

Church and State in the GDR

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Allow me to preface my remarks with some information about myself. I was born in 1911 before the First World War. As a theology graduate and a young pastor I lived through the Hitler years and the struggle of the Confessing Church. My meeting and friendship with Dietrich Bonhoeffer were a strong influence on my subsequent life and thought. I experienced the collapse of the Third Reich as both a liberation and a judgement on the German people. The division of Germany into two states was for me a direct consequence of German guilt. For this reason I never saw myself as sitting in judgement over the communist state of the GDR, but as one of those who was guilty for what Germans had done to themselves and to other nations. I felt it was my duty to do all I could to work to bring about good.

I am speaking to you as former Bishop of my Protestant Church in Berlin-Brandenburg. From the time of the founding of the Federation of Protestant Churches in 1969 — that is, from the time when the Protestant Church in Germany (EKD) was divided — I was Presiding Bishop in this alliance of Provincial Protestant Churches in the GDR. For this reason I am able to speak only from the (certainly restricted) viewpoint of the church leadership.

I have been in retirement since 1981. I did not therefore take any active part in the revolution of autumn 1989.

I would like now to address the subject 'Church and State in the GDR'. I will have to tackle the subject differently from ten years ago. At that time, in a state led by a party committed to atheism, it was the duty of the church leadership to preserve the freedom of the church to fulfil its task as Jesus Christ's 'community of witness and service', and as far as possible to secure freedom for individual Christians to live in accordance with their faith. It was also the duty of the church leadership, in a state ruled by party dictatorship, to preserve or win as many human rights as possible for all citizens, men, women and children, Christian or non-Christian. The state had to be reminded that at one time Marxist socialism began as a human rights movement

for the Fourth Estate. In this state it was important to lend support to those tendencies which were working to overcome tension between East and West and to achieve lasting peace. Like most politicians in the world, the churches hoped that this goal would best be served by stable political relations in Europe. They therefore warned against destabilising the GDR. It was the intention of the Protestant Churches in the GDR not to allow themselves to be relieved of their responsibility for the whole of society. They wanted to affirm and support everything tending to improve the quality of life, and to cooperate in this task as far as possible. They wanted to speak out as openly as possible in warning about any developments threatening the dignity of life, and to resist such developments. They took pains to stay on the narrow dividing line between opportunism and opposition.

For these reasons the Protestant Church in the GDR took the decision to participate in the life of this state and this society in a spirit of Christian responsibility, even though the church was able neither to affirm nor to support as such the system of socialism practised in the GDR. 'The Federation (of Protestant Churches in the GDR) will have to prove itself as a church community of witness and service in the socialist society of the GDR' (1970); 'A church community of witness and service in the GDR will need to consider its position very precisely: in a society of this kind, and not alongside it or against it' (1971). This is the origin of the slogan 'the church in socialism', which in its abbreviated form can be open to misunderstanding. In no way does it imply an option for socialism as practised in the GDR. The aim of the formula was merely to say something about the relationship between two powerful institutions which had hitherto scarcely ever been mentioned in the same breath. It calls for a real presence, for participation, for walking with Christians along a hitherto unknown road beset with terrors, for critical solidarity with society in the spirit of the Old Testament prophets. In the final analysis it calls for faith, which remains the First Commandment even in our country.

Such was the path which was accepted by all the Protestant Churches in the GDR and which was widely recognised in the ecumenical community. It assumed: 1) that the system was going to last; 2) that the system was to be taken seriously inasmuch as it was still anxious to work 'for justice and freedom' in the spirit of Point 5 of the Barmen Theological Declaration of 1934; 3) that it was capable of undertaking reforms and ready to do so.

These assumptions have to a great extent been thrown into question, or even completely undermined, by the experiences and discoveries of recent years. 1) The socialist system in the GDR collapsed in the autumn of 1989. Nobody expected this. 2) It was only at that time that the full extent of the politicisation of justice, and

hence the absence of equality at law, became apparent. 3) There had been some positive changes, but the reform programme introduced by Gorbachev in the Soviet Union was firmly rejected. The period of stagnation (since at least 1980) had brought about economic decline, horrendous surveillance and increasing tension in the population, including the church.

Let me now try briefly to outline the various phases in church-state relations as I see them.

As I have already mentioned, I experienced the events of 1945 and afterwards as the execution of divine justice on the Germans for their hubris. I therefore stayed in my homeland while the communist system was imposed on us from outside, the more so since I wanted to contribute to the best of my ability to making it a better and more humane system. I had learnt a theological lesson from the 'Darmstadt Message' put out by the Council of Brothers of the Confessing Church in 1947, Part 5 of which read: 'We were wrong to overlook the fact that the economic materialism of Marxist theory ought to have prompted the church to accept the task and promise of the worshipping community for the life of men together in this world. . . .' In spite of all Hitler's anti-bolshevik propaganda I was expecting that the Marxism we were now hearing about from emissaries from the Soviet Union would have retained something of the spirit of the resistance in the Third Reich when Christians and communists met in the concentration camps and learned to respect one another.

