

Fear of death led Haykin out of Marxism and onto the life-giving path of Christianity



By Jeff Robinson

It is no small irony that God used a deep-seated fear of death as a means to bring Michael A.G.

Haykin to Himself.

Born in Birmingham, England in 1953, Haykin embraced Marxism by age 14. While most of his teenage peers were discovering alcoholic beverages, team sports or the opposite sex, Haykin was imbibing books by Karl Marx and other revolutionary figures such as Vladimir Lenin, Che Guevara and Mao Tse-Tung.

These men promoted a worldview built upon extreme violence. Guevara, for example, explained how to wage guerilla warfare and served as a revolutionary's handbook for making anti-tank traps and assembling Molotov cocktails.

"I and a few friends drank all of this in, and we seriously — and quite naively, I now see — prepared ourselves for the revolution we thought was coming to North America," Haykin said.

"I can even remember preparing myself for the possibility that I would have to kill people who were close to me, i.e. members of my own family, for the sake of the revolution."

Western culture in the 1960s seethed with anger, especially among Haykin's peers, but it was not that atmosphere

alone that drove him to embrace a two-fisted worldview committed to imposing intimidation and violence on innocent people.

The culprits, Haykin said, were Roman Catholicism and Christian hypocrisy. His parents were Roman Catholic and he grew up attending mass, but was wholly unconvinced by the behavior he witnessed among his Roman Catholic peers.

“The change in my worldview began as I observed the hypocrisy that is deeply entrenched in the Roman Catholic church,” Haykin said. “As I went to high school, I noticed that many of my classmates whom I knew led lives centered on drinking and partying, would turn up at church on Sunday and receive communion.

“I soon came to the conclusion that Christianity was a hypocritical sham. I began to stop attending mass. But man is by nature a worshipping creature. I rejected the false worship embedded in Roman Catholicism only to fall into an even more heinous idolatry, that of Marxism.”

Haykin, who earlier this year was appointed professor of biblical spirituality and church history at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, remained a Marxist into his late teen years, but Marxism left him unable to shake one giant personal demon: the fear of death.

“Sometimes my fears would so overwhelm me that I would call my father in the middle of the night and ask him to drive from Ancaster to London (Ontario, where he was attending the university) to come and take me home,” Haykin said. “In the face of such fears, Marxism was helpless, and could give me no comfort.”

Gradually, Marxism lost its hold over him. After enrolling at the University of Western Ontario in London in 1971, Haykin began to probe into various forms of eastern mysticism: Taoism, Zen Buddhism and Transcendental Meditation. However, none of them lessened his angst over the prospect of death, and he soon cast them aside.

Two major events during Haykin’s time as a student at the University of Western Ontario served as a slight spiritual awakening. The first stemmed from his growing interest in philosophy and an academic assignment related to his studies.

“One day in the fall of 1971, I sat down to write out a philosophical proof for the existence of God, but before I could put pen to paper, I knew beyond a shadow of

a doubt that there was a God,” he said.

“One moment I was agnostic about God’s existence; the next, I knew there was a God. But believing that God exists does not necessarily entail a change of lifestyle and it certainly does not mean salvation, as I was to find out.”

The second major event soon followed and arose out of a friendship he developed with Doug, a former football teammate from high school. Doug had become friendly with a group of Christians, and the believers would often be present while Haykin ate lunch with his friend.

“I recall their conversation about Christ and the Holy Spirit,” he said. “I began to try to pray to God, but how can you truly persevere in prayer, if you don’t know Christ, and if His Spirit doesn’t live in you? As John

“He graciously opened my eyes to know Christ and to know that in Christ there is salvation not only from sin, but also from sin’s wages, eternal death.”

Bunyan put it so well, ‘When the Spirit gets into the heart, then there is prayer indeed and not until then.’”

Haykin quickly forgot these two experiences after moving to the University of Toronto in 1972. As he pursued a bachelor’s degree in philosophy there, Haykin largely ignored the implications of the fact that there was a God and led a lifestyle he describes as “somewhat riotous and immoral.” Still, God would use those experiences in his conversion.

The turning point came in the summer of 1973 when Haykin went to work in a pizza parlor where he met Alison, the woman whom he would eventually marry. Alison was a Christian and Haykin began to attend her Baptist church, animated mostly by a desire to be seen as a respectable, church-going member of society.

Whatever Haykin’s motivations, he now knows that God was drawing the former Marxist to himself.

God began to drive home the truth of Hebrews 2:14-15 which speaks of how Christ’s redeeming work at Calvary has

destroyed the fear of death in believers.

The fear of death, which had lain submerged for some time, had resurfaced, compounded by Haykin’s reading of German philosopher Martin Heidegger who posited that existence is only possible in the contemplation of one’s death. But this time, the life-giving answer to Haykin’s existential angst was close at hand. Soon, Haykin was safe in the arms of God through the Gospel.

“For three nights in a row, I awoke in a cold sweat, my heart pounding, fearful that I was about to die,” he said. “The third night, to my own amazement, I found myself on my knees, praying, crying out to God for salvation, and He graciously opened my eyes to know Christ and to know that in Christ there is salvation not only from sin, but also from sin’s wages, eternal death.

“And when I went home that weekend on the Greyhound bus I knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that I was no longer alone — God had graciously come into my heart, the citadel of my life, and taken possession of it by his Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Jesus.”

Michael married Alison in 1976 and later surrendered to a call to ministry, which, for Haykin, as a lifelong lover of history, meant a life devoted to Christian scholarship. Since earning a doctorate’s degree in patristics from the University of Toronto in 1982, Haykin has taught church history at Heritage Theological Seminary in Cambridge, Ontario, and at Central Baptist Seminary in Toronto. The Haykins have two children, Victoria and Nigel.

Though more than three decades have passed since his conversion out of worldview chaos, Haykin continues to marvel at God’s mercy in rescuing a former Marxist from the fear of death. For Haykin, reading Hebrews 2:14-15 is no longer an occasion for apprehension, but for doxology.

“I, who had once been a Marxist, and so committed to bringing fear and violence into the lives of innocent people, was myself brought by God face to face with fear—the fear of my own death — and so shown the inadequacy of the Marxist view of life: it has no answer to the problem of death,” he said.

“But Christianity does: God has raised Jesus from the dead, and so provided a way of deliverance for those, including myself, who through fear of death were subject to lifelong bondage.”