

# Understanding the Times

## The Arts and a Paradigm Shift

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### INTRODUCTION

#### A Necessary Explanation

I am writing this book as a Christian *layman* and an artist profoundly troubled and concerned with what is going on in our Western world today. And since it is my intention to tackle such overpowering and controversial matters, I would like to make some things clear from the start. First, I am neither an *historian* nor a *sociologist*. The second is that I am not an academic in any way, so I will be approaching the subjects in this book as general basic information for the average person, regarding some of the critical issues going on in society today. And the third is that I have walked away from communism to Christianity<sup>1</sup> and have therefore had some experience in political activism before knowing the Lord as my personal Savior.

Thus, the social unrest and political and ideological activism going on at present, seen through the eyes of a former Marxist, just seems an absolute hallucination. No one could ever have imagined that after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the failure of communism exposed openly for all the world to see, and the advent of a new world order, that Marxist ideas would assert such enormous influence in most Western countries. Not to mention the impact such ideas have had in the hegemonic capitalist country that underwent the witch hunt of the *red scare* in the 1920s and 30s, and the crusade against communism in the 1940s and 50s; the land of free enterprise, freedom and promise that America has always been.

As an artistic director in theater and also the founder and director of the Ars Performing Arts Centre for the last 15 years, I have embarked on a journey of study and research to try to understand the *postmodern, post-Christian mindset*, and how it has influenced the progress of art, and the conditioning of our Western societies in recent years. Astonishingly enough, the result and evidence that emerges from this research is quite devastating since it shows that most of society has been overtaken by a sudden outburst of *irrationality*. In fact, since 2016 when, after much discussion, debate, and research, the Oxford English Dictionary's word of the year was proclaimed to be post-truth, Western society can be clearly and without a doubt, defined with the same definition given to that word by the OED itself: "Post-truth is an adjective defined as 'relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief'".

This implies that the thing that really counts in human behavior now, in the twenty-first century, is the achievement of goals, desires and ambitions without the need to be honest, truthful or even coherent. Lies and deception have been attributed the same status as truths as long as they are the means to get one's ends; a behavior which has clearly become more and more popular among politicians, but not only among them, of course. Lies, alternative truths, fake news are put into the same basket as truths in the public

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<sup>1</sup>You can read a little bit more about my conversion experience on page 118.

market producing an erosion of trust, the end result of which is suspicion, mistrust, apathy and confusion. And this is a devastating situation that, according to some critiques, could very well make the whole of society crumble in the end.

I will be quoting a few authors who have been writing about this process of moral and spiritual degradation over the last one hundred years, later in the book; but now I would like to start by quoting some words by T. S. Eliot, which I think will help us introduce the seriousness of our present situation. He wrote these words in his essay *Notes Towards a Definition of Culture* published in 1949<sup>2</sup> in the aftermath of the Second World War: "We can assert with some confidence that our period is one of decline; that the standards of culture are lower than they were fifty years ago; and that the evidences of this decline are visible in every department of human activity."

To help us clarify these words and put them into context, I need to quote other author contemporary of Eliot, who was also writing and thinking about the catastrophic consequences of World War II in his book *Our Threatened Values*,<sup>3</sup> published in 1946: "...The more pressing danger is of a different kind: it is nothing less than that the typical values of Western civilization may so nearly vanish... as no longer to contribute to what Mr. Churchill has called "the forward march" of mankind... At the crucial moment it will not be paper constitutions that men and women will obey: they will obey their own nature, and their own nature such as it has become." These words were written more than seventy years ago, and since then we have gone a long way, in this process of constant degradation, and find ourselves now at a crossroads where the preservation of the best of our Western Christian civilization is at stake.

How this could have happened to the cultured, sophisticated, well-educated, rational West is something staggering that just defies comprehension. And if we add to this the fact that the West has become a cumbersome, complicated, alienated world where people are bombarded with consumer driven advertisement and entertainment every minute of our lives; and furthermore, if we stop for a minute to think that most Western liberal democracies have been slowly turning into backslidden, <sup>4</sup>autocratic, plutocratic, oligarchic democracies, it becomes more and more difficult and almost impossible to be able to grasp and make sense of what is really going on in our world today.

Nevertheless, one of the things that may help in trying to grasp the reason for the pervasiveness of such a situation, is taking a look at the impact *Marxist* ideologies have had on Western society. And I say Marxist because even though there are other ideologies that have contributed their share to the creation of this state of affairs over the last

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<sup>2</sup>T. S. Eliot. *Notes Towards a Definition of Culture*. Faber and Faber Limited 24 Russell Square, London.

