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The World After the Collapse of Marxism and the Failure of Secularism

Josef Tson & Paul Negrut

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The Laing Lecture for 1992 was given under unique circumstances. Dr Josef Tson, President of the Romanian Missionary Society, had accepted the invitation to give the Lecture, but in the week before the Lecture was to be given, was found to have a polyp on the larynx that required surgery. Dr Tson named Paul Negrut as his alternate. Paul Negrut is President of the Romanian Evangelical Alliance and has for many years been Dr Tson's close associate in the Second Baptist Church, Oradea. He is currently a doctoral student at London Bible College. The Laing Lecture was, therefore, unique: for the first time we had a Lecturer from outside the United Kingdom, for the first time a Lecturer who was also a student of the College, and for the first time a Laing Scholar delivering the Laing Lecture.

In these unusual circumstances it was decided, with the approval of both Dr Tson and Paul Negrut, that the Lecture should be published as the joint work of both scholars, taking Dr Tson's original text, but adding to it the particular contribution of Paul Negrut. There was a further innovation in that two scholars were invited to respond to the Lecture, and their valuable and perceptive comments are included here, with much appreciation.

The Laing Lecture 1992 proved to be a thoroughly challenging and heart-warming occasion, delivered by a scholar, with authority, and with a challenge to the commitment of an attentive audience. Uniquely, Paul Negrut received a standing ovation at the close of his lecture.

THE LAING LECTURE 1992

The collapse of the communist system in Europe, and the spectacular disintegration of the Soviet Union, is without a doubt one of the most radical and unexpected reversals in human history. This change of direction involves directly some four hundred million people in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, but it also influences and affects the rest of the world in ways that are still impossible adequately to assess. If we accept that four hundred years ago Europe discovered the

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rest of the world, now, in 1992, it can be said that Europe is beginning to discover itself.

We can only guess at the ways in which the world will become a different world as a consequence A these recent events. It may help us in our attempt to predict the future if we first attempt to understand how the Marxist communist experiment emerged, and what its failure represents in terms of an understanding of the world and of life itself.

Marxism was not an accident that simply happened in Eastern Europe. It was the culmination of a process, the end result of a movement that began five centuries ago in the Renaissance.

The belief that God was the source and ruler of the universe was rejected and humanity took its place as the centre of attention, fit to decide its own destiny. Human reason became autonomous, the supreme authority, and so the philosophy of humanism was born. Socialist movements began to emerge, along with Darwinism and the theory of evolution. First Marx and then Lenin took these concepts and others welded them into a process: illuminism, rationalism, positivism, and the Hegelian dialectic wedded to materialism, producing a system that would be completely closed towards God, but open to humanity: atheistic Marxism.

This development was not an Eastern European phenomenon. It took place in the West, and was transplanted into the East by Lenin, who gave to it the power that went with the installation of a totalitarian regime. In the West the development has been a process of gradual secularisation. It took place in the universities first, and it produced the so-called 'scientific' understanding of the world and of life. From the universities it then permeated general Western culture, the media, and a politics.

However, the most systematic formulation of this secular 'scientific' interpretation of the world was the philosophy of dialectical materialism of Marxism. Although in the West many considered that Marxism was an economic system, the Marxists themselves always insisted that it was first of all a world-view.

Communist theory maintained that if all property were nationalised, and if the government was entrusted with the running of the entire economy, the assured end result would be heaven on earth. But then if the government was to have total authority to run every aspect of the affairs of the nation, it must be the only authority to exist. If the government was to have complete authority, then God must disappear. Marxist materialistic atheism was an essential component of the communist system.

Thus, when the totalitarian regime began its nationalisation of property and the installation of a centrally planned and State-run economy, that totalitarian regime began also to use force to implement a programme aimed at the total eradication of religion, and the

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introduction of an atheistic world-view into the whole off society. The French Revolution had *attempted* to eradicate religion, but the experiment was short-lived and failed. It was only under the communist system that a totalitarian state, using all its energies and all its agencies, moved seriously into the creation of a society without religion.

Nobody could predict what such a society would look like. It took seventy years in the Soviet Union, and forty years in the other Eastern European countries for this experiment to show its results. The results can now be seen. Literature was destroyed, poetry was stifled, philosophy was choked, the arts were killed, and an entire culture disappeared. But the most disastrous outcome was the total destruction of traditional morals: harshness, rudeness, brutality, hatred, disregard for the value of the person, became the characteristics of humanity. Care for the individual, charity, politeness, goodness, all but disappeared.

