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A table of contents for *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* can be found here:

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Protestants and Catholics in the German Democratic Republic, 1945–90: a Comparison*

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The Protestant Church

In 1949 the German Democratic Republic was formed from the post-war Soviet zone. The eight Protestant churches located in this territory remained members of the German Protestant Church (EKD) with its administrative centre in the Federal Republic. It was not until 1968, when a new constitution was promulgated, that the Protestant churches of the Democratic Republic formed a separate federation which recognised that the political frontier was also that of the church. The church's actions in 1968 were a sort of belated response to the new demarcation set up by the building of the Berlin Wall in 1961, an event which demonstrated the determination of the Socialist Unity Party to protect its citizens from the demoralising influence of the West, and which eventually forced the church to acknowledge the existence of two separate Germanies. Until that point, in maintaining one single administrative operation for the two Germanies the church had helped to keep alive the idea of German national unity.

During the period from 1949 to 1961 there were numerous clashes between the church and the repressive policies practised against it. Most of those in authority in the church – bishops, pastors and lay people – were aware that the anti-Christian state ideology permeated all aspects of society and aimed to confine the church to its own precincts. Gerhard Besier goes so far as to state that during this period the church in both parts of Germany was almost unanimous in adopting an anti-communist stance and that it reacted as vigorously as possible to the repressive policies of the government.¹

For some, the period stirred memories of the struggle against National Socialism which led to what was known as the *Kirchenkampf*. This is an ambiguous term because initially it referred to the struggle to safeguard the true church against the intrusion of National Socialist heresy and not the struggle against the church.

Tension mounted in 1951–53 with the introduction of the *Jugendweihe*, a ceremony of consecration for young people which was denounced as incompatible with religious confirmation. The second half of the 1950s saw the hardening of state policies towards the church as the Cold War intensified and the Federal Republic joined NATO. Ideological pressure on Christians mounted, and people started

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leaving the churches: I will come back to this subject later. In his most comprehensive study of the churches in the Democratic Republic² D. Pollack attributes the church's loss of ground, and hence of oppositional vigour, to the pressure the regime put on the people and in particular to the civic sanctions it could bring to bear on anyone who opposed it. Parishes which were no longer able to find the strength to risk full-scale opposition began to give way: any direct action might compromise the future of families and their children. In this situation the church, which no longer felt itself supported by its congregations as it had been some years before, had no other choice than to come to terms with the regime,³ which was pleased with its success in infiltrating the population with Marxist–Leninist ideology and now set about gaining the support of the clergy in promoting the form of peaceful socialism it extolled. It encouraged those in the ecclesiastical administration who proved cooperative, punishing the 'bad' and rewarding the 'good' in a policy of carrot and stick.

Just as under National Socialism there had been a radical wing in the Confessing Church, so there was also a group of Christians in the Protestant Church who did not agree with the political orientation of the Federal Republic endorsed by Adenauer through his entry into NATO. In the Federal Republic, most of these people joined the Social Democratic Party. What led the church to find a new way of coming to terms with state socialism was the entry of the socialists into the governing coalition in the mid-1960s, the policy of detente inaugurated by Willy Brandt, and international recognition of the two German states. From an institutional point of view the separation of the churches in the Democratic Republic from the Protestant Church of Germany marks a new stage in the existence of the church under a socialist regime. The separation did not mean that financial support by the Protestant Church in the Federal Republic ceased: financially the church in the GDR depended on the church under the capitalist regime, between a quarter and a third of its revenue coming from the Federal Republic. The Catholic Church in the GDR was in exactly the same position.

