



EAST-WEST CHURCH REPORT

VOL. 32, NO. 2, 2024

Found in Translation: Protestant Women Academics in Romania

The current issue of the East-West Church Report features interviews with three Protestant women who are active scholars in different parts of Romania, and who draw inspiration from creative arts and innovation in the English-speaking world. Their pursuit of deeper meaning has developed counter to the harsh restrictions on spiritual and intellectual inquiry that were instituted under Communism from 1947 onwards, and their activities now flourish thanks to the new possibilities following the overthrow of Romanian dictator Nicolae Ceaușescu in December 1989.

Your grandfather, Simion Cure, seems key to your own life. Who was he?

My grandfather was born just before the First World War—Romania saw many changes in his time. Prior to the rise of Communism after the Second World War, Romania went through a period of fascism—this was an age of extremism. During the fascist period, it was still possible to be a pastor—there was a Baptist seminary in Bucharest—but the fascists were strongly opposed to Protestants as they were solely in favor of the Orthodox Church. I discovered in archival documents that my grandfather was beaten by members of the Iron Guard [Romanian fascist paramilitary movement]. After seminary he started off ministering to some smaller Baptist churches before eventually becoming pastor of a larger congregation in Reșița, an industrial city in southwestern Romania. That was where Communism found him.

Here too, a lot of my knowledge comes not from oral history, but from archival documents, as I was able to access my grandfather's secret police files in 2017. In the early Communist years, the *Securitate* secret police were trying to recruit pastors

“What was intended for evil was used for good”:

An Interview with Monica Cure

An active member of the Anglican congregation in the Romanian capital, Bucharest, Dr. Monica Cure is the granddaughter of Pastor Simion Cure [1914-90], a Baptist prisoner-of-conscience in Communist Romania. Raised in the United States, she earned her PhD in Comparative Literature from the University of Southern California. She was subsequently an assistant professor at Biola University in Los Angeles, where she taught a curriculum including literature, theology, philosophy, and political thought, spanning Plato to Virginia Woolf. Monica is an internationally published poet and award-winning translator [www.monicaure.com].

In mid-June 2024 the editor of the East-West Church Report interviewed Monica about her multifaceted experience of Romanian church life and culture. She spoke from Bucharest via Skype.



Monica Cure (Source: M. CURE) and her English translation of Romanian writer Liliana Corobca's forthcoming novel, *Too Great A Sky*.



as informants and to make them amenable to their policies. While my grandfather tried not to make them angry, he definitely did not give them anything that was of use. The *Securitate* started to put pressure on him, but he refused to do things such as close the church at certain times. Ultimately, through informants inside the church, the secret police were able to pin possession of illegal literature upon my grandfather, as well as the catch-all accusation of working against the regime. He was sentenced to seven years in prison, of which he served five. He was released under a general amnesty in 1964.

(continued on page 2)

Cure Interview (continued from page 1)

What was the illegal literature?

Bizarrely, it was a Romanian-American publication that I grew up reading and perhaps finding not so interesting! [Laughs.] Contact with Americans was considered subversive.

Was your grandfather able to continue his ministry after his release from prison?

Only unofficially. Like many former political prisoners, he could not find work except for the lowest kind, so he became a pest control worker. Ironically, that gave him the clearance to travel across the country, so he was able to speak to various church groups. That is why so many Romanians know about him. He also had a special ministry for younger people—he would take them out hiking in the mountains, where they would have time for fellowship.

Do you remember your grandfather?

Yes, but just childhood memories—I was 10 or 11 when he died in 1990. Actually, it was really interesting to get to know him through the eyes of the enemy by reading between the lines in the *Securitate* files. The secret police made several attempts to recruit him. At one point, they think things sound promising: They describe my grandfather as very smart and a good family man. The only thing is, he is not very punctual! [Laughs.] Reading that, I thought: “Yeah, I don’t think he would be in a hurry to pay a visit to you!”

Did your grandfather stay long in Romania after his release from prison?

Many more years, until 1980. My father, Mircea Cure, was raised there, and I was born there.

Why did your family decide to leave?

There are several narratives—this is what makes family history, as well as history in general, so fascinating. After she was widowed early, my maternal grandmother eventually married a Romanian American who already lived in the United States. I believe that family connection allowed Grandfather Simion to



(Left to right) Monica’s father Mircea Cure, aunt Adriana Dragoi, grandmother Ana Cure, and grandfather, Pastor Simion Cure (Source: M. CURE)

leave Romania. Another narrative thread is that my grandfather was called over to become a missionary in San Diego by Romanian Americans there; at some point he certainly became an official church worker among Romanian Americans in California. When I went to Los Angeles for grad school, I found an entire circle of people who knew my grandfather and had stories about him that they wanted to share with me.

As I learn more about Communism in Romania, my sense is that the 1980s were the worst period of all. In my grandfather’s letters, however—the secret police were still opening his mail, of course—I found one passage where he tells my parents that things are not easy in the States either: “When I think about how things are over there in Romania, I’m horrified, but when I see how things are over here, I’m also horrified, so I really don’t know what to tell you about making the choice about whether to leave.” My father was renowned for disapproving of Romanians who left the country, and would say: “If everyone leaves, who is going to hold down the fort?” Then at some point my mother apparently started feeling that God was telling her that they needed to go. She was reluctant to tell my father, but he was getting the same sense, and they finally told one another. They left for the States when I was two years old.

Was your upbringing in the United States strongly culturally Romanian?

Yes—there is a large Romanian diaspora in Detroit, where we went. My maternal grandmother had already settled there, and the Detroit area had several Romanian Baptist and other kinds of Romanian Evangelical churches. Our family social circle consisted of other Romanian Americans.

Was your father also a pastor?

No. One of the really terrible corollaries of having a parent in prison was not just that you lost a parent for that period but that you were also blacklisted—your file was no longer clean. You couldn’t go to high school [Editor’s note: age 15 onwards]—you had to leave to become a worker



First Baptist Church, Reșița, in 2019 (Source: M. CURE)

immediately. By the grace of God, a family friend learned that a music high school in a nearby city needed viola players and that they were not going to examine people's files too closely. My father and this family friend then crammed to learn the viola—my grandfather was musical and music was always part of their family. When the question “Where is your father?” came up, he said that he did not know, which was true because they kept moving him from prison to prison. That is how my father was able to go to high school and then conservatory once things became less hardline after 1964. Playing and teaching viola also came in very handy when we moved to the States, as my father did not then speak English.

Growing up in the United States, did it feel like you existed in two separate cultures?

I was very conscious of my difference. The process of being transplanted from Romania to the States resulted in lightbulb memories at a very early age, as I sensed that something traumatic was happening. To be honest, for me the two cultures offered correctives to one another. What I loved about the Romanian church was the feeling of connection, family, and trust. In my American context, on the other hand—school, basically—there was a bigger world of possibility and, especially as I got older, the sense of what it meant to be an intellectual woman. The ambition that I was able to pursue came as a result of my American culture.

Was the émigré Romanian Baptist community rather traditional?

Definitely, and especially at that time. A subset had emigrated earlier, but it was still a rather new diaspora, with many newly there due to Communism. There was very much a “batten down the hatches” feeling.

Did the women tend to take inconspicuous roles?

Yes, except if they somehow managed to carve out a niche for themselves! [Laughs.]

How did you come to return to live in Romania?

I loved Romania ever since I first came back for a three-week trip with my mother and sister in 1994, aged 14. Many things suddenly made sense: the ways in which I was different, references my parents used to make. I spoke a language that no one else seemed to speak, and all of a sudden I was in a whole country of it, with its own literature and music. It just felt so healing. At first, I came back every other year, then in 2003 I came to Romania on the Fulbright Scholar Program. Later, being a professor at Biola University meant that I did not visit so often. Then, in 2017, I took an early sabbatical and came back on another Fulbright scholarship. By then, the situation in Romania had changed a lot since I first lived here in 2003—not only was I enjoying it as always, but it suddenly seemed like I could live here. But *could* I live here? I realized that, if I were to have a major life shift and leave academia, there would be no better place for me to live. So, after my Fulbright finished in

2019, I decided to move to Bucharest and focus on my writing.