<sup>3</sup>Victor Gollancz. *Our Threatened Values*. Victor Gollancz LTD. 14 Henrietta Street, W.C.2

<sup>4</sup>Democratic backsliding is also known as autocracy and democratic decay. All of these words define a gradual decline in the quality of democratic governments. If this situation goes unchecked, democratic backsliding results in the State losing its democratic qualities, and becoming an autocracy or authoritarian regime. This democratic decline takes place when State-led policies weaken political institutions that are supposed to sustain the democratic system; such things as the peaceful transition of power, free and fair elections, the infringement of individual rights — especially freedom of expression —, lack of independence on the part of the judiciary, and an over-emphasis on national security as a response to acts of terrorism or perceived antagonism on certain groups of the population. All of these subtle and hidden violations of the law by the institutions which are supposed to uphold it result in an unhealthy, inefficient and untenable democratic system.

decades, many of them have been influenced or have sprung from Marxist ideology. Now, to clarify what I mean when I speak about Marxist ideology, I have to say that there is a difference between what one could call the “classical Marxist view” of Engels, Marx, Lenin and the communist regimes that were established in Russia and China; and what is known to some as *Cultural Marxism*, which we will be seeing in more detail later in the book.

The other clarification I want to make when talking about Marxism, is that I do understand and believe that a considerable amount of the criticism put forward by Marxist Theory concerning the evils of a capitalist society, are certainly correct in many ways. But that does not mean that they have been able to offer the best and most desirable of solutions to those evils. Actually, this is what one of the most important historian of the twentieth century, Eric Hobsbawm –himself a Marxist–says in a BBC interview regarding this issue: “Marx has been enormously powerful as an analysis of what is happening under capitalism. But inevitably not very good at analysing the possible alternatives.<sup>5</sup>” So even though we should take seriously and pay close attention to some of the ills and problems Marxist theorists point out in Western society; as Christians we should also discern and understand that the real *systemic* problem does not come from the structure of society, the class struggle or from political ideologies dominating it, but from our fallen human nature, that needs to be radically changed inside out by the redeeming work of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Therefore, it is not my intention to embark on a profound study of Marxist ideology, rather I will be dealing with the broader consequences that have been brought about by the ideology of postmodernism, –not as a philosophical study of an ideology that has permeated various aspects of culture and society, from the arts to politics–, but by taking a bird's eye view of a sociological phenomenon that has produced a radical transformation of Western society in recent years. This is then not an academic book, since I do not belong to Academia, although it has been my purpose to be as accurate as possible in the information and account I give of the issues dealt with in this book.

Nonetheless, there will be some names, books and quotations which will be completely unfamiliar to many, but please do not be put off by them. I am either quoting them or mentioning their names with the purpose of letting you know that I am basing the information on reliable sources, and on the knowledge of other people, much more notable and wiser than me. My sole desire is to present a general, reasonable survey that can help the average Christians obtain a broad idea of the current situation and encourage them to reflect on some of the social, spiritual and cultural changes taking place in our society. It will just be a kaleidoscopic view of a vast situation which has been gradually eroding and affecting Western society over the last two hundred years or so.

There is currently a proliferation of disinformation, confusion, tension and prejudice and therefore a pressing need for information and understanding on what is going on in our culture so people can make sense of the issues being debated. Thus, it is my humble intention to offer my view point based on personal experience in communist activism and the research I have carried out in recent years in order to make sense of many of the things I could not understand. It is my hope that by doing this I can at least help some to overcome the feeling of helplessness and discouragement, and stimulate them to

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<sup>5</sup>[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_3NwF6XgWp4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_3NwF6XgWp4)

explore this most crucial matter farther. Ever since I became a Christian, one of the things that struck me the most and captivated my heart was the fact that the gospel message is relevant for every situation in any society and at every moment in history; so it is also my hope and my prayer that by sharing something about our work and experience with *Ars Vitalis* in the last years, I can help provide some light on what could be done from a Christian standpoint in the midst of this most challenging situation.

Therefore, in the process of trying to describe some of the changes that have taken place in the last years, I will be using such words as *postmodernism* —though this ideology has already been replaced, or as some academics argue, it has evolved and set the stage for the advent of all the newer and more radical ideologies that sprang up from the 1980s onwards. Nonetheless, since it is obvious that we are no longer living under the tenets of the modern world that began with the Renaissance in the fifteen century and was definitely established by the Age of Reason in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; there is no doubt that the new ideologies have been influenced in one way or another by what has been called the attitude of postmodernism. The other words I will be using to describe our present society are *post-Christianity* and *apostasy*, mainly because they describe the reality of the Christian Western world following the profound changes that have taken place since the middle of the eighteenth century.

