1985

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GOD'S PEOPLE IN SOCIALISM AS EXEMPLIFIED IN THE GDR

by Wieland Zademach

Dr. Wieland Zademach (Lutheran) born in 1934, studied theology and philosophy in Bonn, Hamburg, and Erlangen. He received his doctorate in 1971 with a dissertation on the Christian-Marxist dialogue of the 1960s, later published as Marxistischer Atheismus und die biblische Botschaft von der Rechtfertigung des Gottlosen (Düsseldorf, 1973). This was followed by Eurokommunismus--Weg oder Irrweg (Munich, 1979). From 1971 to 1983 he was pastor in the Lutheran Church in Bavaria. Currently he is a free lance writer and collaborator of the Study Commission of the Lutheran World Federation.

1. Statistical Survey.

Approximately ten million of the seventeen million inhabitants of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) belong to a Christian church. Eight and a half million are members of the eight regional sections of the Protestant Church, 1.3 million are Catholics and the rest belong to seven other Christian denominations. All churches send delegates to the Conference of Christian Churches in the GDR (Arbeitsgemeinschaft Christlicher Kirchen in der DDR). The Catholic Church is represented only by observers. Membership in the Protestant and Catholic Churches has declined steadily since the 1950s. This decline is not primarily caused by withdrawal; most parents, although still regarding themselves as members of the church, hesitate to have their children baptized and confirmed and shrink from sending them to confirmation classes. Official religious statistics have not been recorded since the end of 1964.

The Union of Protestant Churches in the GDR (Bund der Evangelischen Kirchen in der DDR), founded in 1969, comprises the eight regional sections of the Protestant Church and includes the venerable Brothers' Union (Evangelische Brüderunion) at Herrnhut with its 3500 members, ten parishes and twenty clergy. The administrative body consists of the General Synod made up of delegates from the regional sections, and the Church Council consisting of 24 representatives, partly elected by the General Synod, partly by the regional church administrations. The Protestant Churches in the GDR, West Berlin and the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) had previously formed a union called "The Protestant Church
in Germany (EKD), which broke up in 1969. However, in article 4.4 of its statutes we read that the Union of Protestant Churches in the GDR still acknowledges a special community with all Germans embracing the Protestant faith and that the Union is prepared to take responsibility in Protestant affairs in a spirit of true partnership.

2. Church and State since 1949.

Since the establishment of the GDR in 1949 we can distinguish three major phases of official church policy developed by the state. From 1949 to 1958 the policy was mainly aimed at a general restriction of church activities in society as a whole. The next decade (1959-1971) the state directed its aggressive methods of containment against the all-German church organizations, especially against the EKD (Evangelical Church of Germany). The third phase saw an ever-increasing effort, especially among Protestant circles, to define their position in socialist society. On the other hand, however, political leaders like Erich Honecker declared in March 1978 that a partnership between church and state could be envisioned to a certain extent, in spite of the differences in Weltanschauung.

The tendencies of the 1950s have, nevertheless, persistent. At that time the aggressive atheist and anticlerical propaganda was fostering a general movement to leave the church, especially among the educated population. A normal career in an academic profession became nearly impossible once a person belonged to a Christian church. An atheist ceremony of initiation (Jugendweihe) was deliberately set against the rite of confirmation. In schools run by the state, religious classes were ended (a fait accompli incompatible with the 1949 constitution), and suddenly the curricula of students had no place for any religious instruction whatsoever. Church taxes were changed into private donations. During the 1950s church activities normally were limited to buildings owned by the church; work among the younger generation was steadily obstructed. We even hear of imprisonment and show trials.

At the same time the churches kept enjoying certain privileges. Land property had not been confiscated by the land reforms; it was not even kept for collectivization purposes. The ecclesiastic labor law (concerning church employees) had not been abolished, and students of theology
had been qualifying and taking their exams at the six state universities.

