

Ten Years On: The Church-State Discussions of 6 March 1978 in the GDR*

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Erich Honecker has described the discussions as a “crown and new beginning”. They were certainly not a turning-point or a conversion. Paul Verner (the member of the Central Committee responsible for security and for church affairs) indeed took the view that the discussions were a perfectly normal outcome of the Party’s policy of being flexible while remaining true to its basic principles. In any case, they were to set the seal on the Party’s religious policy which had been developing ever more clearly since 1971. Meetings at a high level had already taken place. Most of these discussions, however, had been called to put an end to unpleasant developments. The meeting of 6 March 1978 had a different cause. The leadership of the Federation of Protestant Churches took the view that it would be good for Christian citizens, bearing in mind the state reorganisation of September 1977, if there were a meeting with the highest representative of the state at the time of his assumption of office. Both Party and state let it be known that they were in favour of a “summit” of this kind. Such considerations underline the main significance of the discussions of 6 March.

There were no “negotiations” in the strict sense of the word. No “bargains” were struck or demanded. Negotiations had gone on for months about practical problems, which could be solved only by decisions at the highest level: in particular, arrangements for regular pastoral work in prisons, nursing homes and homes for the aged, the participation of long-term church employees in the state insurance system, and the possibility for the church to have its own radio and television programmes.

The slogan “a new beginning” could have only one meaning: the

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final removal of the distrust which, over many years, each side has had for the other; that is, a step forward into new realms of candour and understanding, and into a proper kind of cooperation for the good of those human beings who are both Christians and East German citizens.

To be more specific: a “new beginning” means the start of a journey along an open road, where no barricades block the way. We must look out for blind alleys, so that in future we can avoid them altogether. True, the “open road” does not rule out potholes and piles of rubble. Klaus Gysi, the Secretary of State for Church Affairs, likes to talk about an “historical experiment”. Those who go in for experiments must be prepared to take risks.

The Aims: a Climate of Trust

What did the discussions of 6 March achieve? It was the specific wish of the chairman of the State Council to contribute to a trusting, sincere and unemotional atmosphere, the effects of which would reach out to ordinary people. He was ready enough to talk of his high esteem of the contribution made by both the individual believer and the church as a whole to the general good of GDR society. Social service and peace work were heavily stressed. The wish for candour was fulfilled in the discussions which followed the opening speeches. Part of what all the church participants had to say took the form of criticisms, which were at once answered by Honecker in a concrete way; appropriate decisions were taken about most of them.

In my answer to the remarks made by the Chairman of the State Council (which had lasted an hour and a half), I did my best to put the rather vague word “trust” into concrete language:

‡ We sincerely wish that meetings between heads of state and church may lead to the kind of trust which does not question, but instead assumes, an honest attitude on the part of the other side. This atmosphere of trust will grow all the more if trust is felt not only at the highest level but also at the grass roots. Honesty and frankness — these are the barometers of trust. The relationship between state and church is only as good as its reflection in the experience of the ordinary Christian citizen in his corner of society.

A Model for Meaningful Discussion

The discussions of 6 March 1978 were indeed intended as a model for the future cooperation of church and state. They adhered to the strict

separation of church and state. A basic assumption was that Marxist ideology and Christian belief are irreconcilable. There is a symbol of this situation in the centre of Berlin: the City Hall and the Marienkirche [East Berlin's principal Protestant church — *Tr.*] stand side by side, but instead of being divided by an abyss, they are linked by a pedestrian zone, so that people can cross from one side to the other.

Since 6 March we have seen the monologues and confrontations which were previously the order of the day replaced everywhere and at all levels by sincere and open discussions. Contacts between local government and local church officials, between the Federation of Protestant Churches and the Secretary of State for Church Affairs, have become normal procedures. Matters of concern to one side or another are discussed point by point. During the last few years, quite separately from these official contacts, discussions have been possible with representatives of state or Party at church academic conferences or at *Kirchentage*. The reciprocal opening-up is a tedious business, needing much goodwill and patience from both sides. Troubles with the ecological library at the Zionskirche in Berlin last November [when the premises were searched and a number of arrests made — *Tr.*] show that there is still a great deal to do.