Now, though I will be getting in more detail into this whole issue later in the book, I should also say a word about *artistic expression* now, mainly because it may seem a foreign subject when dealing with social and cultural changes. But the fact is that political activism and an interest in the creative imagination, culture and the arts have always been a very important part of communist ideology, and even more so for cultural Marxism in the process of conforming and shaping society. This is a critical issue that needs to be understood and kept in mind as we try to tackle the present Western cultural situation. So even in this introduction I am just going to mention briefly some of the tenets of cultural Marxism regarding the arts and culture before getting into the main subjects of the book.

For cultural Marxism *culture* includes everything regarding emotions, imagination, the intellect, the psyche, religion, convictions, beliefs and morals. All of these constitute the ground where the values that dominate the way people think and behave in any given society grow. And according to neo Marxist theory, these values are means by which the ruling classes control, condition and manipulate a whole population. This is the reason why they were convinced there needed to be a process of deliberate subversion of those values; and the arts, the education system and the mass media, according to their view, are highly efficient tools for accomplishing this mission.

Thereby, some cultural Marxist theorists and ideologues started to study and do research in these fields in the 1930s in order find out how the arts and the mass media could be used to achieve cultural subversion. Some of the most prominent names in this area are Theodor Adorno, philosopher, sociologist and musician, who was one of the most important members of the *Frankfurt School*, —an institution we will be considering in more detail later on. He believed that artists and musicians could help in overcoming some of the social contradictions through the development of emancipated or autonomous art. He was convinced that this could be done through the use of the modern theories of music composition such as atonality, serialism or dodecaphonism. These are just theories that aim at finding new ways of artistic expression, undermining in the process the classical

methods of composition. It is in practice a means of artistic subversion that intends to do away with “the classical, bourgeois” methods of composition attacking their very structure and corrupting their most basic elements: melody, harmony and rhythm.

Another very influential name in this area is Walter Benjamin, a Marxist philosopher who was one of the main collaborators of the Frankfurt School and someone whose thinking had great influence on their ideas and presuppositions. He was even more convinced of the transformative potential of culture, the arts and mass media. He wrote profusely about art and explored the idea of “political art” attacking the concept of *artistic contemplation* as an alienating tool that had to be substituted by an art that would inspire and move the spectator to social and political action.

The last name I should mention is Berthold Brecht, a committed Marxist who was one of the most influential and important playwrights of the twentieth century. He, as all the members of the Frankfurt School, was greatly influenced by *Sigmund Freud* and his psychological ideas. He firmly believed that man and society could be intellectually analyzed, and this led him to develop his theory of *epic theatre*. This approach was based on the understanding that theater should appeal not to the spectator’s feelings but to his reason. He argued that in the *realistic theatre* of illusion the spectator tended to identify with the characters on stage and became emotionally involved with them rather than being stirred to think about his own life. Therefore, theater, while still providing entertainment should be strongly didactic and capable of provoking social change.

The theories that these thinkers and some others developed, and all the research they did has contributed to undermining the classical concept of art as centered around the idea of the search for goodness, beauty and truth. All these aesthetic, subversive ideas have had a strong and devastating influence on the way Western culture and civilization has developed in recent years, as we will see later.

In short we can say that the creative imagination, the arts and humanities have been extremely instrumental in creating the climate of disruption, disarrangement and confusion going on in our society over the last one hundred years. Edward Bulwer-Lytton said in the nineteenth century that “Beneath the rule of men entirely great the pen is mightier than the sword.”<sup>6</sup> And in his *Defence of Poetry* from 1821 Percy B. Shelley said that “Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world.”<sup>7</sup> And paraphrasing Francis Schaeffer, he also said that the profound ideas that philosophers and thinkers work out in their ivory towers are then picked up and brought home to the masses by the artists. So, as we can see, it is not only the cultural Marxists who are aware of the powerful potential of the arts to produce change and transform societies. This is, of course, not to say that the arts are solely responsible for the situation of disarrangement in any society; neither am I implying, by any means, that they are evil in nature. The creative imagination is just an indicator that measures, detects, and reflects what is going on in a society at a specific time in history. And on the other hand, the arts and the mass media can be powerful tools for political and ideological propaganda and indoctrination.

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<sup>6</sup>Edward Bulwer-Lytton. *Richelieu or the Conspiracy*. A Play in Five acts. First published in London in 1839, by Saunders and Otley.