You are a professional translator from Romanian to English.

Yes, I am one of a few professional Romanian to English literary translators. Perhaps you know of Nicolae Steinhardt? On my first Fulbright, I discovered his work, *The Journal of Joy* [Editor's note: Also known in English as *The Diary of Happiness*, this is a compilation of reflections by Steinhardt, a Romanian intellectual and later monk who converted to Orthodox Christianity in 1960 in a Communist prison.] That is what started my journey into translation—I began to translate it as a devotional exercise. Thanks to my work as a professor, I became familiar with all the material that Steinhardt had read as well as a much better translator, so I realized that I would be able to translate it well. I went several times to Rohia Monastery where he became a monk—it is in a very remote part of Maramureș County in far northwestern Romania. The monastery holds the rights to his literary work, and I am now trying to secure a contract to publish it. I am obsessed with this book: It is a masterpiece, and I really want to get it into as many hands as possible. Parallels with [American Catholic monk and theologian] Thomas Merton keep coming to mind—I think it could have that kind of cross-over appeal.

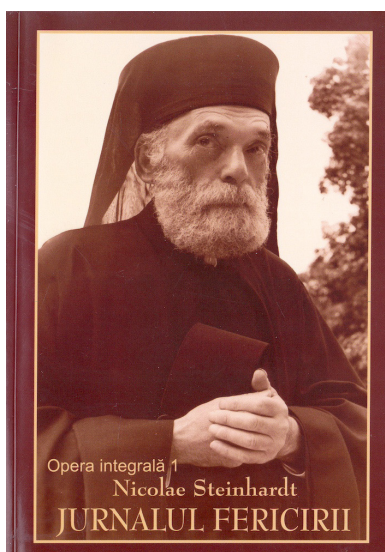
Currently, I work especially closely with a Romanian-Moldovan writer, Liliana Corobca—I have translated all three of her novels into English. For the first novel, *The Censor's Notebook*, I won the Oxford-Weidenfeld Translation Prize in 2023. We will soon launch her third novel, *Too Great A Sky* [<https://www.sevenstories.com/books/4650-too-great-a-sky>]. All three of Liliana's novels

are wonderful—she has a brilliant way of writing that is both profound and funny—but this third one is especially relevant. It is about the Soviet deportation to Kazakhstan of Romanians from Northern Bucovina, a region which is now part of Ukraine. In it, the narrator—an Orthodox Christian—describes how she survived the experience of Kazakhstan because of her faith: God is present throughout the entire novel. Liliana is perhaps better known in Romania as a researcher at the The Institute for the Investigation of the Crimes of Communism and the Memory of the Romanian Exile, which was founded in Bucharest in 2009.

Also in Bucharest, you are active in the Anglican Church of the Resurrection?

Yes, I am now one of the churchwardens there. When I moved to Romania, I was open to any and all church recommendations that people gave me. They often had something beautiful about them, but I am both joking and serious when I say that the Anglican Church was the only one where nothing made me mad! [Laughs.] For me it was a

(continued on page 4)



Romanian edition of *The Journal of Joy* by Archimandrite Nicolae Steinhardt

Cure Interview *(continued from page 3)*

very non-coercive church, while friendly enough.

Does the Anglican parish have a long presence in Bucharest?

Yes, since the middle of the 19th century. It was neither confiscated nor converted for another purpose during the Communist period, thanks to diplomatic relations with the United Kingdom. I think now is the best time in its history—we have a full-time priest, Fr. Nevsky Everett, who is supported by the church as a Romanian employee and is also the official Anglican *apocrisarios*, or representative, to the Romanian Orthodox Patriarchate. Previously, full-time priests came for very limited terms and were more or less based in the U.K. The congregation of around 50 is growing—it is an international group, and includes quite a few Romanians.

You are also an internationally published poet. One of your translations is of a Christmas carol written by your grandfather, Simion—do you follow a similar poetic tradition?

My grandfather wrote religious poetry—a volume of his verse was published by the Romanian Missionary Society, which was greatly appreciated by the Baptist community. When he wrote it, he couldn't publish in Romania legally—he would recite his verses at gatherings. His poetry is very different from the kind that I write, in that it has rhyme and meter. Also, while Romanian is making its way into my poetry, I write in English.

Your grandfather's Christmas carol was set to music by Nicolae Moldoveanu, a member of the Lord's Army Orthodox renewal movement who was in prison during the same years [www.anglicanchurchbucharest.org/blog/a-special-carol]. While they did not meet in prison, were any of your grandfather's fellow prisoners also Christian?

Yes. My second visit to Romania, when I was 16, was with my father—it was the first time that he had been back since the 1989 Revolution. We met with Fr. Silvestru Augustin Prunduș, a Greek Catholic priest who was probably my grandfather's closest friend in prison—that was why my father was so keen to



Anglican Church of the Resurrection,
Bucharest (M. CURE)

seek him out. During the Communist era, the Greek Catholic Church was completely outlawed in Romania, but Fr. Prunduș became quite senior in the Greek Catholic hierarchy following the 1989 Revolution.

Are the Communist-era files of the Securitate secret police open to the general public?

Monica Cure's translation of "La iesele," a Christmas carol written by her grandfather, Pastor Simion Cure:

At the Manger

Let me come to kneel before you,
See you laid within the manger—
Baby from a world so different
Now exposed to cold and danger.

You I worship, little baby,
You that heaven did inhabit,
Lost in humble adoration,
Traveler to our lowly planet.

Magi brought you gifts of fine myrrh,
Frankincense and precious gold,
But the tears of true repentance
Are the only treasure that I hold.

Now I bring them here before you,
Full of awe and sorely sorry,
Little child come down from heaven,
Come for me, the cross to carry.

They are if you are a researcher with the right credentials—you have to make an application. The first time I applied to see my grandfather's file was in 2003, during my first Fulbright visit to Romania. I knew he had to have a file because he was in prison, but the response I received was that he didn't have one. Some of the files did get lost, so there could have been extenuating circumstances. Then, in around 2013, a letter addressed to me arrived at my uncle's house in the city where I did my Fulbright, granting me access to my grandfather's files! Being a professor in Los Angeles, I could not just hop onto a plane and go into the archives. When I received my second Fulbright in 2017, however, that was priority.

When I finally saw the files, there had been a couple of other researchers who had been able to see them. Unfortunately, one of them had written a book that slashed through everything without understanding nuance. In my grandfather's files there are around three pages where the *Securitate* tried to recruit him, and he says nothing. Due to that, this researcher had concluded that my grandfather was an informant. If that is your conclusion, on the basis of those few pages within a thick stack of files, then you are ultimately not telling the truth. I later met with that researcher to try to understand—I found him to be a limited black-and-white thinker for whom I felt rather sorry.

Have you written anything about the content of the files yourself?

I'm planning to do more. What I have done so far was for the centenary of the founding of the Baptist church in Reșița where my grandfather served. They had invited all the children of former pastors to say a few words. My father wanted me to come, and I agreed as long as I could have a few minutes of his time to talk about what I had found in the secret police files. He—and the organizers—agreed, so I spoke for around 10 minutes about what I had found, as well as how my grandfather's imprisonment had affected me and my family. I then offered forgiveness and hope that the church would lead a process of reconciliation, redemption, and truth. It

was one of the most meaningful experiences of my life. There were over 300 people at the church that day, and everyone thanked me afterwards and commented that what I had said was really necessary for healing. [In Romanian, the church's recording of the event is available at: www.youtube.com/watch?v=3AmqHk39bLo. Monica's speech is approximately 41 minutes in.]

What was your impression of how the congregation regards that past?

They don't talk about it—Romanians, including Romanian Christians, prefer to let sleeping dogs lie. That is what people thanked me for—they said that this was stuff that was always there under the surface and had caused a lot of heartache, even leading some people away from the church because it had not been dealt with well. To be able to bring it out into the open and to offer forgiveness...

...Specifically for the fact that your grandfather had ended up going to prison?

Yes, and everything that meant afterwards, because something like that has a ripple effect upon many things later on. I was able to talk about how God redeemed that. He also used it for good—what was intended for evil was used for good.