It was to the church's benefit that the Soviet Military Administration, which was the exclusive arbiter of political life in the Soviet Zone of Occupation in the early years, adopted an amazingly friendly attitude towards the church. The reason for this was the Potsdam Agreement concluded by the victorious powers in 1945 and the hope of establishing an undivided neutral Germany between the fronts. While this hope still persisted, a curb was put on the ideological activity of the SED under Ulbricht — activity aimed at creating an atheist society. When Soviet efforts collapsed in 1952, Ulbricht had a free hand for a dangerous and brutal attack on the church, and especially on its work with students and young people. At that time over 50 Christians involved in this work were imprisoned on absurd charges. Many members of the Protestant Youth Organisation (*Junge Gemeinde*) were expelled from their schools. Large numbers of diaconal facilities were taken over. The situation changed three months after the death of Stalin. On 10-11 June 1953 the church and the state held discussions, and the anti-church measures were revoked. The period of open persecution had however generated deep distrust within the parishes and had confirmed old fears.

There followed a period of uncertainty, of hostility both overt and covert, but also of various steps towards a better relationship between church and state. In 1954 the 'Youth Dedication Ceremony' (*Jugendweihe*) was reintroduced. This had originally been devised as a substitute rite instead of confirmation for the children of freethinkers, and as such was clearly in an anti-church tradition. The intention was doubtless to attack the church's youth work from within by means of this rite. For a long time the *Jugendweihe* remained a heavy burden on church-state relations and also on the church community.

An event characteristic of this period was the controversy over the agreement on military chaplains concluded between the council of the EKD and the government of the Federal Republic. It needed to be ratified by the Synod, which at that time was common to both parts of Germany and therefore included GDR delegates. This led to heated discussions with the EKD, which at that time extended over the whole of Germany. Official relations between the government and the Protestant Church were broken off until further notice.

A different tone was to be heard in Ulbricht's 1960 'Policy Statement' to the GDR Parliament (*Volkskammer*): 'There is no contradiction between Christianity and the humanitarian goals of communism.' One can of course ascribe greater or lesser significance to basic statements like this; but nevertheless a departure from the radical Marxist critique of religion is indeed being expressed here. And this departure was later to take practical effect.

Within the church as well — and especially after the final collapse of any hopes that it would be possible to restore German unity within a relatively short period — people began to reflect that even a state run by an atheist party cannot remain a 'blank spot' on the divine map. Even when the state authorities (Romans 13:1) are unbelievers, they are still 'under God', and they have a God-given task to fulfil. The Church Brotherhoods, which came together as heirs to the Confessing Church, not only opposed the rearming of both German states, but also struggled to find a theologically defensible position vis-à-vis the GDR regime. They resisted the widespread belief that 'a front line of good against evil, of light against darkness, of justice against injustice' should be created (Darmstadt Message 4) — a front line, in other words, of the 'Christian West' against communism. 'In obedience to our faith,' they confessed, 'we shall neither fear nor love the political system of our society, the state, but participate in the fulfilment of its God-given task.' (Seven Statements from the Weissensee Working Group, 1964, VII, 1). Some church officials also spoke out in this spirit. The Synod of the Protestant Church of the Union (formerly 'Prussian Union') had already recognised in 1957 that a state can represent 'authority' in the scriptural sense irrespective of

how it may have come into being or what understanding it may have of itself.

A new stage in church-state relations was reached when in 1969 the various provincial Protestant Churches came together as a Federation and left the EKD. It had been becoming steadily clearer that the Protestant Church would not be able to continue to span both parts of a divided Germany. The Cold War, the closing of the GDR's borders (particularly after the building of the Wall in 1961), and also the very different kind of witness required in the two Germanies meant that it was essential to achieve an organisational separation from the churches in the Federal Republic. This became unavoidable with the ratification of the new GDR Constitution in 1968 which said that any church organisation extending across the borders of the GDR was illegal. Article 4,4 of the Constitution of the Federation of Protestant Churches in the GDR ensured that the churches of both parts of Germany would remain in close spiritual contact as a 'special community'.

In subsequent developments the global political background must be taken into account. A period of 'detente' began, which brought up ideological questions. The state was looking for a 'normal', that is to say, a better, relationship with the church. This was of course welcomed by the church. The high-point of this phase was reached on 6 March 1978 when the Chairman of the Council of State, Herr Honecker, received official representatives of the Federation. Honecker used the occasion to set the church policies of party and state in their context. Most importantly, he once again clearly confirmed that equal rights and equal respect are constitutionally guaranteed to all citizens, and he conceded that the churches had 'many possibilities to cooperate in achieving the humanitarian goals' of the state. He thereby recognised a positive role not merely for individual believers, but for the church as a whole: this was something new. In our response, we felt as church representatives that it was important to make the following points: 'Honesty and openness are the barometer of trust. Church-state relations are only as good as each individual Christian citizen finds them to be in his own local situation' — however they may be described in official speeches.

