

Recent trends in the GDR *Jugendweihe*: State and Church attitudes

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On 30 March 1930, a group of young people gathered in the main hall of a Berlin school to swear the *Jugendweihe* (Youth Dedication) oath. Nearly all the candidates were members of the Communist Young Spartacist League. Among them was the twenty-year-old Margarete Driest, now a citizen of the GDR.¹ The formal question was put to the young people, "Are you willing to fight side by side with us for a Socialist order of society?" Margarete responded, together with the other young people, "Yes, we are!" Margarete's father was unemployed at the time, and doubtless it was no easy matter for the Driest family to scrape together enough money for the required celebration at home. These were the heroic days of the *Jugendweihe*, when "fighting for Socialism" meant just that — fighting with sticks and stones, sometimes with fire-arms, against Hitler's "brown battalions" in the streets of Berlin. The *Jugendweihe* oath was no empty formula.

Margarete Driest's grandchildren, who took the oath recently, have grown up in the world of "socialism". The erstwhile victims of persecution are now the masters of the hour, setting the standards of orthodoxy. What was once a challenging venture has developed into a tedious ritual. The party has the daunting task of trying to inspire the youth of 1985 with the crusading zeal of fifty years ago. The leaders must surely often ask themselves the question: can these dry bones live?

Certainly a great host of 14-year-olds have stood to swear the *Jugendweihe* oath during the 1980s: 229,000 in 1983², 223,800 in 1984³ and over 224,000 by the end of the school year of 1985⁴. There is no decline here; each of these three figures represents over 97 percent of the Republic's 14-year-olds, although theoretically participation in the *Jugendweihe* is a voluntary act. In practice, however, the *Jugendweihe* programme is an important element in the state educational programme for the eighth class. Failure to participate is inevitably regarded in official circles as lack of zeal for "socialism", and there is undoubtedly discrimination against objectors.

Formal responsibility for the *Jugendweihe* does not lie with the state, but with a large number of local (but centrally coordinated) *Jugendweihe*

committees, which cooperate with schools, parents' associations, the "Free German Youth" and various local enterprises in making their annual arrangements. These committees have the duty of arranging ten training classes which constitute the preparation for the *Jugendweihe*. Committee members are often keen to enliven these sessions (which a recent candidate describes as an "indescribably tedious chore".) To this end, one-time members of the anti-Nazi Resistance are recruited to give talks to the candidates, explaining to them what life was like under Hitler, particularly for those who failed to show enthusiasm for the "Thousand-year-Reich"; it is thought that descriptions of the worst horrors are more effective when given by those who have actually suffered at the hands of the SS and the Gestapo. Large numbers of 14-year-olds are taken in parties to the concentration camps at Buchenwald and elsewhere, in order to learn about the sufferings of communists (for other prisoners are rarely mentioned). It is interesting to watch a group receiving a lecture; the guide, though thoroughly sincere and well-informed, can make little or no impact on pupils who enjoy the occasion in a youthfully sadistic way, but who find the whole affair entirely irrelevant to their own lives. They seem even less inspired by the contributions to the training sessions given by artists, scientists, representatives of industry, civil servants and party officials.

Between March and May 1985, some thousands of *Jugendweihe* ceremonies were scheduled; a number of them in the big cities, but many in small towns and villages. It is the task of the committees to make these occasions appear as significant as possible. Serious thought is given, for example, to appropriate wear for the occasion: at the Congress Hall in Berlin there was a fashion show on 11 February 1985 at which the new models for the 14-year-old boys and girls were displayed.⁵ There are a number of performances by youth orchestras and chamber music groups. Recitations, dances, and the singing of special songs ensure that the cultural aspect is not neglected. Grandparents and other relatives join the family circle for a celebration at home. Some go to the theatre, others organise excursions.