There are certain salient features about the way the church tried to accommodate itself to socialism. There was little support for the idea that the church might take on the role of watchdog (*Wächteramt*) *vis-à-vis* the state, as it had at the time of the *Kirchenkampf* under Hitler. Another, quite different, approach was political neutrality with a commitment to avoiding confrontation with the state: this was the practice particularly in Saxony and was very much in the Lutheran tradition of the Two Kingdoms. Albrecht Schönherr, bishop of Berlin from 1972 to 1981, sanctioned the most widely used phrase: the Church in Socialism. There were other church leaders who went further, appealing for solidarity with the Democratic Republic. This approach did not rule out a critical stance towards state policies, but basically envisaged a positive attempt to integrate with socialism. Its chief exponent was Heino Falcke, the Lutheran dean of Erfurt. Falcke developed the idea of 'improvable socialism' (*verbesserlicher Sozialismus*).⁴ Since the 1950s Karl Barth had expressed the opinion that socialism was closer to certain tenets of the Gospel than capitalism and had encouraged pastors in the East to seize their opportunities. Despite this there was no dialogue between Christians and Marxists of the kind that was in vogue in the West after the Second Vatican Council.

At the same time as trying to maintain a special place in the social and state structure the church was from now on to rely most of all upon confidential discussions with the state and its representatives. The Secretary of State for Ecclesiastical Affairs, a post set up in 1957, became the most high-profile contact. These negotiations often took place behind closed doors and ordinary churchgoers were not

informed of the issues under discussion. The influence of church lawyers like Manfred Stolpe increased, but so did distrust on the part of churchgoers who felt that they were excluded. The suicide of Pastor Brüsewitz in August 1976 revealed widespread disorientation among believers who felt abandoned by the clergy in their daily struggles with the encroachments of the totalitarian and atheist state.⁵ As far as the state was concerned, one aspect of collaboration was that it enlisted churchmen (bishops, pastors, lawyers) as informal collaborators with the state security organs. The total number of such collaborators has been estimated at between 500 and 750.

During the 1980s things changed again. On the one hand, state and church had come to an arrangement; the situation had stabilised. However, new groups were emerging in the GDR whose objectives were not specifically religious but ecological, pacifist and ethical. These overlapped to some extent with concepts which were officially part of the churches' own agenda, such as 'Integrity of Creation'. The church was able to offer itself to these groups as mediator between them and the state; at the same time it came under pressure from a new generation to take them under its wing as the only institution which had managed to preserve for itself an area of freedom in a totalitarian state. With the effect of events in Poland, *perestroika* in the Soviet Union and economic problems in the GDR the second half of the 1980s saw a widening of the social role of the church and an increasing boldness among clergy to concern themselves with a whole range of human rights issues with which they had previously had relatively little to do. It is of course clear that when the church put itself at the service of civil society and its problems it did so within the accepted framework of socialist reality. It was not the church that spearheaded the peaceful revolutionary movement which would lead to the collapse of the GDR: the living forces of society used the church's means of communication to realise their goal.

The Catholic Church

In Protestant countries, Catholics live in a diaspora. In contrast with the situation of the eight Protestant churches in the GDR, most of the administrative structure of the Catholic ecclesiastical jurisdiction in Germany remained in the Federal Republic. For obvious pastoral reasons the relevant bishops vested jurisdictional powers in priests in the GDR: in Erfurt, Magdeburg, Schwerin and Meiningen. In 1959 those in Erfurt, Magdeburg and Schwerin became vicars general and auxiliary bishops. As early as 1950 a conference of ordinaries was held in Berlin which brought together everyone with responsibility for church jurisdiction. The GDR had introduced separation of church and state, and did not recognise the 1933 concordat. Up until the building of the Berlin Wall in 1961 bishops could take part in assemblies of the German episcopate.

Before the Second World War there were about a million Catholics in the GDR. Migrations after 1945 brought in a flood of refugees who more than doubled the Catholic population to 2.7 million. By 1961 more than a million of these refugees had gone to the Federal Republic: the main stumbling block to settling was social and economic integration into the life of the country rather than any religious factor. Catholics were not singled out for persecution but experienced the same problems as Protestants at the hands of a Party committed to eradicating the influence of the church on society and especially on young people. Individuals came into conflict with the organs of the state, but there was no general persecution. The church withdrew behind a sort of barricade where it continued its charitable and religious

activities while attempting to limit conflict with the state. Leaders anxious to prove their credibility on the international scene even manifested some tolerance towards the Catholic Church in the GDR since it formed part of the universal Catholic Church. Mgr Spülbeck, bishop of Meissen, gave a revealing description of the way the church saw its role in the totalitarian state when speaking at a *Katholikentag* in Cologne in 1956:

