

5-1984

# Churches in Eastern Europe: Three Models of Church-State Relations and Their Relevance for the Ecumenical Movement

J A. Hebly

*Utrecht University*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree>



Part of the [Christianity Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Hebly, J A. (1984) "Churches in Eastern Europe: Three Models of Church-State Relations and Their Relevance for the Ecumenical Movement," *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe*: Vol. 4: Iss. 3, Article 3.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree/vol4/iss3/3>

**CHURCHES IN EASTERN EUROPE: THREE MODELS OF CHURCH-STATE RELATIONS  
AND THEIR RELEVANCE FOR THE ECUMENICAL MOVEMENT**

by J. A. Hebly

Dr. J. A. (Hans) Hebly (Dutch Reformed) was born in 1923 and received his doctorate in theology from Utrecht University. From 1951 to 1970 he served as a minister in the Netherlands Reformed Church. Since 1970 he has been the deputy director of the Interacademical Institute for Missiological and Ecumenical Research, Utrecht, the Netherlands. He is the author of Protestants in Russia (1976), Churches in Eastern Europe (1975 in Dutch), The Russians and the World Council of Churches (1978), Churches Within Socialism (1979 in Dutch about the G.D.R.) The Struggle for Peace (1983 in Dutch), and The New Confession of Faith of the Evangelical Christian Baptists (1983 in Dutch).

It is not so easy to define exactly what we mean when we speak of "Eastern Europe. Geographically the notion is rather unclear; the GDR and Hungary, for instance, do not consider themselves belonging to Eastern Europe in this sense. Confessionally we speak of the Eastern and Western churches, meaning Latin and Orthodox Christianity, and in this sense Poland belongs to the West. For present purposes let us speak of Eastern Europe in the popular political sense; namely, that part of a continent which has a communist system of government and belongs to the Soviet sphere of influence. In that sense Yugóslavia is not really part of Eastern Europe.

It is also a very complicated matter to speak in general about "the" churches in Eastern Europe. Every church has its own history and background. There are those which have been up until modern times powerful, privileged people's-churches and which have gone through a difficult process of adaptation to a totally new situation. Then, there are small minority churches, often oppressed in the past, which were at first inclined to accept a new communist regime as sort of liberation from age-long oppression by ruling confessions. There are Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Lutheran, and Reformed churches that have reacted in their own, very different ways to the situation that arose after the communists had taken over. The relations of church and state and church

and society were and are not identical, and the fact that the communist regime was established in the Soviet Union in 1917 and in the other countries only after 1945 is not without significance. The communists initially tried to apply the Soviet mother-model of church-state relations in the other countries, but that has in some cases been a complete failure, most clearly in the GDR and in Poland. It is for that reason impossible to speak in general terms about the church in socialism, or the church in Eastern Europe. One should always be more specific in defining historical and confessional contexts.

Another important factor which should be kept in mind is that there has been a process of development in church-state relations in the last 30 years. It no longer suffices to speak of a general policy of persecution and oppression of the church. There have been changes in the policy or tactics of the regimes. They have learned to live with the fact that Christian churches continue to exist and that they will do so for a considerable time. In the ideal communist society, belief in God and the church will have died, but this stage has not yet been reached and, as some communists say, the disappearance of religion is not a condition for, but will be a consequence of, the establishment of a communist society.

The present stage, that of "developed real" socialism, is no longer regarded solely as a transitory period, a sort of purgatory before entering paradise. The myth of progress has fallen into the background. Communism, as Wolfgang Büscher writes, is not so much political action directed toward conquering and establishing political power,

but a form of the existing society aimed at stabilization--it is establishment. In spite of all present polemics against the thesis of Ulbricht of socialism as a relatively independent form of society between capitalism and communism, this thesis is the hidden ideological basis of present party policies. An inspiring concept of progress and a model of the future which can mobilize the workers and the intellectuals are wanting in GDR socialism. It is more a question<sup>1</sup> of the stabilization of existing conditions.

The party wants the churches as supporting partners; the ideology, has not succeeded in really inspiring the people, and the party looks for those elements which can help build up a new national identity. The celebration of the Luther Year in the GDR is a good example. The regime has come to the conclusion that there should be a constructive "miteinander von Staat und Kirche" [a togetherness of state and church]. The Hungarian Reformed Bishop Károly Tóth says that the Marxists themselves discover that improvement of social conditions does not automatically create the new person, but rather emphasizes the problems of individual life. Because of this he sees new dimensions for the pastorate of the church in present-day Hungarian society.<sup>2</sup>

Because of the endeavors to bring in the churches as associates for the building up of the real socialist society, anti-church policies and aggressive atheist propaganda have been abandoned in the GDR and Hungary. Fundamentally, a similar tendency can be observed at work in the Soviet Union. The existence of the church is more or less accepted or tolerated and the fight against religion is in some publications presented as a fight against those social roots from which religion arises. If the social causes of religious consciousness are eliminated, then this changes one into a tree without roots, which withers away and perishes.<sup>3</sup> In the Soviet Union, however, there is a distinct tendency to encourage this process of decay and there is active propaganda for atheism. It is said in an article in Pravda:

