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A CONTRIBUTION TO THE DIRECTION OF
THE EVANGELICAL CHURCH IN THE
GERMAN DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC

by Albrecht Schönherr

Albrecht Schönherr is a retired bishop of the Federation of Evangelical Churches of the German Democratic Republic and for many years its most influential representative. This is a version, reworked by the author, of a lecture delivered on February 10, 1986, at a meeting in the house of the major governing body of the Christian Democratic Union in Berlin.

State Secretary Klaus Gysi has termed the relationship between church and state in the German Democratic Republic a heretofore unique experiment in a socialist country. He expressed this opinion during his visit to London in May 1981.

First point: A Protestant majority church encounters Marxist-Leninism as a governmental force for the first time in history. The state is aware that Protestantism professes an attitude toward social responsibility which diverges from that of other churches. For Protestantism, this attitude is the direct outgrowth of faith.

Second point: The relationship between church and state in the German Democratic Republic is understood and ordered in such a way that each respects the other's identity. It is a question of a cooperative-constructive relationship of consensus, and of tolerance on the part of each side, wherever this consensus has not yet been reached.

These are, naturally speaking, conclusive statements--the end result of a long, exhaustive, and also painful process.

I. A Difficult Beginning

Preconditions for the development of mutual understanding are complicated on both sides. We will not be able to evaluate what has been achieved unless we are completely aware of this fact. On the other hand, the underlying conditions are of an historical nature. The relationship of the Protestant church to the worker movement was encumbered by the firm ties of the church to the ruling class--I am thinking here simply of Cuius regio eius religio and of the sovereign as the highest ranking bishop of the church--a questionable legacy of the period of the Reformation.

In general, people in the church viewed the suffering of workers as something to be responded to with beneficence and they saw class conflict only as rebellion. The Social Democrats were dismissed as unpatriotic and godless low types. The "religious Socialists" were a

tiny minority, and they were viewed by church people with the greatest suspicion. The entire disillusionment of the working class extended to the relationship to God, for example, in the "International" one hears the phrase, "No God, no higher Being will help us."

On the other hand, questions of one's view of the world were also factors here. The incredible rise in popularity and influence of the natural sciences was successful without having to concern itself with either theology or belief in God. The political and social emancipation of the working class was reinforced by a philosophical emancipation: freeing oneself from the aegis of the cleric resulted in recognition of the fact that religion was not only unnecessary, but even actually harmful to genuine progress. Religion might be considered as simply the content of human consciousness turned into history and, like everything historical, it would pass away. As a false consciousness, religion would be quite harmful to scientific, and that means primarily natural-scientific, understanding and therefore would hinder progress. That meant that religion was to be combatted.

That was the situation when the persecution of Communists and the church struggle began in 1933. Deep mutual distrust made persecution easier. The churches took no action when Communists, Social Democrats, and other Hitler opponents were taken away to prisons and concentration camps, when they were tortured and murdered.

The Vatican concluded an agreement with Hitler because it expected from him an effective counter to Bolshevism, and by means of this agreement, the Vatican actually objectively aided the Nazis in achieving a kind of moral status in the world.

In the Protestant churches, even in the Confessing Church (Die Bekennende Kirche), people feared and spoke repeatedly of the "world threat of Bolshevism." They were not unwilling to emphasize that on this point the church was in accord with the government.

The first genuine contact between Christians and Communists took place in the concentration camps--but now in the face of the gallows and the gas ovens. Christians became acquainted with solidarity from an unexpected quarter in a situation which was new to them. And Communists came to respect the fact that Christians were prepared to give their lives for their convictions. The Communist Hasso Grabner made this very attractive statement about the Protestant martyr Paul Schneider, who was tortured to death in Buchenwald, "Death clasped our hands together." In September 1981 Klaus Gysi said, "We agree in the conviction that the struggle against Nazi barbarism . . . remains a precious legacy. During all the deliberations which will occupy us in the future concerning the relationship between church and state, we and our successors should always try to be true to this inheritance."

