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Second Response to the Laing Lecture 1992

Jonathan Lamb

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I share David Blair's reluctance to respond, partly because it is difficult for us Western observers to follow such a passionate and helpful lecture from someone who has lived through these difficulties, and partly because it is extremely difficult to make some assessment of what is happening at the moment, let alone consider what may happen in the future. I think most Western commentators and journalists are seeing the wisdom of the old Chinese proverb: 'To prophesy is extremely difficult, especially with regard to the future.' And that is the case—to make any judgment about the present situation in Eastern Europe is very difficult. Nevertheless, may I make a few observations in response.

First, I think it is necessary that we take a long-run perspective on what has been said. There were very swift changes in the heady days of 1989. But if we are going to see the sort of partnership that has been appealed for, we will need to look longer term for some of these things to work through. Whilst some of the changes were overnight, the real judgement on the impact of the revolutions in Eastern Europe will take many years.

A second thing that is necessary to say, by way of preliminary observation, concerns the question of complexity. The Eastern bloc never was monolithic, although we often thought of it as such. We thought of Eastern European countries and the Soviet Union as being much the same. That was never true and it is certainly not true now. They are very different culturally, they have very different religious backgrounds, and they now face different opportunities. We rejoice in what is effectively revival in Romania, but that is not the case throughout the central East European countries and the former Soviet republics. The development in national churches, be they Roman Catholic or Orthodox, or other religious groups such as Islam, will need to be watched and to be understood if our response is going to be appropriate.

The third preliminary comment I'd like to make is that we ought also to exercise a degree of caution. There has been a tendency in the Western Christian response for us to be simplistic, and sometimes rather uncritical. We thank God for all of the amazing changes which Paul Negrut has rehearsed and we rejoice with God's people in all of those things. But there are other reasons for concern which have already been

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touched on, and I think it would be inappropriate if we didn't remind ourselves, as European believers, of some of those tendencies—whether they are the severe economic and ecological problems, whether they are the new nationalist and authoritarian and exclusivist tendencies which are appearing in our continent, whether it is the fact that the former USSR is virtually in turmoil, whether it is the old military division of Europe now being replaced by an economic one—there are many reasons why I think we must also have a sober estimate of what is happening at the moment. And those ugly features which are filling the ideological vacuum left by Marxism should not be ignored.

The Western responses that we are now witnessing are several. Three common secular Western responses have also had their impact on us believers. There is the *selfish* secular response which may affect the Christian community in the West. Neil Ashcherson, one of the journalists writing on Eastern Europe has pointed out that the Western response has been very 'earth-bound', to use his words. Many people have got no further than: 'What's in it for us?' That's a common Western response, and it can affect us.

The second common Western response is *self-righteousness*. One of the fellows of St. Anthony's College, Oxford, Timothy Garton Ash, also a regular commentator on Eastern Europe, says that the East offers nothing new on the 'big' questions. It offers nothing new in the questions of politics, economics, law and international relation. In other words, the implication for a British academic is that we in the West live in the best of all possible worlds. I say again, self-righteousness can rub off on Christians too. The Western Christian response can be much the same if we are not very careful.

A third common response, in secular terms, is a cynical one. And that is: 'We have nothing to learn'. Or, 'We will learn nothing.' Bernard Levin, in his recent book, *Now Read On*, has commented that just as the newly liberated nations are busily throwing down walls and tearing up restrictions, we in the West are oblivious to our own loss of freedoms, indifferent to the shrinking of our own liberties. In other words, we learn nothing from what has happened. It is the cynical view reflected in the oft-repeated maxim that the one thing we learn from history is that we don't learn from history.

So, in summary, what is a proper Christian response? I would like briefly to offer five simple suggestions.

First, we need to change our attitude. We do have something to learn and Paul Negrut has helpfully highlighted that in expressing the nature of our partnership—West and East. The assumption for most Christians in the West, as I understand it, is that the flow is generally West to East. The aid, the expertise, the ideas, the travellers, will all be West to East. I think we need to change our attitude, but I fear that Western academics are going to be deaf to their Eastern colleagues and will not

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have the attitude that is ready to receive. Christians should not be guilty of that attitude. We should first be ready to learn.

Second, our response must be one of prayer. I think the enormous challenges which presently confront Europe, West and East, mean that we must be more committed, as European believers, to prayer. Usually in Eastern European countries, as we know, the Evangelical Church is in the minority; it is often divided (unlike Romania) and it is often unable to be involved in shaping society, in being involved in the political, social and economic transformation that is taking place. Indeed, most Eastern European societies have not fully shaken off secularism as is suggested in the title of the Laing Lecture. There are still many instances where Eastern European societies are in a headlong rush down the blind-alley of materialism, adopting Western values or looking Westwards in the hope of some remedies. Therefore, I think, we must pray. We can thank God for the many examples of courageous initiative on the part of God's people, not least Paul Negrut himself, and we must pray. That, I think, will be our greatest contribution in shaping the new Europe together.

Third, as David Blair has implied, we need a new view of mission. There are well over three hundred different Western missionary organisations working in many of the countries to which we are referring. I'm afraid to say that very frequently they are working in ignorance of basic missionary principles. We are condescending and we do not always emphasise the principles of *partnership* which have been suggested. For that, I think we should repent, and we should also work hard to ensure that we don't duplicate exactly those mistakes in Albania and now in the former Soviet Republics. Therefore, the words we should be using in our approach to mission and our approach to our fellowship with God's people in Europe are: *service, partnership, submission* to local believers, respect for national culture and tradition, and *co-ordination*. All these things need to be built into our way of thinking about mission. Many of us involved in working in these countries have been guilty of the wrong attitude in mission for which we must ask the Lord's forgiveness and the forgiveness of our Eastern brothers and sisters, and develop a new attitude to what partnership in mission will mean.

Fourth, we can rejoice that God's truth will stand. That is one major lesson which comes out of the events of the last few years. Vaclav Havel, the President of Czechoslovakia, is not a believer as far as we know, but he frequently asserts in his lectures and addresses the theme of truth. In his address to the Helsinki Citizens Assembly, referring to Czechoslovakia, he said: 'The truth did prevail over the lie. It did not need any instrument of coercion, it did not need weapons, it did not even need the breaking of a single shop-window. The system did crumble. The truth did prevail.' And that, of course, Christians say with

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even greater conviction. The fact that God's truth will prevail, that the Gospel is powerful, especially in weakness, is one of the lessons which we have learned from this year's Laing Lecture. The basis of our hope for Europe and for the former USSR is the Gospel—first and last. Certainly we need careful strategies, certainly wise application of resources, West and East, but first and last, the truth of the Gospel. The truth will stand.

The fifth and final lesson to take to heart as Western believers is that which was expressed in the Laing Lecture itself, and that is the fact of God's sovereign rule. We believe that history is shaped by God himself, that kings and governments and dictators are in his hand. The centre of power today is not in Moscow, is not in Washington, is not in London. The centre of power today is the Lord God omnipotent. Therefore, our response as believers must be one of *humility*, coupled with the certainty that God is in control of the affairs of the nations, including our own, and including this continent with its rapid change which will accelerate yet more. May God help us to remember that fact: that he is the sovereign Lord in control of the affairs of history and of all men and women.