A recent article in the official party newspaper *Neues Deutschland* does its best to give the *Jugendweihe* a human face:

Weeks before the *Jugendweihe* ceremony a more refined tone than usual is noticeable in the class. Nicknames give way to genuine first names among the girls; the boys turn to poetry with a sensitive ear. The class teacher is delighted with the improvement. Sometimes the new spirit enforces instant justice — as when Dirk finds newly made notches in a desk in the 8B classroom. A boy from Class 9 was the culprit. Remembering that the pupils of 8B did up the classroom themselves, Dirk himself deals with the evildoer. The teacher is pleased that Dirk

is prepared to defend his own and his friends' work, and turns a blind eye.

Who are the models for the pupils of 8B? They honour the heroes of literature and the outstanding figures of history. They revere Müntzer, Luther, Marx and Engels, Lenin, Liebknecht, Luxemburg, Thälmann and many "nameless heroes". They also take as models people whom they know personally — parents, grandparents, teachers and friends . . .

To be received into adult life means accepting a new kind of responsibility. It means belonging to a community in which one has a settled place, learns from others, speaks out openly and has disputes (but not petty ones). All these aspects of adult life are in the minds of the pupils of 8B. On this May Sunday they promise to work and fight for the great and noble cause . . .⁶

The wording of the oath has been modified a good deal since the introduction of the *Jugendweihe*. At present the text is as follows:

"Are you prepared, as young citizens of our German Democratic Republic, to work and fight side by side with us, in accordance with the Constitution, for the noble cause of communism, and honourably to maintain the revolutionary heritage of the people?"

Response: "We are!"

"Are you prepared, as loyal sons and daughters of our Peasants' and Workers' State, to strive for a high standard of education and culture, to develop your skills to the utmost, to learn incessantly, and to use all your knowledge and ability towards the realisation of our great humanistic ideals?"

Response: "We are!"

"Are you prepared, as worthy members of the socialist community, to act in the spirit of comradely cooperation, to respect and support others, and always to unite your own road to happiness with the struggle for the happiness of our people as a whole?"

Response: "We are!"

"Are you prepared, as true patriots, to deepen our firm friendship with the Soviet Union, to strengthen our brotherly ties with the socialist countries, to carry on the fight in the spirit of proletarian internationalism, to safeguard peace, and to protect socialism against all imperialist aggression?"

Response: "We are!"

The wording of the oath is significant, but the essence of the *Jugendweihe* is most clearly seen in the preparation classes, and in the handbook which is presented to all the candidates at the ceremony. There have been two major changes in the content and style of this book since the introduction of the *Jugendweihe* in the GDR in 1954. The first edition

had the title *Weltall — Erde — Mensch* (The Universe — the Earth — Mankind) and heavily stressed science and ideology; the second was *Der Sozialismus — Deine Welt* (Socialism — your world) and had socialist citizenship as its main theme; the most recent title *Vom Sinn unseres Lebens* (The Meaning of Life) clearly sets out the new trend. This last book contains four main sections. The first and second, headed “Understanding the natural world — one’s philosophy of life” and “Who directs the course of history?” respectively, are intended as a guide to the main points of Marxist theory. The third, headed “The battle for peace and social progress”, discusses the themes of “fully developed socialism in the GDR”, “unity in the battle for peace”, and “the ultimate goal of communism”. The quest for the meaning of life in the narrower sense takes up the last fifty pages of the book. The style is ponderous and hardly likely to inspire the young reader; such topics as the meaning of personality, individual talents, ideals vis-à-vis reality, are not treated in such a way as to stir the imagination. The reader who searches for the meaning of “freedom” is hardly likely to find the following passage entirely satisfactory:

The “realm of freedom” has become a reality for the citizens of our land. The freedom to wield political power, the freedom to take an active part in moulding our political, economic and cultural life, legally guaranteed rights and freedoms (such as the right to work and to social security), freedom from exploitation, unemployment and poverty, the right to a modern education, to leisure time and leisure activities, to treatment when ill and care when old . . . all these things have long been safeguarded by the party in our republic.⁸