We are living in a house whose foundations we did not build, and we think those foundations are not capable of bearing much weight ... We are happy to help to make it a place where we can live with human dignity, but we are unable to add another storey because in our view the foundations are defective.⁶

There was not much a Catholic living under socialism in the GDR could get excited about in the name of the church, for opportunities were limited. In 1957 Mgr Döpfner, bishop of Berlin, continued the tradition of his predecessors in stipulating that only members of the church hierarchy – priests, deans and bishops – had the right to engage in negotiations with the state; at government level this in effect meant just the president of the Bishops' Conference.⁷ This state of affairs continued until the end of the GDR. In the totalitarian context it guaranteed cohesion and by and large prevented contradictory or even just divergent opinions being expressed within the Catholic Church. Thirty years after Mgr Spülbeck's declaration, Cardinal Meisner of Berlin declared in Dresden that 'In this country the Christian Church would like to invest its talents and gifts in society without being forced to follow another star which is not that of Bethlehem.'⁸

There were nevertheless some differences in the positions adopted by the various bishops. At the outset, Cardinal Preysing of Berlin took the same hard line on communism that he had taken under national socialism. He condemned infringements by the civil authorities in no uncertain terms: one has the impression that he could scarcely imagine the existence of the church in an atheist state.⁹ For his successor Weskamm (1951–56) pastoral concerns were paramount – he compared the situation of the church in the Democratic Republic to 'gardening in a cold climate' – and his negotiations with the state were marked by moderation. Mgr Döpfner, who succeeded Weskamm, renewed Preysing's hard line; the state retorted by refusing him access to the western part of his diocese.

The real trail-blazer, however, was Cardinal Bengsch of Berlin (1961–79), who marked out a clear line of action for the church. He saw the separation of church from state as an opportunity, took care not to make concessions to the regime and concentrated his energies on maintaining religious life in the strict sense. Bengsch even refused to meet Ulbricht or Honecker. He took an unequivocal line when the state infringed human rights. On the whole, however, the church distanced itself from the problems of society; when it did intervene it was in those traditional areas of church concern, education and sexual ethics. Bengsch was an irascible and authoritarian character who succeeded in ensuring that his strategy prevailed over those of certain of his colleagues and some dissidents by using all the administrative means at his disposal. It has never been clearly established whether these interventions put a stop to the 1969 Meissen diocesan synod which wanted to discuss 'Christian life in the concrete context of church and society'. At the Dresden pastoral synod (1972–75) he did manage to prevent a discussion of the role of the church and Christians in society.¹⁰

Bensch's personal position was determined by a desire to maintain church unity and to follow an uncompromising political line. He shared neither Preysing's

pro-western orientation nor Weskamm's view of the supreme importance of pastoral work; he also forbore to follow Döpfner's path of confrontation. Hugo Aufderbeck, bishop of Erfurt (1963–81), took a line which was similar to Weskamm's but was more theologically reflective. He did not preach that the struggle against communism was a Christian duty, but that the body of Christ had to be built even in adverse external circumstances. His pastoral realism deeply affected the life of the church in the GDR outside his own diocese, and he tried fully to exploit every opportunity for the church to witness in a socialist system, risking Bengsch's wrath by favouring interaction with the state.

Despite all these differing approaches, the Catholic Church as a whole gave the impression of withdrawing behind the barricades of religious life in the strict sense: liturgy, family apostolate, pilgrimages, charitable activity. The image is of a church with a 'fortress' mentality, or in a state of hibernation. There were exceptions in certain parishes, mainly university parishes; but on the whole Catholics who got involved in movements struggling for greater civil liberty felt themselves abandoned by the church authorities. There was similar discontent over the circumspection and reserve Protestant leaders exhibited; it seems that it was only towards the end of the 1980s that there was significant complicity with the forces of opposition.

