Church and State in East Germany

CAROLINE WARD

East Germany seems in many ways to have more in common with the West than with her East European neighbours. She has shared, historically, in western cultural traditions and industrial development. She has the highest living standard in Eastern Europe.[1] Family and personal ties with West Germans are still strong despite the Berlin Wall, and until 1968 the Protestant Churches in both East and West Germany belonged to common organizations.

The influence of the East German Churches within socialist (communist) society bears comparison with that of the Catholic Church in Poland. Both can be described as national churches, in the preponderance of their members over those of minority faiths, and in their different historical traditions. In the GDR, about half, or eight million out of the 17 million population, belong at least nominally to the Federation of Protestant (Lutheran and Reformed) Churches, about 1.3 million to the Roman Catholic, and 84,000 to Free Churches. There are 6,000 Protestant parishes served by some 4,200 pastors and preachers, with several thousand catechists, deacons and sisters engaged in social work.[2]

The eight federated *Landeskirchen*, or regional churches, each have an elected bishop and a synod. There is also a General Synod and a Standing Conference of all church leaders under the chairmanship of Bishop Albrecht Schönherr of Berlin-Brandenburg. The election of bishops and synods and the administration of the churches are entirely free from state interference since a brief period of attempted interference during the Cold War of the 1950s.

The Churches have refused to be confined to a narrowly religious role, and maintain a wide range of social welfare activities, in cooperation with the State's health and social services. The Protestant Churches run 52 hospitals (with 7,000 beds), 87 homes for the handicapped (over 6,000 places), 280 old people's homes, 112 convalescent homes, 23 children's homes, about 550 welfare centres in parishes, and over 300 children's day centres. Some 15,000 people are employed in this work.[3]

The Catholic Church maintains 40 hospitals and 167 homes. The parishes are served by some 1,450 priests (some with secular employment)

and 2,700 nuns.[4] They are said to have succeeded remarkably well in maintaining cohesion among scattered congregations in dioceses which, all except for the bishopric of Meissen, cross the country's borders with West Germany or Poland.[5]

The GDR state radio broadcasts a Sunday church service (at 7.30 a.m.). The great traditions of German church music receive popular support, with many more professional church musicians than in Britain. Famous church choirs such as those of Leipzig and Dresden and their choir schools, as well as many church music schools are maintained.[6]

The Catholic and small Free Churches have their own training colleges, as does the Protestant Church, and there are theological faculties at six universities which receive state aid. However, the number of ordained clergy in both major Churches is declining, and a wider training is being introduced for Protestant pastors and lay helpers to enable more functions to be shared.[7]

Pastors and churches in East Germany are reasonably well cared for by donations, collections, and a voluntary levy on church-goers' income as well as by the proceeds from the agricultural enterprises which the Protestant Church still owns (about 500,000 acres).[8] In addition, the government contributes large sums each year for administration, repair of churches, and the running of hospitals and homes. About 40 per cent of the Church's budget comes from the West German Church and is often designated for specific purposes such as rebuilding, or providing a car or refrigerator for a clergy family. These donations are welcome to the regime as foreign currency. The Churches' diplomatic channels usually arrange the purchase of western goods required by the government, who reimburse the Church in East Germany. Besides western donations, the GDR also welcomes the Churches' contribution towards staffing and running the welfare services.[9]

Although the regime has provided money for restoring many historic churches – often in prominent city centres – not enough churches have been built in the big new industrial areas. Officials have argued that building materials are scarce, and point to redundant churches elsewhere. Nevertheless, permission was given in 1976 for the building of 40 new churches.

