

## CHARLES HABIB MALIK AND REFLECTIONS OF A LEBANESE MULTI-RELIGIOUS LANDSCAPE

### A Comment Written on the Occasion of the Celebration of the 70th Anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights

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**Charles Habib Malik** شارل مالك (Bterram 1906-Beirut 1987) was a Lebanese diplomat, theologian and philosopher who was president of the Commission on Human Rights which was working on the United Nations' most important document "The Universal Declaration of Human Rights" signed 70 years ago. Charles Malik was a special person: his native homeland was Lebanon and his childhood in a Christian family was ensconced from the earliest years in the complex and heterogeneous religious and ethnic fibre of Lebanese society. All this had a great influence on Charles Habib Malik, resulting in a complex multilayered person characterized primarily by his humanity.

It is not so well known that as an Orthodox Christian he wrote one of the most valuable books published in the Middle East after WWII which reflects his ideas at the time when the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was signed. In *Christ and Crisis*, first published in 1962 (newly reprinted by Acton Institute (Grand Rapids, MI, USA) in 2015), Malik states that the deepest crisis of our age is a spiritual one which, in his view, is clearly recognized and underlined by the Church. He was a devoted Christian and was heavily involved in ecumenical work.

His Christian, multi-ethnic and multi-religious Lebanese and humanistic character shone through during his entire life, notably when he presided over the General Assembly of the United Nations in 1958, but especially during the drafting of the UN Convention against Genocide. He thought that the crisis of the new age was a crisis of the spirit and asked the Church and all people of faith to practise the discipline of holiness. All his family worked tirelessly for Christian reconciliation and for establishing good relations with Jewish people: his brother was a Catholic priest and son Habib is a respected academic and human rights activist. Charles Habib Malik held professorships at many prestigious institutions such as Harvard, the American University in Washington, Notre Dame University in Indiana and Pascal University in Canada. His last academic post was at the

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Catholic University of America where he taught Moral and Political Philosophy. He edited *God and Man in Contemporary Islamic Thought* in 1967, a book related to the Islamic tradition, published by the American University of Beirut, written before he edited a similar one on Christian thought in 1970. Although a Christian, Malik felt connections between all Arabs, and was critical of the West's treatment of the Arab World. When we read his words, they sound so accurate, intense and contemporary.

*“Independence springs from the Arab sense of difference from others, a sense that has been sharpened in recent centuries by the relative isolation of the Arabs from the rest of the world. Unity takes on many modalities: from the mild form of general community and consultation enshrined in the Arab League to the extreme form of complete political unification desired by certain nationalist movements, particularly in Iraq and Syria. But regardless of its modality, every Arab feels an immediate mystical unity with every other Arab.*

*Lack of love. Strategy, commerce, exploitation, securing an imperial route: these were why the West for the most part came to the Near East, not because it loved us. Add to this the immense racial arrogance of modern Europe. The West has not been true to itself, and therefore it could not have been true to us.”<sup>1</sup>*

In any case, Malik was the son of Lebanon, a multi-religious society, a country with a long history and a glorious past, a man who understood the real need for ecumenical and interfaith dialogue and was critical of the lack of moral integrity and international humanism. Lebanon is a country where all major religious groups have representations which always fill a particular branch of power; e.g. the president of the Republic is constitutionally a Maronite Catholic, the president of the Government (Prime Minister) a Sunni Muslim, and the president of Parliament is a Shia Muslim, and so on. Lebanon is the classic definition of a consociational society, where it might appear that the division of powers based on religious grounds could only cause problems. However, in spite of potential reasons for criticism, this environment may also be fertile soil for finding solutions on how to live together (in harmony). Malik was a product of such an environment and as such made a huge contribution to the development of human rights worldwide.

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Malik, “The Near East: The Search for Truth,” *Foreign Affairs*, 30, 1952.