomenon. But my views about how the world was going to be made better remained firmly entrenched in the talk of my father and his cronies. Of course, in the meantime had come the First World War, to be followed by an almost insane outburst of expectations that henceforth peace would prevail in the world, that we would have a League of Nations to ensure that there would be no more wars, and gradually everybody would get more prosperous and everything would be better and better. That rather lugubrious figure Woodrow Wilson arrived on the scene, to be treated with the utmost veneration. I can see him now, lantern-jawed, wearing his tall hat - somehow for me he didn't fill the bill of a knight in shining armor who was going to lead us to everlasting peace. Somehow the flavor of Princeton about him detracted from that picture, but still I accepted him as an awesome figure.

My time at Cambridge was a rather desolate time. I never much enjoyed being educated, and have continued to believe that education is a rather overrated experience. Perhaps this isn't the most suitable place in the world to say that, but such is my opinion. I think that it is part of the liberal dream that somehow or other - and it was certainly my father's view - people, in becoming educated, instead of on Sundays racing their dogs or studying racing forms, or anything like that, would take to singing madrigals or reading Paradise Lost aloud. This is another dream that didn't quite come true.

Anyway, from Cambridge I went off to India, to teach at a Christian college there, and I must say it was an extremely agreeable experience. The college was in a remote part of what was then Travancore, but is now Kerala. It was not one of the missionary colleges, but associated with the indigenous Syrian Church, which you may know is a very ancient church, dating back to the fourth century, and now there are a million or more Syrian Christians. In its way it was quite an idyllic existence, but of course one came up against naked power for the first time. I had never thought of power before as something separate from the rest of life. But in India, under the British raj, with a relatively few white men ruling over three or four hundred million Indians, I came face to face with power unrelated to elections or any other representative device in the great liberal dream that became the great liberal death wish. However, it was a pleasant time, and of course the Indian nationalist movement was beginning, and Gandhi came to the college where I was teaching. This extraordinary little gargoyle of a man appeared, and held forth, and everybody got tremendously excited, and shouted against Imperialism, and the Empire in which at that time the great majority of the British people firmly believed, and which they thought would continue forever. If you ventured to say, as I did on the boat going to India, that it might come to an end before long, they laughed you to scorn, being firmly convinced that God had decided that the British should rule over a quarter of the world, and that nothing could ever change this state of affairs. Which again opened up a new vista about what this business of power signified, and how it worked, not as a theory, but in practice. We used to boast in those days that we had an Empire on which the sun never set, and now we have a commonwealth on which it never rises, and I can't quite say which concept strikes me as being the more derisory.

That was India, and then I came back to England and for a time taught in an elementary school in Birmingham, and married my wife Kitty. (I wish she were here today because she's very nice. We've been married now for 51 years, so I am entitled to speak well of her.) She was the niece of Beatrice and Sydney Webb, so it was like marrying into a sort of aristocracy of the Left. After our wedding, we went off to Egypt, where I taught at the University of Cairo, and it was there that the dreadful infection of journalism got into my system. Turning aside from the honorable occupation of teaching, I started writing articles about the wrongs of the Egyptian people, how they were clamoring, and rightly so, for a democratic setup, and how they would never be satisfied with less than one man one vote and all that went therewith. I never heard any Egyptian say that this was his position, but I used to watch those old pashas in Groppi's cafe' smoking their hubble-bubble pipes, and imagined that under their tabooshes was a strong feeling that they would never for an instant countenance anything less than full representative government. That at least was what I wrote in my articles, and they went flying

over to England, and, like homing pigeons, in through the windows of the Guardian office in Manchester, at that time a high citadel of liberalism. That was where the truth was being expounded, that was where enlightenment reigned. In due course I was asked to join the editorial staff of the Guardian, which to me was a most marvelous thing. I may say that the work of teaching at Cairo University was not an arduous job, essentially for three reasons. One was that the students didn't understand English; the second that they were nearly always on strike or otherwise engaged in political demonstrations, and thirdly they were often stupified with hashish. So I had a lot of leisure on my hands.

Incidentally, to be serious for a moment, it seems to me a most extraordinary thing that at that time you wouldn't have found anybody, Egyptian or English or anybody else, who wasn't absolutely clear in his mind that hashish was a most appalling and disastrous addiction. So you can imagine how strange it was forty years later for me to hear life peeresses and people like that insisting that hashish didn't do any harm to anybody, and was even beneficial. I see that in Canada it is going to be legalized, which will mean one more sad, unnecessary hazard comes into our world.