Since the establishment of a new social order the tendency toward the decay of religion in the USSR is strengthening. It would be a mistake, however, to assume that religious faith can fully disappear on its own, only through the influence of the socialist way of life and the achievements of technical-scientific progress, (or) without the development of systematic, efficient atheistic work."<sup>4</sup>

This should not, however, have only the form of enlightenment, but be directed towards the activation of the participation of believers in the society in the existing social, political, and cultural organizations. V. Kuroyedov wrote in Kommunist: "The involvement of believers in the practical struggle of the building up of socialism and communism, and at

the same time the constant propaganda for the materialistic world-view among the masses, is the scientifically correct way to overcome religious prejudices."<sup>5</sup>

- - - -

A description follows of the church-state situation in three socialist countries: the Orthodox Church in the USSR, and the Protestant churches in Hungary and in the GDR--three different models. The Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) is above all a priestly church, which seeks solidarity with people and nation, stresses the liturgical-sacramental life, and does not deal with social and political issues on its own impulse but only where the government expects it. This is the case especially in peace work. The ROC adopts a patriotic, not an ideological, position. The leaders of the Hungarian Protestant churches identified themselves with the ruling regime and accepted the place which the regime accords them. The Council of Evangelical Churches in the GDR wants to be loyal to socialism, but is constantly involved in a struggle for the safeguarding of its right to exercise its prophetic ministry and to speak out independently on vital questions in the life of the nation. In describing these three models, I do not want to suggest that there exist only these. We should always endeavor as noted above, to give a nuanced view of the church-state relations in the different national and confessional contexts. And by choosing these three models I just wish to illustrate the variety of these relationships.

#### The Russian Orthodox Church

There seem to be two apparently contradictory tendencies in the policies of the Soviet government and the ruling CPSU in regard to the church--which we could describe with the words marginalization and integration. Both these words have a special meaning and content in this context. Marginalization means that the church is only allowed to move in a strictly religious-liturgical sphere and not to intrude in other aspects of the life of the society. Its task is to satisfy the religious needs of the faithful. This is implied in the legislation which is very restrictive as far as those aspects of religious liberty are concerned which do not directly relate to the celebration of the liturgy. The decree on separation of church and state is interpreted in such a way

that the church is separated from society and that it has no right to have anything to do with cultural, social, or political questions or to display any activities in these fields. The church has become absolutely marginal in regard to society and a Soviet citizen will not encounter the church in any province of daily life. But there are two more aspects which give this marginalization a special Soviet coloration. The first is that the party and government see it as their task to exercise an anti-religious influence especially by means of education, publicity, press, and propaganda. In Soviet terminology this is called enlightenment to liberate the people from the influence of unscientific ideas. This causes a alienation of believers from society. Their own contribution to the life of the nation is disqualified in advance and there is no right of defense or reply, because this is forbidden by law as propaganda for the faith.

A second aspect of marginalization is that this does not mean that the church may live its own life in silence in a quiet corner of society. The authorities exercise sharp control over the life of the church through their Council for Religious Affairs; they interfere in the inner life of the church and they are motivated by a deep animosity toward the church. Interference in the life of the church was a normal procedure in Tsarist times, too. Those observers who accept the thesis that a traditional authoritarian system of government is today perpetuating itself in a new quasi-socialist form can find strong support in their favor in the attitudes of the government towards the church. An essential difference, or course, is the fact that the present government does not only want to arrange the affairs of the church, but that it does with intention of putting a brake on the life of the church--to hinder, damage, and abolish it.

The other tendency of Soviet policies in regard to the church could be called integration. They want to use the church for the building up of socialism. In Soviet terminology the revolutionary workers movement within real socialism has the task to strengthen and deepen the unity of action between representatives of the Marxist-Leninist world-view and religiously believing people in the process of building socialism.<sup>6</sup>

Since 1943 the Soviet regime has gradually started taking into

account the fact that it is not all that easy to destroy the church and that an increasing number of citizens intend to stick to their convictions. The realization began to break through that it could be useful to make the church subservient to national political purposes, as, for instance, the strengthening of the inner cohesion of the socialist world, the re-establishment of Soviet influence in the Middle East and, since the 1950s, the Soviet peace offensive. The ROC proved to be a useful and docile instrument, but the regime remained cautious lest the influence and position of the church in the life of the country should increase in any way. (One recalls the extreme form of marginalization, an active campaign of church persecution during the Khrushchev period.) The peace activities of the church as thus directed mainly towards churches and people abroad.

The Council for Religious Affairs has the special duty to "help" the church; that is to say, this state office controls its activities and defines their content. The aim of the regime is to demonstrate abroad that the communists are willing to cooperate with believers. Anti-religious actions appeared to impede the influence of communism among traditionally believing people in Muslim and Third World countries, so the intention is now to establish the image of positive collaboration of communists and believers and of real religious liberty under socialism. The adherence of the ROC to membership in the World Council of Churches (WCC) in 1961 also was motivated by the government, which gave the green light for this step in a period of great internal tension between church and state, to play a role in the worldwide ecumenical movement because of the possibilities which WCC membership offered for the furtherance of the peace movement. Peace is identified with the establishment of socialism and for the furtherance of the policies of the socialist motherland.