The sections on happiness, work and play, and culture, lack colour and impact. In the section devoted to sexual relationships, at least, the reader finds something more specific. Having extolled an appropriate degree of self-control, the book continues:

Self-control in love, on the other hand, does not mean doing without sexual relationships completely. Young people whose personalities are well developed, and whose relationship is based on genuine attraction and love, can certainly not be denied the moral right to sexual intercourse. The recognition of this right by our society is not a charter for casual relationships, nor is it suggested that 16 and 17-year-olds who are not ready for sexual activity, should be looked on as peculiar people. Love between two human beings is a vitally important affair; they must show a sense of responsibility as much in the use of contraceptives as in consideration for a partner’s further development.⁹

The chapter then returns to the theme of happiness. Short passages

about politeness, honesty and the love of truth complete the work. *Vom Sinn unseres Lebens* is clearly printed, and contains a large number of illustrations, but it cannot be claimed that many young people read it very assiduously.

Official publications give assurances that the *Jugendweihe* is suitable for all young people in the GDR:

The solemn pledge made on this occasion by young people is a voluntary commitment to the socialist state, a promise to become good citizens. Christian concepts and religious beliefs are not affected by the *Jugendweihe*. Participation in confirmation or Holy Communion is left to the children's parents and does not rule out participation in the *Jugendweihe*.¹⁰

Although the authors of *Vom Sinn unseres Lebens* have gone to some lengths in order to avoid being charged with militant atheism, denial of God is nevertheless implicit in the whole book, as for example in the Marxist condemnation of "Idealism" in the following passage:

Natural things and processes are regarded as manifestations of ideas. A primary Idea, a creator of the world (God), a first mover must have been at work. But materialism accepts reality as it is . . .

A later passage also specifically rules out the Divine:

When Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels applied dialectical materialism to history, they were able to demonstrate that there are not affected by the *Jugendweihe*. Participation in confirmation or Holy Communion is left to the children's parents and does not rule out participation in the *Jugendweihe*.¹⁰

Christians have few illusions about the anti-religious purpose of the *Jugendweihe*. Its introduction towards the end of the 19th century was to rally the children of humanists, free-thinkers and other opponents of the church. When in 1954 the rite first appeared in the GDR, its proclamation of militant atheism was in no way camouflaged; there was no doubt about the open challenge to Christians — particularly to young members of the Protestant Churches. (In the meantime the content of the instruction has been modified many times, and is now considerably more sophisticated.) The blow was aimed at a weak point in the defences of the once "established" church. Following the principle that all baptised persons over 14 years of age who had not formally left the church were reckoned as church members, most citizens of the GDR were said to belong to the Protestant Churches. For many young people confirmation, normally at the age of 14, had degenerated into a meaningless ritual — just something to be gone through at the time of leaving school. In the 1930s the writer Martin Doerne spoke of confirmation as a "half-way house between a

sacrament and primitive folk-drama".¹³ In many cases lack of commitment was only too obvious. In addition, however, confirmation has always posed theological problems for Lutheran churchmen. On the one hand, the Roman Catholic doctrine of "consecration to the lay apostolate" is rejected, on the strength of the Lutheran belief that baptism is all-sufficient and needs no later amplification. On the other hand, conflicts with the Anabaptists have forced Lutherans to think hard about the nature of the blessing which confirmation may be said to confer. There is as yet no clear understanding.

It is not surprising, therefore, that within a dozen years of the institution of the *Jugendweihe* some 88 per cent of the GDR's 14-year-olds were taking part. "The battle for the allegiance of the youth is now a matter of ancient history," declared one GDR churchman in 1984, and many of his colleagues would tend to agree. In the 1950s it was the policy of the Protestant Churches bitterly to oppose the *Jugendweihe*; in theory, this may well still be the case, but the practical line is different. It is accepted that the majority of Protestant young people will have been through the secular ceremony, and that confirmation instruction must bear this fact in mind. (That is not to deny that thousands of Protestant young people, supported by their parents, refuse to participate in the Youth Dedication.)