Equal Rights and Equal Respect for all Citizens

At that time, of course, and since that day, both church people and the general public have listened with special attention to what the state's representative has to say about equality of rights and equality of respect for all citizens, regardless of their faith or outlook. He has called attention to his oath to uphold the Constitution. This response is a clear renunciation of the practice of dividing citizens into "grades" of esteem and trustworthiness. It is perfectly clear, nonetheless, that this "grading" gives us problems. As I see it, no binding solution has ever been given to the vexed problem of how to combine the Constitution's guarantee of freedom of religion and conscience with the educational goal of the "communist personality". For many years there have been requests from Protestant synods to discuss this difficulty. On the one hand it can be said that, like everybody else, teachers of theology at universities are committed to this communist goal. *And* they regard their teaching work as an expression of their Christian faith. On the other hand, both parents and children are constantly coming up against people who take the line that the Christian faith is unscientific or indeed harmful, and who

are suspicious of those who hold this faith. In this area there is a great deal to be done.

From Tolerance to Normality

The outcome of 6 March has come to be regarded as a kind of Edict of Tolerance. The assumption is now made that Christians and their church are no longer to be seen as an arm of the class enemy. The discussions, however, needed to achieve a great deal more than this.

Being "tolerated" (it might be called "being on sufferance") means something like this: "For better or worse, we have got to get along with you. We put up with you, as other people put up with an unsociable member of the family. We just have to live side by side — probably for a good deal longer yet".

Probably Honecker had "normality" in mind. This word means "we want to live side by side". The Rector of Berlin's Humboldt University has described the presence of a theological faculty not as something *exotic*, but as something quite *normal*. The Luther Year of 1983 was an aspect of this "normality". Even the experiences of the *Kirchentage* are to be reckoned as "normal". Bishop Johannes Hempel has declared: "The churches of our country have learnt that it really is possible for them to live and work as Christian churches within the domain of an exclusively Marxist-Leninist regime, which demands the allegiance of the whole person." There is no question here of pluralism on the Western model. But as long as a Constitution guarantees freedom of religious practice, and the theory can be carried out in practice, the label of "totalitarianism", which makes it feasible to class fascism and Marxist socialism together, must be rejected.

It is a process of normalisation that we are in, rather than a normality which has already been achieved. Anyone who lives his Christian faith in the socialist society of the GDR is often enough faced with negative experiences. He may ask himself how he should behave in certain situations. If, for example, he finds himself excluded from certain positions or professional groups, should he react with resentment or fear and withdraw into an attitude of "inner emigration" or indeed apply to leave the GDR? Or should he take his stand firmly on the equality of rights and respect, guaranteed to all citizens by the Constitution and the Head of State himself? With regard to the education of his children, should he capitulate to the demands of the secular society which surrounds him on every side? Or should he take his own educational duties and opportunities all the more seriously?

In the wake of 6 March 1978 another step forward needs to be

taken, a step from tolerance and normality in our relationship to positive acceptance of one another. We must not just live with these people. We do not just live with them as a fact of life; we *need* them for the progress of the society for which we are responsible. In a working paper prepared by a group on behalf of the Synod of the Mecklenburg Church (see *epd Documentation 52/87 — Ed. of KiS*) we find the words:

As Christians we must do all we can for our fellow-men. Our primary commitment is not to our *own* rights and opportunities, but to the welfare of society as a whole. Our position in the GDR, therefore, is neither one of opportunism nor one of opposition. We must take part responsibly in the successes and hopes of this society, insofar as we are prepared to share the burdens and problems of others.

Even before 6 March I had a long and confidential talk with Hans Seigewasser, the Secretary of State for Church Affairs who died in 1979, about a large number of such problems. In this conversation he said to me: "Do not imagine that we are supporting the churches' social work merely to take it from you later on. We cannot do this work as well as the Christians do it."