Eastern Europeans experienced all of this. We had the opportunity (sometimes we even dare to say the blessing) to live in such conditions. We experienced a political system without God, a society without religious values, an economy run completely by the government, a world where the rule of darkness seemed to be absolute, where men replace God. The early

communist ideologists issued 'prophecies' which went out through the media all over the Soviet Union and Romania: that within twenty years Christianity would belong to history. It would no longer be relevant for modern men and women and modern society. They would build a new society, where men and women would find themselves truly fulfilled. The Christian Church was targeted. In those years thousands of pastors, priests, lay leaders, and young people were arrested and sentenced to jail. Most of them never came out again.

The communists insisted that Christian love and morality were an illusion, that if a man is reduced to his basic needs he will inevitably deny all his religious ideals and attempt to survive by following other values. In an attempt to demonstrate this, they arrested the religious leaders of various churches in Romania and put them in prison, all in one room. They were videoed, so that the whole nation could see what happened in the cell. It was decided to give food only to one man in the cell, but not to the others. Out of the eight or nine men in the cell, each would receive food from time to time, but only one person on any occasion. It was anticipated that when the food came to the one, the others, who were close to starvation, would attack him and attempt to get the food for themselves, while the one would try to keep the food for himself.

What actually happened was remarkable. When the first of them received his food, he said to the others, 'I am not worthy; the food is for you!' And he shared it with the rest. And so did the second. And the others. Their captors were totally unprepared for this. They then decided to cut off the food from all the prisoners, but to prolong life,

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they would give a cube of sugar to the one who appeared about to die. Again, however, not one of them wanted to eat the sugar. Each one looked to the others, and insisted: 'It's for you.' And that is the foundation for the evangelical fellowship in Romania today! It was laid when the darkness was greatest.

After forty years of Marxism in Romania the result was a complete economic failure. Long queues, hundreds of people standing in line for food. One had to wake up at two o'clock in the morning to stand in line until eight o'clock to buy meat. Culture collapsed: the arts, poetry, literature, philosophy. All day long the communist leaders would be addressing the crowds who were compelled to listen to them, but there was no human beauty or creativity. All resources were wasted in increasing the police force, the secret police; the army—all to maintain the machinery of oppression. It was sometimes said that wherever three people gathered together, one of them would be a secret police informer. They even infiltrated the churches.

And then, almost overnight, things started to change—in Poland, East Germany, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Romania, Bulgaria, Albania, the Soviet Union—country after country. 1989 was the year of miracles, and the year of great expectations. We expected those countries which had been communistic to step at once into full democracy and that all would be heaven on earth, but it was not so. Politically all those countries still have major problems. The old structures still exist. In Romania, Ceaucescu and his wife were executed, but four and a half million communists are still there. The thousands of secret police, the army leaders promoted by the communists, are still there. The network of society is still largely in the hands of former communists.

But yet something new is happening. The nations that lived in darkness are experiencing the desire for light, those who lived under a lie are now hungry for the truth, those who lived without God are now crying out to him. There was a general consensus that atheistic propaganda must be stopped, and that Christianity must be brought back into the life of the nation.

This was, in fact, stated very clearly to a group of evangelical leaders by Ion Iliescu, President of Romania, in November 1990. He admitted: 'We cannot have better political systems with corrupted people. We cannot have economic prosperity with bad people.' And he added that the only agency that could resolve that problem was the Christian Church: 'Can you help us rebuild the country morally?' Imagine John Major speaking to the people of the United Kingdom and saying, 'Our biggest problem is not the Community Charge, our biggest problem is a moral problem!' Will we hear such words from the leaders of Western nations?

Furthermore, President Iliescu emphasised that the new leadership of

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the country did not give freedom of religion merely from political reasoning. It was because of a conviction that the Church was vital for the healing of the nation that not only did they wish religion to be free, but they wanted to bring back Christianity into the very fabric of society. It is important to emphasise the fact that Iliescu is still a communist and is still an atheist. His statement about Christianity becomes even more impressive when it comes from such a man.