The struggle of the Confessing Church (Bekennende Kirche) against the barbarism of Hitler seems to be one of the reasons for the indulgent treatment of the church after the Nazi capitulation. The church was exempted from agrarian reform. It retained its entire deaconate mission, even if the setting of the goals of such work changed over time. Church presses, parish newsletters, and periodicals were licensed. Church theologians continued to be trained at the universities. Seminars for the preparation of students for a religious profession could begin their work. In the first constitution of the German Democratic Republic, the independence of churches was guaranteed. The scope and content of the relevant articles of the constitution were largely identical to the corresponding articles in the Weimar constitution.

Nonetheless, after an initial phase, in which the church and its efforts toward reconstruction had again reached success, there were new irritations. The years 1952-53 brought a forceful confrontation over the church activities of young people and students. Young members of Christian congregations were dismissed from schools of higher education. Under the accusation that they were spies in the service of American secret agencies, a group of church workers and university students was arrested. Those who had "known it all along" felt themselves justified in their suspicions by these events. It is well known that this episode ended suddenly in 1953 at Stalin's death. Based on the deliberations of then Prime Minister Otto Grotewohl with the Council of the Protestant Church in Germany on June 11, 1953, a pact was concluded with the Federation of German Youth, which granted freedom for their activities in Christian youth ministries. The students were readmitted to school and gradually the thirty-seven people who had been arrested regained their freedom. Only the publication of the Protestant youth movement, "The Courier," failed to reappear.

The events of these years left behind them a feeling of uncertainty. It had become obvious that there was still a long way to go before the achievement of open and relaxed relations with one another. This feeling of uncertainty was heightened because of the reintroduction of the initiation of young people in the Communist Party. After all that had gone before, this move was perceived on the part of the church as an attempt to push back the volunteer work of children and adolescents from within. The church reacted with a vehement "No," which has basically not been rescinded up to the present day. But, in the course of time, for religious reasons, people found a way to make church confirmation possible, after an interval, even for those who have undergone the Communist initiation.

It has been difficult for the church to view the government of the German Democratic Republic as an authority in the Biblical sense, and, to a great extent, people felt themselves allied with the Western concepts of the "Christian Occident." Nubiculum est, transibit-- translated, "it is a small cloud; it will pass away." This was the opinion of more people than just Western church leaders. Most of us believed from one year to the next in a reunification in the Western sense of the word. When hopes for such an event disappeared, then the church was thought to have the function of at least so-called "national brackets" around the two "parts of Germany."

Therefore, it was no wonder that the tensions between church and state continuously erupted with noticeable eclat. A textbook example is the event surrounding the chaplaincy agreement for the military. The Council of the Evangelical Church in Germany had made this agreement with the government of the Federal Republic of Germany for the Army, which is one of the armies of the NATO alliance. The treaty agreement had to be ratified by the Synod. According to the basic order of the Synod, citizens of the German Democratic Republic were also members. They took part in the debate, ostensibly without considering the political context in its complexity, and they also voted. The government reacted to this subsequently with undeniable vigor. The office of the delegates of the Evangelical Church of Germany was declared to be abolished. Heinrich Gruber had no access to governmental agencies in this capacity, from then on. The government created the office of a state secretary for church matters to serve as a liaison with the churches. Henceforth the government dealt only with representatives of individual regional churches and also with individuals in its trust. It is obvious that this measure had to lead to significant tensions within the regional churches themselves.

II. Division and Readjustment

At the latest, after the failure of the Geneva Foreign Minister's Conference of 1955, it had become clear that the German Democratic Republic was not an ephemeral phenomenon. It was really high time to consider the situation from a theological standpoint and to draw the necessary conclusions.