The Protestant Churches' manuals recognise that confirmation candidates, even if they have not participated in the *Jugendweihe*, will have been influenced by many years of "socialist" education as well as the everyday experiences of life in a "socialist" community. A re-evaluation of the principles of confirmation is going on — a process which began nearly thirty years ago and is as yet far from complete. Traditionally, confirmation has had three elements: the conclusion of the church's course of instruction, formal acceptance of the church's teaching, and admission to Holy Communion. Nowadays these three are no longer thought of as necessarily belonging together. Some feel that admission to Communion should come before the instruction is finished, others much later. Nearly all the GDR Protestant Churches have postponed the age of confirmation until 15, a year after the *Jugendweihe*, with the idea that having gone through his Youth Dedication, the candidate should have a whole year to come to terms with the meaning of membership of a religious body, before experiencing the confirmation service as a definitive break with atheism.

A recent church publication, *Syllabus for the instruction of children and young people*, affords clear instances of the new trends. For example, the section headed "God" makes an imaginative effort to put the reality of God before the children for whom it is intended (eight to ten-year-olds). The various divisions are headed "Aims", "Themes", "Biblical texts", "Other materials", and "Activities". The quality of the material may be

judged by looking at only one of the aims — “Discovery”: “God is not provable, but we can experience Him.” The theme is “God’s Heaven is not the same thing as the Cosmos of space-travellers”; the biblical texts come from I Kings and Psalm 139; other materials include two short stories, a children’s story by Borchert (“Where does the dear Lord live?”) and some space photographs; activities include suggestions for role-play, one theme of which is “There is no God”!

Perhaps it is no coincidence that the Lutheran *Syllabus* and the *Jugendweihe* handbook ask much the same questions about ethics and the meaning of personality. One section of the Church’s *Syllabus* strives to contrast distinctively Christian views with the attitudes generally accepted in society outside the Church. Thus the student is faced with the themes: How do I have an effect upon other people?; What do I expect of a future marriage partner?; The other sex: “We want to be different”.¹⁵ There are suitable Bible passages. There is discussion of vital contemporary issues such as abortion legislation, the meaning of the sixth Commandment, and the problems of a young Christian engaged to an unbeliever.

The section of the course intended for 12 to 15-year-olds (including confirmation candidates) illustrates the essential character of the whole *Syllabus*. On the one hand, there is a real effort to bring young people face to face with the nature of the Old Testament, the development and problems of the Early Church, and in particular the claims of Jesus Christ. On the other hand, there is ample recognition of the kind of society in which today’s believers live. Thus, one of the themes, social conflict, includes the following: Racial conflicts; Capitalism — Socialism; Efforts for understanding; Friendship between nations; the Red Cross, the Ecumenical fellowship of the Church; How different opinions originate, e.g. the use of television; How can one help someone to face death?¹⁶ These themes are balanced by biblical texts, the Commandments, and reference to such outstanding figures as Dunant, St Francis of Assisi, Dolci and Schweitzer. The assumption is that the Christian young person, living as he is in a community dominated by ideological values, is compelled to make daily decisions for or against Christ. It would be simplistic to narrow the choice down to one between confirmation or *Jugendweihe*.

The attitude of the Roman Catholic Church in the GDR to the *Jugendweihe* in the 1950s was, like that of the Protestant Churches, one of bitter opposition. Roman Catholic opposition, however, has been carried on, at least in theory, ever since. There are various reasons for this difference. For one thing, the GDR’s Roman Catholic Church does not suffer from the weak position which was inherited by the Protestants owing to their once “established” status. For another, their lack of numbers in the GDR gives Roman Catholics a defensive mentality which is exceedingly

difficult to shake off. Moreover, there is an extremely deep-seated fear of "collaboration" among the Roman Catholics of the GDR, which perhaps owes a good deal to the lessons learned under Nazism, and which was very bluntly expressed by Bishop Otto Spülbeck during the early years of the conflict over the *Jugendweihe*:

