CHARLES CORM

6000 YEARS OF PEACEFUL CONTRIBUTIONS TO MANKIND

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La Revue Phénicienne Publications
I grew up and received my primary and secondary education in Lebanon of the 1960s and 1970s. I can therefore claim – not without pride – that I am the product of a multiform polyglot educational system, which like Lebanon itself, a hybrid conduit and intermediary between cultures languages and civilizations, was a consummate practitioner of an intense laissez-faire liberalism. In that sense, my high school – Saint-Joseph’s College of Antoura, est. 1657 – was one of a number of Lebanese educational institutions which, although conforming to a common (fluid) national curriculum, imbued its student body in a variety of perspectives and a wide spectrum of worldviews. After all, in the words of an early twentieth century Lebanese thinker and accomplice of Charles Corm’s, this was the very essence of Lebanon; a cultural and intellectual entrepôt and a crosscurrent of peoples and ideas where conquerors and their conquests came, went, and faded away, but where the Lebanese forever remained and endured, steadfast and committed to their ever diverse character. 

1 Lebanon is a meeting-place, wrote Michel Chiha (1891-1954),

[...] into which peoples flock and assimilate regardless of their origins, [...] where varied civilizations drop in on one another, and where bevy of beliefs, languages, and cultural rituals salute each other in solemn veneration. [Lebanon is]

ON JUNE 7, 1949, as the UNESCO’s General Assembly was convening in Beirut, Charles Corm delivered the following *Six Thousand Years of Pacifist Genius in the Service of Humanity* lecture at the Cénacle Libanais. In many ways, a lecture with a daring title such as this might have seemed a bit impish; a cheeky challenge, as it were, to the times’ prevailing orthodoxies. Yet Corm’s wager paid off, for no one before him had dared marshal the requisite poise, talent, and vigor to lay out a factual and exhilarating historical survey such as this, as compellingly as he had.

For its time, Corm’s lecture was a resounding success and a national sensation, as it were, causing quite a stir in Lebanese popular and intellectual circles. Indeed, the lecture succeeded in infecting the Lebanese of the time with a feeling of unbounded awe and a genuine sense of pride in the exhaustive inventory of their ancient ancestors’ exceptional accomplishments.

Corm himself had already written elsewhere, in an earlier work and in another context, that *one can hardly find, anywhere on this earth / a tiny country such as Lebanon, with such lofty destiny.*

Today, in the midst of the turmoil tearing into the body and soul of this “tiny country,” it is hoped that Corm’s exquisite reminders of Lebanon’s glorious past will induce the Lebanese into, once more, taking stock of their country’s greatness, heeding the fact that, for millennia, Lebanon had endeavored to endow humanity with
Since the remotest antiquity, at a time when they were still known as Canaanites, and later as Phoenicians, the Lebanese have created, preserved, defended, affirmed, and advanced an expansive and liberal civilization with universal impulses and predilections so accessible to other peoples, to the point that some of those, even the loftiest and brightest among them, had come to assimilate these attributes of Lebanese civilization as if they were their own, identifying them with their own national genius.

If Humanism, as I think it ought to be defined, is a certain benevolence and hospitality of both the heart and the mind, capable of receiving, and therefore conceiving; capable of accepting, and therefore appreciating; capable of giving, and therefore forgiving — that is, never condemning nor indicting — any and all of that which is in the purview of human nature; if Humanism is this supreme blessing of Mankind's, bestowed upon Mankind above and beyond all other riches, allowing Mankind possession and transfer, as well as
A Modest Preamble to a Monumental History

SIX thousand years! Sixty centuries! It is an immeasurably long journey through the grooves of time that I am asked to undertake with you in less than one hundred short minutes! An undertaking such as this is a perilous adventure indeed; an adventure where I run the risk of getting lost myself, and losing you along the way; that is to say, getting lost and losing you in the very true sense of the term. But rest assured, for as to not overly disorient ourselves, we shall visit but a select few stations in the countless stages of our country's timeless existence. And since you've so kindly given me the honor and good grace of indulging me with your attention, we will only trail the mysteries of our origins in order to make out the permanent features and characteristics that will help us peer with more clarity into the darkness of the unknown, so as to better sketch out an image of the best Lebanon possible, and to reproduce, in light of our findings, a sort of an awe-inspiring, wonderful reality.