After the turning-point of 1989 the differing views of Protestants and Catholics on the path to follow gave rise to a volley of professional reproaches from both sides. Old prejudices and inhibitions resurfaced amidst hastily-made generalisations. Protestants complained that 'We brought about the revolution; the Catholics are now reaping the benefits.' People even talked of a Catholic counter-reformation; this was, of course, an unjust reproach but was due to the fact that while the Catholics had distanced themselves from the regime they were now assuming political and administrative functions out of proportion to their numbers.

There was more to follow. At the time of the 'Wende' (1989–90) the role which the Protestant churches played in the peaceful process of democratisation and their influence on the masses seemed to establish once and for all the positive and apparently decisive role they had played in this evolution. Some people were even talking about a 'Protestant revolution'. Scarcely two years later this perception was completely altered. The complaints of members of the opposition that they had not been sufficiently supported by the church, and especially the opening of the Stasi archives handed over to the Gauck office, produced the strong impression that the autonomous space of the churches had been more limited than anyone thought. The Protestant Church was accused in 1990 of having been too close to the regime in the light of the unexpectedly extensive infiltration of the Stasi into all the church's departments. Almost overnight the church was toppled from the pedestal on which it had been admiringly placed; it was accused of collaboration and dishonest collusion with the regime under cover of ambiguous theological formulae. The position of the Catholic Church, which had kept itself apart, was contrasted favourably with the compromises of the Protestant Church; some thought it the ideal path to have followed.

Of course this fall from grace was meat and drink to the media; and it was also the occasion for the settling of scores between some West Germans and their separated brethren in the East. The situation did not exactly make for objective historiography. The Protestant Church will have to examine its conscience and should clarify its position under the socialist regime; it will need to continue to purge itself, as it did with denazification after 1945. The Catholic Church took a firmer line than the Protestant Church under the two dictatorships, but it would be wrong to rest on its

laurels; it should ask itself whether that voluntary isolation could have continued for much longer without leading to an impasse. It should also respond to the plight of Catholics who were active in the opposition and whose contribution was not sufficiently recognised by the church when the thaw set in. It would be an exaggeration, however, to say that the Catholic Church missed a historic opportunity for witness. One has to remember that it was a minority church (5–6 per cent) with a very small percentage of intellectuals. It would be wrong to imagine that it could simply have let itself be dragged along behind its historically larger and more firmly established sister-church. In my view the preconditions for that to happen were not present.

Conclusion

The first part of my conclusion is general and historical. While it is clear that the two dictatorships were not identical, there needs to be a much more systematic comparison of the positions and reactions of the churches during the Nazi regime with their positions and reactions during the communist period. People are also too quick to project the concepts and content of one religious tradition onto another confession without taking into account that these same concepts may have a totally different theological connotation in the other confessional tradition. This is true of apparently very clear concepts like *Kirchenkampf*, which signified both the struggle against the churches and the struggle to safeguard the true church from invasion by the German Christians. The same goes for concepts like synod, ecumenism, concordat. It could be said that it is because of the concordat that the Catholic Church might be seen by the general public as a church which collaborated with the Nazis, while the Protestant Church is held to have been a 'confessing church' in its entirety. And now the popular image of the Protestant Church can change overnight from precursor and architect of the revolution to friend of the system.

In an article in summer 1991 the Protestant Bishop Albrecht Schönherr said that he regretted that Cardinal Bengsch, president of the Catholic Bishops' Conference, had never been ready to lend his hand to a common ecumenical policy for the GDR. In the abstract, that would have been an ideal prospect; but it was unrealistic. It must be remembered that during the first dictatorship there was no agreement between the two churches on the institutional level: such a thing would not have been possible because the institutions on the two sides did not parallel each other, but were quite different structures; this rendered a common course of action unrealistic and unfeasible. Old confessional prejudices continued to exist on both sides. In 1956, on the occasion of the Hungarian uprising, Heinrich Grüber, a high-ranking official in the Protestant Church, wrote that Cardinal Mindszenty was the person who was really responsible for the bloodshed: 'Mindszenty is the schemer, avid for power, who does not hesitate to use any means he can, while keeping himself cleverly in the background.'¹¹ This was not the only reflection of Grüber's which led Catholics to see him as a spokesman for the Party and the state. Problems of authority within the state, the integration of Germany into the western defence system and the policies of the Catholic Adenauer raised new fears which heaped themselves on old ones. There was no discussion of the underlying assumptions which determined the different attitudes of the churches on the general or ecclesiastical political level.