This process was completed in my own case as follows: I asked myself whether I seriously believed in God's ordering of the world. Can there be empty places on God's globe? Must God not also be at work here among the people of the German Democratic Republic? Must it not also be true for the government of the GDR, as Paul said of worldly authority, that whether governments know it or not, they are God's servants for the good of people (Romans 13:4)? So I betook myself to the Potsdam district, which was the office in my area, and

said to the official for church matters there, "Please be aware that we are not partisans for the West. We want to stand with both feet in the GDR, but as Christians." Others felt similarly. Many found their way to such a stance, and, in addition, the Synod of the Evangelical Churches of the Union verified as early as 1957 the fact that the government of the GDR was indeed to be accepted as a world authority in the Biblical sense.

Such questions moved the church brotherhoods, which had come together, to strive not to allow the insights of the church struggle to be lost altogether. Above all, they wanted to consider the political responsibility of Christians in both Germanies and strengthen it with their protest.

With both feet in the GDR--that was a difficult concept. The Evangelical Church of Germany had a majority of members in the Federal Republic. Its "bracket function" became more and more problematic, corresponding to the political situation. The social structures of both countries diverged more and more widely. It became ever less possible to make a pronouncement about current questions which could satisfy both sides. But such non-partisan decisions seemed to be quite necessary in order to allay the suspicion that critical objections had been inspired by one or another side. It became increasingly clear that it was not a good idea for decisions to be made by the Council of the Evangelical Church in Germany, if they concerned people who lived outside of the area in which these decisions were being made, that is, responsibility should not be taken by those who could not personally vouch for it because they were citizens of the opposite state. Finally, the Council of the Evangelical Church in Germany was no longer permitted to meet in joint session. The Evangelical Church in Germany had failed to become regionalized at the proper time. Finally it was definitively compelled to complete an organizational division, because of the situation called forth by the new Socialist constitution of 1968.

GDR churches confederated into the Federation of Evangelical Churches in the German Democratic Republic on June 10, 1969. At the same time, they relinquished their membership in the Evangelical Church in Germany. The Evangelical Church in Germany, now reduced to the churches in the Federal Republic, agreed. With this, a strict organizational separation was achieved. As churches of their Lord Jesus Christ, in the tradition of a long German history, after the experiences of the church struggle and in common responsibility for the peace of the world at the focal point of two world systems, both groups, that is, the Evangelical Church in Germany and the Federation of Evangelical Churches, held together in the "special commonality of all Evangelical Christianity in Germany" and they exercised this

cooperation, as it says in Article 4,4 of the Federation rules, "in free partnership." The result was not a twin church, as people sometimes termed it then, but rather a brotherly church and, therefore, as is usual among brothers, also a critical partnership.

At the sometimes quite painful conversations, which were held at this time, we often heard the fear expressed: you will not be able to withstand the fearful pressure from the state for very long; you will soon lose your freedom and turn into a "socialist" church. Such remarks were a goad to our conscience. As one of the most important results of the church struggle during and after the Nazi period, we had recognized and we had striven with all our power to retain the concept that the church must show, with its message and with its structure, that it belongs to Jesus Christ the Lord alone. Therefore, the church is unable to relinquish either the form of its mission or its structure to caprice or to the shifts of the prevailing philosophy or political persuasion. This is clearly promulgated in the Barmen Theological Statement in the Third Thesis.

It became clear that from the government quarter developments were in progress which were designed not to strengthen such fears but, in fact, to disarm them. As early as the Berne Conference of the German Communist Party in 1939, a commonality between Communists and Christians was discerned, at that time, naturally, with an eye to the common fight against Fascism. It became clear that this wish for common cause proved to be a lasting one, not only in the historical circumstances of that era, but also after the destruction of the Nazi regime. It was a question of peaceful reconstruction after the war and of the common task of doing everything possible to stabilize peace in the world. For this task, inner peace was a necessity. So it came to that communiqué with church representatives in 1958, which was to search for new means to achieve an organized relationship, in the name of the Evangelical Church in Germany, after relations had been broken off in connection with the military chaplaincy treaty.

The declaration of the communiqué exceeded this well-defined task, which gave rise to heated discussions in the church. We established basic agreement with the peace efforts of the GDR, and the most controversial sentence read, "They [namely, the churches] respect the development toward Socialism."