Did the members of the Reșița church who preferred not to talk about this feel some responsibility for not having defended your grandfather?

I think that's part of it.

Did they also dismiss it as something that happened a long time ago?

This was a fear other people had expressed to me when I told them of my plans, but the church in Reșița completely understood what I was doing. The whole "long time ago" thing doesn't really hold for me. I feel like that is an excuse because it is painful and there is a collective sense of guilt. When I gave my address, I was very careful to give a complete picture of what I had found in the investigative police files—to say that there were also people in the church who helped my grandfather, even though that was a risk for them.

Were there also people in the church who actively denounced him?

Yes, denounced him and did so for their own gain. There is a spectrum when it comes to informing, and that is close to the worst end.

When you addressed the church, were there therefore people in attendance who had been on that spectrum of behavior, but who just carried on after the 1989 Revolution without addressing the issue?

Yes, and what this other researcher wrote did not help.

How does your experience of Romanian émigré culture contrast generally with what you have encountered now that you are living in Bucharest?

It is quite, quite different. Change in Romania—

especially over the past few decades—has been absolutely astronomical. From having periodic visits starting in the 1990s to living here today, I have seen change in the course of a single lifetime to the point where Romania has become a very cosmopolitan place, even while still relatively homogenous in certain demographic ways. Yet now, for instance, there are migrant workers coming to Romania—that used to be something unheard of. The young people, especially in the cities, are really quite sophisticated.

Do you find significant differences in attitude towards the Communist past, depending upon generation?

Even among the older generation, there is a split. Sadly, for me, there is quite a sizeable subset that is nostalgic for Communist times. There are people who never really opposed the regime and who lived fairly comfortable lives—except for the

1980s, when nobody was that comfortable. Or perhaps they were comfortable because their family was in a higher position in the Communist Party. Still, the majority now feels that it is better to be free and not to live in fear.

As for the younger generation: I don't think that they are particularly knowledgeable—again, because there is so much that has not been said. However, there are various people and organizations that are passionate about wanting to pass on that knowledge to the next generation, and to do so in a balanced way—not simply to vilify the past, because that, ironically, can serve to

perpetuate some elements of it.

Opened as a museum in 2016, the extravagant mansion in Bucharest that belonged to Nicolae Ceaușescu [Romania's last Communist dictator] is presented to the public without any negative evaluation of his rule.

The first time I went there, the tour guide was dryly sarcastic, but the second time I went I ended up stopping the tour! I said to the guide, "Could you please tell people that this is ugly, and what happened back then was not okay?" He replied, "Well, that is a matter of taste," so I said, "No, it is not." Politically, Romania is what American anthropologist Katherine Verdery has called "an incomplete transition." There are so many continuities between those who held power during Communism and those who hold it today, although the fact that people who have lived abroad are coming back means that there is a degree of genuine change.

Is there now a wave of people returning from Western Europe?

Yes, I'm certainly seeing it. Many people came back during the Covid pandemic. I was recently with Romanian friends raised in the same Baptist tradition—our parents knew each other. They live in London, where they have high-powered positions in different spheres. They are now keen to create a Christian spiritual retreat center here in Romania—there is something about Romania that keeps calling them back. ♦



Golden bathroom at the Ceaușescu Mansion Museum, Bucharest (G. FAGAN)

“I had no idea who C.S. Lewis was, but I received the answers to all my questions regarding the existence of God”:

An Interview with Denise Vasiliu

Dr. Denise (Daniela) Vasiliu teaches English at the Alexandru Ioan Cuza University in the city of Iași, the regional center of mountainous northeastern Romania. Originally from the town of Piatra Neamț some 100 miles to the west, she is an active member of Iași's Adora Christi Baptist Church, where her husband, Florin, is pastor.

Over the past decade, Denise has become familiar internationally to scholars and enthusiasts of the popular British Christian writer C.S. Lewis (1898-1963). Together with two female colleagues—Professor Emerita Rodica Albu and Dr. Teodora Ghivirigă—she has organized a series of conferences devoted to the life and legacy of C.S. Lewis, as well as kindred Christian writers such as J.R.R. Tolkien and George MacDonald. Held in Iași from 9-11 November 2023, the sixth and most recent of these events—“C.S. Lewis—The Re-enchanted Academic”—drew 45 specialists from 12 countries. The initiative is unique in Central and Eastern Europe, and all the more remarkable given that C.S. Lewis's works were practically unknown in Romania before the downfall of the Communist dictatorship of Nicolae Ceaușescu in late 1989—even until the early 2000s.

In early December 2023 the editor of the East-West Church Report met Dr. Vasiliu in Iași to learn more about her passion for Lewis's work and her efforts to share his legacy in and beyond Romania. The interview took place in English.



Denise Vasiliu (G. FAGAN)

How did you encounter Christianity and the works of C.S. Lewis?

My brother and I used to celebrate Easter and Christmas with my mother, but she never attended church—maybe for the Easter service, but Christmas was a very small celebration under Communism, almost forbidden. In early 1989, when I was in my twenties, a young person in Piatra Neamț who had converted to Evangelical Christianity from a non-practicing Orthodox family told me about the Lord Jesus and gave me some tracts to read. I asked my mother if she believed in Jesus, and she replied, “Yes, of course.” I then asked who He was, and she said, “I don’t know.” That was how illiterate we were. We had no idea—I had never seen a Bible in my life. I accepted an invitation to attend a wonderful Baptist church that had just started meeting at a small house in Piatra Neamț. There I started to receive answers to my questions through the sermons, but I found it very hard to reason that God exists. In my heart, I was somehow very afraid that my life would change completely.

Then someone gave me Lewis's *Mere Christianity*. It was a miracle that there was a copy in Piatra Neamț—it was an edition that had been translated and printed in Wheaton, Illinois, by the Romanian Missionary Society and smuggled into Romania along with Bibles. I had no idea who C.S. Lewis was, but I received the answers to all my questions regarding the existence of God. Suddenly, everything made sense.

In early autumn 1989, not long before the [December] Revolution, I had been very depressed, because my teenage dreams of love, truth, and beauty were in ruins—those years

under Communism were terrible and ugly. In winter we lived in severe cold and darkness, and we had very little food. Because of the secret police, people said, “Truth? There is no such thing”—everybody was scared of saying what they were really thinking. It also seemed as if there was no love, because everybody was cheating on each other. Then, as I read *Mere Christianity* and the Gospels, I reached the point where Jesus says, “I am the Truth.” I remembered that I had written in my diary that I believed that truth did exist, and that it would be like a key unlocking the mystery of life and the universe. I then realized that what I was looking for was His person, not a concept of truth. So I knelt and prayed: “If You exist—I don’t believe, but if You do—I definitely want You to be in my heart.” Why would anyone reject God if He is love, truth, and beauty? Nothing happened immediately, but after about a week I realized that all the unbearable emptiness inside my heart had somehow disappeared.

What was it about *Mere Christianity* that particularly resonated with you?

It was the first time that all the pieces came together and made sense—it was so coherent and clear. Somehow I was able to trust and hope that God exists before I had received the Lord in my heart. I accepted it with my head, and that had been the most difficult thing. Lewis experienced something similar in his conversion.

Following the Revolution my husband—who had converted in 1988 through the same young person in Piatra

Neamț—left to study theology at the Baptist Seminary in Bucharest. Women were not admitted to study theology, and for a whole year I cried that this was not fair. I begged God to do something. The following year, the Faculty of Baptist Theology opened within the University of Bucharest. Previously there had just been a small seminary for training pastors, but the introduction of religious education as a compulsory subject in state schools following the Revolution meant that new theology faculties were required to train teaching staff.

A specifically Baptist theological faculty must be a rarity in Eastern Europe.

Absolutely, it's unique. In addition to Orthodox theology, the university also has a Faculty of Roman Catholic Theology. There is a small Pentecostal Institute, but it is not part of the university.