The integration of the church and the believers in Soviet society must not be seen as a process in which they can bring their own values and ideas about the human being and society in the building of socialism. It is rather a process of assimilation in which they should be liberated from their antiquated, unscientific views; it is an enforced conformism in an ideologically synchronized society. The

Christians may participate only when they keep silent about their own social and ethical principles and take part in peace work whose aims and principles have been determined without their collaboration or influence.

There is an inward immigration and an outward conformism of believers and the church is involved in a constant and bitter struggle for its life. This struggle is not characterized by a militant and active confrontation with or opposition against the regime, although militant groups do exist. The struggle of the church is rather characterized by a strong commitment to its spiritual traditions, by perseverance in the faith, and a quiet building up of the pastoral life of the church. These are the weapons with which the church responds to marginalization. It perseveres in silence under the atheistic propaganda and suffers humbly the interference of the secular powers in its life. The church, and especially the ROC, realizes that its real power does not lie in official public recognition and an efficient organization of church life, but in the devotion, the fidelity, and the sacrifice of many millions of believers. The church cannot reach out to these people, but they come to it and support it.

The ROC also has not resisted the integration enforced by the regime. It has accepted it, but at the same time has tried to make it serve its own position in a way that is not always in accord with the regime's intentions. The willingness to collaborate with the building of socialism, according to leading hierarchs, is based on the assumption that the party realizes in practice the righteousness which was preached by Christ. Communism is in this way reduced to a byproduct of Christendom, with the further implication that the party only practices what always has been preached by the church. The ideological pride of a scientific world-view is wounded by such suggestions. They touch Soviet ideologists at a vulnerable spot.

Collaboration with the regime is also motivated by the fervent patriotism which has always been characteristic of the Russian Orthodox Church. It has always been on the side of the people and so it is now; it sings in concert the praises of the Great October Revolution, the Great Patriotic War, and the achievements of socialism. The ROC stresses



its contribution in periods of need and of threat to the life of the nation. It integrates itself in a way that disturbs the ideologists. In Nauka i Religia, the way in which the ROC is preparing for the celebration in 1988 of the millennial anniversary of the baptism of Vladimir was sharply attacked; it said "one should refute the church legends about certain historic facts and figures and the pretensions of church organizations that proclaim themselves bearers of the patriotic principle and guardian of the spiritual heritage of the nation."<sup>7</sup> The way in which the church tries to use its enforced integration to reinforce its own position seems to be regarded as menacing by Soviet authorities. It must also be acknowledged that not all bishops accept the integration in the same manner. There are degrees in loyalty as even the Foerov report, a secret Soviet government report about the church, published in 1980 in the West, clearly shows.

Integration in the peace offensive and in propaganda abroad is also regarded by the church as a means of survival and strengthening its position. It must be acknowledged, however, that the ROC, especially in this aspect of its activities, tends to put the sister churches with which relations are maintained in a rather awkward position and to raise a number of problems for the ecumenical movement which have scarcely been analyzed up till now.

#### The Hungarian Model

The Reformed Bishop Tibor Bartha spoke in 1968 about the development of a specific Hungarian model of cooperation between the churches and the socialist state. He alluded to the Reformed and Lutheran churches, which together form about a quarter of the population. The leadership of these churches speaks in a very positive way about this model. Vaguely, some allusions are sometimes made that there will still exist some problems between state and church, but they hasten to add that these will be resolved. The situation is officially considered to be satisfactory and in their many international contacts Hungarian church representatives put this model forward as an example for those countries in the Third World that have opted for Marxist socialism.

The communist party in Hungary, too, sees itself as the exclusive

guide on the way to a better future. It assumes that there exists a broad consensus between the leading party, which knows the goals of history and determines the way to attain them, and the people. Where this consensus does not seem to exist, everything should be done to attain it. The secretary of the State office for Church Affairs, Imre Miklós said:

We want welfare for the whole people. Our program is known by everybody. The majority of the workers agree with it, the population agrees with it. The believers also support our program. To cooperate does not mean to play the game of the communist party, as some would allege, but to put the program into action. We do not want to build up society without the collaboration of the believers. Therefore our only desire is that the church help us. There is a program of the Patriotic Front and clergymen were engaged in drawing it up. Atheists and believers together have voted on it as the congress. . . . Therefore, our purpose is to realize the program. This is all we desire. The church must be able to live in peace and do its work. The believers should not live in a constant tension. If they do<sub>8</sub> not, people will be able to work better."

The ideological character of society is not accentuated here; all emphasis is put on pragmatic cooperation. But it goes without saying that the party determines the aim and content of the policy. "We declare," continued Miklos, "that we are a Marxist state, but that does not mean that everybody who lives in it is a Marxist." The Hungarian regime takes into account that there are churches and Christians who are no adepts of the official ideology, but that does not mean that these can make an independent contribution or can take an independent stance in regard to government policies. Vice-premier György Aczel said: "Marxism-Leninism exerts the ideological hegemony, because this is a scientific ideology which, according to its essence, can disclose the deepest problems of our time and can give the best answers to it."<sup>9</sup>

The church must not only renounce the idea of a dialogue about the principles of Marxism-Leninism, but cannot put forward its own social principles. The communist regime assumes: (1) that it should accept the

fact that Christians and churches exist, (2) that historical evolution leads to an evergrowing influence of the scientific (i.e., Marxist-Leninist) worldview and the dissolution of the "mystical veil of mist"--a process that the government must further, knowing however that the final aim of a communist society lies in a far future, and (3) that cooperation with Christians in the realization of the revolutionary aims of socialism is possible and useful if they are loyal and accept socialism as the program of the people.