The declaration of the governmental council representative Walter Ulbricht in his programmatic statement in front of the people's legislature in 1960 was understood as a sign of a positive development by the church. Ulbricht said, "Christianity and the humanistic goals of Socialism are not contradictory." Here there was a sign of a step toward overcoming what had been understood to be an antagonistic contrast. People could only applaud this, but at this time, things

remained in the "first step" stage. Not much enthusiasm was shown by the churches for such formulations as "Socialist citizens of the Christian faith" and the like. They proved to be unsuitable as designations anyone could agree on.

Regional Bishop Mitzenheim placed himself at the disposal of the state as a substitute dialogue partner, since the official representative of the Evangelical Church in Germany was no longer being officially received. We are thinking of the Wartburg conversation at which the possibility of retiree-trips was first discussed. But such conversations with well-known individuals--I am thinking also of the meeting of Walter Ulbricht with Emil Fuchs--could really only have a substitute function, albeit an important one.

A new level was reached with the founding of the Federation of Evangelical Churches in the G.D.R. The fact that the government waited a year and a half to recognize this group, in any form at all, calls the assertion often made in the West into question, namely that this alliance was formed under pressure from the state. It was probably no coincidence that this state recognition was granted shortly after the decision of the Conference of Church Governing Bodies, the governing body of the "Federation," to agree to combat racism in every form and with all resources, including those of the controversial "Special Fund" in the economic program. The Evangelical Church in Germany had expressed significant reservations concerning these "Special Funds." The Federation had proven that it held itself to be separate from the Evangelical Church in Germany in this important and fundamental decision.

On February 24, 1971, the representative of the Conference of Church Governing Bodies was received by the State Secretary for Church Affairs. With this, the basis for an ordered relationship between church and state was established. The state was not reliant upon its self-elected partner, but was able to establish a connection with the official church organ, and it did so.

A foundation had been created. The topical subjects of conflict had not been swept off the table because of this. As early as the February meeting, the church representatives had to make reference to the new regulation concerning meetings, which caused a great deal of worry right after that time.

But that a new level in the relations between church and state had really been reached was proven by the fact that this problem was solved in a satisfactory way in the end.

III. Crowning Achievement and New Beginning

In order to understand the following developments we must keep the larger framework of world politics in mind. At this point, the

era of detente was just beginning. A fundamental change, which also necessarily included changes in ideological formulations, was announced by the very important Paul Verner speech, delivered on February 8, 1971. Not all of his pronouncements were received by us without contradiction. But such statements as this one we received with gratification and remembered as a good indicator for the future. He said, "In the process of changing social relationships in a fundamental way, we have also altered our very selves." And, "The enemies of peace and social progress have always exploited both the dramatization of and the obscuring of the insurmountable philosophical differences between Christians and Marxists--history provides ample evidence of this." And, "In our country everyone who works for the furtherance of our Socialist society and toward the establishment of peace is respected and encouraged, including those who do so because of Christian convictions." And, ". . . a 'Socialization' of Christian teachings has not yet taken place and will also not happen in the future." And finally, a statement which seems to me to have significant and fundamental meaning as regards the insight into religion which it expresses, "This involvement [namely, of Christian citizens, who have participated through their creative efforts to the establishment of peace] arises from the simple fact that the Christian, if he follows the original Christian ideals and moral-religious precepts, [finds] his material and philosophical life-interests" preserved in a Socialist society.

This speech was delivered, as is well known, at a meeting of the Presidium of the Central Committee of the Christian Democratic Union. And please permit me at this point to make a few brief remarks about my view of the role of the Christian Democratic Union. There were times when Christian citizens and Christian churches had the feeling that the Party viewed it (C.D.U.) as its only task to indoctrinate Christians and churches about the way to become integrated into Socialist society. At times, that led to heated controversy. It is being increasingly noted that their members are making an effort to work together positively in church congregational leadership and in other capacities and to advocate the interests of Christian citizens. This implied development can only contribute to positive progress for the whole corpus.