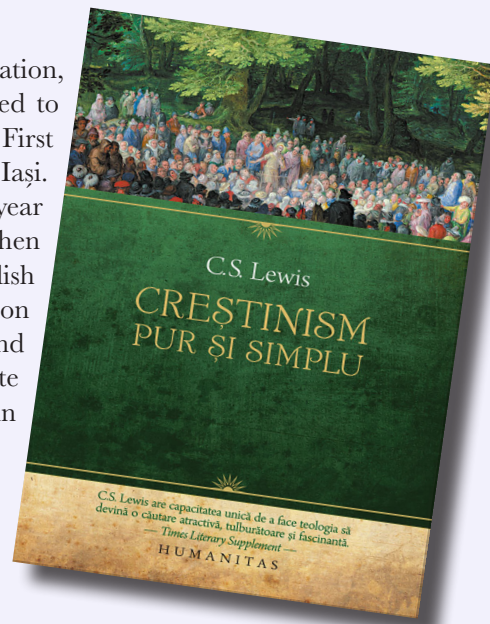
When my husband was in the second year, I enrolled at Bucharest University to study Baptist theology along with English in the Faculty of Foreign Languages and Literatures. I chose English purely because it would help us in our theological training and to be in contact with the outside world. I had not learned English because it seemed like a dead language when I was in school. In the years before the Revolution, they cut off almost all contact with English-language music and movies. I was one of only three girls in the university English class.

You must also have been among the very first women studying Baptist theology in Romania.

Yes, which was an amazing thing. It was God's provision—theology and English gave me the whole foundation for what I'm doing now. In my English classes I realized that the lecturers would often misinterpret things—they were not able to recognize any Christian elements because they had no biblical knowledge. You cannot study literature or philosophy without that understanding. I thought, "This is a mission field, actually."

After his graduation, my husband was invited to serve as a pastor at the First Baptist Church here in Iași. I stayed for one more year in Bucharest and then started teaching English and religious education at Richard Wurmbrand College, a private Christian school here in Iași.

Romanian edition of *Mere Christianity* by C.S. Lewis, published in 2019



After 1989 did you encounter other works by C.S. Lewis besides *Mere Christianity*?

No. I didn't hear about him at all until the movies appeared. In 2006 the first movie, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, was launched at a big cinema in Iași. That was when I first encountered *The Chronicles of Narnia*.

A group of Romanian intellectuals who had managed to study in exile abroad returned to Romania after the Revolution—one of them, Andrei Pleșu, was even Minister of Culture from 1989-91. Their goal was to establish a publishing house that would translate 10 "forbidden" authors into Romanian, and one of those was C.S. Lewis. But I was not aware of that back then. We used to be pretty isolated—life was hard, ministry very difficult, we had three children, and I was teaching.

I also completed a Master's degree program, travelling to Bucharest for classes twice a month for two years. When I came to write my thesis, I said that I wished to write at the border between literature and theology. The sad answer from one of my professors was that I would not be able to find a good enough theologian in the sphere of literature! In the end, I wrote on the doctrine of God's sovereignty in Puritan thinking, still in my English language subject area.

While at home during those years, I watched the movies and read the books in *The Chronicles of Narnia* series. I began to think about applying to do a PhD in literature—something interdisciplinary. I thought about proposing a Christian writer: "What about C.S. Lewis?" Someone gave me the number of Rodica Albu, who was at that time professor of linguistics in the Department of English at the Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iași. She was interested in C.S. Lewis and encouraged me to apply immediately. I passed the entrance examination and enrolled in the PhD program. The title of my doctoral thesis is *C. S. Lewis at the Border Between Christian Spirituality and Fiction*.

Everything was possible thanks to Professor Albu. Like me, she discovered C.S. Lewis in 1989 just prior to the Revolution, through one of her students who is now my
(continued on page 8)



C.S. Lewis literature at the 2023 C.S. Lewis Conference in Iași
(Source: www.facebook.com/C.S.LewisConferenceIasiRomania)

colleague, Dr. Teodora Ghivirigă. While visiting Bucharest on a very cold day, Teodora went to the British Council library—she tells how it was warm and smelled of oranges at a time when we couldn't find anything like oranges or chocolate in Romania—and asked for book recommendations. She was given a copy of *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* to take home. She gave it to Professor Albu, who fell in love with the book, translated it, and managed to publish it in 1993. We believe Professor Albu's to be the very first edition in Romanian.

How did the C.S. Lewis conferences that you organize in Iași develop from your studies?

The same year that I enrolled in the PhD program, my family visited Pastor Stuart and Jill Briscoe in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. When Jill heard about my PhD, she said I must go to the Marion E. Wade Center at Wheaton College [Editor's note: a research center devoted to "seven British Christian authors who provide a distinctive blend of intellect, imagination, and faith": C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, Dorothy L. Sayers, George MacDonald, G.K. Chesterton, Owen Barfield, and Charles Williams.] There I met the then director, Christopher W. Mitchell, who exclaimed, "No way! A PhD on C.S. Lewis in a post-Communist country! At a state university!" I did not realize at the time how surprising that was. The following year, 2013, there were several commemorative events to mark 50 years since Lewis's death—a summer school in Oxford and a conference hosted by the Inklings Society in Germany. [Editor's note: The Inklings were an Oxford-based informal literary discussion group that included Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien.] When I returned from them to Romania, I asked, "What about allowing me to organize an event here?" My professor agreed, but said that the university could not help financially, and added, "If you have 10 people, consider it a success." "Ten speakers, or 10 attendees?" I wondered—but I didn't have the courage to ask.

By a miracle, a family in the States offered to support the conference financially. Michael Ward, a key Lewis scholar,

accepted an invitation, as did a German professor, a local translator, and a few others. By another miracle, the then British ambassador also agreed to come. [Editor's note: Martin Harris, as of 2023 British ambassador in Ukraine.] When people heard that the British ambassador was coming, everybody came, including the rector of the university! The British ambassador spoke movingly about his first-edition copy of *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, which his grandmother had read to his mother, his mother to him, and he was now reading to his own children.

Quite unexpectedly, the event proved a great success: In total, around 150 people attended. The following year the university asked me to organize a second conference. The fact that we keep it strictly academic means that we have had no hindrances whatsoever. We never talk about beliefs from confessional points of view, only from Lewis's point of view, and we always include atheist perspectives because it is an academic conversation. We are also able to make the conferences interdisciplinary—this year we covered literature, history, philosophy, theology, psychology, and law.

Have the conferences focused upon particular themes?

The first one, in 2013, was called "The Romantic Rationalist: Life, Joy, and Imagination in the Work of C.S. Lewis." It focused on the idea that, in Christianity, Lewis discovered a way to reconcile his reason with his heart. The following year was "C. S. Lewis—Life and Legacy," which was more introductory, as Lewis was still not well known here. After that, we decided to hold a conference every two years, as it was too much to organize annually. The conferences in 2016 and 2018 were both called "C.S. Lewis and Kindred Spirits," which gave us the possibility to consider other Christian writers. Here in Romania, for example, there was a famous Orthodox priest, Fr. Nicolae Steinhardt [1912-89], who wrote a book called *Jurnalul Fericirii*, or *The Diary of Happiness*. We had a professor talk about the fact that Steinhardt was influenced by Lewis's *Surprised by Joy*. [Editor's note: See Laura Carmen Cuțitaru, "From C.S. Lewis' Joy to Nicolae Steinhardt's Happiness," *Linguaculture* vol. 5, no. 2 (December 2014), 99-103, <https://www.shakespeare.linguaculture.ro/images/stories/22014/cutitaru.pdf>.] The other Inklings are mostly not well known, nor are kindred writers Dorothy L. Sayers and George MacDonald.