This meeting brought church-state relations onto a new level. Both sides wanted a clear separation of church and state. The Marxist-Leninist Party did not retreat from its critical attitude towards religion; but ideological disagreements were no longer to define relations with Christians and the churches.

On 6 March 1978 the church's 'autonomy' was recognised. At a fundamental level the state renounced the right to interfere in church matters. From the very beginning, then, it was the church alone which

appointed its officers, without approval having to be sought from the state. One may contrast for example the situation in Czechoslovakia. Separation of church and state also meant, however, that no religious instruction could be given on school premises, for example, and that the state refused to offer any assistance in the collection of financial contributions for the churches (still incorrectly called the 'church tax').

At the end of the conversation of 6 March 1978 on the premises of the State Council, Herr Honecker took me to one side and said: 'Bishop, we are both going to have a difficult job making sure that what we have just agreed is actually carried out.' How very true! From the side of the church it was extremely difficult to believe that Honecker's promises were sincere. From the side of the party it was almost impossible to overcome a hostility which had been nurtured for a century and a half. I am quite convinced that Honecker genuinely meant what he said. This was obvious from the very strenuous efforts that were made to communicate the outcome of the conversation to organs of party and state throughout the Republic. Success was obvious in a greatly relaxed atmosphere and a much greater objectivity, compared with earlier, in the conversations now taking place everywhere. The church authorities were able not only to put their own concerns on the agenda, but also to intercede for individual citizens — even those who were not church members — and often help them effectively. Some of the types of help secured: permission to study at school or university; permission to travel or emigrate to the Federal Republic; visits to prisoners and the release of prisoners. There were endless individual cases. Generally the authorities were ready to talk; but this readiness ceased whenever the state representative thought that the system as such was being questioned. This was the boundary beyond which one could not go.

Today we must of course ask ourselves whether we ought to have been satisfied with this. We had to weigh up whether helping individuals or criticising the system was more important, more of an imperative for us. From about 1980 onwards, there were groups of citizens who were concentrating ever more explicitly on criticising the system, and we must concede their right to decide to commit themselves to this. At the same time, the church leadership felt that its own duty was diaconal service. This does not mean that clear and outspoken criticism was not forthcoming at the Synods, which were open to the public and attended by representatives of the state. Unfortunately these state representatives thought less about the truth of what was being said than about censoring the speakers for their attitude towards the state.

The foreign policy and peace policy of the GDR evoked relatively little criticism. What concerned us Christians was militarisation within the GDR, from kindergarten to high school, from the army to the paramilitary 'combat groups', which were to prove ever more clearly to be an army directed against the people. The Synod of the Federation of Protestant Churches concerned itself very intensively with questions of peace and security, especially in 1982 and 1987, and produced a clear statement opposing 'the spirit, logic and practice of deterrence'.

The conversation of 6 March 1978 found no echo in the realm of educational policy, apart from the fact that young Christians were more frequently admitted to places of education without having to participate in a *Jugendweihe* ceremony or join the state youth movement. It remained the case that Christians were generally excluded from the more responsible jobs.

The contradictions became considerably more acute during the last period we have to describe. One was forced more and more to the conclusion that there were several different parties within the party: church policy became quite opaque.

In the Luther anniversary year of 1983 we were glad to see that the party had developed a new, differentiated understanding of Luther. Church and state were able to divide up the festivities between them, and they were held separately. In the course of the year seven church conferences (*Kirchentage*) attained West German dimensions with over 100,000 visitors. Even in 1987 we were able to hold a church assembly in East Berlin. All these assemblies were subsidised and assisted by the state. Right up to the summer of 1989 Honecker kept repeating what he had said on 6 March 1978, but without making any comment on how the situation had changed since then — a symptom of the paralysis by then besetting him.

For the situation had indeed altered considerably. Within the church, groups had been formed which had become involved in a whole range of questions to do with peace, the environment, social development and human rights. Young Protestants proclaimed 'peace weeks' (*Friedensdekaden*), and parishes participated widely in these. The church leaders had reason to rejoice: the most important aspects of human coexistence were being thought through in small groups and new activities being planned. At the same time, they had the far from easy task of protecting these activities from the attentions of the state. It can be said that a considerable potential for responsible action on world problems in the spirit of the Gospel was built up in these groups.