An important milestone along the way was the revelation that the possibility now exists to build churches in the large new construction districts. This took place in 1976, perhaps not entirely by accident in the garden of the Chairman of the CDU. With this event, a request, which had been repeatedly brought forward, was granted. Its basic significance is obvious: churches are built, not to serve for a few years, but for the long term. The Marxist-Leninist Party probably

continues to believe that religion--like everything which has arisen in history--will disappear again at some time. In spite of this, the thought has been accepted that there will be people with religious ties in our country for a long time to come and that not only must the government live with this fact, but it is glad to coexist with religion, and recognizes that the lessening numbers of Christians does not presage the demise of religion. The word "religion" is always understood in terms of legal and world-view considerations and not, as in Barth and Bonhoeffer, in the differentiated theological sense.

The cap to this progress toward a constructive relationship between church and state was the reception of the representative of the Conference of Church Governing Bodies by the State Cabinet representative on March 6, 1978. Both parties had wanted this encounter. On the part of the church, there was an interest in bringing several important questions between church and state, which had to be decided at the highest level, to a decision. We church people were pleasantly surprised that the measures taken by the state representative were not limited to such questions as ministry to prisoners and ministries in retirement and nursing homes, church programs on radio and television, the inclusion of ministers in state retirement programs, equal treatment of church farms, and the like. Of the greatest significance was the fact that the highest representative of our government reinforced the constitutionally established equality and right to respect of all citizens as the norm "which sets the tone for all interpersonal relationships and which is binding on everyone." And of the churches he said, "Many possibilities to work together today and in the future toward the achievement of these deeply humanistic goals are opening up for the churches, as churches in Socialism." As the goals to which he referred, he stated, "That the people of our country may live in peace and that the fruits of their industry benefit them in both a material and a cultural sense." On the church side, we participants in this conversation experienced the atmosphere of this encounter as humanly beneficial and the demeanor of our esteemed host as very generous. All five members of the executive committee spoke on this occasion. The Prime Minister (Chairman) responded spontaneously and concretely to these remarks. We were particularly gratified that he invited us to express our wishes concerning the contents of the press release. We asked for inclusion of several sentences from our response to the Chairman of the State Council. Particularly important to us was this passage: "Openness and frankness are the barometer of trust. The relationship of church and state is as good as the experience with it of each individual Christian citizen in her or his local situation."

Erich Honecker termed this meeting of March 6 [1978] a "crowning achievement and a new beginning." "Crowning" he presumably used to

mean that with this meeting the path to meaningful and constructive coexistence ought to be viewed as both specifically sought by the state and the leading party, and as lasting. Therefore, it is not a question, as is sometimes remarked in public, of a stunning turn in our relationship, but also not as a fleeting special phenomenon, as people could sometimes read in the Western press, reported with premature glee. In fact, it was a question of the ratification of a course of events, which was already in progress.

So the phrase "new beginning" means then that a new level of relations between church and state has been achieved, on which the future path can proceed even further. We are not referring to the conclusion of a formal treaty, not even to mention anything like a concordat, but it is also not simply a declaration of intention. Erich Honecker set down the foundations and guidelines of the government's church policy. It is a question of a process which is now in motion and which should continue in the sense of the March sixth meeting, and not of a treaty, in which the interests of church and state are statically fixed. As important as formal agreements are, the spirit which should determine future developments is still more important. The declarations which resulted from this meeting are of fundamental importance inasmuch as the religiously inimical beliefs of the Marxist-Leninist Party, without taking them back, are evidently no longer to determine the course of the relationship of the government and the SED--Paul Verner, a member of the Politburo, was present at this conversation--to the church and to individual Christian citizens. Only when respect for the fundamental beliefs of the other person and the attempt actually to understand his/her thinking remain palpable can the dialogue be a truly firm basis of mutual understanding and remain so.