Romanian edition of *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* by C.S. Lewis, published in 1993



Romanian musicians at the 2018 C.S. Lewis Conference in Iași
(Source: www.facebook.com/C.S.LewisConferenceIasiRomania)

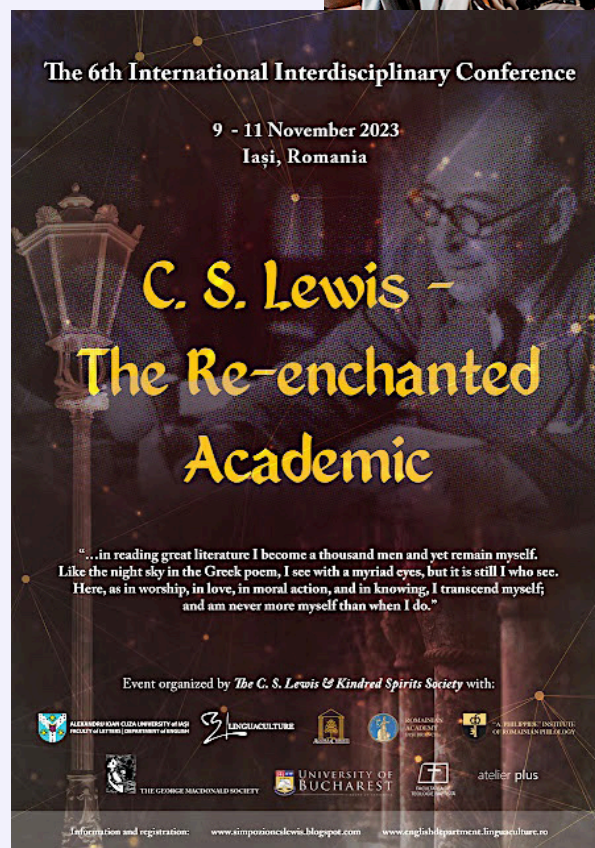
The recent pandemic must have affected your activities.

Yes. In 2020 we organized the first of many online events, “C.S. Lewis and Kindred Spirits Connected.” In 2021 we hosted a hybrid conference, “C.S. Lewis and Kindred Spirits: Of This and Other Worlds.” Some people attended in person, some via Zoom. In recent years, online events have allowed us to feature speakers unable to attend in person, including Oxford-based Orthodox Metropolitan Kallistos Ware [d. 2022] and California-based Orthodox priest Fr. Andrew Cuneo, as well as Oxford-based scholar Alister McGrath and Cambridge-based scholar Malcolm Guite, who are both Anglicans.

With this year’s conference, “C.S. Lewis—The Re-Enchanted Academic,” we celebrated our tenth anniversary. The event has grown—over 200 people attended from 12 countries, and this was the first year in which we hosted not only speakers, but people who traveled simply in order to attend the conference.

Is C.S. Lewis now a popular author within Romanian churches?

He was always on the radar of those who are keen readers, but he has become especially popular among young people. In our Baptist church we work a lot with young people who are very interested in Lewis—they all came to the recent conference. We are now planning to start a reading group to study *Mere Christianity*. Such reading groups could be for people from any background, similar to the [Oxford University] Socratic Club which Lewis chaired. His purpose was simply to present Christianity. You cannot force people into belief, but at least we can give them the opportunity to discover that Christianity is not something related



The 2023 C.S. Lewis Conference in Iași
(Source: www.facebook.com/C.S.LewisConferenceIasiRomania)

to a certain church, or to tradition, or to old thinking. They should have the right to have the resources to support them in their search for meaning, even if they never choose Christianity.

I now assist two students doing PhDs on C.S. Lewis. Today it has become easier to get hold of resources—I have many specialized books on Lewis which were displayed at our conference, and I was able to send some to a student in Bucharest who is doing a Master’s degree on Lewis. Our dream would be to open a dedicated center for all these resources. That would be unique in Central and Eastern Europe.

Poster for the 2023 C.S. Lewis Conference in Iași

(Source: www.facebook.com/C.S.LewisConferenceIasiRomania)



Participants in the 2023 C.S. Lewis Conference in Iași
(Source: www.facebook.com/C.S.LewisConferenceIasiRomania)

*Editor’s note: Dr. Paul E. Michelson of Huntington University, Indiana, has written a detailed paper on the emergence of Romanian interest in the works of C.S. Lewis. See Paul E. Michelson, “C.S. Lewis Comes to Romania, 1977-2022,” in Ion Bolovan and Melania-Gabriela Cioț, eds., *Românii și România în context European. Istorie și diplomatie. Omagiu profesorului Vasile Pușcaș la împlinirea vârstei de 70 ani, Cluj-Napoca: Editura Academia Română/Centrul de Studii Transilvane*, 2022, 985-1004, https://pmichelson.com/michelson_csl_comes_to_romania_2022.pdf.*

*Also freely accessible online, an earlier article by Emanuel Conțac of the Pentecostal Theological Institute in Bucharest similarly considers the reception of C.S. Lewis in post-Communist Romania. See Emanuel Conțac, “The Reception of C.S. Lewis in Post-Communist Romania,” *Linguaculture* vol. 5, no. 2 (December 2014), 123-41, <https://journal.linguaculture.ro/index.php/home/article/view/55/45>. ♦*

“If you don’t have something that helps you orient yourself, you will drift all over the place”:

An Interview with Rodica Mocan

Dr. Rodica Mocan is a Baptist from Cluj (officially Cluj-Napoca), the largest city in the Transylvania region of northwestern Romania. For more than two decades, she has taught journalism, cinematography, and new media arts at Babeş-Bolyai University in the city. Dr. Mocan holds PhDs in Sociology as well as Theater and Performing Arts from the same university. In November 2023 the editor of the East-West Church Report met her in Cluj to hear about her broad experience navigating dynamic changes within the spheres of church, media, and education. The interview took place in English.

Were you raised in a Baptist church?

Yes. In fact, the very first Baptist church in our town was started in the house of my great-grandfather. Following the First World War, a young man called Ioan Dan who had fought in the war and somehow become Christian was working at the agricultural university in Mănăştur, which is now a suburb of Cluj, but at that time was a nearby village. He began going into the village to try to evangelize the local people, but they were strongly opposed, sometimes even violently. My great-grandfather was among them. Following a serious fight, he and a few others ended up in jail. He was converted by a Reformed pastor he met there. After my great-grandfather was released, he went looking for Ioan Dan—he knew he worked at the agricultural university—and told him, “Now you can come to my house and talk to me about God.” He gathered his family, opened a house church, and that is how a Baptist community was started. Very soon they organized women’s meetings, a brass band, choir, and so on. In 1926 they built the church that is now known as the First Baptist Church in Cluj. My parents went there, and I grew up there. There are now more churches that started from the First Baptist Church, and I attend one of the more contemporary ones.

Rodica Mocan
(Source:
R.MOCAN)



Does the historical variety of church traditions in Transylvania generally mean that there is tolerance towards Protestants here?

Yes and no. Romania has a majority Orthodox population, but Transylvania became part of Romania only in 1918. Before that it was part of the Austrian and then Austro-Hungarian Empires, so there are greater Catholic and Reformed influences here. Historically, these remained within the German and Hungarian minorities who were the rulers, while the general population was Orthodox. But you do find more Protestant communities in Transylvania.

Protestant churches were legal at all times, even during Communism—Romania was party to the relevant charters on human rights, and so churches could not be closed down completely. But they were *severely* controlled—the authorities tried to crush them by persecuting their members. It was very hard to become a professor, for example—you would be kicked out for being a believer. That was not effective, however: On the contrary, I think the churches strived more, and we had more members then than we do right now.

Today, as part of the European Union, I think we are part of a free-thinking country. There is more freedom and openness. Locally, there are sometimes personal animosities: There are certain Orthodox priests who not only discourage but also incite their people against Protestants. But there are also other areas where they respect one another and participate in each other’s events. We also see a surge in more devout Orthodoxy that we didn’t see before. I do hope more Protestants will stop thinking of themselves as Christians and of everyone else as non-Christians, as it used to be. During Communism especially, the Orthodox Church was perceived as very much a formality: People would go there to get married, but they didn’t want to have anything more to do with church. That is why the Protestant community developed this language of their being Christian versus the rest



Construction of the First Baptist Church in Cluj
(Source: <https://bisericamanastur.ro/>)

being non-Christian. This needs to be abandoned, especially as there are now many Orthodox who are even more devout than some of the Protestants.

Growing up in the Baptist community, did you personally encounter any pressure from the state authorities during the Communist period?