The alacrity of Protestant theologians to accept that the fundamental tenets of Christianity were better upheld in a socialist society than under a capitalist regime raised the question of whether there is an underlying predisposition to socialism in

the Protestant tradition. The hypothesis to this effect put forward by F. W. Graf¹³ has been criticised for its reliance on tenuous analogies. The best theological reflection on the church under socialism and on 'improvable socialism' sets them against the background of the 'theology of hope' and 'theology of revolution' of the 1960s. In the words of Heino Falcke, 'We used to put our emancipatory demands down to biblical traditions of liberation, of which Marxism is the secular heir.'¹³ Liberation theology was not a Protestant speciality, but was widely adopted in Latin America amongst Catholic theologians. At the popular level of preaching and propaganda, there was a preference for using Old Testament parallels to legitimise the concepts involved.

There is another avenue of exploration which I believe to be of more central importance both for historical research and for self-reflection on the part of the churches. It was opened up by Kurt Novak¹⁴ and Detlef Pollack. It deals with the dechristianisation of the territory of the GDR, the extent of which has not been fully appreciated. Novak floats the idea of a state without a church. A Christian church may retain a relatively intact facade, but the faithful may have quietly disappeared. In fact, the figures on church attendance after 1945 are very revealing. Whilst in 1950 80.5 per cent of the population were still members of the Protestant Church, by 1964 this was down to 59.4 per cent and by 1989 to 24 per cent. It was during the second half of the 1950s that the church lost members at the greatest rate; this was also the period of the introduction of the *Jugendweihe*. In this context we should remember that all the *Landeskirchen* of the GDR were churches which the German Christians (*Deutsche Christen*) had succeeded in taking over in 1933. This should give us pause for thought. The fact that all these churches could be disabled in this way fits into a tradition of estrangement from the church which goes back to the nineteenth century, especially in Thuringia and Saxony. Baptism seemed to indicate that the Christian faith was relatively intact; but even in 1882–83 Pastor Oskar Pank thought that only 8 per cent of the population took an active part in the life of the church. Detachment from the church was at a much higher level among the working class than among the intelligentsia and the bourgeoisie. Today about 70 per cent of the population say they do not belong to any confession; enquiries reveal that it was not the repressive policies of the former regime which induced people to leave the church but simply the fact that they no longer believed in God. Albania and the territory of the former GDR are today amongst the most dechristianised parts of Europe.

What still needs explaining is why the church was able to play such a significant role in the last phase of the communist dictatorship. The church's subtle balancing act between compromise and conscientious objection, which ought not to be interpreted as a double game because it was the only basis on which the church could take any action at all, attracted broad sympathy among the critical sections of society.¹⁵ The church became more attractive in the 1970s and 1980s when modernising the system economically and politically became less and less feasible. The church remained within the political framework of the regime and did not confront it. However, it became a place where people could come together, the focus for reformist movements in society.¹⁶ Its function was growing, but disproportionately to the real extent of its rootedness in society. It was thus able to operate as a moderating influence in the negotiations of 1989, but not as one of the main players. It was not a Noah's Ark for society, as the church in Poland was; on the whole its position was too weak and the dissident groups too heterogeneous. As far as the so-called Protestant revolution of 1989 is concerned, I agree with Pollack: 'The revolution was not a consequence of the spirit of Protestantism. It was a contingent event which

might well not have happened at all. No one planned it, but when it happened most people rallied to it.’¹⁷