The party shows the way and wants the support of the broad masses of the population. Thereby the churches can play an important role and the party expects the collaboration of leading church people in its politics. The church should not take a neutral position and those who want to stay aside risk being regarded as a silent opposition. And one of the most remarkable features of a communist society is that there is no room for even a silent opposition. The Hungarian regime wishes a positive stance of the churches and does not expect any criticism from that side, which it would immediately qualify as opposition. The Hungarian Protestant church leaders, in accordance with these expectations, pronounce themselves to be supporters of the socialist regime; they want to be "a servant church" in socialism which accepts the social and political program of Marxism, with the exception of its atheist principles. They have developed a theology of service (theology of diaconia) and the synod of the Hungarian Reformed Church in 1960 pronounced its "yes" to socialism: "We hail the socialist edification and we offer anew for the final realization of socialism our prayers. . . . In the forms of life of the new Hungary we discover the God-willed framework of a more just and happy Hungarian life."<sup>10</sup> These churches have identified themselves to a large extent with the regime. They recognize that in principle churches have a prophetic-critical function in society, but for them this is the case for churches mainly in the Christian-capitalistic countries. In socialism the prophetic function of the church is not a critical function; in these countries it means that the church should give such an orientation to the people of God that it is willing to cooperate in the building up of a new socialist society. The prophecy of the church must recognize where

positive forces are at work and support these.

Lutheran Bishop Zoltán Káldy also said: "The church, therefore, has put itself at the side of socialist development and has said yes to socialism, because she can see that this society does not only talk about humanism but realizes it."<sup>11</sup> In that connection, it has been stated that "the Hungarian churches are of the opinion that the way to the future, according to the laws of social development, leads to a socialist world order. They confess that they have found their place and their service in that socialist social order which, according to their experiences, has more promising possibilities for the solution of the great world problems."<sup>12</sup> The Reformed Bishop Lajos Bakos said at a meeting of the Patriotic Front: "Socialism means the world of freedom, of justice, of equality, and of humanity,"<sup>13</sup>

Not only is a critical attitude rejected, but the prophetic task of the church is reduced to an appeal to conformism to the new order. The churches regard the line which the party chose after 1956 and the way in which it wants to build its own Hungarian form of socialism as the only feasible possibility for the country and they do not expect any positive results from a confrontation with the regime. But the question must be asked whether their conception of the role of the church is not an impediment to exploratory action to find where the limits of the rather tolerant policy of the Hungarian regime with respect to cultural matters actually lies. Because this is its present position, the church cannot function as the protector of religious groups --such as the Peace Group for Dialogue--that wish to pursue a more critical and independent course. It must also be pointed out that not all ministers share the views of the leading bishops. Leading personages in the church can only be nominated under supervision of and in cooperation with the government, which undoubtedly has furthered their course of conformity.

#### The GDR Model

The GDR is in large majority a traditionally Protestant country. The Protestant churches are united in the Federation of Evangelical Churches in the GDR, officially founded in 1969. The GDR churches have been able, in comparison with their Hungarian sister churches, to go a very different way. There are some very evident historical reasons for

this. The most important might be the fact that the "Landeskirchen" (people's-churches) in the Soviet zone had been able to maintain their links with the churches in West Germany. Formally until 1969, but actually until the building of the Berlin Wall in 1961, GDR churches were full members of the Evangelical Church of Germany. This has given them a stronghold and support in their endeavors to find a place in the new regime which tried at first to apply the Soviet model of church-state relations and, to, confine the influence of the church to a cultic ghetto. The second reason is that in its confrontation with the new situation that arose as an outcome of the Second World War, the churches could profit from the experiences of the Confessing church in Nazi Germany and the theological heritage of the Confessing Synod of Barmen in 1934.

The Hungarian churches with their strong nationalistic traditions were much less prepared for the social, cultural, and political revolution after 1945 and did not succeed in resisting the temptation of a new identification with the powers that be. They did not have a strong and inspiring theological tradition, in which they could have found their foothold and a basis for a more independent and autonomous position in the new situation. If the situation in the GDR differs from that in Hungary, one of the main reasons was certainly that the GDR churches reacted to the new regime in a very different way. When I speak about the GDR Model, I confine myself to the policy of the main Protestant churches as formulated by Synods and Bishops. There exist of course a number of responses to the situation which are quite different. Among church members there are those who are primarily interested in a spiritual migration from society and there also exists a rather vocal group of partisans of the present regime, especially among members of the CDU and the GDR.