Allow us to highlight some of the actions taken by the new Romanian leadership regarding religion. The laws that restricted religious freedom were abolished. A decree was issued requiring local authorities to give land for the building of new churches. Our own church in Oradea has benefitted from this: we have been given the best piece of land in Oradea and we are building our new sanctuary on it. The teaching of Christianity was introduced in the State schools, and the theological colleges and seminaries were asked to train teachers for it. But the authorities reckoned that the teaching of Christianity would not be sufficient to keep the teacher fully employed, and so they asked theological colleges to consider teaching joint secular subjects and religion, or joining with universities to train teachers. The University would then teach students the secular subjects and the theological college would give the training that would qualify them to teach Christianity. The Secretary of State for Education said: 'Gentlemen, we have a big problem. The whole education system of Romania is destroyed. At this very time there are twenty-eight thousand vacancies in the public schools of Romania. Most of those vacancies are in the villages where there is no electricity, no transportation, no water. Nobody wants to go there to teach the children. We came to the conclusion that it takes a missionary to go and live in the villages and be the teachers in the schools. Our problem is that we cannot produce missionaries. Can you help us? Can you develop your theological seminaries into Christian universities and teach your students theology and languages, theology and history, theology and mathematics, theology and computers? You send them as missionaries, we will employ them as teachers and we will pay them to do the work!'

The new Constitution of Romania not only provides for religious liberty, but goes further, obligating the State to facilitate and assist the recognised denominations in performing their activities. Under a special provision we have been able to start seven Christian High Schools,

and when the new Education Bill becomes law in the near future we shall have the legal framework to begin church schools at all levels, from kindergarten to University. The Baptist Seminary in Bucharest has entered into a joint venture with the University of Bucharest. So far our Bible Institute in Oradea has developed its own teacher training programme, but next year we shall also enter into a joint venture with the Oradea State University.

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Similar developments are occurring in the other European countries. It was deeply moving to read a recent article by Philip Yancey, 'Praying with the KGB'.[1] It tells of a visit by nineteen evangelical leaders from the USA to the headquarters of the KGB in Moscow. They were received there by General Nicolai Stolyarov, the Vice-Chairman of the KGB, who said: 'We realize that too often we've been negligent in accepting those of the Christian faith. August 1991 shows what can happen. But political questions cannot be decided until there is sincere repentance, a return to faith by the people. That is the cross I must bear. In the study of scientific atheism, there was the idea that religion divides people. Now we see the opposite: love for God can only unite.'[2]

Perhaps the most spectacular evidence of this change of direction was the Russian decision to give up the celebrations of 7th November, the anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution, and to make Christmas a national holiday. The presence of the President of Russia at the Christmas Eve Mass in Moscow Cathedral was one of those events nobody could have dreamed of happening in our generation.

For us in Romania there is yet more. The Romanian Evangelical Alliance is given half an hour of Romanian television every day. We decided to present a 'Superbook' programme for Romanian children: the whole Bible in one hundred and eight episodes. We have been given the best possible time—from seven o'clock until half past seven in the evening every day. The response has been over forty thousand letters every day flooding into the offices of the Evangelical Alliance from the children, and the young people, and their parents. But forty thousand a day is not all. From villages where there is no evangelical witness, delegates are being sent to the evangelical churches, asking them to come and preach in their villages because they want to come and give themselves to God. Now, in Romania, the field is crying out for labourers! God hay brought the communist atheistic philosophy, its political system, its secret police, and its army, into judgement. He is building up his church.

It is also important to see what is happening in the universities of Eastern Europe. The professors are eager to purge their courses of the taints of Marxism. For them, dialectical materialism and evolution are part and parcel of the communist system that has dominated their thinking for such a long time. Now that communism has been rejected, its atheistic ideology is thrown out too. Most of the universities have introduced courses on the Christian faith and ethics. Exactly how deep the change is we cannot know, but we can expect to see scholars rejecting evolution and arguing for creation. Again, we cannot know to what extent this phenomenon will affect Western universities. But we may hope that Eastern European scholars might be the missionaries to convert their colleagues in the West!

Finally, let us review the process off secularisation that has taken place

[1] P. Yancey, 'Praying with the KGB', *Christianity Today* 36, 1 (13 January 1992), 17-25.
[2] Yancey, 'Praying with the KGB,' 18.