The Christians were joined by others who wanted to involve themselves with the issues the groups were addressing. As time went

on it became increasingly clear that, as far as these particular issues were concerned, some fundamental criticism of the ruling Marxist system in the GDR was going to be unavoidable. The groups thus became more and more of a stumbling block to the state, which had its informers everywhere. In the late summer of 1987 it seemed as though the state was going to make the aims of the groups its own. In the Olaf Palme March for Peace, which crossed the whole of the GDR from north to south, members of the state youth movement, the Protestant *Junge Gemeinde* and the above-mentioned unofficial groups found themselves in astonishing harmony.

Then came the sudden reversal: the events surrounding the raid on the environmental library in the Zionskirche in Berlin and the arrests in connection with the Luxemburg-Liebnecht rally are well known throughout the world. They were the prelude to a whole series of police interventions which reached their peak — and their turning-point — on 7-8 October, the 40th anniversary of the GDR. After services in the churches, Christians and non-Christians alike dared to go out onto the streets where police cordons were waiting for them with truncheons and dogs. It was those people who gave the impetus to the revolution before whose non-violent power the SED regime was compelled to capitulate.

As far as church-state relations were concerned, the revolution was total. Twenty-four members of Parliament (the *Volkskammer*) have theological qualifications: almost all of them are ordained ministers. Four government ministers are also ministers of the church. The Prime Minister is also deputy presiding lay officer of the Synod of the Federation of Protestant Churches. Many others in the new government are in church service or closely associated with the church. The vice-chancellors of the Universities of Berlin and Greifswald are professors of theology. All this does not add up to a seizure of power by the church. It is much more a case of the churches now having to take over the thankless task of liquidating the GDR at a time of political and moral collapse. Protestant Christians have the one advantage that they were able to some degree to retain their integrity in a system that corrupted its own citizens on a massive scale. And they also have a little more experience of democracy than most other people. What they do not have is very much practical expertise. They have reaped the anger of their own compatriots, who have watched the immediate well-being they so longed for being continually postponed; and they have reaped the scorn of the western media which have called them 'amateur politicians' intent on steering their own course on a sinking ship. For us Christians, what we are now experiencing is no occasion for joy or satisfaction. We simply hope that our brothers and sisters who have governmental responsibility

will soon be able to bring their caretaker role to an honourable conclusion.

This should be no occasion for bitterness. As Shakespeare said, 'The Moor has done his duty; the Moor can go.' The church at the present time is faced with huge tasks which will demand all its resources: giving support to those who are in confusion or despair; working through the lessons of the past, not sparing its own failures; seeing to it that our people gain a new sense of right and justice; resisting the tendency for communism simply to give way to consumerism; and in general to lead the children of God away from worshipping the golden calf now they have been freed from slavery. The church will have to make Jesus Christ clearly manifest through witness and service so that the Christian faith takes over the whole man, including his life on earth with all its duties, complications and temptations. The church will be able to do this if it retains its own credibility and does not lapse into a comfortable position of honour or of well-being funded by the rich churches of the West.

The churches of the GDR will have to remain true to the 'conciliar process' for Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation (Basel, Seoul): this is especially necessary in the situation in which they now find themselves. The question of foreign immigrants, which has become an incredibly burning issue in the GDR; responsibility for the Third World; solidarity with the poor and the weak in our country, in neighbouring countries and in the wider world: these are some of the most important tasks for Christians today. On the peace issue, our churches will have to ensure that the good decisions they have made on equal status for military and civilian service are not forgotten once again in the process of reunification with the Federal Republic. If they want to retain their credibility they will press for complete, not just nuclear, disarmament. They will keep on repeating the warning that economic interests are winning out over ecological interests: this has been our constant experience in recent times; but it will become increasingly difficult to say so in future as what the citizens of the GDR want above all else is an economic boom.

The church in the GDR will remain a minority. There is no prospect of a religious revival in the wake of the political revolution. The church is not going to avoid marginalisation simply by claiming that it is significant: it will do so only by retaining and continually gaining credibility as the flock of the heirs of Jesus Christ. The church must confess its weaknesses and must not pretend to have strengths it does not in fact possess.

In the period of socialism in the GDR the church had to overcome a number of dangers. Matters sometimes took a serious turn and things were often very difficult for individual Christians. Documents which

have been discovered in the files of the secret police (the *Stasi*) show that we just avoided a new period of severe persecution. But throughout this period, and even in the very fact that our possibilities were limited, we were conscious of God's power, which is mighty in the weak. We won a freedom which came from trust in our Lord. In the future, too, we shall have to continue to tread the fine dividing-line between opportunistic adaptability and negative narrow-mindedness. If we are to live in a new era, the Cross will nevertheless still be there too even in a world which recognises its commitment to Christian values. Only if this is so are we going to be capable of bearing to the world and to our country that kind of witness which is essential for the survival of humanity.