Thus, separation of church and state does not have to mean a cold, reluctant having to tolerate one another, but it includes the "autonomy" of the church. One does not have to subscribe to Christian beliefs to understand that genuine Christian faith and a truly Christian church cannot be an instrument in the hands of class enemies and do not exist for human damnation. The church strives to demonstrate that as "God's possession" (see Thesis 3 of the Barmen Theological Declaration), it emulates God in God's service for the healing and salvation of humankind and of the world. The formulation of Eisenach in 1971 entitled "Witness and Common Service" serves to confirm this.

That is the reason--and not the attempt to speak to every issue and certainly not to have its finger in every pie--why the church concerns itself with the social problems which are essential to life.

On March sixth [1978], Erich Honecker emphasized efforts toward peace and for the sick and the handicapped. Directly connected to the

peace question are efforts to eliminate suffering in the world and to enhance the rights and human dignity of individuals. That Christians also actively place themselves at the disposal of groups which preserve the natural environment lies entirely within the province of the tasks outlined at that time.

So, with the use of the word "autonomy" also on the part of the government, it has been recognized, in the first place, that the church, like all Christians, conducts its life based on a wellspring, which is not determined by political or social categories. But this concept probably also has its politically significant aspect. The state fundamentally renounces the practice of intervening in church matters. An example. Church offices, say the office of bishop, are filled by the church, without getting state permission. This autonomy also pertains in relations with the churches in the other German state. The partnership relationships which have grown up do not call into question the fact that the churches in the German Democratic Republic wish to find, and must find, their own answers to the questions posed to them in this arena.

I hesitate a bit to use the word "partnership" for the relationship between church and state in the German Democratic Republic. At the very least it is a question of unequal partners. The church has no forceful means which it could apply; it cannot and does not wish to justify itself by the use of privilege. To speak with Bonhoeffer, "Solely through its 'example' the church's word should gain emphasis and force." (Bonhoeffer was the one originally to choose to use the word "should" here.)

Exactly this very situation of the church is ostensibly one of the reasons for the attention which the church in the GDR receives in the world religious community. People and countries on the verge of Socialism will observe with great interest how this experiment succeeds. A large church in a Socialist state, a church without external power or governmental privileges in an environment determined by a Marxist political party. The development of a free church in this country is the best means to refute worldwide anti-Communism.

IV. The Pathway Through the Plain

The following are thoughts, which occur when we survey the possibilities which have opened up since the March 6, 1978, meeting. "A path through the plain" means that now many things are easier, and naturally it also means taking upon ourselves patiently and with a view to our goal the difficulties posed by this new situation.

The time since that memorable day and the time to come will have to be used to translate what was achieved there more and more clearly into concrete reality. That this task will not be easy follows from

everything that preceded that meeting. A contrast, which grew up over the course of a century and a half, which was continually being reaffirmed and which is firmly established, will not be banished from the face of the earth in a few years. Both parties have difficulties with this new relationship.

The most important thing is that now the atmosphere for dialogue has been relaxed. Real communication, generosity, and matter-of-factness characterize the atmosphere. The topics of conversation are no longer narrowly limited to the church-religious area. Fears of contact have lessened on both sides and that is certainly important.

Once again this reference to the essentials: since the Allied Synod of Eisenach in 1971 we speak of "the Church in the Socialist context." This formulation is not especially precise. More exact would be the term "The Church in the Socialist context of the German Democratic Republic."

This terminology does not indicate any legally established relationship, but rather the gradualistic process to which I have already referred. At any rate, this phraseology seems to be so serviceable that it has also been adopted by our governmental conversational partners. What does it mean?

We cannot remove it from the context in which it was formulated at that time. In Eisenach it meant, "We do not want to be the church outside of or against Socialism, but rather the Church within the Socialist context."

The church in the GDR views itself in the way described quite aptly by Manfred Stolpe "neither as the Trojan Horse of counterrevolution" nor as the "disseminator of ideas of the SED." The church also does not crawl into a corner or a niche "until the rain stops." It tries to proceed along a narrow path, in fulfillment of the Lord's injunction to dwell neither in the heavenly regions with a perpetual hallelujah on its lips, nor in hell, with an all-encompassing "damnamus."

