The New Civilization

A Mingling of East and West

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After Western civilization, what will become the dominant world culture? Human history has seen the rise and fall of many civilizations: Egypt, China, the Incas, the Arab-Semitic forms and ideas, the classic cultures of Greece and Rome. Finally, with the industrial revolution and the rise of capitalism and the strong tide of human aggression of the European and North American peoples, came what is called Western civilization. Now there are many evidences that this system, which grew to world dominance during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, will not continue much longer, in the forms that have characterized it until now. A new world culture is already in the throes of birth. It is being made up of strong elements from both the West and the East.

This idea comes as a great shock, for most of us have taken for granted that our civilization was the perfect flowering of human history and thus was final and eternal. For centuries we in the Western world have been assuming that Western civilization was in every way superior to every other culture, and have been trying to force our ways of life and our standards upon the whole world. Religious missions, imperialistic conquest, and world trade have been handmaidens of our determination to make over all people into our image, an aim which has been infused with much altruism and pious zeal, however perverted by complacent arrogance. We didn’t invent this idea of racial superiority. All peoples have had it to a greater or lesser degree.

But several things have re-enforced the arrogance of the West and given it unique status. The theory of progressive evolution, taken over from biology into the social field, has provided a philosophic base for the belief in a natural superiority of modern — that is, Western — civilization, which is viewed as a final flowering of society, a culmination toward which all social change has been tending during the millenniums. Christianity, one of the few great proselyting religions, has consolidated our faith in a mission divine as well as human. Furthermore, a whole group of nations in Western Europe and America, rather than a single state, are unified in a common arrogance. And battleships and modern communications have given us a power and an opportunity to push our assumptions down the throats of the whole world with an effectiveness more devastating than anything heretofore known in history.

Our power has been so overwhelming, our efficiency so dazzling, our mechanical gadgets so fascinating, and our cocksureness so hypnotizing that we have convinced not only ourselves but un-
fortunately a considerable portion of the rest of the world that we of the West are completely superior to all other peoples and all other cultures. Confused as to the elements of our own greatness, we have insisted on the superiority of the entire bundle of our modes of life: our religion, our morals, our competitive capitalism and world trade, our democratic political concepts, even our telephones and bicycles and worship of routinized busy work. Hundreds of millions of very diverse people are today turning from their ancient characteristic folkways to ape us in our trivialities as well as in our greatness. Women in the warm Pacific islands are wrapping themselves in skirts and dresses, young men and girls throughout the East are leaving their native dances to crowd into movie houses to gaze at the antics of over-sexed females from Hollywood and to admire the gun play of Chicago gangsters; beautiful hand-made tapa and batik are being supplanted by cotton prints from Manchester (and Glasgow); leisurely communal farming is giving way to routine labor in mills, in sugar and pineapple plantations, in commercialized service to tea and coffee, tobacco and rubber. All elements of Western civilization are being avidly swallowed by the awestruck youth of the East with little realization of what they mean and with a devastating neglect of the beauties of their own arts and crafts, the dignity and expressiveness of their traditional ways of life.

Now just as the whole world is adopting it, Western civilization begins to totter. We still believe in its essential soundness, but we are forced to realize that it has great weaknesses as well as admitted strengths. The World War was more than a gesture toward suicide; it and the post-war rearmaments are the spectacular evidence of the impasse to which competitive nationalism and imperialism had brought the Western nations. The present economic debacle is no accidental or transient crisis; it is the cumulative collapse of competitive capitalism, which has produced the grotesque absurdity of want and privation not because of lack of food and goods but, ridiculous as it sounds, because of a glut in all food crops, a snarl in the over-abundance of all products and supplies. The Russian experiment, the Fascist movements in Italy and Germany, the New Deal in America, are all repudiations in one way or another of our traditional economics. Western civilization as we knew it in the heyday of the nineteenth century is finished.

This is a time, as we are rebuilding our social order, to inquire diligently whether other peoples than those of Europe may have something to teach us as to how life may be lived both with material prosperity and with personal and communal satisfaction. Specifically we will do well to see whether society may not benefit by some mutually enriching trade between the East and the West in ways of living. The first task in contemplating such an ex-
change is to sort out the characteristic and useful aspects of European civilization and of the cultures of the East.

The great achievement of Western civilization is the development of tools. Through science we have ferreted out the secrets of nature; through mechanics and efficient organization we have put all forces to work for our service and convenience. The West has carried this whole business of the use of tools beyond anything ever known in world history.

The works of science and machines are all about us, blatantly and gloriously conspicuous. In many ways they have transformed the world. The industrial revolution, efficient machine manufacture, and scientific farming have brought in a new plenty in happy contrast to man's age-old, desperate, hand-struggle to obtain enough food and shelter and supplies to keep life going from day to day. Modern communications have made of the whole earth a small, easily accessible province. Gunpowder, high explosives, and poison gas have given us a power in destruction equal to our miracles of creation. In contrast to the new mechanics of killing, through a single phase of science — medicine and its application in public health — we have prolonged the average duration of life by more than two decades, we have curbed the great contagions, and have greatly increased our freedom from disease and the robustness of our health.