Let me quote the kind of conversation that has often taken place at the highest level. "Minister, you are a Marxist. I am a Catholic Christian. Ideologically we have nothing in common. There is no bridge between us . . . But you and I live in a single house. *We* have not built the house, and we consider its foundation wrongly laid . . . we gladly see to it that we can live an honest and Christian life in this house, but we are not prepared to add a storey to a building whose foundations we think untrustworthy . . . For us, this house remains an alien house . . .!"¹⁷

In accordance with this doctrine a pastoral letter was read in all Roman Catholic churches at Christmas 1954, making it abundantly clear that the new "socialist" rite was contrary to Christian belief and was to be given a wide berth by all the faithful. The less openly atheist line adopted by the new *Jugendweihe* handbook *Der Sozialismus — Deine Welt* caused no modification of the church's attitude. It was noted that the preface to this book contained the words: "Young people must take up an unmistakably socialist attitude, even in complicated problems and contradictory situations." Furthermore, the main body of the work contained the unmistakable claim that "a so-called Higher Being, a supernatural power, an almighty spiritual principle, a creator of the material world — just does not exist." Nowadays a considerable number of young people from faithful Roman Catholic families participate in the *Jugendweihe*, though in many cases with reluctance. The church's declaration of principle remains unaltered.

The Roman Catholic authorities do not content themselves with mere negative declarations. There is a fair amount of helpful teaching material available. As an example, a booklet recently published in the GDR *Thoughts about young love as seen from a Christian viewpoint*¹⁸ may be quoted. The book is attractively printed, and well illustrated. The young people are not portrayed as belonging to any holy ghetto; their clothes, hairstyles and activities are unmistakably those of "socialist" society in the 1980s. The approach is, after all, not so different from that of the Protestants. This handbook begins by asking the question "Who am I?" and goes on to ask the meaning of love, and to put love, engagement and marriage in a Christian context. Catholic teaching is unobtrusive but is unmistakably there. In the "test for engaged couples" one of the questions put is "Do I know your attitude to the fundamental problems of life, for

example the Christian understanding of marriage, of work, of society, of lifestyle?" As do Protestants, Roman Catholic spokesmen underline the cost of Christian discipleship.

Most Roman Catholic candidates for confirmation are well under the age of 14. A considerable number of those who have been confirmed participate in the *Jugendweihe*. As has been already pointed out, the *Jugendweihe* claims the great majority of those young people who belong — in a formal sense at least — to the Protestant Churches. Both the Protestant and the Catholic Churches try to minister to those who take part as well as to those who refuse. Yet the bold minority should not be forgotten; in 1984 seven thousand 14-year-olds in the GDR did not swear the *Jugendweihe* oath.

¹Margarete Driest was commended in the official party newspaper *Neues Deutschland* (11 March 1982).

²*Neues Deutschland*, 30 May 1983.

³*Neues Deutschland*, 8 March 1984.

⁴*Neues Deutschland*, 7 September 1984.

⁵*Neues Deutschland*, 11 February 1985.

⁶*Neues Deutschland*, 12/13 May 1984.

⁷Wording of the *Jugendweihe* oath as used in 1984.

⁸*Vom Sinn unseres Lebens*, p. 223.

⁹*Ibid.*, p. 245 (tr. author).

¹⁰Wolfgang Heyl, *Christians and Churches in the German Democratic Republic (DDR: Panorama, 1975)*, p. 29.

¹¹*Vom Sinn unseres Lebens*, p. 14.

¹²*Ibid.*, p. 96.

¹³M. Doerne, *Neubau der Konfirmation*.

¹⁴*Rahmenplan für die kirchliche Arbeit mit Kindern and Jugendlichen (Konfirmanden)*, (Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1982).

¹⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 68-69.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, pp. 64-65.

¹⁷*Petrusblatt*, 9 September 1956.

¹⁸Juliane and Klaus Bittner, *Und liebt mich . . . Gedanken über junge Liebe in christlicher Sicht* (Leipzig: St Benno-Verlag, 1983).