Then what do we mean by the church "in the Socialist context"? The late Party Secretary Seigewasser once said, "Christians and church life belong to the life of genuine Socialism." The preposition "in" means first of all "presence." This is not a trite statement. There were times in which the church was by no means "present," at least not with both feet in the door. The slogan of the church's struggle with the state, "Church must remain church," should not lead us to make the mistake of being not present at all. "Presence" is participation in the successes and failures, in the hopes and problems, in the gains and the difficulties of this government and its citizens.

Thus, the "Church in the Socialist context" strives to help its Christian members to find their way in this society. It wants to

consider concretely along with them how this way--as was stated at the synod in Schwerin in 1973--can be discovered within "the freedom and constraint of faith."

As the "Church in a Socialist context," it wants to support everything which encourages life within this society and it wishes to warn against everything which could threaten life. The church appropriates to itself the right to an independent "yes" and, on occasion, also an independent "no."

In 1972 Heino Falcke spoke of "critical solidarity" and Werner Krusche mentioned "critically decisive cooperation." The phrase "watch-dog function," which played such a large role in previous years, is not felt to be apt in the present day. The church does not like to view itself as "the watcher above the fray," who sees everything clearly before others do, nor does it appreciate the view that it is like a "taskmaster," who always knows better than others do.

We Christians do sincerely share in the confusions and errors of this world. It is truly preferable that we speak of a prophetic function of the church in the sense of Jeremiah, who shares fully in his people's destiny, and exhorts them to seek the best in government, but who, above all, reminds them of their failure to remember the Lord, "Oh country, hear the Lord's word."

The church within Socialism sets itself the task, along with all other citizens, to overcome the past and for their part to see that "a future generation can live," to speak with Bonhoeffer.

The church "in" a Socialist context cannot be exchanged one day for the church "pro" Socialism. After the Barmen meeting, the church is not able to declare for any particular form of government or say that any form of government conforms to Biblical prescriptions or even "confess" it, and we are speaking here of either parliamentary democracy or Socialism. Naturally, this does not prohibit the individual Christian, as a responsible citizen, from deciding for the one or the other.

Finally, also included in the formulation "the Church in a Socialist context" is the fact that the church recognizes the existing power structure as the environment in which it must realize the obligations of the faith.

Let me add at this point a statement of Bonhoeffer: "Whoever makes sure that nothing happens which deprives him of co-responsibility for the course of history, because she or he knows that historical responsibility comes from God, this person will have a fruitful relationship to historical events, removed from both unproductive criticism and equally unproductive opportunism." The Church in the Socialist context means renunciation of all varieties of abdication of responsibility.

Also, formulations like "the Church within Socialism" or good meetings and fruitful conversations, like the one of March 6, 1978, cannot obscure this fact: church and state will always have tensions with each other. In the "not yet redeemed world" which both inhabit, tensions will be created again and again, if the church wishes to remain true to its prophetic task of reminding the state, society, and not least of all, itself of God's commandments, of justice, and rulers and ruled of their responsibilities (Barmen Thesis, 5). The church's task is not to represent its own interests or those of a specific class or group, but, to the best of its knowledge and conscience, the church is to "reveal the free grace of God to all people" (Barmen, 6) and, by this means, to validate the "strong claim (of God) to our whole lives" (Barmen, 2).

Thus, the church must recognize that it is enjoined from allowing the word and work of the Lord to be used to the service of any self-chosen wishes, ends, or plans, to which it might be seduced by human pride (Barmen, 6).

This is the case in the relationship of church and state in every country. Since the church struggle and the Barmen Theological Declaration we can no longer avoid this fact. In the GDR we also have to contend with the contrasts between fundamental views, contrasts which can neither be ignored nor overplayed. But it all depends on how such tensions are defused.

The March sixth [1978] meeting has encouraged us to realize that tensions do not need to lead to confrontations. On the contrary, with good will on both sides, they can be dealt with by means of objective dialogue. It was clear to both conversational partners from the start that on both sides it would not be easy to carry out the principles promulgated on that day in all situations and down to the most fundamental level.