Yes, I did. Within the Protestant—and especially Baptist—Church, you are baptized and become a full member only when you are mature. But my family was very involved in our church—my father was a choir leader—so even before I had my own convictions, I grew up absolutely terrified that there would come a moment when I would be confronted and recant the convictions of my parents. I wasn't confronted, but I was constantly afraid, because there were political discussions in high school every week. Probably more than 50 percent of the time, these were about looking down upon and mocking those who were Christians. There was a lot of indoctrination against the church, so you felt threatened all the time.

When I was baptized a few months before graduating high school, I told myself that from now on, I would need to own my faith for myself. In my third year at university—that would be 1984—I was confronted privately by the dean. He stressed that it was important for everyone to be discreet about their faith, and that all he wanted was for me to sign a piece of paper saying that I would not go to church anymore. He also said that in reality no one would check up on me, so that I could do whatever I wanted. He was very shrewd in the way he put this, and I didn't understand at the time—only many years after Communism—that it was one of the ways in which the *Securitate* [secret police] controlled people. What he wanted me to sign would have been a commitment of collaboration. You would then have to tell who else went to church, and so on. In addition, there was a very discreet threat of being expelled—it was around a two-hour discussion in all.

I remember listening to the dean and saying to myself, “This is it, this is the moment you have been fearing all this time.” I also realized how important it was for me that my parents were also Christians—if I were expelled, I would not lose my relationship with them. Very often young people had to choose this: their family over their commitment to God. In the end, when the dean said that nobody else would know, I replied:



Memorial in Cluj for 27 people killed during December 1989 protests against the Communist regime (G. FAGAN)



Cluj Opera House, built in the early 1900s when the city lay within the Austro-Hungarian Empire (G. FAGAN)

“I would know, and I wouldn't be able to sleep at night. I won't sign.” In the event, nothing happened after that, and I was able to graduate without a problem.

Were you involved in the 1989 Revolution that overthrew the Communist regime?

Not directly—my husband and I did not go out into the streets. We had two small children at the time, and it was clear that people were being shot and killed. I was not prepared to die for my country, and I am not ashamed to say that. Being committed Christians, we developed a mindset in which we were citizens of two worlds: For the time being we are citizens of this world, but actually we are citizens of the kingdom of God. I was prepared to lose my life for the kingdom of God, but not for this earthly kingdom. Our thinking was also that we had to learn to live in times of oppression—actually, I continue to say that, because nowhere in the Bible are we promised that we will be the ones who will make the rules; who will ensure that the world is healthy and fine. On the contrary, we are promised the narrow path [Matthew 7:14].

A pro-freedom movement did exist among Christians in Romania under Communism, but after its members were arrested, they were expelled from the country; they moved to the States in the early 1980s. There was no significant movement in that vein because of this attitude that we needed to change ourselves on the inside, not the world outside.

Do you feel that the impact of the Communist regime upon the churches, as well as general society, has been resolved in Romania?

Unfortunately, many of the people who should have been kept out of politics because of their relationship with the regime, were able to stay in power. There were also people who engaged in forms of collaboration that had no consequence for others, or who had duties related to their job. Mona Muscă, for example [Minister of Culture and Religious Affairs, 2004-5]—in my opinion, she could have been the first female Romanian president. During the Communist period she taught Romanian to foreign students, and so she was asked to sign a document saying that she would report if any of them caused a problem. To me, that makes sense: If you had Muslim students, for example, wouldn't you want to know if any of them were radicalized? Mona Muscă was accused of collaborating with the

(continued on page 12)

Mocan Interview *(continued from page 11)*

Securitate because of that, and she ended up resigning—that is how the post-Communist law on collaboration has been used to taint people.

In my view, certain things are not worth dwelling upon, while other things should have been resolved at the time. If, during the first five or 10 years after the 1989 Revolution, we had had a moment when everything came out and was criticized—i.e. lustration—things might have been different. The fact that we did not do that means that we are still in a situation where things are not very clear. Communism has also impacted generations in terms of worldview and values—or the lack of them. If you remove Communist ideology, what do you put in its place? Savage capitalism came to Romania, and with that came individualism and greed. People wanted all the things that they had missed out on, so they ended up neglecting their children while they pursued those ends. You adopt all kinds of morals that are foreign, as you do not have the grounding to refuse them.

You are an educator of post-Communist generations of Romanians. Could you describe your work at Babeș-Bolyai University?

Babeș-Bolyai University is the largest and overall highest-ranking university in Romania. It is huge: We have 22 faculties and close to 50,000 students. Since 2006 I have taught in the Department of Cinematography and Media within the Faculty of Theater and Film. I specialize in digital media, with an emphasis on digital interactive performance. I also teach a course on new media documentary, or non-fiction storytelling. My focus is mainly technology and how it has changed the face of various aspects of life: journalism and the visual arts. One focus of our master's degree in digital interactive arts is performance, and how technology is enabling new means of expression through new genres of arts. Some of these fall into the category of art performance, some visual arts, and others non-fiction storytelling, but all are based on technologies.

Technologies from the past 50 years, say? Or as far back as the early 20th century?

The past five to 10 years! Everything is changing so fast. Two years ago Adobe Flash, the technology that fueled most of the fabulous interactive documentaries in one course I introduced, was discontinued. Luckily, I had just started to look at virtual reality (VR) and how it is starting to engage in storytelling. That is the focus of most of my course now, because most of the other



Dr. Mocan introducing “Halls of Mandos” VR presentation at the 2023 C.S. Lewis Conference in Iași
(Source: www.facebook.com/C.S.LewisConferenceIasiRomania)



Professor Emerita Rodica Albu viewing “Halls of Mandos” VR presentation at the 2023 C.S. Lewis Conference in Iași
(Source: www.facebook.com/C.S.LewisConferenceIasiRomania)

technologies are gone. This has become a very ephemeral type of art, but it is nonetheless something that students must understand, because it gives them an edge in the marketplace.

We have VR headsets and 360-degree cameras that allow us to decode the new language of virtual reality storytelling. You cannot use the same means of expression as previously. For example, I show my students a VR documentary about Roma people from Romania living in an illegal settlement in Paris. It is interesting to look around while wearing the VR headset and to see the whole environment. But then, all of a sudden, you come face to face with a person talking, because you use close-ups in conventional filmmaking. In VR, however, the proportions are different—when you move around, you would not normally be so close in proximity to this person. In VR, the close-up is an error—you cannot just

translate what you do in linear film. Also, not all subjects are worth producing in VR. It must be something where immersion in the environment is worthwhile and will give you certain perceptions.

Viewing VR sounds more intense than traditional documentaries.

Yes, it is physically challenging to watch. When I started to research it, I felt sick. After an hour, you are sometimes sweating and tired. I also had to close the door and tell my family not to creep in on me, because you completely disconnect from reality.

Interestingly, I have observed that I have to push my students to put on the VR headsets. I thought their response would be, “Oh yeah! Let’s get these headsets on. We’re going

to play,” but they don’t want them. I have to explain that this is part of the assignment and they need to get past the initial feelings of nausea. There is also the immersion of the story—sometimes the experience can be too strong. This is why new media formats are much shorter: Documentaries are usually around seven minutes long—20 minutes at most.

Being older, we tend to assume that young people keep up with newer technologies.

They generally don’t! However, I have found that those students who are [computer] gamers are much more open to experimenting with it: Virtual reality comes from computer gaming.

Do you think the discomfort caused by VR occurs because, in more traditional forms of media, you are aware at some level that you are a spectator?

Yes—with most media, even if you feel moved, you first approach at a cognitive, rational level. With VR it is very physical. It taps deeply into your emotions, and you are not always willing to have them steered in this way. There is an American journalist, Nonny de la Peña, who has recently started to use the immersive technologies of VR to tell stories in a more compelling way. She essentially coined the term “immersive journalism.” In her VR piece *Project Syria*, for example, you find yourself in a marketplace in Aleppo at the very moment when a building blows up. It was commissioned for the World Economic Forum in order to convince people about the awfulness of the situation in Syria.

Now, to me this is perfectly valid documentary storytelling, but it is not journalism. Journalism should be neutral and detached, but this type of “immersive journalism” is very manipulative—it taps into your feelings and steers you. That is what I try to explain to my students.

Virtual reality sounds extraordinarily difficult to make.