The attitude of the Federation of Evangelical Churches (Bund) has been expressed in a very concise formula: We want to be a church within socialism, not over against socialism, not in favor of socialism, and not alongside socialism. They refused to follow those who called for assimilation, opposition, or retreat from society. They wanted to find a way to combine civic loyalty, social engagement, and the freedom of an

autonomous attitude in regard to the problems of society . The synod of the Bund held in Eisenach (July 2-6, 1971) expressed this as follows:

The eight churches of the Bund regard the GDR as their state and take it seriously . The churches have made it their duty to help Christians to find that place in their state where they can fulfill their co-responsibilities in such a manner as the witness and service of the Gospel demand from them. The churches themselves are prepared--on their own or in the fellowship of the Bund--to participate in the process of communication which the state has with its citizens about the forms of their common future. They are convinced that in this dialogue they can contribute something very essential to insight into what man and what the human society is and needs, because they are called to the witness and service of the Gospel. A witnessing and serving community of churches in the GDR will be obliged to give a clear account of its position: in this thusly formed society, not alongside it, not over against it. It will have to maintain the freedom of witness and service. Because on the basis of its vocation it is only committed to Him who as the incarnate will of god came to us to save creation."<sup>14</sup>

This declaration of intent has not put an end to the long process of learning in which these churches are involved. They still struggle with the problem in what way it is possible to be a witnessing and serving community in the corpus socialisticum.

The communist regime from its side had to learn how to live and deal with a church that is not willing to be changed into a collective chorus of assent or a one-way channel of communication from the party to the people. It was only after the erection of the wall in 1961 that the process started that led from an attitude of confrontation and rejection to acceptance of the fact that one had to live as a Christian within socialism. Gradually it became clear that the GDR was not a provisory or provisional state and that they should not continue to cherish the frustrating idea that to live in the GDR was a tragic fate. The challenge to live in this situation had to be accepted and the catchword of the Bund became: loyalty but then critical loyalty, cooperation but

then critical cooperation. "We have not become a silent church," said one of the bishops. "When we speak, however, we do not want confrontation--we do not use aggressive, polemical and offending tones. . . . We do not look for conflict, but neither do we evade it at all costs."<sup>15</sup>

In principle the communist regime does not appreciate it when the church keeps itself a critical distance. It wants the church to become a partisan of the socialist order. The church is not asked to abandon its faith and confession, but it should choose for what is good--socialism, and reject what is bad--capitalism. Christians may have their proper motivation, their "eigen motivierte Parteinahme," as the secretary of the State Office for Church Affairs declared in 1982:

We assume that the separation and independence of the churches of our Republic in respect to the churches of the Federal Republic and separation of church and state--which means the noninterference of the state in the internal affairs of the church and the noninterference of the churches in the affairs of the state--are as much in the interest of us all and certainly in the well-understood self-interest of the churches when they take sides with peace, disarmament, and detente<sup>16</sup> on the basis of their own motivations.

This really means that the church should restrict itself to purely religious matters and should not deal with social questions that are exclusively the domain of the party. It is, however asked to support the policies of the party on the basis of its own motivations.

We constantly meet with this sort of reasoning when the Marxists in the post-revolutionary situation of East European countries speak about cooperation with Christians in the building of a socialist society and about the realization of "true humanism." Christians may have their own motivations to join in this process, but they are not expected to bring in anything of their own as far as the content of the cooperation is concerned. Before starting the dialogue and the cooperation they have to leave all their own ideas and principles in the cloakroom. And it is precisely that that the GDR churches do not want. They do not wish to identify, even out of their own Christian motives, with the existing

society and hail the policy of the ruling party as the only possible and only right way for the future.

Bishop A. Schönherr expressed as his conviction that to be a church within socialism meant full-fledged participation in society while retaining its full autonomy and its proper profile.<sup>17</sup> This attitude is quite different from that of the Hungarian Bishop Tibor Bartha, who said: "For Christians who stand in the imitation of Christ the building of human social conditions is a categorical moral imperative, though on the basis of a different inspiration and motivation."<sup>18</sup> He does not want to hear about a critical distance in respect to the regime, but considers this historical period, in which the government wishes to serve the interest of the people by uniting all creative forces as an act of Divine Providence. Critical loyalty has here been exchanged for conformism, as desired by the party. Here it has been accepted that Christians only have their own particular motives to cooperate, but that they are not real partners with their own principles and insights about the human being and society.

The churches in the GDR have chosen the narrow path by rejecting on the one side a full identification with party aims and methods, but by refusing at the same time to play the role of an opposition party. A very delicate position, because political opposition is not tolerated and the subtleties of the difference between critical Christian witness and political opposition are not always very clear, not even for Christian groups in other parts of the world, let alone for communist governments. The churches do not want to be regarded as politically dissident movements but rather as churches with their own specific task in society. They decline to form on the basis of the Christian faith a sort of anti-ideology with a competitive vision of the ordering of society. But they also refuse to consider the ruling ideology as a doctrine of salvation which would have the right to mould the consciousness of the people and they reject the pretension that this ideology contains ultimate answers to the deepest problems of human beings and society. The Gospel liberates the human being and enables him or her to see the ideology in its limited significance and to continue to ask critical questions about how far it serves in theory and practice



in human life. If, however, the Marxist-Leninist ideology becomes absolute and a closed world-view, then a conflict is inevitable. In an article titled "Salvation Today," Bishop Krusche wrote: "The faith that in Christ alone is salvation is a critical correction of all actual idolatry, of all endeavors to give a messianic content to an engagement for the people (and) to qualify humanistic programs and ideas as doctrines of salvation."<sup>19</sup>