Such results are not simply "achievable." They require patient and clever work at persuasion. And this does happen and it has not been without its successes.

The fruit of such work is the good cooperative efforts during the Luther anniversary year, not only in the technical but also in the scientific realm. The Marxist historians and the church historians both strongly wish that such a fruitful exchange will take place at other times, and not only on the occasion of jubilees.

If it is, and must be, a question of common responsibility for the future and correspondingly of meaningful cooperative efforts, then we will have to concern ourselves intensively, respectfully, and in a spirit of willingness to learn about the philosophical and faith bases for the beliefs of our conversational partner. Successful dialogue cannot overlook these factors in the long run. By this process we

will discover that things have changed since the last century in the theoretical realm as well as in other areas. In view of the theologians who resisted Fascism, in view of the theology of liberation, whatever one's theological stance toward it, and in view of the struggle, actually carried out under the leadership of clerics, against apartheid, we can hardly make a blanket statement about the covering over of reality and consolation in another world. Let us admit that this role was attributed to an unworldly bourgeois Christianity in the preceding century with a certain justification. On the Christian side--and I make bold to say this--I believe an understanding has developed of the concern which has been expressed by the word "atheism." The god, who combats popular atheism, is not the God of the Bible, but, as Karl Barth expresses it, a "dead conceptual idolatry." But this idea must be discussed more fully and the sooner the better.

It is clear to all of us that some grave deficiencies must be noted in the area of education; it is still not clear that a Communist course of study does not include renunciation of Christian beliefs. For many parents, the fear persists that their children could have difficulties in their educational progress if they reveal that they are Christians. On the sixth of March [1978] the thought was expressed that openness is the barometer of trust. There is nothing wrong with an open revelation of individual convictions. One should keep in mind in this regard, however, that pupils are in a decidedly weak position vis a vis their teachers.

Conscientious young Christians, scientists and technicians and others, sometimes suffer because they do not get the opportunity as often as others do to assume leadership positions. I am not referring to those who have long since established positions for themselves. Our government will be needing scientifically well-educated, clever, and responsibly-thinking people, if it wants to keep pace with world standards and at the same time satisfy the needs of the populace. Those who are challenged below their real capacities in the long term lose their interest in work and naturally their productivity declines.

Concerning the question of military service, I would simply like to mention something which has scarcely been noted. I do not need to repeat here the questions which are asked over and over again at synods. Only this: sometimes the opinion seems to prevail that Christians are normally ranked with the soldiers who do limited military service or with the conscientious objectors. In fact, the vast majority of young Christians perform normal military service. The church has not gone on record as saying that any form of conscientious objection should be the only stance commensurate with Christian faith. Shouldn't all Christian military personnel be given the opportunity to attend Sunday church services? Should it not be a matter of course

for them to have Bibles and Christian literature among their personal effects? And should they not also be permitted to consult ministers who perform their offices in the areas in which these men are stationed? And I am not speaking here on behalf of any military-clerical agreement. But I am arguing that young Christians in the Army of the GDR be able to exercise their constitutionally guaranteed freedom of religion at all times and in all places in an open, unhindered way.

March 6, 1978, opened a wide territory to all of us. We can all feel gratified that exactly a year ago, on February 11, 1985, Minister Erich Honecker and Bishop Hempel, at that time the moderator of the Council of the Federation of Evangelical Churches, reaffirmed this accord and went a few steps further along the path to mutual understanding. I would like to be so bold as to assert that events taking place here in the German Democratic Republic, where both church and state live, and with whose populace we both have to do, can help to ensure the success of mutual understanding and lasting peace in the world arena, too. Particularly in recent days, Erich Honecker has repeatedly offered his hand to us in the cause of better cooperative efforts and thus also in the preservation of peace. His policy of peace also gains credibility because he fosters understanding and cooperation in his own country, where previously seemingly insurmountable barriers to these efforts existed. He may be sure that for such efforts to chart new territory and serve the cause of peace, he has the full support of GDR Christians.

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