In addition to filmmaking skills, you also need to know computer programming. Some of my students have very advanced skills. One of my PhD students, Florin-Adrian Marc, was a [computer] gamer who had never done virtual reality but was one of its very eager adopters. In just one year he progressed through two or three VR headsets and is now producing his own stories and games online. At the recent C.S. Lewis conference in Iași, he presented his project, “Halls of Mandos: A VR Expedition into Tolkien’s World.” He is passionate about the works of J.R.R. Tolkien—Lewis’s friend—and he created this VR story using Tolkien’s *The Silmarillion* as a focal point. It transports you to a cathedral-like hall where there are multiple tapestries hanging. Once you look at them, they start to move and narrate individual stories.

Given your experience with young people, and their experience of such rapid recent changes in media, are there some fundamentally different approaches that they expect in a church context?

Definitely. In more traditional cultures, a person’s worldview is received from close influences in family and the local community. These are usually very direct and within an oral culture. Once humanity moved into a print-based culture, you would read about religion if you wanted to learn about it. Later on, a great deal of information came through audiovisual media. As regards the more aggressive type of Christian evangelism—full-scale televangelism—only the Americans are far advanced in that. In Europe, audiovisual media have been used by congregations more as a means of self-presentation, to identify themselves within the larger context.

With digital culture, things are very different. Now there is information everywhere, and we have returned to the tribal type of influence—influence not even from local tribes, but virtual, online tribes. This means that the amount of confusion—as well as the potential for syncretism—is far greater. Those who are lucky enough to find their face-to-face community are more

rooted and organized, but the rest think in increasingly syncretic terms.

I often tell my students that they need to know what they believe. I explain that I am not going to teach them what I believe, but that I am trying to get them to the stage of critical thinking. At that point, they will know where something comes from when they see it, and they can adopt or reject it consciously. Introducing academic ethics and morals, for example, we discuss posthumanism and transhumanism. Very often students come with those kinds of ideas—it can seem cool to enhance the body by adding new senses and so on, but then you realize

what the implications are and how, if you enhance something, you are actually losing something else. You see where this could lead and how we may lose our humanity—how transhumanistic thinking can push you towards eugenics. Once students unpack these ideas, their response is generally, “That’s not really what I want to think.”

That’s why you need to know what you think and where your influences come from. Archimedes apparently said, “Give me a firm spot on which to stand, and I shall move the earth.” If you don’t have something that helps you orient yourself, you will drift all over the place. This is what I see most about the young generation. Probably, it is also the reason why there is so much unhappiness and even depression. At least the traditional religion that modern people might refute gives you an orientation point...

...Whereas that is lacking now.

What worries me even more is the official relativization of truth: “This is my truth—if that is your truth, then that is fine for you.” Well, it’s not,

because there are certain things that are not relative.

Do the young people you encounter show any interest in church, or is Christianity something completely alien to them?

They would not come to church if they were not interested—that’s one thing I have learned. My generation hung in there even if we didn’t like our pastor or the teaching. The next generation, now in their 40s—didn’t know what they wanted. They were in and out of church. As for the new generation—if they don’t like something, they are gone. So if you see churches full of young people, it is because they want to be there.

There are a number of churches here that have become increasingly contemporary. The whole set-up is cinematic, with a large stage, big screens, and a different kind of music and lighting that is more appealing. This is something that can be a hook for young people, but also a refutation of the attitude that Christians are old-fashioned bigots. So these things can attract young people, but I don’t think they would stick around if they didn’t also find what they were looking for. If they didn’t find deeper meaning and a positive influence on their lives, it would just be one more disco place: “That was a cool club I went to—now let’s find the next one.” They have found something in which they feel grounded. ♦



Babes-Bolyai University
in downtown Cluj
(G.FAGAN)

The Religious Dimension of Russia's War: A Ukrainian Evangelical Reflects

ANDREY KRAVTSEV

Editor's note: The author is a Ukrainian relief worker, church planter, and seminary professor in the city of Kharkiv, northeastern Ukraine. He was raised in a Russian-speaking context in the city of Donetsk, southeastern Ukraine, currently under Russian occupation. From 2001 until some weeks after Moscow's February 2022 full-scale invasion of his homeland, he served as a missionary in Russia: "I was there in Russia, while my heart was breaking for my people in Ukraine." He is also one of four authors of a March 2022 open letter against the war that was signed by more than 400 Evangelical leaders and church members across Russia during the few days in March 2022 when it was circulated online.¹ "As believers," the signatories concurred, "we evaluate what is happening as the grave sin of fratricide: the sin of Cain, who raised his hand against his brother, Abel. ... The war destroys not only Ukraine, but Russia—its people, its economy, its morality, its future."

Andrey Kravtsev's text below is an expanded version of his article published on 29 April by Christian Leadership Alliance (<https://christianleadershipalliance.org>).

Over the two decades of my life in Russia, I witnessed a gradual formation of a new civil religion progressively filling the post-Communist ideological vacuum. While this superficially bears some marks of Orthodox Christianity, it in reality worships the nation as supreme spiritual entity. The current Russian war on Ukraine has been partially fed by—and in turn, contributed to—the shaping of this syncretistic set of ideas.

On the one hand, there is nothing new in this phenomenon as it calls to mind those historical empires that claimed divine status in order to ensure complete loyalty from their subjects. On the other hand, its consequences have already been disastrous. As is customary for an idol that has taken the place of God, the nation demands human sacrifice, and we already see half a million casualties of this war. The Russian patriarch, as chief priest of the emerging ethnic cult, has blessed this sacrifice by publicly announcing that all who die fighting in the "holy war" will be "absolved of all their sins."

Civil religion

The "creed" of the new quasi-religion can be found on the official website of the Russian Orthodox Church. Recently it published a document that illustrates more explicitly the replacement of key Christian doctrine with a civil religion serving the current political ambitions of the Russian state.² Entitled "The Present and Future of the Russian World," this was approved by a special session of the World Russian People's Council (WRPC) chaired by Patriarch Kirill at Moscow's Cathedral of Christ the Savior on 27 March 2024.

In the most obvious substitution, the "Russian World" of the document's title is identified with all who exalt "Russian tradition, the sacred things of Russian civilization, and great Russian culture" as "the highest value and meaning of life." At



Ukrainian Independence Monument,
Kharkiv, 2018 (G. FAGAN)

the same time, the text never mentions God, Christ's death and resurrection, nor any of His teachings as having any relevance to individual or social existence. The nation here claims the place of God Himself, who alone should be the supreme value and meaning of a Christian's life.

A second substitution identifies Russia with ultimate goodness. She is hailed as "the universal force holding back [the Antichrist] and protecting the world from evil."

Christian Scripture indeed speaks of a unique people who are entrusted with the task of anticipating the Kingdom of God in their communal life. However, this is not a specific nation but the universal Church: a community of believers including representatives of all nations and cultures.

History demonstrates that the association of this notion with particular ethnic groups or states stems from the privatization of Christianity by national elites. In this instance, the myth of Russia as the "Third Rome"—the sole Christian state entrusted with the task of preserving true faith until the end of time—shaped her rulers' self-awareness and attitude towards their subjects for at least four centuries. At the same time, it defined Russian foreign policy and fueled continual imperial wars.

Western civilization as evil

A third substitution in the WRPC document is the identification of Western civilization with the forces of evil: the West is directly accused of having "fallen into Satanism." In Christian theology, however, humans—whether from the West or the East—are neither absolutely good nor the source of evil. To see oneself as the sole "bearer of light" is self-deception, and to demonize others is to embark upon a dangerous path of dehumanization and hatred.

Patriarch Kirill often disparages Western secular

humanism's prioritization of individual rights and desires as rebellion against God. Yet he is never heard exposing the unjust courts, persecution of people for their convictions, or extrajudicial violence—including torture—that take place within Russia's borders. Nor does he speak out against the mass violations of the Commandments "Thou shalt not kill," "Thou shalt not bear false witness," and "Thou shalt not covet" which are committed daily by representatives of "Holy Russia" against citizens of a neighboring country.

