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The Religious Situation in the German Democratic Republic

by Max L. Stackhouse

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The immediate situation of the churches, and of religion generally, in the G.D.R. is deeply affected by the recent upheavals in Poland. Although the predominant religious traditions of Eastern Germany are quite distinct from these of the Polish neighbors, a profound structural reality presents a common element. In both countries, the church represents the largest and most influential organization not directly integrated into the party and state apparatus.

In the G.D.R., the people have not experienced the relative breakdown of economic and political life presently manifest in Poland. Indeed, the G.D.R. surely represents the most successful of the Eastern European countries in terms of economic productivity, availability of consumer goods, and participation of the population in building up a socialist society. This small country has moved into sixth position among all the nations of the world in terms of industrialization, gross national product, and international trade.¹ Further, earlier militant confrontations between church and state have begun to mitigate. Wider privileges were accorded the G.D.R. churches in March of 1979, and in 1980 a prestigious state committee was formed with much fanfare and working in concert with church committees, to prepare for a national celebration of the 500th anniversary of Luther's Birthday in 1983. Such a move reflects both a realistic recognition of the continued influence of Reformation ideas among the people and an appreciation for the cultural impact Luther had even among militant non-believers.

Nevertheless, when Lech Walesa, leader of the independent Polish unions, says that he has succeeded "because I speak the truth," when he indicates that he has "no other strength other than that of the heart, of faith," when he reports that he goes every morning to mass and takes communion "because it is the source of [his] strength,"² and when that news is broadcast to the G.D.R. via West German television, those responsible for preserving the integration of the

present system in the G.D.R. become concerned about the potentially explosive impact religion and the church can have on the people. As a result, religious officials in the G.D.R. expect at least a temporary cooling of church-state relationships. Some pessimists, it must be said, fear a partial return of Stalinist security measures with the tight supervision of all aspects of church life. Although I believe severe pessimism is unwarranted, the signs of new constraint and caution are modifying the hopefulness visible in the last few years.

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The range of religious influence in the G.D.R. is partially indicated by statistical data and institutional facts which have been relatively stable during the past decade. Somewhat more than 40 percent of the population is on the official lists of the churches. The figures continue to decline under the impact of intentional secularization and the reluctance of younger people to accept the vulnerability that overt involvement entails. Most church members are in the "Evangelical" traditions derived from the Lutheran wing of the Reformation. They are organized either into the three Lutheran "territorial churches" or into the five "United Protestant Churches" (Evangelische Kirche der Union), also organized on territorial base--deriving from the old Prussian Union. This larger of the two major church groups includes both Lutheran and Calvinistic congregations.³ Some eight percent of the population is Roman Catholic; about one percent is related to the "free churches" such as Methodists, Baptists, etc. A tiny remnant of Jews worships at the two synagogues remaining in the country. Although exact figures are difficult to obtain, it is estimated that approximately ten to fifteen percent of the people have regular contact with the institutional churches. About five percent can be considered genuinely active.

Protestant bodies cooperate through a "federation" with each other, and with other church bodies around the world through the World Council of Churches and the Lutheran World Federation. They also have a number of specific international ties with Protestant churches both in other countries of Eastern Europe and in the West. The churches own and manage some 7,400 worship centers and some 2,000 other institutions, including more than fifty hospitals; thirty-five homes for mothers, the elderly, and the handicapped; seminaries; retreat centers, etc.⁴ Theological education is carried out in both independent schools and the state-run universities which traditionally had theological faculties.

The constitution of the G.D.R. provides for freedom of religion. Functionally, this provision protects freedom of private belief and for traditional worship. It does not protect the right to proselytize, the right to organize new groups, the right to comment upon public issues, even on religious or ethical grounds, or to organize "cultural affairs." For instance, a coffee house for youth or a music concert by a church choir or orchestra (there are several of good quality) for the general public are not considered "religious," but "cultural" in nature and thus subject to political control. Religious materials, including Bibles, are available in bookstores and may be purchased by anyone. However, giving unsolicited religious documents to those who do not request them is prohibited, and a rather strict censorship is practiced on all books and journals produced by the religious community. Atheist and anti-religious material, on the other hand, is subsidized by the state.

The churches are economically independent of the state in the sense that the old Middle-European practice of having "church taxes," collected by the government and paid to the pastors, no longer exists. Churches solicit their financial support from those who remain on the old "tax lists" from earlier days as well as from regular contributions by those most active. In recent years the state has agreed to indemnify the churches for lands earlier given to the churches, but seized by the government in the process for forming co-operative farms. The churches also receive considerable aid from sister churches outside the country, especially for the repair and maintenance of church buildings. Such contributions are in fact welcomed by the government for it aids the general economy in that it provides "hard currencies" for use in international trade. Indirect control over the fiscal life of the churches, however, is often exercised by the fact that materials for building renovation, paper for printing, machines for mimeographing and photocopying, etc., must all be purchased through government controlled agencies. The Secretariate for Religious Affairs serves as a clearing house for all church activities that are not confined to private belief and traditional patterns of worship.