The Church: Independent and Relevant to Society

The Chairman of the State Council has characterised the church as an independent organisation [*"eigenständig"*, a word with no exact English equivalent — *Tr.*] and one that has relevance to society. He has assigned to it a task of cooperation in achieving the goals of society, and has approved of its present special area of activity. He has made special mention of its social and peace work. Viewed from a strictly ideological standpoint, these pronouncements are far from what might be expected. If, for Marxist theorists, religion represents false consciousness, then the church is the institution which preserves and propagates that consciousness. The party theorists would say that the church is not only unnecessary, but harmful. It is abundantly clear, therefore, that we are faced with a new view of the church's involvement in society. ')

At the same time, it has become clear that freedom of religion, as guaranteed in the Constitution, goes beyond worship and pastoral activity. There is a growing idea that religious faith and responsibility for this world go together; the Christian convictions of both the church and the individual believer impel them not merely to work for the salvation and welfare of the individual, but also for the salvation

and welfare of society, indeed of the whole world.

Test cases arose immediately after the discussions of 6 March. It became known that the authorities intended to introduce, at the beginning of the new school year, a compulsory course of pre-military training for all the higher classes. The Federation of Protestant Churches had serious reservations about this plan. Various negotiations took place, but the church was not successful in persuading the authorities to change their minds. The very fact that these exchanges took place, however, showed that the state did not question the churches' right to make their views known. There followed countless discussions of defence matters, and they bore fruit; the result has been that the situation of "construction soldiers" [conscripts who on grounds of conscience opt for unarmed service only — *Tr.*] was noticeably improved. Some total objectors have been treated more leniently than is customary in some countries of the "liberal" West. Since the Helsinki Declaration of 1975 there has been public discussion of matters of human rights. Discussions between church and state on the environment, too, have for some years been the order of the day; whole sessions of provincial synods have been devoted to these problems. In all these matters there are points of agreement as well as contrary opinions, but for a long time now it has been normal practice for officialdom to discuss them with the church and with Christian citizens.

When the GDR delegation to the World Council of Churches at Vancouver in 1983 addressed a session about peace, justice and the integrity of creation, there was no lack of concern and discussion at home. It is simply not true to say that the state distrusted or obstructed the activities of church groups lock, stock and barrel. What one can say is that *some* groups gained a lot of publicity, and thus gave the impression that they represented all those working in this area.

Manfred Stolpe [a leading Protestant churchman in Berlin, who took part in the 6 March discussions — *Tr.*] summed things up in these words:

The church is recognised as an independent [*eigenständig* — *Tr.*] organisation in every sense, with a meaningful place in society and the right to make its voice heard. Its share of responsibility for the welfare of all citizens is undisputed. Nowadays, therefore, the church is looked upon not as an institution of the class enemy, but as an independent [*eigenständig* — *Tr.*] force in society.

The discussions of 6 March seem, therefore, to provide a model showing how the state and its leading Party view the ideological struggle in the GDR. Peaceful coexistence of peoples and nations, a

principle which since Lenin's time has occupied an important strategic place in socialist policy, does not imply the peaceful coexistence of ideologies, we were told. The idea of "non-coexistence" had a sinister ring for us, because we Christians regarded our faith as the basis for our whole existence. Denial of the principle of coexistence could thus mean that Christians were denied the right to exist.

The discussions of 6 March were not limited to the problem of church-state relationships. The Party's ideology is, in practice, inseparable from the structure of the state. This was made clear by the fact that the Chairman of the Council of State and General Secretary of the Party took personal responsibility in the discussions, without delegating authority to the Chairman of the Council of Ministers. Besides the deputy Secretary of State for Church Affairs, the Secretary of the Politburo, Paul Verner, and the leader of the Party Central Committee's working group for Church Affairs were present. A principle which Verner expressed in a widely-regarded speech, made in 1971, is clearly of central importance for the Party's church policy: "Both the exaggeration and the blurring of the contradictions between Christianity and Marxism — conflicts which are of course unbridgeable — have always aided the enemies of peace and social progress. History knows plenty of examples."