Combined, these three substitutions generate a fourth: the thesis that Russia's war against Ukraine is a "holy war"—for that is how the WRPC document maintains the "Special Military Operation" should be understood in spiritual and moral terms. Here, we see how the transposition of the metaphysical categories of good and evil into the realm of relations between cultures inevitably transfers spiritual warfare to the political sphere. Since the mid-2000s, the Russian political elite has revived the time-tested narrative of a hostile West in order to secure the power and resources its members have usurped. The Russian Orthodox leadership has assisted by providing eschatological context for this narrative, thus granting it sacred status.

Post-Soviet psychological traumas

Admittedly, we should take into account the psychological traumas experienced by many Russians following the break-up of the Soviet Union, including the loss of political significance, ideological chaos, disillusionment with democracy, impoverishment of the population, regional separatism, and the rampant spread of organized crime. Rather than working to revive core Christian values in the face of these challenges, however, many Russian Orthodox clerics have preferred to preach the "unique spirituality" of



Baptist church distribution of groceries to residents of Saltivka, a Kharkiv suburb prone to Russian shelling (A. KRAVTSEV)

their nation, denounce the "decadent West," defend increasing restrictions on civil liberties, and strive for proximity to the autocratic regime. This has fed a spirit not of national repentance, but of national resentment.

Russian state propaganda has repeatedly portrayed Ukraine as an "anti-Russia," but it is more correct to view it as an "alternative Russia." Ukraine faced many of the same post-Soviet challenges as other former republics, but has followed a different trajectory. Unlike Russia, no assumption exists that all ethnic Ukrainians belong to a dominant Orthodox Church by default. Ukraine's robust religious



Baptist church distribution of aid to residents of Saltivka, a Kharkiv suburb prone to Russian shelling (A. KRAVTSEV)

pluralism—it has multiple Orthodox Churches, two forms of Catholic Christianity, and a significant Evangelical population, in addition to other faith groups—has generally obliged governments to treat religions equally.

Religious pluralism usually goes hand-in-hand with social and political openness. Historically, Evangelicals have tended to reject the autocratic principle *rex est lex loquens*—"the king is the law speaking," adhering instead to what 17th-century Scottish Presbyterian Samuel Rutherford termed *lex, rex*—"the law is the king."³ Ukraine has elected six presidents over the past 30 years and—despite prolonged birth pains—has been developing as a democracy committed to challenging post-Soviet corruption and chaos. Democratic aspiration is, in fact, one of the real reasons for the current war.

In and of itself, this democratic foundation—entailing regular changes of power, human rights, and media competition—is no threat to the Russian people. It certainly rings the death knell for Russian authoritarianism, however—and therefore the privileged position of the Russian elite. Potential democratic challenges to this elite are why state propaganda (religious included) instills the fear of the West as "the perpetual enemy" in the minds of the young Russians who die by the hundreds every day on the steppes of Ukraine.

Evangelicals not isolated

Evangelicals, as part of their societies, cannot be fully isolated from these cultural influences. Here, the differences between Ukrainian and Russian Evangelicals are substantial. While Evangelicals in Ukraine even had a church member serving as Acting President for several months in 2014 after President Viktor Yanukovich fled the country, the real freedom of Evangelicals in Russia began to fade with the 1997 law privileging "traditional religions." As a result, Ukrainian believers had to begin thinking about the social and political implications of their faith, while their Russian brothers and sisters have largely remained within the Soviet paradigm of eschatological escapism centered upon the gospel of "God, my soul, and heaven."

Today, in my estimation, fewer than a quarter of Evangelical leaders in Russia support the war either actively or passively (although that number may be higher in Pentecostal

(continued on page 16)

A Ukrainian Evangelical Reflects *(continued from page 15)*

or Charismatic circles where emotional experience can override biblical authority). Approximately another quarter oppose the so-called “Special Military Operation” either actively or passively, but they have to be very careful as to how, where, and to whom they say anything. The remaining half has taken refuge in a form of apolitical Christianity. Tested and approved by Soviet Evangelicals back in the 1950s-80s, this has proven to be the safest choice. In sum, Russian Evangelicals’ attitude to the current war serves as an eloquent illustration of Paul Hiebert’s classic “Critical Contextualization” chart on responses to non-Christian cultural tradition.⁴ While some seek to understand such tradition through biblical evaluation, others are refusing to contextualize and/or are falling into syncretism.

In this context, it is startling to see a number of Western Evangelicals—such as “MAGA Christians” in the United States—also captivated by a false image of Vladimir Putin as a leader with “conservative moral values.” This February, for example, Pastor Mark Driscoll of The Trinity Church in Scottsdale, Arizona, tweeted: “No matter what your thoughts are on Putin, I think we can all agree we need a leader who loves this country as much as he loves his.”⁵

In reality, what lies at the root of the current crisis in Eastern Europe is spiritual ignorance within Russia, where—despite more than 30 years since the Soviet collapse—most have still to hear the Gospel clearly. For Russia’s own sake, it is vital to expose the “sacred” ethnocentric myths that take its place—as Fyodor Dostoyevsky wrote, “doom [befalls] a nation without the Word of God.”

It is high time for Christian believers both in the West and the East to think through the implications of their faith once again. Let us try to be instruments of peace and justice, rather than submit to manipulative politicians who are consumed by their own thirst for power, wealth, and self-glorification. First and foremost, our values and loyalties should be determined by the Gospel, which tells us who we are, why we are here, and the true nature of the battle which involves us all. ♦

The quarterly *East-West Church Report* explores Christian life in the former Soviet Union and Central and Eastern Europe. We focus on:

- church-state, interfaith, and interchurch relations
- emerging threats to religious freedom for all
- innovative Christian charitable projects and mission
- latest academic research into Christian history and culture in the region

Annual subscription rates are \$23 (individuals) and \$54 (institutions). Payment is either by check (in U.S. Dollars only and payable to *East-West Church Report*) or by PayPal via the “Subscribe” page at www.eastwestreport.org.

Whichever way you pay, please provide (with your check or by email) the e-mail address to which the *Report* should be sent, the subscriber’s name and address, and the type of subscription required (individual or institutional).

East-West Church Report holds 501(c)(3) non-profit status and is largely reliant upon subscriptions and voluntary labor. Please consider adding a donation to your subscription.

Institutional subscribers may distribute issues to those within the institution (e.g. students using a university library). Other distribution/



Andrey Kravtsev (center, in black UBTS top) with students of the Ukrainian Baptist Theological Seminary (UBTS)
(Source: A. KRAVTSEV)

Andrey Kravtsev requests that anyone wishing to support his work in the city of Kharkiv, Ukraine—illustrated by the accompanying photographs—contact him at resetaland@gmail.com.

Notes:

¹ Dated 2 March 2022 and published online, the text of the open letter was removed by 4 March 2022: <https://gazeta.mirt.ru/stat-i/obschestvo/post-2535/>.

² <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/6116189.html>.

³ <https://archive.org/details/lexrexorlawprinc00ruth>.

⁴ <https://munsonmissions.org/tag/paul-hiebert/>.

⁵ 9 February 2024, <https://x.com/PastorMark/status/1756052393433952314>.

Andrey Kravtsev is a graduate of Donetsk Christian University and holds a PhD from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, Illinois. He has taught in various parts of Russia, including at the North Caucasus Bible Institute.

reproduction of whole issues or individual articles requires the permission of *East-West Church Report*. Once permission is granted, the following statement is to be carried with the reproduced material: “Reproduced with permission of the *East-West Church Report*.”

The *Report* values feedback from readers, including suggestions for potential topics and authors. Please write to the editor at: eastwestchurchreport@gmail.com.

EAST-WEST CHURCH REPORT

P.O.Box 76741
Washington, DC 20013
U.S.A.

Geraldine Fagan, Editor
eastwestchurchreport@gmail.com
Mark R. Elliott, Editor Emeritus
emark936@gmail.com
Matthew Lee Miller, Book Review Editor

©2024 ISSN 2576-344X (formerly 1069-5664)
Indexed by American Bibliography of Slavic and East European Studies (ABSEES), OCLC Public Affairs Information Service (formerly PAIS), Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI), and Christian Periodicals Index.