

The Angle

Volume 1956 | Issue 1

Article 8

1956

"Witness"

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Recommended Citation

Panzetta, Anthony (1956) ""Witness"," *The Angle*: Vol. 1956: Iss. 1, Article 8.
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"Witness"

Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"Undoubtedly the greatest struggle of philosophies the world has ever known is being waged in today's world. These philosophies, manifested in two diametrically opposed political ideologies, are now both dedicated to an embroglio which promises to shape the life of all mankind for years to come. It requires no great investigation to determine with what forces we are herein concerned. Clearly, the struggle between Communism and Democracy is one which is of utmost significance to all serious peoples. We daily follow the progress of the cold war ... the war of mental strategy, where men compete to capture the faith and support of the world. We, as Americans, and living in the stronghold of the Democratic system, the very stronghold which is the chief opponent of the Marxist theory in action, are very integrally a part of the great struggle. We are constantly made aware, by radio, television, newspapers, and every other possible means of communication, of the great threat posed by the ever-increasing power of Communism. We are constantly informed of the latest advances or defeats of the Iron Curtain. The oft times inhuman attitude of the Soviets is painstakingly made known to us despite the mask of peace which these people choose to wear."

Cover Page Footnote

Appeared in the issue: Volume 1, Issue 1, 1956.

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Because of this acute awareness of Communism which a troubled nation has dramatized and condemned with all its might, we have been conditioned to a position where we are like the immature movie-goer who, through constant exposure to Hollywood's horse operas, has identified the villain as the ugly man with the moustache and the hero as the handsome superman on a white stallion. We have come to the point where the Communist is automatically invisioned as a wicked evil man intent on carrying out all the harm that he possibly can. Our country, its government and the leaders of that government are immediately held as knights in shining armor who can do no wrong.

These are the positions and imaginings which Whittaker Chambers brilliantly crushes in his remarkable book, "Witness." Here, from the lips of an admitted one-time Communist, are the reasons, the methods, the dreams, the faith the "soul" (if such a word dare be used here) of Communism.

The infiltration of Communism into the government of the United States and the unbelievable extent to which it had found acceptance among all kinds of Americans was a revelation which rocked our nation during the Alger Hiss trials and the Elizabeth Bentley Hearings. With Whittaker Chambers supplying information of secret and astonishing espionage activity carried on right beneath the nose of our government, Americans first became aware of the great danger of Communism. How, they asked, could so many ostensibly clear-headed and successful Americans betray their country for the infamous methods of Soviet Communism? How did such a movement find roots in some of

the highest and most influential positions in our government? What is it about Communism that is so appealing?

Before reading the "Witness" these questions were largely nebulous and unanswered. After reading it one cannot help but feel that the long book (some 800 pages) was well worth the time it took to read. Few books are so completely able to convey to the reader the very interior of a man's soul . . . of his hopes, dreams, convictions, disillusionments and courage. As Whittaker Chambers reveals his life with all its errors and searching we are led to an excellent grasp of the whys and wherefores of this oft spoke of but little understood philosophy.

Chambers begins his book with an excellent foreword entitled "Letter To My Children." In it, he attempts to explain to his children, and in effect to his readers, why he embraced Communism and then later repudiated it in so devastating a way.

Chambers, like many other men, saw in Western Civilization a decadence which he likened to the decadence of ancient Rome. He felt sincerely and deeply that the world was being led to a position; the position where the dignity of man was being trampled on through a system which allowed the few to possess wealth and the many to toil and struggle for these few. This crisis, he found, was written of by Karl Marx and here he read of a theory which promised a solution. In the writings of Lenin he found the theory was made practical with the call for action . . . the call for revolution. He found that he inevitably was drawn to the Communist Party.