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in the West. It has affected virtually all the universities of the Western World, and it is a known fact that where the university goes, there, too, by and large, goes the next generation in the country. Step by step the culture of the Western World has been secularised. Religion has been marginalised as 'irrelevant'. And yet a faithful remnant remains to act in some measure as salt and light to society.

It was only in Eastern Europe that this process of secularisation was coupled with an authoritarian state intent on destroying religion entirely. And only in Eastern Europe has the end result of total secularisation become visible. In Eastern Europe we are more advanced than the West—we have gone all the way down this road of secularisation, and we saw the abyss, and we turned back. And so the question must be asked, What will be the impact of the experiment and experience of Eastern Europe on the Western universities? The importance of the question will be realised when we remember that the reformation in Western Europe was carried through by university professors: by Martin Luther and John Calvin, by Latimer and Cranmer, and others. It was these scholars, speaking and acting within the context of universities that had an impact on and changed entire nations.

Christianity will be revived in the West only when Christianity can re-conquer the universities. At this moment they seem so far from God and from the Bible that their pride would not readily surrender their autonomous reason to the authority of Jesus Christ. But that pride is precisely what was defeated in the universities of Eastern Europe. Our professors now know what is at the end of the road which is built by autonomous reason. For our scholars, it is now not so difficult to come back to God and to submit to his authority.

The question remains as to how strong this return to God and to Christianity will be in Eastern Europe. Will it be sufficiently articulate as to integrate a Christian world-view into biology, physics, chemistry, history, and so on? Will those academics who turn to God in Eastern Europe be adequately equipped so as to induce a similar phenomenon in the West?

Dr Tson and Paul Negrut concluded with very personal meditations on the way ahead, and for obvious reasons these are presented separately.

Dr Josef Ton

Some fifteen years ago I came to understand that communism has totally failed to fulfil its promises. I also came to see that the system of communism is contrary to all that God intended for humanity. I knew then that communism would fall. My immediate question was what we would replace communism with. Will we have trained Christians at the

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time of that fall, capable of presenting Christianity as the base for rebuilding the nation? I began then to concentrate on the task of training young Christians for the day when communism would collapse.

I saw also at that time how atheist indoctrination was creating a spiritual void in people. I predicted then that at the end of the communist experiment, the nations that went through it would be more ready for the Gospel than any other nations in the world.

I outlined these ideas at the City Temple in London in 1985. At that time, people treated these statements as the over-optimistic hopes of a dreamer. Yet now they are realities, developing before our amazed eyes. Now when I speak of the openness of Eastern European scholars to the Gospel, it is no longer the mere hope of a dreamer. I work with these university professors in the key places of Romania, and I know what they think, what they ask for, what they aim at.

If I were a Christian strategist in the West, I would concentrate my efforts on the universities in Eastern Europe. Their conversion might be instrumental in the conversion of the universities of the West. Let me add here a very important element of the picture. Secularisation necessarily produces a spiritual vacuum. People cannot live long in such emptiness. The drive for material goods does not satisfy, and there comes a moment when people look for a spiritual reality to fill the void inside them. I do believe that the phenomenal success of the New Age movement, especially in the cultivated circles of the Western World, is the sign of the ultimate failure of secularisation. About thirty years ago people began to say that we were living in a post-Christian era. They declared it in too much haste. It appears now that we are living in a post-secular era. But we have still to prove to our generation that Christianity provides the reality that can fill the tragic emptiness created by secularisation.

Are we ready for this day? Are we able to speak meaningfully to the secularised mind? Are we able to convince people that Christianity alone is spiritual reality? That is our challenge!

Paul Negrut

What does this mean for us? Those of us in colleges and universities must ask ourselves what we should do. It seems to me that the greatest challenge for us in these days is for us to come together: the family of God from the East with the family of God from the West. God has blessed you, here, with many years of peace and economic prosperity. God has given you leisure to gain knowledge, to do research, to read and to write books, to develop libraries. (At the library of the Christian University of Oradea we have only two hundred volumes, and even they were a gift.) God gave us the fire, there, in the persecution, for persecution always brings zeal. This is the time to bring these two

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together. Can we even begin to imagine the new Church, with the knowledge of the West and the zeal of the East, with a new desire to proclaim Christ and to answer the most fundamental questions that people can ask? The time for the harvest has come.

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