Not only have we wrought these overt triumphs but in the course of them we have developed to a high degree the intellectual tools — language, concepts of precision, mathematical theory, science — so that these are not only means of achieving fresh victories but are in themselves a broadening of mental scope, an enlargement of the intellectual life.

Tools, both mechanical and intellectual, are the achievements of the West. They are contributions to world society, ample to justify our conspicuous place in the sun. They are our unique gift.

The mistake of many who insist upon the superiority of Western civilization is that they do not distinguish between its real and characteristic strength and other elements which are merely incidental, however conspicuous they may be on the surface. They confuse the unique features — intellectuality and invention, science, mechanics, and organization — with non-essential elements which have happened to be present in the West at the time of her greatness: competitive capitalism, democratic nationalism, our religious forms, and our moral rules and social habits. These are not among our special gifts. Certain of them are not distinctly Western; others are not particularly successful in themselves.

Christianity, for example, is a contribution not of the West but of the Near East. Furthermore, the central teachings of the founder of Christianity have never been followed in Europe and
America. Brotherly love without regard to race or caste, the Golden Rule, pacifism, humility, communal sharing of goods and services, contempt of worldly wealth—these which were the cardinal teachings of Jesus are directly opposed to just those things which the Western nations have founded their power upon: capitalism, armaments, individualism, disregard or hatred of one's neighbor, especially if he be of a different race or color, the accumulation of material wealth. It is one of the ironies of history that Christianity by a series of accidents should have become the professed religion of just those nations which by all their dearest practices are furthest from its teachings. The principles of Jesus are followed unofficially and unconsciously by many people throughout the world. They have never been accepted by the West and are not today a part of Western civilization.

Competitive capitalism, notoriously a feature of the West, is beginning to be recognized as a weakness rather than a source of strength. The wealth of the West came from the tremendous new power over nature provided by the tools of science and mechanics, not from unrestrained exploitation strutting under the banner of rugged individualism. It is another of the strange accidents of history that a civilization whose characteristics were research and planning and organization should have allowed unplanned individualism to seize the spoils of its scientific advance. It required the absurd situation in which the West now finds itself to show us that organized production, however abundant, can serve mankind only through order and communally planned distribution.

Democracy, in the form of mass control and political manipulation of government, has not been very successful. And nationalism, at least in the extreme forms of a Balkanized Europe, is an anachronism in the modern world, so closely bound together by rapid communications and so interdependent in material wealth and intellectual advance.

As to the peculiar morals and social habits of the West, they are, on the whole, neither better nor worse than those which have existed in many eras under varying cultures. We in the West, for example, have rigid taboos in matters of sex and personal property rights. These are a part of our custom of private property and of a society built largely around the biological family as a unit. Very different rules are appropriate for societies built on communism or on a different conception of the family. The West has great respect for clothes largely because in Europe and North America we live in a rigorous climate. But to suppose that the inhabitants of tropical regions are immoral because they wear less covering or none at all is foolishness. In many other matters the incidental or non-essential character of Western mores is easily seen by anyone who has not hopelessly confused custom with a mystical idea of sacred and inalterable moral law.
In one great aspect the habits and ideals of the West have been peculiarly deadening. Puritanism and industrialism have between them removed almost all enjoyment and richness from day-by-day living. Puritanism with its emphasis upon a future heaven and its coolness toward the content of life on earth has made enjoyment almost synonymous with sin. Industrialism has fixed our eyes on another heaven — success — also in the future, also to be obtained by sacrifice of the present. These two great forces of the modern West have done much to degrade our regard for art and expression and to make daily enjoyment seem the shirking of a great life duty, the abandonment of the march toward heaven and success. They tend to make our lives routinized, dull, and barren.

Meanwhile, other peoples have been working out ways of life of very different kinds. In the islands of the South Seas, the villages of Japan, and the Malay archipelago, there are not the efficient tools of the West, but there is an astonishing amount of enjoyment and expression. Song and dance and drama play a large part in the daily life. There is less devotion to careful planning for the future but much more delight in the present. Even the simplest villager or farmer understands that life is to be lived as it goes along. Success to him is not a remote achievement but something to be realized every day.

Art in the East is not the profession of a few, but the expression of many. Weaving, the making of tapa or batik, the carving of temple ornaments or of simple utensils for the home, are matters not only of labor but of creative joy. Dancing and singing are expressive diversions and accomplishments of high prestige. The rice fields, tended with devotion for the purpose of a maximum crop, become items of loveliness in a beautiful landscape.