When finally Chambers left the Party, the reason and strength which enabled this move, namely the awakening to God, also enabled him to understand clearly why the Communist is the manner of man that he is. He explains that the apparent dedication of the Communist is just that . . . true dedication. In the Communist is a strength of purpose and conviction which do justice to the most noble of causes. To become a Communist first means that the prospective Party member has realized the crisis of modern civilization and has felt the urgent need to act in some way to remedy it. This man finds in Communism and the Communist Party the release for his deep convictions. To join the Party requires of the man the utmost in dedication and sacrifice. This he knows before he joins and so when he does join it is an indication of the fervor and zeal that are his. To this man, the aim of Communism is uppermost in his mind. The method needed to attain this goal, he is convinced lies in the Communist call to worldwide revolution and he is dedicated to this objective. Therefore the means seem nothing in comparison to the end. That is why intelligent, conscientious men are able to live the Communist life in face of the harsh and often cruel methods inherent in the system. Chambers calls this a "Faith in Man" . . . a Godless faith. Truly this might be likened to a humanistic attitude . . . one noble in theoretical objective but sadly diseased in method and deplorable because of its Godlessness.

Chambers writes:

Economics is not the central problem of this century. It is a relative problem which can be solved in relative ways. Faith is the central problem of this age. The Western world does not know it, but it already possesses the answer to this problem—but only provided that its faith in God and the freedom He enjoins is as great as Communism's faith in Man.

One of the most important features of the book is the excellent insight the reader gains into the causative factors which lead both the rich and the poor into Communism. Chambers felt that the world was in a turmoil. He refers to Victor Hugo's "Les Miserables" in describing his feelings:

The universe appeared to him like a vast disease; he perceived fever everywhere; he auscultated suffering everywhere. And without trying to solve the enigma, he sought to staunch the wound.

Chambers explained that it was the crisis of the World that made men Communists and kept men Communists. "For the Communist who breaks with Communism must break not only with the power of its vision and its faith. He must break in the full knowledge that he will find himself facing the crisis of history, but this time without even the solution which Communism presents and crushed by the knowledge that the solution which he sought through Communism is evil against God and man."

This rejection of Communism came for Chambers after he had embraced it for some thirteen years. He had tasted the life dedicated to revolution and finally saw that it was evil. During those thirteen years he led the unique life of his singular dedication. Starting in the open Communist Party he quickly rose to prominence within the Party on the strength of his intellectual capacities and writing success. While on the staff of the Communist "Daily Worker" he established this literary ability. But his tasks were various and often changed. He was later made to join the Communist underground branch of the Party and there carry on the secret works of espionage. It was while in the underground that Chambers became aware of the "sources" which the Party had placed in many important positions in the nation. Here he worked with some of the top leaders of Communism in America and aided in the information gathering function of his particular "apparatus."

Of this period in Chambers' life the book is particularly interesting as it describes the secret intrigues and methods used by the Communist underground. The gigantic betrayal by men such as Alger Hiss and Harry Dexter White, to mention only two of many the book names, is described at first hand.

It took Chambers some ten years after leaving the Party to finally speak out publicly against his former comrades. After he had first broke with Communism he undertook a single handed task of trying to convince some of his former associates to leave the Party. When this failed the matter was temporarily held inactive. Finally, at the same

time Elizabeth Bentley was making her startling revelations to the world, Chambers felt that the time had come to awaken a sleeping nation to the danger which was securely entrenched in their government and elsewhere.

Chambers explains, and calls on history as his witness, how he at first encountered many difficulties in attempting to tell his story. It seemed that the very people he hoped to warn and aid were his enemies and staunchest opposition. The government had been blind to the Communist infiltration and now refused to accept the fact. The calling of the Hiss-Chambers Case a "red-herring" attempt to discredit the Administration is an indication of how the leaders of the land were determined to neglect Chambers and his accusations.

Finally, in the very dramatic Hiss Hearings, the revelations of Chambers were proven to be correct and the Communist threat was set back considerably.

In this book then, is one of the best explanations ever offered for the perplexing questions which arise when considering Communism and its phenomenal success. We learn that this movement is the result of dedication to an ideal and faith centered in man. It is in this complete anthropomorphism that the evil is violently displayed . . . that the method is seen to contradict the position of humanity as held in our Christian light. We are shown by Chambers that the struggle is more correctly a struggle of Godless men with zealous dedication to the ideal of world revolution and the man who accepts the reality of the soul . . . the reality of God. He warns that the victor of the struggle will be that side whose faith . . . be it in man or be it in God . . . proves to be the stronger.

ANTHONY PANZETTA '56

Wanderer
where
Are you now?
Some city where
Some three flight walk-up there
Is all the home you know?