Anyway, these were the golden days of liberalism when the Manchester Guardian was widely read, and even believed. Despite all its misprints, you could make out roughly speaking what it was saying, and what we typed out was quite likely, to our great satisfaction, to be quoted in some paper in - Baghdad or Smyrna as being the opinion of our very influential organ of enlightened liberalism. I remember my first day I was there, and somehow it symbolizes the whole experience. I was asked to write a leader - a short leader of about 120 words - on corporal punishment. At some head-masters' conference, it seemed, words had been spoken about corporal punishment and I was to produce appropriate comment. So I put my head into the room next to mine, and asked the man who was working there: "What's our line on corporal punishment?" Without looking up from his type-writer, he replied: "The same as capital, only more so." So I knew exactly what to tap out, you see. That was how I got into the shocking habit of pontificating about what was going on in the world; observing that the Greeks did not seem to want an orderly government, or that one despaired sometimes of the Irish having any concern for law and order; weighty pronouncement tapped out on a typewriter, deriving from nowhere, and for all one knew, concerning no one.

We were required to end anything we wrote on a hopeful note, because liberalism is a hopeful creed. And so, however appalling and black the situation that we described, we would always conclude with some sentence like: "It is greatly to be hoped that moderate men of all shades of opinion will draw together, and that wiser councils may yet prevail." How many times I gave expression to such jejune hopes! Well, I soon grew weary of this, because it seemed to me that immoderate men were rather strongly in evidence, and I couldn't see that wiser councils were prevailing anywhere. The depression was on by that time, I'm talking now of 1932--33. It was on especially in Lancashire, and it seemed as though our whole way of life was cracking up, and, of course, I looked across at the USSR with a sort of longing, thinking that there was an alternative, some other way in which people could live, and I managed to maneuver matters so that I was sent to Moscow as the Guardian correspondent, arriving there fully prepared to see in the Soviet regime the answer to all our troubles, only to discover in a very short time that though it might be an answer, it was a very unattractive one.

It's difficult to convey to you what a shock this was, realizing that what I had supposed to be the new brotherly way of life my father and his cronies had imagined long before, was simply on examination an appalling tyranny, in which the only thing that mattered, the only reality, was power. So again, like the British raj, in the USSR I was confronted with power as the absolute and ultimate arbiter. However, that was a thing that one could take in one's stride. How I first came to conceive the notion of the great liberal death wish was not at all in consequence of what was happening in the USSR, which, as I came to reflect after-ward, was simply the famous lines in the Magnificat working out, "He hath put down the mighty from their seat and hath exalted the humble and meek," whereupon, of course, the humble and meek become mighty in their turn and have to be put down. That was just history, something that happens in the world; people achieve power, exercise power, abuse power, are booted

out of power, and then it all begins again. The thing that impressed me, and the thing that touched off my awareness of the great liberal death wish, my sense that western man was, as it were, sleep-walking into his own ruin, was the extraordinary performance of the liberal intelligentsia, who, in those days, flocked to Moscow like pilgrims to Mecca. And they were one and all utterly delighted and excited by what they saw there. Clergymen walked serenely and happily through the anti-god museums, politicians claimed that no system of society could possibly be more equitable and just, lawyers admired Soviet justice, and economists praised the Soviet economy. They all wrote articles in this sense which we resident journalists knew were completely nonsensical. It's impossible to exaggerate to you the impression that this made on me. Mrs. Webb had said to Kitty and me: "You'll find that in the USSR Sydney and I are icons. " As a matter of fact they were, Marxist icons.

How could this be? How could this extraordinary credulity exist in the minds of people who were adulated by one and all as maestros of discernment and judgment? It was from that moment that I began to get the feeling that a liberal view of life was not what I'd supposed it to be - a creative movement which would shape the future - but rather a sort of death wish. How otherwise could you explain how people, in their own country ardent for equality, bitter opponents of capital punishment and all for more humane treatment of people in prison, supporters, in fact, of every good cause, should in the USSR prostrate themselves before a regime ruled over brutally and oppressively and arbitrarily by a privileged party oligarchy? I still ponder over the mystery of how men displaying critical intelligence in other fields could be so astonishingly deluded. I tell you, if ever you are looking for a good subject for a thesis, you could get a very fine one out of a study of the books that were written by people like the Dean of Canterbury, Julian Huxley, Harold Laski, Bernard Shaw, or the Webbs about the Soviet regime. In the process you would come upon a compendium of fatuity such as has seldom, if ever, existed on earth. And I would really recommend it; after all, the people who wrote these books were, and continue to be regarded as, pundits, whose words must be very, very seriously heeded and considered.