<sup>7</sup><https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/69388/a-defence-of-poetry>

However, just to advance a word about my view of the arts, after becoming a Christian I have been persuaded that they are powerful means given by God for helping humanity grow in spiritual sensitivity, intellectual clarity and character building. They are also magnificent ways of making human life more bearable and enjoyable. And in the jumbled and perplexed society in which we live I believe the arts, used in the proper biblical way, can help create awareness regarding the transcendental aspect of life, and prepare the way for the introduction of the gospel message.

Ever since I began to study theater at a very early age and was then exposed to Marxist ideas, I have been intrigued by and interested in the way societies function. And since I became a member of the actors' guild and had the privilege of going into every theater for free, and participated in artistic workshops, conferences, symposiums and discussion groups, I have also been fascinated by the artistic experience. I have always been enchanted by poetry, painting, theater, dance and the wonder of the creative imagination, and have never ceased to be captivated by it.

The more I grow in my relationship with God, the understanding of the creative imagination, and the knowledge of history, I am more stunned and awestruck by the wonder of God's creation, the ubiquitous presence of beauty everywhere in the universe, the need and urge for artistic expression in the life of every person, and the power of the imagination. I am also taken by the presence and reality of God in the lives of Christians throughout history; and the transforming revolutionary impact of Christianity in shaping the Western world. It is as if God's unconditional love and mercy towards us cannot be avoided everywhere one moves and looks and works, with a clear mind and an open heart.

Thereby, even though the arts have been used as tools for indoctrination and propaganda, and misused for promoting moral degradation at some times in history, the truth of the matter is that the *creative gift* and the artistic imagination play a vital role in the life of the individual made in the image of God, in the Church at large and society in general. It is absolutely undeniable that as stated by Gertrude Himmelfarb in her book *On Looking into the Abyss*: "There is a connection between the aesthetic sensibility and the moral imagination, between culture and society."<sup>8</sup> God has made human beings in his own image, and one of the implications of this fact is that beauty and creativity spring from God himself and are divine attributes given for the enjoyment of life, human growth and enrichment of the intellectual, imaginative, affective and spiritual life. Thus, aesthetics, the arts and the creative imagination are so crucial that they cannot be ignored when trying to understand the nature of our postmodern world, and how they contribute to disseminate ideas and attitudes that can spread into the whole fabric of society. No matter how much humans try, the artistic imagination cannot be neglected or overlooked without causing damaging consequences to human life, culture and society.

Therefore, the nature of our postmodern madness and disarray, the way the arts and the mass media have helped in promoting this situation, and the alternative Biblical Christianity can provide in the midst of this situation, are the issues I will be dealing with in this book. And although I cannot say I feel academically qualified to address some of the issues I am about to tackle, I am determined to address them for a few major reasons.

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<sup>8</sup>Himmelfarb, Gertrude. *On Looking into the Abyss*. Alfred A. Knopf. New York. 1994.

First, seeing what is going on in the West at present, I feel strongly that it is imperative that Christians do not give way to frustration, bewilderment and defeat as, it seems to me, many have done in recent years. It might appear that the West has been taken over by corruption, deconstruction, confusion, secularism, depravity, insanity and apostasy; but in the midst of this outrageous situation there is hope because God is still on His throne.

Secondly, having been a political activist, I would like to encourage my dear brothers and sisters, not to fall into the trap of dogmatic social and political activism without even realizing it. Of course, as I have mentioned already, there is truth in the cultural Marxist analysis of Western-capitalist society; and Christians more than anyone else should be caring for the needs of the poor and destitute as well as for the minorities, despised, rejected and marginalized of society; but this should be done in the fear of God and in the spirit of Christ following the teachings and precepts of the Bible.

This is the way the primitive Church<sup>9</sup> did it, and as a consequence they produced a radical transformation of the whole Roman Empire. And this is so because as the Lord Jesus taught and the Bible sets out clearly from the beginning, the real root of the problem for all the social and cultural problems of any society is the evil and corruption of the human heart. It does not matter how much political ideologies endeavor to change the structures of society, the means of production, the distribution of capital, and so on; virtue, honesty, compassion, fairness, humility, love and justice cannot be produced by ideological indoctrination or social and political activism, as we shall see in this book.

Thirdly, I feel I have something to say about these crucial issues because having experienced a life without God and seen firsthand what political ideologies and social activism can provide in terms of offering hope for humanity, and knowing a little bit about the inner workings of the Marxist ideology, I know now that even the best and most upright political ideologies cannot come close to the hope offered by the transforming message of Christ. Not to mention those political *ideologies* from the right or the left that have proven to be dictatorial and deadly in the countries where they have been implemented. Finally, having lived in various Western countries and travelled into a few others; and having done the research I have with the purpose of understanding the post-Christian mindset, and knowing how to be able to present the gospel message to this new mentality, I feel I have something which may be of interests for other Christians who have the same burden and desire.