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At the more personal levels of life, tensions still remain between church and state. Baby-naming ceremonies, socialistic weddings and burials, and especially the "youth-dedication" rituals for young people have been developed by Party-front organizations intentionally to displace traditional Christian rites of baptism, marriage, funeral and confirmation.⁵ When a couple makes a

decision to be married in the church, to have a child baptized, a young person confirmed, or a grandparent buried in an overtly religious service, there is often a price to pay. A promised job promotion does not come through; the youth does not get into the university; the state-controlled allocation of housing space seems to render fewer options. A young person's peers in the youth organizations or one's teachers in school, and the leaders in the parents' work group or the supervisor of the plant, take an intense and persistent interest as to whether the members of that family are or are not genuinely committed to the upbuilding of a truly socialist society. Widely regarded church leaders, to be sure, do not always experience many such constraints; but the ordinary Christian family frequently feels intense pressures.

During visits to the G.D.R. in 1976 and 1980,⁶ I had the chance to discuss these matters with a number of young people. In response to my queries, they indicated that no more than three or four percent of the teen-aged youth were significantly committed to Christianity. They also estimate that only about that number are deeply committed to the study of Marxist-Leninism or participation in Party-related organizational activities. Another fifteen to twenty percent are vaguely sympathetic one way or the other. Although about 95% go through the steps to "youth dedication," at least in a mechanical way, most seem disinterested in any "ideology" requiring commitment. They want to be left alone, to get on with their lives, to find a niche in this energetically producing and consuming society, and to avoid anything that might cause a hassle. They study and pass their exams in Marxist-Leninist history, social studies and philosophy, even though they have no passion for it. One older pastor said it is like learning the catechism under the Kaiser. At the same time, it must be pointed out that since the orthodox Marxist-Leninist interpretation of life and history is the only one to which they youth have systematic exposure, the dominant thought patterns are increasingly those of "scientific socialism" tinged with a somewhat sour scepticism about all ideological, philosophical or historical matters.

The clergy and the most active laity whom I met tend to reflect other perspectives. For some, the present situation is viewed as a time of trial. A certain passivity, a resignation, a tiredness characterizes their private conversations as well as their preaching. For others, indeed for the majority of those whom I encountered, decisions have been made which are sustaining and energizing. In the Nazi period, they were a part of the "Confessing Christ."

Many of these had an opportunity to go to the West before the Wall and decided not to do so. They are committed to a "church in socialism"--and explicitly not to a church against socialism, a church of socialism, or a church for socialism. They oppose the philosophies and pieties of bourgeois, capitalist societies and the theologies which baptize them uncritically. They also resist totally materialistic, atheistic and secular world-views. Instead, they believe that within the biblical traditions are resources which can in fact "improve socialism" both in its theoretical understanding of human nature and in its practical life in the world. They do not believe that viewing humans essentially as "workers" does justice to human nature. They utilize their ecumenical contacts to press quietly for a unified Christian voice on matters of human rights, world peace, protection of the environment, and solidarity with the poor and oppressed. They support their government in the creative steps it has taken on several of these issues. At strategic points they speak out in criticism of their government--in regard, for example, to the recent introduction of universal military training in the G.D.R. schools. Pastorally, they nurture their people to dig more deeply into the resources of faith to find those themes which will allow hard-working folk to make faithful decisions in the daily course of life while remaining loyal citizens in a socialist land. It is from the families and parishes of this group of church leaders that a new generation of socialist Christian leadership at both pastoral and lay levels is likely to be drawn.

State officials seem to me to be very suspicious of this group. This last group has a resiliance that does not seem to be a part of the predicted "fading away of religion." It is important to note that many of the senior Party leaders spent time in Hitler's concentration camps when they developed a respect for those Christians, now senior church leaders, who were a part of the "confessing church." Hence they share much in terms of common opposition to Fascism and of common suffering under Nazi oppression. The new generation does not share this personal history. Furthermore the idea that Christianity can supply perspectives which can "improve socialism" is troublesome to younger Party leadership. It means, in fact, that the institutionalized "civic religion" of Marxism-Leninism to which they have given their lives is not supreme, and that it is subject to criticism from a "higher authority." That is held to be false, unscientific and dangerous. Ties that previously held church leaders and politicians together are becoming less visible.

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If one believes, as I do, both that the kind and quality of religion which exists in a society is decisive for the civilization, and that religion is profoundly shaped by deep, long-term developments, it is necessary to add another dimension to this brief overview. Behind the current situation stands a long religious tradition with extensive sociological implications.⁷ When Luther made his break with Rome, both his own understanding of the Pauline-Augustinian tradition and the hard facts of political reality made a rather sharp division between piety and politics necessary. The evangelical tradition from these roots has interacted with a rather Machiavellian political history and has, in succession, influenced the German princes, the rise of Prussia, the era of Bismarck, the short-lived Weimar Republic, the National Socialists, and the present situation.⁸ Throughout this turbulent past, the predominant religious orientation of what is now the G.D.R. has conditioned believers to distinguish sharply between that realm which has to do with this world, its powers and principalities, its philosophies and prudential realism, and that realm which has to do with salvation of the inner soul, the dispositions of the heart and the peace that passes understanding. The consequence of this history has been a series of antinomies in the religious situation of Germany generally.