Like any good student of history worthy of the title, we shall begin our journey, should you allow me to do so, at the proverbial beginning of the story; that is to say, we shall begin not merely six thousand years ago – as you certainly have every right to expect, and indeed, demand – rather, our starting
Humanism in Deeds

SINCE the very early beginnings of this century, and especially given that some of us still carry on our faces the scars of the last two wars, Humanism with a capital H seems to have become a full-time preoccupation; a magic-word, as it were, on everyone's lips. And so as to conceal the grins of a bad conscience under the pleasing façade of Humanism, everyone seems to have suddenly morphed into a votary of Humanism, celebrating Humanism, calling for Humanism, claiming and acclamation Humanism, and gleefully applauding oneself for doing so.

Yet even among the most committed apostles of Humanism, who lack neither good faith nor good will, very few can be said to have genuinely and willingly lived, integrated, devoted, and sacrificed themselves for the sake of this much vaunted Humanism. Very few indeed! In fact, scouring the four corners of the world in search of true Humanism can often yield but a disappointing handful of committed practitioners. Even the noble lessons that would-be Humanists would preach, lustrous and comforting as they might be, are all too often stifled by the din of violence where some of the most advanced and devastating "smart" weaponry go on being produced, in preparation for an impending third butchery!
A Fifty-Thousand Year Old Lebanese Surges from the Ground to Greet You

In 1938, two young American paleontologists, Fathers Ewing and Doberty, crossed the Atlantic and the Mediterranean to come and dig up a bit of Lebanese subsoil. They cast their eyes on the canyon of Jeita, near the coastal town of Antelias, in the eastern suburbs of Beirut. Recently discovered finely cut and polished ancient flint tools had attracted their attention to the site. Upon their arrival, and following a few months of minute scratching and scraping in a ditch, Ewing and Doberty finally reached the bottom of some twenty meters of compact piles of dirt ensconced under sediments deposited by local underground streams. They then set out to minutely scrutinize every speck of dust at their disposal. By dint of sorting out, peeling off, analyzing, and clearing the site, they eventually stumbled, in the midst of sundry petrified bones, upon the fossilized skeleton of a

23) Doberty and Ewing were Boston College Jesuits and professors during the first half of the 20th century. In a paper titled "Fifty Years After: Egbert, an Early Upper Palaeolithic Juvenile from Ksar Akil, Lebanon", published in Paléorient (vol. 15/2 – 1989), authors C.A. Bergman and C.B. Stringer maintain that the skeletal remains that Doberty and Ewing happened upon in Lebanon in 1937 – that is, the remains of Egbert which are the topic of this segment of Charles Corm’s paper – were shipped to the United States “for conservation and study.” Egbert’s skull, on the other hand, is presently at the Beirut National Museum.
In The Image of the Landscape

It seems quite fitting for us to indulge the luxury of ruminating a few questions about our history and memory, now that science has unearthed this ancient little Lebanese ancestor of ours; a find so far removed from our times, yet so close to us and so supremely revealing of our ancient kinship and filiation.

For starters, one might ask if it would not have been more fitting last winter to have had this little Lebanese, rather than the best and greatest among us, receive the delegates of 43 countries convened in Lebanon for the UNESCO’s General Assembly? Wouldn’t it have been more fitting to have had him – he who remains, to date, our city’s first-citizen – welcome the UNESCO’s delegates to good old Beirut? Wouldn’t we have been better served electing him as host, rather than having had others organize a reception that revealed precious little of our true selves, and flaunted much, far too much, of what is not us and what does not behoove us?...

With his little lips, reconstructed for the occasion, evincing a modest smile bespeaking centuries of patience, sagacity and introspection, Egbert would have told our guests that here in Lebanon, it is quite natural for us to have gone on being human (in spite of the world’s periodic delirious descents into
Plains People and Mountaineers

BY DINT of being faced with always the same trees, always the same walls, always the same streets, always the same storefronts, and always the same faces of the same clients — or rather the same pockets of the same victims — and by dint of only seeing the façades of things and people before them, most city dwellers, and more generally speaking, most residents of flatlands, inexorably over time run the risk of shriveling, degenerating, and becoming numb to their surroundings. Thus, their eyes become smaller, their senses become clouded, their impulses become impaired, and their spirits, by now overly bent on the ephemeral jostling them around, overly riveted by the immediate concerns besieging them, and all too subservient to the stifling limits of their narrow landscape, they are soon rendered the sentence of forfeiting their wings. If they happen to observe more obediently their habitat’s narrow constraints and its accepted norms, they are seldom indemnified for their bondage without readily trampling each other and their neighbors. Hence the ever-increasing need for a lebensraum and a national outlet. Fortunately, such a people’s saving grace is that they often acquire the very qualities of their defects.

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