I recall in their yellow jackets a famous collection in England called the Left Book Club. You would be amazed at the gullibility that's expressed. We foreign journalists in Moscow used to amuse ourselves, as a matter of fact, by competing with one another as to who could wish upon one of these intelligentsia visitors to the USSR the most outrageous fantasy. We would tell them, for instance, that the shortage of milk in Moscow was entirely due to the fact that all milk was given nursing mothers - things like that. If they put it in the articles they subsequently wrote, then you'd score a point. One story I floated myself, for which I received considerable acclaim, was that the huge queues outside food shops came about because the Soviet workers were so ardent in building Socialism that they just wouldn't rest, and the only way the government could get them to rest for even two or three hours was organizing a queue for them to stand in. I laugh at it all now, but at the time you can imagine what a shock it was to someone like myself, who had been brought up to regard liberal intellectuals as the samurai, the absolute elite, of the human race, to find that they could be taken in by deceptions which a half-witted boy would see through in an instant. I never got over that; it always remained in my mind as something that could never be erased. I could never henceforth regard the intelligentsia as other than credulous fools who nonetheless became the media's prophetic voices, their heirs and successors remaining so still. That's when I began to think seriously about the great liberal death wish.

In due course, I came back to England to await the Second World War, in the course of which I found myself engaged in Intelligence duties. And let me tell you that if there is one thing more fantastical than news, it is Intelligence. News itself is a sort of fantasy; and when you actually go collecting news, you realize that this is so. In a certain sense, you create news; you dream news up yourself and then send it. But that's nothing to the fantasy of Intelligence. Of the two, I would say that news seems really quite a sober and considered commodity compared with your offerings when you're an Intelligence agent.

Anyway, when in 1945 I found myself a civilian again, I tried to sort out my thoughts about the great wave of optimism that followed the Second World War - for me, a repeat

performance. It was then that I came to realize how, in the name of progress and compassion, the most terrible things were going to be done, preparing the way for the great humane holocaust, about which I have spoken. There was, it seemed to me, a built in propensity in this liberal world-view whereby the opposite of what was intended came to pass. Take the case of education. Education was the great mumbo--jumbo of progress, the assumption being that educating people would make them grow better and better, more and more objective and intelligent. Actually, as more and more money is spent on education, illiteracy is increasing. And I wouldn't be at all surprised if it didn't end up with virtually the whole revenue of the western countries being spent on education, and a condition of almost total illiteracy resulting therefrom. It's quite on the cards.

Now I want to try to get to grips with this strange state of affairs. Let's look again at the humane holocaust. What happened in Germany was that long before the Nazis got into power, a great propaganda was undertaken to sterilize people who were considered to be useless or a liability to society, and after that to introduce what they called "mercy killing." This happened long before the Nazis set up their extermination camps at Auschwitz and elsewhere, and was based upon the highest humanitarian considerations. You see what I'm getting at? On a basis of liberal-humanism, there is no creature in the universe greater than man, and the future of the human race rests only with human beings themselves, which leads infallibly to some sort of suicidal situation. It's to me quite clear that that is so, the evidence is on every hand. The efforts that men make to bring about their own happiness, their own ease of life, their own self-indulgence, will in due course produce the opposite, leading me to the absolutely inescapable conclusion that human beings cannot live and operate in this world without some concept of a being greater than themselves, and of a purpose which transcends their own egotistic or greedy desires. Once you eliminate the notion of a God, a creator, once you eliminate the notion that the creator has a purpose for us, and that life consists essentially in fulfilling that purpose, then you are bound, as Pascal points out, to induce the megalomania of which we've seen so many manifestations in our time - in the crazy dictators, as in the lunacies of people who are rich, or who consider themselves to be important or celebrated in the western world. Alternatively, human beings relapse into mere carnality, into being animals. I see this process going on irresistably, of which the holocaust is only just one example. If you envisage men as being only men, you are bound to see human society, not in Christian terms as a family, but as a factory--farm in which the only consideration that matters is the well--being of the livestock and the prosperity or productivity of the enterprise. That's where you land yourself. And it is in that situation that western man is increasingly finding himself.