During the second period (1959-1971) the Communist church policy became more openly linked with general political tendencies in German affairs. When the EKD came to an agreement with the West German government concerning pastoral care for the armed forces, East German government officials immediately severed the still existing links with the EKD and tried to break off all other relations between the East and West German churches by means of administrative measures. In 1957-1958 the East German government flatly refused to negotiate on problems arising from this situation, e.g. in the field of education. On the other hand, East German government officials were ready for discussions on other issues with representatives of the East German Protestant churches. A communiqué in the summer of 1958 said that Christians in the GDR readily fulfilled their duties as citizens according to their faith; that they respectfully agreed with the development of socialism and took an active part in the building of a peaceful community. In 1966 Walter Ulbricht, in a speech before the East German Volkskammer (Assembly), positively reappraised the 1958 communiqué. The end of the official atheist and anticlerical propaganda was marked by the statement "Christianity and the humanist ends of Socialism are by no means contrasting ideas." In this way Ulbricht not only tried to win Christians over to the GDR's socialist development but even asked them to assert it while repudiating the "West German NATO churches." On February 9, 1961, Ulbricht spoke with a delegation of "Christian personalities" led by Emil Fuchs, a professor of divinity from Leipzig, and asked again for cooperation. Again he declared both the humanistic and social aims of Christianity and socialism to be nearly the same, so that there would not be any space left for antagonism. In the so-called Wartburg talks on August 18, 1964 with Bishop Mitzenheim—the only leading church representative to agree with Ulbricht's new policy—Ulbricht insisted on a "common humanistic responsibility" of both Marxists and Christians. Taking the leading role of the Socialist Unity Party (SED) for granted, Ulbricht's idea of a "socialist citizens' community" (sozialistische Menschengemeinschaft) nevertheless became an important factor in the relationship between Marxists and Christians.

The churches, however, hesitated to accept Ulbricht's new policy,
primarily because it threatened the unity of the all-German EKD. Membership in the EKD was still formally supported and in the Fürstenwald Declaration of April 5, 1967, the delegates confirmed their determination to participate in the activities of the EKD.

However, when a new constitution of the GDR came into force in April 1968, the East German churches changed their attitude. The constitution's intention was to sever the Western links of the churches completely and set the pace for bilateral treaties with the East German state. A new organization called "Union of Protestant Churches in the GDR" came into life; its charter dates from June 10, 1969.

Article 39 of the new constitution marked the beginning of the third phase. It states that each citizen had a personal right to belong to any denomination and to practice any religious faith. The various religious groups were permitted to organize their activities freely in accordance with this constitution and additional government regulations. Special problems should be solved by agreed ruling. Freedom of conscience and religious liberty was guaranteed in Article 20. The state officially neither gave privileges to religious denominations nor put obstacles against their religious practice; the government remained inactive concerning religious matters. Yet it acknowledged religious activities of the churches, which was quite a different way of tackling the problem compared with the handling of religious matters in the USSR. While protecting religion, on the one hand, the constitution of the USSR explicitly allows the spread of atheist propaganda on the other. So atheists in the USSR can propagate their ideas freely whereas believers are merely tolerated. The constitution of the GDR lacks such a disproportionate view. The East German churches, on the contrary, are regarded as partners of the state in their own right, according to Article 39 mentioned above.

The East German government's policy clearly aimed at eliminating Protestantism as a driving force towards German unity. The Union of Protestant churches strengthened the coherence of Protestants within the GDR, although the state party surely did not intend to invigorate the organization of Protestant churches as such. 2

At first the SED did not seem to be interested very much in the new
situation. On February 24, 1971, delegates of the Union were invited by secretary Seigewater to exchange declarations with the GDR government. It meant official acknowledgement of the Union as a representative of the eight Protestant churches. Paul Verner, a member of the Politburo, had already pointed out in a speech on February 11, 1971, that the GDR would regard the churches as active partners in strengthening the state, in fostering peace and promoting a positive movement towards socialist society.

The East German Union of Churches felt verified in its intention to intensify activities in society lest it should be closed up in a ghetto of private affairs and private worship. The urgent search to find their own status in a socialist society is revealed by the following statement: "We do not want to be a church against or a church beside socialism, but a church within socialism."

At the same time the East German government signalled its new, accommodating policy by encouraging the construction and restoration of churches (which became part of government developing schemes) and by demonstrating official interest in the churches' work of charity. Article 39 led the way for both Protestants and Catholics to come to terms with the state in various fields, e.g. the approval of school exams and training courses in the medical professions. When Erich Honecker wanted to have the Berlin cathedral (Dom von Berlin) rebuilt—which the Protestants did not need for church service at that time—the Union agreed. The state guaranteed that the building, once restored, could be used exclusively by the church.

In Summer 1976 another important decision was made, allowing churches and community centers to be built in newly planned construction areas. It was a decision church authorities had kept striving for since the mid-1950s and this practice has been maintained to the present time.