Christianity has become a part of the cultural establishment when sympathetic regimes found it advantageous to support the church, yet the heart of German evangelical faith neither found solace in institutional religion nor worked out the implications of the Gospel for effective social and political witness--as it tried to do in Catholicism, Calvinism, and many of the "free church" groups of other lands. Evangelical piety in this tradition both has had a higher estimate of the proper authority of secular rulers in regard to worldly matters, and a lower expectation of what cultural, economic, social and political change can do in regard to human salvation and sanctification than most other Western branches of Christianity have.

Simultaneously, those elements of Marxism which derive from German "organicism," from the celebrations of human "autonomy" by the continental enlightenment, from Hegel and Feuerbach, and from the critical analysis of traditional relationships between the propertied classes, state bureaucracies and religion have a certain pertinence to the deep history of Germany. Marxism, as the newest form of "Realpolitik," beyond the reach of theology and religious ethics, is more at

home in the G.D.R. philosophically and socially than it is in several other lands where it also has become the predominant ideological force, backed in all cases by what one wag has called "Red Prussianism."

What the church has in the G.D.R. is a profound sense of the depths of the human soul and an equally profound sense of the power of "The Word." Without a sense of the God-given dignity of the human person, individuals become cogs in the machinery of political economy; without a sense of the power and authority of "the Word," intellectual life, poetry and, finally, the scientific quest for truth are subverted. They become only utilitarian instruments of social praxis--allowed only insofar as they are useful for Party purposes. What the Party has is a practical sense of social-historical dynamics and an equally practical sense of the power of technology. Without the former, the life of the mind becomes separated from the needs and passions of the people; without the latter, social progress would be stunted. What each has, the other lacks. If either is lost, the society is likely to collapse.

At present both are strong enough to sustain the most successful society of Eastern Europe. Yet, the prospects for maintaining even the present balance in the 1980's are not good. The suspicion of the church by the Party threatens to destroy what the country most needs. At the same time, the enforced "diaspora" of the church threatens to reactivate those forms of piety which have always been present in German religious life and which remain satisfied with a theology of "pure inwardness" tied to a "pure creedalism." Because of this situation, believers in the G.D.R. are likely to reactivate those forms of the "Two Kingdom Doctrine" which have proved to be debilitating to both evangelical religion and social-political righteousness ever since Luther suggested that questions of ecclesiology, polity and rulership were "adiaphorus"--purely matters of pragmatic worldliness, having nothing to do with salvation.⁹ And non-religious citizens are likely to develop a parallel schizophrenia--publicly fitting in, but keeping their deepest convictions and loyalties safely isolated from public expression or scrutiny.

In view of present tendencies, I doubt whether either the predominant religious traditions or the official doctrines of Marxist-Leninism, singly or together, will be able to bring about the reconciliation of those antimonies which have preoccupied German thought and social life for centuries. A pronounced alienation is likely to continue below the surface of intellectual, social and personal life.

One can only be more hopeful if three conditions are met. First, if international tensions are reduced--and these tensions at present entail both the

reduction of conflicts between the NATO and Warsaw Pact countries generally, and the peaceful resolution of the Polish situation particularly--the perceived threat to the society of "independent" religious thought and organization will also be reduced. Those church bodies working with Rome and with the World Council of Churches would have a greater opportunity to develop and extend their constructive witness as a "loyal opposition." Second, the evangelically influenced churches in the G.D.R. must rethink their ecclesiology on a basis which exploits their relative structural autonomy and develops, within the zones of relative freedom available to them and among the laity, a fresh sense of theonomy in questions of polity, culture and social order. In this regard, aspects of the traditional ecclesiological heritage will surely have to be modified in the directions of the ecumenically oriented, socially and culturally involved "free church" traditions. And third, the G.D.R. government will have to cease its petty harrassment of religion and modify its policy of suspicion, allowing the new generation of socialist Christian leadership, who are in fact deeply committed to the G.D.R., scope to speak, act and organize openly. If these conditions are met, the G.D.R. could become what it has the potential to be--a showcase of more or less successful socialism marked by genuine freedom, a model to smaller countries around the world who wish to avoid being swallowed by either superpower.

Notes

1. E. Schneider, The G.D.R. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1978) and J. Steele, Inside East Germany (New York: Urigen Books, 1977).
2. L'Express, cover story, December 13, 1980.
3. See the periodical Kirche im Sozialismus, June, 1979, especially pp. 32ff.
4. T. Beeson, Discretion and Valor (Glasgow: Wm. Collins Sons, 1974), pp. 167ff.
5. R.W. Solberg, God and Caesar in East Germany (New York: Macmillan, 1961).
6. More fully analyzed in my book, Religion and Human Rights, especially Chapter 5.
7. My own research tends to confirm the earlier perspective of E. Troeltsch, The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches (New York: Harper, 1931) (Tr. from 1911 German Ed. by O. Wyon), Vol. II.
8. Religion and Human Rights, op. cit., Chapter 6.
9. See K. Hertz, Two Kingdoms and One World (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 1976).