State policy towards the Churches has in the main been governed by East Germany's peculiar situation in postwar Europe. Since the formation of two separate Germanies in 1949, two primary objectives of the regime have been to win international recognition, and to create a new sense of national identity for its citizens. Success was not notable in the latter aim, even after the Berlin Wall in 1961 prevented further large-scale departures westwards.[10] Ten years later, many East Germans still felt that they belonged to a wider Germany, embracing the western half.[11] However, in recent years, improved living standards and the

successes at the 1976 Olympic Games have helped create greater pride in the GDR.[12]

The support of the Church and Christians generally has been sought to help foster a new collective consciousness. In politics this role is taken by the Christian Democratic Union (East). This is one of the four major subsidiary parties, (each with an equal and predetermined number of seats) which, with the mass organizations, make up the National Front in the People's Chamber, headed by the (Communist) Socialist Unity Party, the SED. Many members of the CDU have played a prominent part in East German society and government: the present Chairman Gerald Götting, was until 1976 President of the People's Chamber and is still Vice-President of the Council of State, an unparalleled position for a self-professed Christian in a communist country.

The CDU runs a publishing house, six bookshops, a national and several daily newspapers (which like the Churches' weekly and monthly journals, are subject to censorship). The party sees its task as being to reconcile socialism to Christians, the middle class and farmers, and to develop their "socialist consciousness" by presenting SED policies as Christian humanism in action. While the Church and many Christians cannot accept this view uncritically, it undoubtedly has its appeal in a society with a strong sense of social morality, and where the Churches have a clear role in social welfare. The CDU, like other minor parties, also provides an alternative for those who feel unable publicly to support the SED. It has occasionally defended Christian interests in the People's Chamber, *e.g.* by voting against the abortion law reform in 1972.[13] Although some church members join the CDU, church leaders view with suspicion its generally uncritical support for the SED. Their relations with CDU leaders can at best be described as "correct". In fact the CDU cannot, and does not seek to represent the Churches to government, a role which is well performed by church leaders themselves. Relations with the communist State Secretary for Religious Affairs, Hans Seigewasser, are generally cordial. He has been in office for 20 years, during which time policy towards the Churches has, with occasional changes of emphasis, been remarkably constant.

An important factor in church-state relations in East Germany until now has been the character of the church leaders, all of whom belonged to that part of the Protestant Church which stood up to Hitler. This fact, and the shared experience of Nazi prison-camp, meant that communist leaders and churchmen after the war respected one another; the churchmen had proved themselves to be "anti-fascists" (in communist parlance equated with anti-capitalists). Furthermore, the war-time experiences of the Church and the theological insights of Martin Niemöller, Dietrich Bonhöffer, and others, have contributed to a theologically active Church which is concerned with social issues and anxious, like much of German

society, to redeem the failures of the Nazi period. Their experience of resistance to Hitler has also given the present leaders confidence in maintaining the Church's independence under communism.

While no bishop has been totally hostile to the regime, none have supported it unconditionally either, although Bishop Mitzenheim of Thuringia (now retired) might be said to have come close to this. Even he, however, could criticize official policies at times, and others have been outspoken in their criticism. During periods of open conflict, such as the 1950s, some pastors and church members were imprisoned, but not the bishops. In general, the Church has developed an attitude known as "critical solidarity" to the regime, which combines qualified acceptance of compromise on non-essentials, with firmness when the Church is really threatened.[14]

Both the independence and the moral credibility (to socialists) of the Church were in fact strengthened after the formal separation from the Protestant Churches in West Germany, in 1968. Joint activities across the Wall and border had continued with increasing difficulty until then, and the decision was taken to form, in 1969, a separate Federation of Protestant Churches in the GDR. The regime had been campaigning ideologically for the split for some time, identifying the West German Church with capitalism and militarism (especially after West German rearmament in the 1950s), and the East German Churches with humanism and socialism.[15] The State's aim of a distinct East German identity for the Church was thus achieved while the Church was strengthened, with its Lutheran and Reformed branches united, and was still able to maintain links with the Church in the West.