To a certain extent this self-definition of the churches in regard to their position in a communist society has been officially accepted. The meeting of the representatives of the Bund with E. Honecker on March 6, 1978, seems to have resulted in a prudent acceptance of this kind of role of the church in society. Problems were to be solved in a spirit of tolerance and mutual understanding. The protocol of this meeting has been described subsequently as a document "von konkordatsähnlichem Charakter"<sup>20</sup> (in other words, a quasi-concordat). The tensions between church and state have not disappeared since then and they are inevitable between a state which has definite ideological conceptions about the place of the church in society and a church which is not willing to let itself be locked up in a cultic ghetto or to function as decoration of the facade of socialism. The church, as a room for freedom and fellowship, presents itself as a societas alia, a societas alternativa, and a societas contraria.<sup>21</sup> The tensions that this involves are an essential aspect of the struggle for liberation which the GDR churches carry on. They are in a real spiritual sense a liberation-movement, because they resist submission to human concepts of salvation and refuse to accept the totalitarian pretensions of the regime.

#### Relevance for the Ecumenical Movement

To conclude, I would like to make some remarks about the ecumenical collaboration of churches in Eastern Europe. Let me start with the views of an unknown East European theologian whose remarks were published in a World Council of Churches' study, which is one of the few critical publications on the situation of the churches in Eastern Europe to be issued by the WCC. He writes:<sup>22</sup>

Ecumenism in Eastern Europe is still fragile and inarticulate, because the ecumenical profile of the region is not clear,

there is little opportunity to "practice" regional ecumenism, and the full ecclesiastical diversity of Eastern European churches is not represented in their dialogue with one another: for example, the Roman Catholic Church, the church of the majority in many Eastern European countries, is not a partner in the discussions. Moreover, the autonomy of the regional church bodies cannot be safeguarded against the various political measures. In any case, the churches must be sure that ecumenism is not a trap set by the state to encourage them to neglect their internal, local mission<sup>22</sup> for the sake of international contacts.

These last two points are very important. The possibility of a free and autonomous organization is not possible and the state tries to use ecumenical church bodies for its own purposes.

It is remarkable, but after what has been said not surprising, that the Protestant churches of Hungary play a predominant role in the organization of a sort of COMECON-ecumene. The Reformed Bishop Karoly Toth succeeded Metropolitan Nikodim as president of the Christian Peace Conference (Prague) and since then the activities of this peace movement in the Third World have increased considerably. The Lutheran Bishop Káldy, one of the well known church diplomats, said in the report to his synod (Feb. 1981)<sup>23</sup> that in a period of four years he participated in 160 conferences and meetings abroad "to make known our views and to strengthen interchurch relations; he received at home 80 delegations from abroad. In a meeting of the National Peace Congress in 1973, he explained: "We support the foreign policy of our socialist state and we devote our international contacts to the furtherance of the peace endeavors . . . our primary peace work is our stand for socialism, our faithfulness to it, and the fortifying of this faithfulness. For us peace and socialism are indissolubly interrelated."<sup>24</sup> His colleague, Bishop E Ottlyk, observed that "our churches raise their voice in the forums of world Christianity. . . . This is a sign of the aspiration that the Christians of the world become a worldwide camp for the furtherance of peace and the friendship of people."<sup>25</sup> In the Hungarian parliament, of which he is a member, Káldy remarked in 1976 that the excellent relations between church and state in Hungary bear

fruit and are a stimulant for those countries in Africa which have chosen the socialist order. "We like to inform the churches in these countries about our experience and we exhort them to accept the new social order and serve positively in it."<sup>26</sup> In his report of 1979, he spoke about the new relations with the Lutheran Church in Ethiopia: "Our aim was to encourage the church which lives in a new revolutionary situation and to strengthen its insight that the building up of a socialist social order does not impede the service of the church."<sup>27</sup>

At a meeting of the All-African Conference of Churches, Bishop Tóth, as leader of a CPC delegation, stated that the CPC is always willing to help the churches and church organizations to get more easy access to the socialist countries,<sup>28</sup> and Hungarian Professor E. Kocsis wrote in a CPC publication that the socialist countries have become models of the development of the Third World.<sup>29</sup> He added: "The churches and Christians of the East European countries have on the basis of the human aims of the new society decided positively for socialism." These leading voices continually emphasize that devotion to peace is preceded by a choice for the existing Marxist socialist order. Peace work in this sense is an aspect of the ideological and political confrontation. Nowhere else do we find this so clearly expressed as by these Hungarians.