Notes and References

- ¹ Gerhard Besier, *Der SED-Staat und die Kirche: der Weg in die Anpassung* (Bertelsmann, Munich, 1993), vol. 1, p. 66.
- ² Detlef Pollack, *Kirche in der Organisationsgesellschaft: zum Wandel der gesellschaftlichen Lage der evangelischen Kirchen in der DDR* (Kohlhammer, Stuttgart, 1994).
- ³ *ibid.*, p. 151.
- ⁴ Heino Falcke, ‘Kirche im Sozialismus’, in G. Heydemann and L. Kettenacker (eds), *Kirchen in der Diktatur* (Vandenhoeck, Göttingen, 1993), pp. 259–81.
- ⁵ G. Ringshausen, ‘Paul Schneider und Oskar Brüsewitz’, *Kirchliche Zeitgeschichte*, vol. IX, 1996, pp. 89–110. (Many volumes of *Kirchliche Zeitgeschichte*, which is edited by Gerhard Besier, are of interest, especially vol. IX, pp. 3–186.)
- ⁶ Th. Raabe, *SED-Staat und katholische Kirche: Politische Beziehungen 1949–1961* (Schöningh, Paderborn, 1995), p. 221.
- ⁷ *ibid.*, p. 44.
- ⁸ Manuscript by Joseph Pilvousek of the Theologische Hochschule, Erfurt, *Rückschau mit gemischten Gefühlen*, kindly put at my disposal by the author (1993).
- ⁹ Raabe, *op. cit.*, notes on p. 93.
- ¹⁰ Pilvousek, manuscript.
- ¹¹ G. Lange, ‘Politische Gemeinsamkeiten zwischen der katholischen und den evangelischen Kirchen in der DDR?’, in G. Kaiser and F. Frie, *Christen, Staat und Gesellschaft in der DDR* (Campus, Frankfurt, 1996), notes on pp. 63 and 69. See also Sigurd Rink, *Der Bevollmächtigte: Probst Grüber und die Regierung der DDR: Konfession und Gesellschaft, Beiträge zur Zeitgeschichte*, vol. X (Kohlhammer, Stuttgart, 1996).
- ¹² F. W. Graf, ‘Traditionsbewahrung in der sozialistischen Provinz: zur Kontinuität antikapitalistischer Leitvorstellungen im neueren deutschen Protestantismus’, *Zeitschrift für Evangelische Ethik*, vol. XXXVI, 1992, pp. 175–91.
- ¹³ Falcke, ‘Kirche im Sozialismus’, in Heydemann and Kettenacker, *op. cit.*, p. 277. Parallels can be drawn between Catholic ‘liberation theology’ and the theology of the Protestant Church in the GDR as it prepared to adapt itself to socialism. See David Martin, *Tongues of Fire: the Explosion of Protestantism in Latin America* (Oxford, 1990), pp. 237, 268, 290. For a positive view of Protestant theology in the GDR see Gregory Baum, *The Church for Others: Protestant Theology in Communist East Germany* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids and Cambridge, 1996).
- ¹⁴ Kurt Nowak, ‘Staat ohne Kirche: Überlegungen zur Entkirchlichung der evangelischen Bevölkerung im Staatsgebiet der DDR’, in Kaiser and Frie, *op. cit.*, notes on p. 23; Nowak, ‘Religion, Kirche und Gesellschaft in der DDR’, *Informationes Theologiae Europae* (Peter Lang, Frankfurt am Main, 1997), pp. 193–207.
- ¹⁵ Pollack, *op. cit.*, p. 372.
- ¹⁶ *ibid.*, p. 444.
- ¹⁷ *ibid.*, p. 455.

Bibliography

A lot has been written since the end of the communist period on the churches in the GDR. This flow of literature was stimulated by the question of alleged ‘collaboration’, mainly on the part of Protestants, between individuals and institutions and the communist regime, which made the subject one of general interest in the reunified Germany. Published material is of all kinds. A great deal of the literature is polemical, settling scores and levelling accusations; there is also self-criticism; but there is much which constitutes serious objective analysis. Both the

Protestant and Catholic churches have set up commissions to investigate collaboration by church officials with the GDR secret police, and both have concluded their reports: see *Herderkorrespondenz*, no. 52, March 1998, pp. 117–19.

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(Translated from the French by Anne Walters)