The Constitution of the GDR, redrafted in 1974, guarantees for all citizens, irrespective of belief, equal rights (and duties), freedom of belief and religious observance, and the general rights of the Churches to manage their own affairs "in conformity with the Constitution and legal regulations of the GDR".[16] Whether or not these freedoms are protected in practice at a local level, the role of religion in a socialist society is formally acknowledged in public. Surprised protests from the Church therefore greeted the draft Party Programme published before the Ninth SED Party Congress in May 1976, which omitted to guarantee equal rights to all citizens, irrespective of ideology, religious belief, or social status. The clause was included in the final version, but so was another, equally disturbing, which stated that the aim of education was to produce young people whose attitudes were guided by Marxism-Leninism.[17]

The ideological guidance of children and young people has been a major cause of conflict between Church and State in East European countries. In East Germany, the government not only wished to promote the "socialist transformation of society" but also to build a new national

consciousness; in both processes, the younger generation was to play a vital role.[18] At school and in youth organizations, children are educated from an early age in socialist attitudes and by 14, when Protestant children are normally prepared for Confirmation, they have been taught the atheist principles of Marxism-Leninism in preparation for the *Jugendweihe*, or Youth Dedication Ceremony (a secular substitute for Confirmation). At first the Protestant Church took a hard line against children who participated in *Jugendweihe*, but since many of the children and their parents felt it was essential in order to demonstrate their loyalty to the State and safeguard their future, the Church eventually agreed that children could be confirmed later.[19]

Religious instruction can be given to children only on church premises and outside school hours. Children may experience some pressure, or ridicule, from their teachers and peers, or more direct threats of educational penalties. At a Synod in April 1976, Presiding Bishop Schönherr said that it was common for parents, thinking of their children's future, to withdraw them from religious instruction, and that in the previous year the number of Confirmation candidates had dropped by 14 per cent.[20] (According to reports, such a withdrawal of Confirmation candidates, following pressure at school, was one cause of Pastor Brüsewitz's protest suicide by burning in August 1976.)[21] Parents seem often unaware of their rights, but when they take up their child's case, or ask the Church to do so, pressures are generally lifted. This is sometimes true also in the case of young Christians (and middle-class children) who have been excluded from university or training college. (Such a penalty is not as severe as might be thought, since evening classes are available for many qualifications.) However, practising Christians cannot expect leading posts in industry, state administration, or education.[22] The state authorities deny that discrimination against Christians exists in the GDR, but nevertheless abuses do clearly occur at a local level. The highly centralized socialist administration may promote such occurrences, and if, as the Church alleges, official policy is not passed on clearly to local authorities, the latter may interpret it wrongly.[23]

The Christian Youth movement, *Junge Gemeinde*, is thriving, as are university chaplaincies, and children's camps. There are ecumenical ventures in social welfare. Some churches are full, alongside smaller, but more committed and more spiritually mature communities which, one can be sure, will survive.[24] But the Church still has many problems. There are too few clergy and lay helpers, too few churches in new industrial centres, and many obstacles are placed in the way of spreading the faith, particularly among the young. With growing economic prosperity, as in the West, materialistic values and religious indifference are spreading. Many see this as a worse threat to the Church than administrative restrictions, or Marxism-Leninism which has a limited appeal.

A good measure of co-operation and tolerance exists in the GDR between Church and State, between believers and non-believers. In part this is due to the mutual respect and understanding which has existed hitherto between Church leaders and representatives of the State. The Churches also provide some economic advantages such as finance from abroad and help in the welfare services. The country has an increasing volume of exports, especially with West Germany, and is unwilling to see this trade, or her international relations generally, upset by any conflict with the Church which would be instantly publicized in the West.[25] For the time being, such factors weigh more heavily with the East German authorities than any possible long-term desire to see religion lose all significance in a more ideologically uniform, communist State.

[1] The GDR's *per capita* income overtook that of Britain in 1974, according to the World Bank Atlas (1977), Washington. For a general account of East German society and politics, see *Socialism with a German Face*, by Jonathan Steele, London, 1977.

[2] Trevor Beeson: *Discretion and Valour*, London, 1974, p. 171. (Report for the British Council of Churches on religious conditions in Eastern Europe.)

[3] Irmela Roitsch: "Die Evangelischen Kirchen in der DDR: ein Uberblick", *Informationsdienst des Katholischen Arbeitskreises für Zeitgeschichtliche Fragen*, Bonn-Bad Godesberg. No. 83, 1977. Christian and non-Christian staff are employed, including 4,400 deacons and sisters, 1,830 doctors and medical staff, and over 8,000 in administration and training. The Churches' social work is organized on a national, rather than regional basis, in cooperation with the Free Churches and state services.