Finally, despite the fact that this book is written for the average Christian, I do need to touch on some theoretical and intellectual concepts which will be necessary to be able to deal with some of the issues we are going to be tackling; issues which are being debated in the main stream culture today. But I would ask you, dear reader, not to be put off by this. They are not difficult concepts and ideas that cannot be readily processed and understood; but above all, we do need to grasp them to be able to know how to make sense of many of the things going in public discourse nowadays.

So I would just like to say a word about the difference between *ideas* and *ideologies*, even at this stage. Ideas are concepts and mental images; this is why philosophers talk

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<sup>9</sup>I am using the phrase Primitive Church in this book to mean the early or apostolic church, as it is known by most American Christians.

about ideas being pictures that can be seen through the inner sight. It is why they also say that ideas always deal with the lofty things of life. In fact, one of the most prominent of philosophers, *Renè Descartes*, believed that all truthful ideas are an emanation from God. This is because ideas help us interpret, explain and understand us and the world around us. But ideologies are not the same thing; in fact ideologies are prone to blur and obscure reality and snatch it from the clear vision of our inner sight. And this is so because they are preconceived ideas that only see the world as a one-dimensional reality. For an ideologue, everything is over simplified, there are no nuances. Materialism, Scientism, Marxism, Positivism, Trans-humanism, etc., are ideologies or ways of understanding humanity and the world in a one-dimensional way.

Now, the problem with this way of looking at things is that it hinders people from being able to see the vastness and complexity of a specific issue or subject, and of life and reality in general. Now, that is all very well, and we are all entitled to have our own views and opinions about things. But the danger comes when ideologies begin to be seen as the final and definite solution for the social, cultural and political problems of humanity; and they are then adopted by activists, advocates, politicians and visionaries who begin to implement and imposed them forcefully on the rest of the population.

From the point of view of Christians, most of us know that there have been dark and terrible times at various moments in history; times when the whole of society has been at the brink of collapse. But it should be clear for us, even as we start this journey of understanding what has happened to our Western society, that since the first century AD, and even after the Roman Empire fell in the fifth century AD, Christianity emerged as the only possible hope and salvation for humanity. At these grave and obscure times it must be remembered that not only did the Early Church bring about a deep and radical transformation of the lives and hearts of people who were then able to produce the most radical transformation of the whole pagan, decaying and corrupt Roman Empire; but that the message of Christ has appeared repeatedly in the last two thousand years, as the only solid and real solution for those insurmountable conflicts societies have faced.

The Church has not been perfect, as we all know, and sometimes devastating things have been done in the name of Christianity. But if we follow the advice of 2 Chronicles 7:14, and humble ourselves and repent and seek God, he has promised to intervene and bring forgiveness, restoration, and redemption to our land. There might be a feeling at this present hour that God has disappeared from the Western horizon, and that Christians have run out of ideas, but as has happened at other times in history, God is still in control.

We may indeed find ourselves in the twenty-first century at the same point and having the same feelings as Saint Augustine of Hippo had in 410 AD, when he had to witness the collapse of one of the most important civilization in history. But at the same time, let us remember that he was also inspired to write, at that very moment, *The City of God* with the belief that Christianity is the only real hope for the major crises and problems of humanity. God is only waiting for people like Abraham, Moses, Joshua, David, Saint Francis of Assisi, John Hus, Savonarola, Luther, mother Theresa and others, who have “the faith of a mustard seed” to believe that with God they would be able to stand their ground and bring to fruition some of the major feats humankind has accomplished through history.



Lastly, and given the situation in which we find ourselves in the West at present, and taking into account that the culture wars have not only become more and more aggressive and pervasive to the point of affecting the Church itself; I must also say a word concerning my political inclinations.

Sadly enough, as it has become evident, words have either become talismans or, even worse, weapons people use to dismiss someone who dissents or disagrees. Given this situation, I must say and emphasize that I am just a Christian who found in the Lord Jesus the answer for the most crucial questions of life. Therefore I do not call myself a leftist or a right winger or a centrist either, I do have to participate in the business of politics as a citizen of my country who has to decide every four years to whom I am going to give my vote. But I do not belong to any political party and in fact I find lies, false promises and deception in all of them, as well as some good. I agree with Jose Ortega y Gasset who said that one of the many ways of becoming an idiot is by giving your heart completely to a political ideology. According to him the only thing that could claim the complete surrender of the heart is religion.