Ideological Conflict and Our Common Future

Such words and the content of the discussion with the Chairman of the Council of State show that significant ideas expressed in the paper published jointly by the Socialist Unity Party of the GDR and Social Democratic Party (of the Federal Republic), *Ideological Conflict and Collective Security*, have for some considerable while underlain the development of church-state relationships in the GDR. It is clearly not a matter of mere tactical manoeuvring, but a process of learning — a process of learning on both sides. The matter cannot be more clearly and credibly expressed than was done by Otto Reinhold, Rector of Social Sciences in the Party's Central Committee, in front of 10,000 participants at the Frankfurt *Kirchentage* in July last year:

The process of learning had two sides. There was once the view held by some representatives of the Protestant Church that it was impossible to live in a state dominated by the atheist ideology, combined with the hope that another kind of state would soon come to pass. It has been a process of learning for people on our side who held the view that, as socialist society was built up, the Christian ideology would become less significant and in due course disappear. I think that we have both made mistakes, and

have both had to change . . . The critical question is not whether one side should alter and eliminate the view of the other, how we can find a way for all citizens of this State to work together.

It is perfectly clear, too, that this process of learning has not yet run its course.

Approaching Dialogue

However, it is evident that in the long run more must be achieved than a mere agreement to work together. Cooperation is not practicable, and indeed not genuine, unless each side is prepared to take seriously the motivation and basic principles of the other. It is clear that a Christian-Marxist dialogue is taking shape — and not in a polemical or apologetic spirit, as used to be the case. Dialogue is meaningless unless it arises from a genuine desire to get to know the other side, and to dispense with the empty repetition of slogans. From the Christian side no attempt will be made to demolish the atheistic position held by Marxists. Such an effort simply will not succeed. Mere argument will not prove or disprove faith.

After a century and a half of bitter controversy, there will have to be a long period during which each side sets out to win over the other by means of the quality of its life rather than by verbal persuasion. More and more people have become convinced that administrative measures achieve only very superficial results, and often not the ones desired. On the other hand, slander and discrimination directed against the Christian faith are almost useless in achieving positive developments in society. On the Christian side the automatic enemy image of “communist” must be given up, together with moral indignation about atheism. Practical atheism, and the worship of the false gods “Affluence” and “Success” in the so-called Christian West, are more abhorrent to our faith than the atheism of the Marxists, which they profess openly and defend rationally.

The Church in Socialism

The discussion of 6 March 1978 is clearly seen as a confirmation of everything that is commonly lumped together under the formula “The Church in Socialism”. The formula is directed first and foremost against the concept of the church’s witness and theology as being tied to no particular location. If Jesus Christ is incarnate, showing forth the Creator’s sense of responsibility for the world, the church can nowhere on this globe neglect its due concern for humanity. Thus

“The Church in Socialism” means — and this point was specially stressed at the national Synod at Eisenach in 1971 — the refusal of any kind of “ghetto” existence, any kind of emigration, whether physical or of “hearts and minds”; it does not rule out, indeed it calls for, a critical attitude. It means “in Socialism”, not just “in the GDR”. It calls for a Christian presence in a particular kind of society. Our society is led by a Party which is dedicated to dialectical materialism. It means presence in a state whose voters do not have to choose at each election which party is to govern; the decisive choice has been made once and for all. The Christian citizen, therefore, faces an unprecedented situation. He is forced to spy out new territory, on which he meets new forms not only of encouragement, but also of temptation. “The Church in Socialism” (so the national Synod put it at Güstrow in 1981) means accepting our share in the problems and achievements of the society in which we live, cooperating with others while making our own responsible decisions, and all the time remaining independent [*eigenständig* — *Tr.*] and keeping our own identity. The church may not withdraw into itself; neither may it look on itself as a rallying-point for opposition.

Should a new “6 March” be striven for? No longer being in active service, I hesitate to answer. It is certain that there are constant problems which must be dealt with in discussion, if need be at the highest level. The possibilities of 6 March 1978, however, seen as a forum for the discussion of basic principles, seem to be by no means exhausted.

Translated from German by Arvan Gordon