It should not surprise us that it was the Hungarian Bishop T. Bartha, together with the Lutheran General-Bishop Jan Michalko from Slovakia, who took the initiative to approach the Moscow Patriarchate with the request to organize a conference of WCC member churches from socialist countries in 1974, with the aim "to come to a common policy and an intensification of their contribution to Christian unity, peace, and collaboration of peoples."<sup>30</sup> This was the starting point for a number of such conferences held since. It would be interesting to analyze these meetings but only superficial statements are issued about them and the reports are not made available. It is very likely that the GDR churches, which of course have many contacts with sister churches in Eastern Europe, but which were rather unhappy with this initiative, have made it clear that they only wished to participate if the meetings were convened by the WCC itself. (This was done from 1977 onwards.) They have

a great reluctance to be inserted into a bloc of East European member churches. Although they have to operate very prudently, one of their representatives expressed this very clearly by stating: "Although our contacts with the established Marxist-Leninist socialism have provided us with a number of common experiences, they have certainly not marked us in such a way that our churches (i.e. the churches in Eastern Europe--author's remark) have developed a specific common line of conduct."<sup>31</sup>

Not everyone was very enthusiastic and the secretary of the Polish Ecumenical Council asked how the churches could bring the real problems of their countries to the fore and whether they have the necessary freedom to do so.<sup>32</sup> The feeling did certainly exist that this was one of those initiatives which one has to accept--Who could refuse to attend a regional meeting of WCC member churches?--but the aim of which really was to bring about the formation of a bloc of East European churches that could have a definite influence on the social and political work of the WCC. At the last meeting of June 1982 in preparation for the Vancouver Assembly, it was said that the churches from socialist countries should have a greater share in the life and activities as well as in the leadership of the WCC.<sup>33</sup> Their contribution could be, and I quote from the excerpt of a report published in Ecumenical Press Service:

a) Experience of the churches in socialist countries can be of some use and benefit to Christians in the Third World where society is in a process of rapid social and ideological change in the direction of socialist order; b) Christian response to the model of socialist society; c) The area of peace, disarmament, etc. Churches in socialist countries have a lot to say and do in this regard. They already have wide experience and fine achievements in their struggle to save the sacred gift of life."<sup>34</sup>

The remark made in the WCC Faith and Order publication quoted above seems to have been forgotten: "The autonomy of regional church bodies (in Eastern Europe) cannot be safeguarded against the various political pressures." They are under pressure to become vehicles of ideological and nationalistic propaganda and to defend the interests of their home

states. It does not seem wise for the WCC to encourage this development in the direction of a bloc of churches from socialist countries, nor to express in Vancouver (Policy Ref. Co. I) the wish that these meetings be continued because they are an important ecumenical development. Are they not, on the contrary, a trap set by the state?

The action of the churches from East European countries in the international field are rather vigorous and, generally speaking fully in line with the political views of the Warsaw Pact countries. Their motivations are different: the Orthodox churches participate in peace work out of a national-patriotic background, Hungarians often seem to be inspired by their political stance in favor of socialism, others do it on the basis of purely pragmatic consideration--they simply have to do it and are too weak to resist the pressure under which they live. All of them have at the same time their purely churchly reasons: they need the contact and the spiritual fellowship of their sister churches in the West and they hope that their position in their own country might be strengthened by their service to national political aims, an expectation which unfortunately is scarcely realized in practice. The bishops of most Roman Catholic churches have been able in the main to adopt an aloof stance towards participation in the communist peace actions.

In my opinion the peace work of the churches of Eastern Europe is used by the state authorities for their own purposes. How far this testifies to a new and real social and political engagement of the churches cannot be easily defined. The actions for peace of these churches are not merely an expression of a new self-consciousness of the believers, but at the same time instruments of ideological propaganda and manipulation of the goodwill of the people. Russian church representatives when abroad, for example, have to take into account legislation about slandering and discrediting the social system--a rather vague article which makes it a dangerous thing to utter any critical statements about the policies of their own country. There is no possibility for a free discussion of social and political issues in the parishes (except in the GDR and Poland and they have no independent sources of information or study groups. Usually statements and declarations of church bodies are not different from those of state and

party. Their biblical and theological motivations seem to have an ornamental function. Even a theological working-group of the Assembly of the Christian Peace conference in Prague in 1978 remarked that the theological motivations in the CPC are rather isolated from its political praxis. In the words of Max Stackhouse in the Christian Century (1983, p. 584) are the peace efforts of the Russian Orthodox Church "simply an extension of the party line in sacred phrases?" This does not mean that a real longing for peace does not exist in the Russian churches, but the government has not, just like our own governments, any need of diverging opinions about the way to attain peace. Contrary to our situation, however, the government of the Soviet Union uses all possibilities to suppress deviating ideas.

This captivity of the churches makes it difficult to come to close cooperation and to common ecumenical declarations about socio-political questions. In a consultation of the Conference of European Churches (CED) in which churches from the Eastern and Western parts of Europe collaborate, a Swiss theologian (H. Ruh, 1978) said:

The churches have to devote themselves to the work for peace in their own sphere of influence. They can not give a contribution to peace in the world by way of appeals across the border, but by way of changes in their own society. We must promise each other to do all we can in our own countries. Western churches are not served by appeals for disarmament from churches in Eastern Europe and these churches do not want such appeals from the West. . . . Unfortunately the churches are often more willing to support changes in other societies. . . . Therefore they must be urged to take initiatives in their own countries in the interest of disarmament and peace.