Graceful living receives a devotion hard to understand in Europe and America. The ceremonial tea in Japan occupies hours and is carried out with scrupulous regard for traditional conventions of courtesy and dignity; the arrangement of flowers is considered so important as to require an education as long and arduous as that we give to science or mathematics. Routine tasks, such as the harvesting of rice in Java or the deliberations of the village chiefs in a Polynesian fono or the reception of visitors anywhere in the East, are invested with elaborate ceremony. Consideration for the feelings of others runs through all of daily life. Courtesy is so important throughout the East that a breach of etiquette is regarded there with the same horror that we look upon a breach of contract.

It is hard to give in general statements a true picture of life in primitive communities or among the masses of even such highly developed Eastern nations as China and Japan. Much hardship
and suffering run hand in hand with joy and beauty — just the hardships which result from the absence of science and tools. Disease cripples all of the East to an extent that seems terrible and inexcusable to persons who have begun to take for granted the recent progress of hygiene in North American and Western Europe. Life is still a desperate hand-struggle for the barest of necessities in food and shelter for many of these people who lack efficient tools. Miserable huts often house pigs and goats and cattle and crawling vermin as well as persons so poor and helpless as scarcely to deserve the name of human beings. And the lack of such intellectual tools as a world literature and scientific method limit mental scope and outlook. In spite of these harsh handicaps even the common people throughout the Orient and the islands of the Pacific get a great deal out of life as it flows by.

There is much to be said, also, for the economy that characterizes communities which we call primitive. The closely-knit family clan and the communal village give an economic security unknown under competitive capitalism. These compact units based on common labor and a common sharing of products offer calm security, an incentive to cooperation, and a fine arena for the development of talents, not so much for competitive gain or individual prestige as for the enrichment of the common life.

Partly because of communal living there is throughout the East a reverence that comes from feeling oneself a part of the whole life process — rather than an enemy or competitor of other persons and other forces. Of course a good deal that passes for reverence in any group is merely superstition and childish fear. But there is a modicum of authentic reverence that flows naturally from sensitivity to beauty, desire for graceful living, an economy based on mutual helpfulness and common sharing, and a feeling of kinship with the universal forces, most of which must always remain mysterious and all of which have gone into the creation of us.

Not all of the tools, of course, have been devised in the West, and grace is not the possession solely of the East. Many clever devices, such as gunpowder and the printing press, were invented in China long before the period of European supremacy, and the tools used in many primitive countries today are as ingenious, if not so powerful, as any worked out by Western science. Certain parts of Western Europe and America are not entirely lacking in expression; though a shocking amount of our "recreation" comes from watching performances of others in concerts or moving pictures or athletic contests rather than from spontaneous creative action by the great body of individuals themselves. While the achievements of various parts of the world overlap each other and while there are great divergencies within the groups, in general it is fair to say that the West excels in tools and organization, and in the power and efficiencies and conveniences which flow
from them, and the East excels in expression, communal living, and day-by-day enjoyment.

The strengths of the West and East are opposites; the weakness of each is the absence of just what the other has so successfully developed. The East lacks tools; the West has inadequate power for expression. The average Westerner can make a living but he is puzzled about how to enjoy life; the average man of the East can enjoy life easily enough but he has a hard time making a living.

An exchange of cultural gifts is the self-evident answer to the needs of each group. The East has seen this much more clearly than we in the West. The great nations of Asia and the various peoples of the Pacific islands have already begun to acquire our force in arms and our wealth in machine production, scientific farming, and modern hygiene. Japan, for example, with a ruthless intelligence, has seized upon our science and mechanics, including armament, is emulating our efficiency in organization and our ingenuity in invention while she calmly ignores our religion and the extremes of our political forms and social habits. Other Eastern countries have not yet been so successful, but all are striving after the power which they recognize as the outcome of our mechanical and intellectual tools.

In the West we are being forced toward a way of life somewhat comparable to that of the abundant tropical islands. Machines now supply quickly the needs which formerly had to be worked for through hard, long days. Leisure, therefore, is not only possible in America and Europe, but is necessary in order that what labor is still required may be divided among the greatest number. The glorification of work which has been a feature of Western industrialism, is giving way before the new economic situation. We in the West are being forced to do something about expression and enjoyment of life as contrasted with our previous complete devotion to making a living.

This new civilization is not entirely in the realm of vague expectation and pious hopes. It is already in course of development. Appropriately enough, the birthplace of this new culture, compounded of the best of the East and the West, is in the group of islands situated midway between the Western world and the Orient. A population descended from the various stocks of Europe and Asia, from Polynesia and the other islands of the Pacific, is here making a new race and a new culture.

You members of the graduating class of the University of Hawaii have the satisfaction of beginning your careers in the very midst of the first page of a new chapter of human history. Do not hesitate to throw your lives into this fresh stream, giving equal value to work and to leisure, to industry and to enjoyment, to the full use of mechanical and intellectual tools and to the cultivation of all of the fine arts of personal and communal living.