This might seem to be a despairing conclusion, but it isn't, you know, actually. First of all, the fact that we can't work out the liberal dream in practical terms is not bad news, but good news. Because if you could work it out, life would be too banal, too tenth-rate to be worth bothering about. Apart from that, we have been given the most extraordinary sign of the truth of things, which I continually find myself thinking about. This is that the most perfect and beautiful expressions of man's spiritual aspirations come, not from the liberal dream in any of its manifestations, but from people in the forced labor camps of the USSR. And this is the most extraordinary phenomenon, and one that of course receives absolutely no attention in the media. From the media point of view it's not news, and in any case the media do not want to know about it. But this is the fact for which there is a growing amount of evidence. I was reading about it in a long essay by a Yugoslav writer Mihajlo Mihajlov,[2] who spent some years in a prison in Yugoslavia. He cites case after case of people who, like Solzhenitsyn, say that enlightenment came to them in the forced labor camps. They understood what freedom was when they had lost their freedom, they understood what the purpose of life was when they seemed to have no future. They say, moreover, that when it's a question of choosing whether to save your soul or your body, the man who chooses to save his soul gathers strength thereby to go on living, whereas the man who chooses to save his body at the expense of his soul loses both body and soul. In other words, fulfilling exactly what our Lord said, that he who hates his life in this world shall keep his life for all eternity, as those who love their lives in this world will assuredly lose them. Now, that's where I see the light in our darkness. There's an image I love - if the whole world were to be covered with concrete, there

still would be some cracks in it, and through these cracks green shoots would come. The testimonies from the labor camps are the green shoots we can see in the world, breaking out from the monolithic power now dominating ever greater areas of it. In contradistinction, this is the liberal death wish, holding out the fallacious and ultimately destructive hope that we can construct a happy, fulfilled life in terms of our physical and material needs, and in the moral and intellectual dimensions of our mortality.

I feel so strongly at the end of my life that nothing can happen to us in any circumstances that is not part of God's purpose for us. Therefore, we have nothing to fear, nothing to worry about, except that we should rebel against His purpose, that we should fail to detect it and fail to establish some sort of relationship with Him and His divine will. On that basis, there can be no black despair, no throwing in of our hand. We can watch the institutions and social structures of our time collapse - and I think you who are young are fated to watch them collapse - and we can reckon with what seems like an irresistably growing power of materialism and materialist societies. But, it will not happen that that is the end of the story. As St. Augustine said - and I love to think of it when he received the news in Carthage that Rome had been sacked: Well, if that's happened, it's a great catas-trophe, but we must never forget that the earthly cities that men build they destroy, but there is also the City of God which men didn't build and can't destroy. And he devoted the next seventeen years of his life to working out the relationship between the earthly city and the City of God - the earthly city where we live for a short time, and the City of God whose citizens we are for all eternity.

You know, it's a funny thing, but when you're old, as I am, there are all sorts of extremely pleasant things that happen to you. One of them is, you realize that history is nonsense, but I won't go into that now. The pleasantest thing of all is that you wake up in the night at about, say, three a.m., and you find that you are half in and half out of your battered old carcass. And it seems quite a toss-up whether you go back and resume full occupancy of your mortal body, or make off toward the bright glow you see in the sky, the lights of the City of God. In this limbo between life and death, you know beyond any shadow of doubt that, as an infinitesimal particle of God's creation, you are a participant in God's purpose for His creation, and that that purpose is loving and not hating, is creative and not destructive, is everlasting and not temporal, is universal and not particular. With this certainty comes an extraordinary sense of comfort and joy.

Nothing that happens in this world need shake that feeling; all the happenings in this world, including the most terrible disasters and suffering, will be seen in eternity as in some mysterious way a blessing, as a part of God's love. We ourselves are part of that love, we belong to that scene, and only in so far as we belong to that scene does our existence here have any reality or any worth. All the rest is fantasy - -whether the fantasy of power which we see in the authoritarian states around us, or the fantasy of the great liberal death wish in terms of affluence and self-indulgence. The essential feature, and necessity of life is to know reality, which means knowing God. Otherwise our mortal existence is, as Saint Teresa of Avila said, no more than a night in a second--class hotel.

1. Sometimes translated as *The Possessed*.
2. "Mystical Experience of the Labor Camps," included in his excellent book *Underground Notes*.

At the time of the original publication, Malcolm Muggeridge was quite simply one of the most delightful, articulate, brilliant thinkers in the world. His career has included journalist and Moscow correspondent for the Manchester Guardian; agent for British Intelligence in Africa during World War II; Liaison - Officer with the Free French; Deputy Editor of the Daily Telegraph; Editor of Punch; and Book Reviewer for Esquire. In addition to several anthologies of his own writings, he is a published novelist and playwright. His television career began when television began, and has continued in the United States, the United Kingdom and throughout the English-speaking world. In England he had worked extensively with the B.B.C.

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