Dr. Ruh asked the churches from Eastern Europe to take a more critical attitude in their own countries. Church actions in the West would be more effective if our churches could say: "Look at what our counterparts in the East are doing--they are also engaged in real work for peace and not just supporting party propaganda."

But unfortunately the situation is still such that most churches up till now, have not been able to attain an independent position in regard

to the state. One of the few exceptions is the Council of Evangelical Churches in the GDR. The GDR churches have succeeded in keeping their internal autonomy and their actions for peace and peace education are critical also in regard to their own national politics. An Evangelical bishop of the GDR has, in a speech to a conference of the CEC, made a famous remark: "Only those who fulfill their social duty in their own area, have the right to speak about what happens in the area of others. The churches can only serve peace if they not simply serve their own national interests and behave as amplifiers of the foreign policy of their own governments. If they only fulfill this role of amplifier, they lose their function as peacemakers. Churches which do not ask critical questions about the policy of their own government, but who declare this policy exclusively as peace policy are not the salt of the earth but the marmalade of their nation."<sup>35</sup>

I think this statement is extremely important, but it is unfortunately too easily forgotten. Most churches in Eastern Europe do not have the possibility to have an independent stance in regard to party policy and their peace work is outward directed. It is thus extremely difficult to come to common actions and declaration by these churches and the churches in the West, which usually approach the politics of their national governments in a very critical way.

Salt and marmalade are not a pleasant mixture. Actions and declarations together with the churches of the communist countries (and again with some exceptions for the GDR) may even have a negative effect because they can raise the suspicion of being propagandistic and to be meant to undermine the position of one of the parties.

It is undoubtedly our task to maintain ecumenical relations with the churches in Eastern Europe but those who maintain these relations should be well informed about the real situation and not fall victim to ulterior propaganda intentions.

J. A. Hebly  
Utrecht

FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>"Ein neues Interesse am Kirche und Religion. Kirche als Element einer socialistischen Nationalkultur?" Kirche im Sozialismus (KIS), 5/81, pp. 13-19.

<sup>2</sup>Ungarischer, Kirchlicher Pressedienst (UKP), 33 Jan. 1981, pp. 11-14.

<sup>3</sup>Nikolai Mizov, Viprosy filosofii (Mscow), No. 7, 1973, p. 77.

<sup>4</sup>August 8, 1980.

<sup>5</sup>No. 5, March 1980, pp. 45-55; quoted in Ost-Europe Archiv, 4/1980, pp. 191-198.

<sup>6</sup>Pressburgse Pravda, March 25, 1982, quoted in Informationsdienst, G2W, Vol, 10, no. 4-5/1982, p. 13.

<sup>7</sup>June 1982, p. 26.

<sup>8</sup>Orientierung, 45, No. 22, Nov. 30, 1981.

<sup>9</sup>Ungarischer Kirchlicher Pressedienst (UKP), 28, 1976, p. 23.

<sup>10</sup>UKP, 12, 1960, p. 39.

<sup>11</sup>UKP, 26, 1974, p. 4.

<sup>12</sup>UKP, 23, 1971, p. 17.

<sup>13</sup>UKP, 28, 1979, p. 20.

<sup>14</sup>See J. A. Hebly, Kerk in het socialism, Baarn, 1979, p. 68.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid, p. 44.

<sup>16</sup>See P. J. Winters, "Mehr als Irritationen," KIS, 2/81, p. 24.

<sup>17</sup>P. Wensierski, "Thesen zur Rolle der Kirchen in der DDR," KIS, 5/81, p. 29.

<sup>18</sup>UKP, 29, Oct. 19, 1977, p. 20.

<sup>19</sup>Die Zeichen der Zeit, 5/73, pp. 172-181.

<sup>20</sup>Otto Luchterhandt, Die Gegenwartslage der Evangelischen Kirche in der DDR. Tübingen, Mohr, 1982, p. 56.

<sup>21</sup>Luchterhand, op, cit., p. 105.

<sup>22</sup>Comment on Church-State Relations in Eastern Europe--Church and State, Faith and Order Paper No. 85, WCC, 1978, p. 111.

<sup>23</sup>UKP, 1981, p. 38.

<sup>24</sup>UKP, 1973, p. 175.

<sup>25</sup>UKP, 1977, p. 316.

<sup>26</sup>UKP, 1977, p. 17.



<sup>27</sup>UKP, 1980, p. 12.

<sup>28</sup>UKP, 1980, p. 34.

<sup>29</sup>"Christians and Churches in the Socialist Countries in the Struggle for Peace," in G. Bassarak, Christians Today in The Struggle for Peace and Social Justice, Prague, pp. 120-128.

<sup>30</sup>Stimme der Orthodoxie, 10/1974, pp. 2-7.

<sup>31</sup>Christian Witness Today. A consultation of WCC member churches in the Socialist countries of Europe on questions of Evangelism, Prague, March 26-30, 1979.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid.

<sup>33</sup>UKP, 1982, p. 114.

<sup>34</sup>Ecumenical Press Service (EPS), July 1982, 49/23.

<sup>35</sup>See J. A. Hebly, Kerk in het socialisme, 1979, p. 86.