[4] T. Beeson, *op. cit.*, p. 172.

[5] Hilary Black, "The Church in East Germany", *RCL*, Vol. 1, Nos. 4-5, 1973, pp. 4-7.

[6] T. Beeson, *op. cit.*, p. 174.

[7] Reported in *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 13 October 1975 and *Die Welt*, 2 October 1975.

[8] T. Beeson, *op. cit.*, p. 174.

[9] Manpower is at a premium, and already in 1973, 84 per cent of women of working age had jobs. See J. Steele, *op. cit.*, p. 180.

[10] In the period 1948-1961, 2.9 million people crossed to the West, a large proportion settling in West Germany.

[11] In 1971, a survey by the SED showed that 71 per cent of people still considered Germany as a whole to be their fatherland: quoted by G. H. Brand, "The Status of Religion in the GDR", *Religion and Atheism in the USSR and Eastern Europe*, edited by B. R. Bociurkiw and J. W. Strong, London, 1975.

[12] J. Steele, *op. cit.*, p. 8. The vast majority of East Germans under retirement age cannot travel to the West, their only view of which comes via West German television, available in all areas except Saxony (Dresden). Comparisons with their own society are now feared less by the regime.

[13] T. Beeson, *op. cit.*, p. 179.

[14] T. Beeson, *op. cit.*, p. 171.

[15] For example, see speech by Walter Ulbricht, 1961, quoted by T. Beeson, *op. cit.*, pp. 177-8.

[16] Articles 20 and 39 of the *Constitution of the German Democratic Republic*, 1974.

[17] For reports of Church protests, see for example *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 26 April 1976.

[18] G. H. Brand, *op. cit.*, in *Religion and Atheism in the USSR and Eastern Europe*.

[19] K. Sontheimer and W. Bleek: *The Government and Politics of East Germany*, 1975.

[20] *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 24 April 1976.

[21] *Newsweek*, 6 September 1976.
[22] J. Steele, *op. cit.*, p. 161; T. Beeson, *op. cit.*, pp. 181-4.
[23] For an analogous situation in Yugoslavia, see Stella Alexander: "Church-State Relations in Yugoslavia: Recent Developments", *RCL*, Vol. 5, No. 4, 1977, pp. 239, 240.
[24] See "GDR: Evening in a Parish" by John Arnold, *RCL*, Vol. 5, No. 4, 1977, pp. 241-3. The author finds similarities in the situation of churches in East Germany and in Great Britain.
[25] Since 1974 West German journalists have been working in East Berlin.

Postscript

PAUL OESTREICHER

In recent months improving church-state relations in the GDR have culminated in an agreement that could inaugurate an entirely new phase, both in church history and in the attitude of the ruling Socialist Unity Party to Christian citizens. On 6 March 1978 Party Secretary Erich Honnecker met the Presiding Bishop of the Federation of Protestant Churches, Dr Albrecht Schönherr for a "summit conference" which has no East German precedents. Both men were accompanied by senior officials of (on both sides) their own choosing.

A detailed communiqué was given pride of place in all of East Germany's media the following day. It was read in full on television. Far from being a bland statement of "total accord on a wide range of issues", both leaders were separately quoted stating on the one hand the State's position, on the other the Church's. There was no suggestion that these are or could be identical. There was the clear affirmation that Christians could have a distinctive and not unimportant role to play in society. This reflected the church leadership's contention that the Church was neither pro-communist nor anti-communist, but a distinctive entity, playing a positive role "within socialist society".

For the first time the State was implicitly accepting this position, and at the same time explicitly giving far more positive content to the concept of freedom of religion. For one thing, it was clearly implied that the Church speaks for Christian citizens. To be realistic, the Protestant Federation probably speaks for up to a quarter of the population. Hitherto it was officially held that the Christian Democratic Union (the pro-communist politically active Christians) spoke for Christians. At the 6 March meeting the chairman of the CDU was not even present. He was merely briefed by Herr Honnecker a few days later.