In March 1978, Honecker officially invited the executive committee of the Union to meet for the first time. A communiqué of this meeting was published in the leading East German paper Neues Deutschland on March 7, 1978. Honecker substantially acknowledged the positive role of the churches in a socialist state, backing the freedom to develop their own way towards the "genuinely humanistic" ends of socialism. He emphasized the principle of equality all citizens of the East German state could
enjoy regardless of their personal views and religious feelings. The GDR as a socialist society would like to give its Christian citizens, too, a feeling of security and a prospect in life. He also declared that the churches should be treated with "a lot of understanding," and he even agreed with Bishop Schönherр's general assessment of the relationship between church and state: it was as good or as bad as the Christian citizens' daily personal experiences. At the same meeting a settlement of various open questions was reached, including the improvement of the parochial service in prisons. Most important of all, however, was the admission of a special church program on radio and television as a supplement to the customary broadcasting of a church service on Sundays.

3. Church Activities in the GDR.

Religious studies and many other church activities have been steadily obstructed, e.g. the courses for religious instruction for youngsters ('Christen-lehre'). The policy of the SED still openly aims at a general reduction of church influence with the young generation; socialist indoctrination in state schools and education centers has, of course, absolute priority.

Officially, religious instruction has never been abolished as such; the number of participants, however, is in steady decline. According to church officials the reason for this must be seen in the hostile climate in schools which creates a feeling of isolation on the part of Christian youth. Complaints lodged against religious discrimination generally have been accepted. The meeting with Honecker on March 6, 1978, was meant to remedy such abuses. However, it is felt that there will be no definite progress if concerned Christians lack the courage to assert their rights. "Voluntary tolerance" of the political community cannot be reckoned with.

The churches run more than one hundred training centers, e.g. for nursery school teachers or nurses going into church service. Church work among the younger generation is, to a certain extent, still regarded as attractive and worthwhile. With all Christians, regardless of age, church conventions (Kirchentag) are still popular. They are held each summer in a different part of the country and are regarded as great events which, on the other hand, could not be successful without the
assistance of the East German state.

In the GDR press the Protestants are represented by one news agency, five weeklies, and some confessional publishers who offer a wide range of publications. On Sundays a service is broadcast over the radio, which is often followed by a commentary dealing with religious problems. Since 1978 the state has allowed an additional 15-minute program to be broadcast once a month by the "Voice of the GDR," as well as five to six television broadcasts per month on the second channel—all of them prepared by the churches themselves.

The ecclesiastical works of charity are the main field of social action, a fact which is considered a unique privilege in a region dominated by strong Soviet influence, particularly as they can be fulfilled obviously without let or hindrance.

The ecumenical field must not be overlooked either. There are various ecumenical workshops and talks among the Catholic and Protestant clergy. The East German state even helped to strengthen international relations. The 'Union' is registered as a full member with the Geneva World Council of Churches and takes an active part in discussing the worldwide themes of Christendom. At the same time, bilateral relations have been improved with European churches in East and West alike. The relationship with the EKD of West Germany has come back to normal also. Official delegations visit synods in the Eastern and Western parts of Germany respectively.


Both the Protestant and Catholic churches impose taxes, but the payment by members is voluntary. The church taxes in East Germany amount to approximately 5% of the rates paid in West Germany. Statistics have not been published so far. Offerings and public collections held twice a year for church reconstruction and charity are also regarded as quite important. The state bears the costs of hospitals and homes run by the churches, but investments are completely at the church's own risk. However, the East German churches are lavishly supported by West German church organizations; there are even grants and subsidies given voluntarily by the East German government for the pay of the clergy. Church salaries are low as compared with West German standards, nor do
they compare well with salaries paid in the GDR in general.

Translated from German by
Dr. Diether Eibach
Bergisch-Gladbach, West Germany

APPENDIX

The Christian Church in a Socialist Society

A Lecture by Bishop Krusche from Magdeburg
Held in the Martinskirche of Basel, Switzerland.

Between the quotes the lecture summaries are by Wieland Zademach.

"The church in the context of a socialist society follows the same guidelines as churches in all other societies: it lives by telling people that this world is the creation of the Lord and that it is upheld by God's love against all odds. The Lord does not leave the world as it is; the Lord wants to win it back. The church tells us that the crucifixion and resurrection mean liberation of humanity from evil: a liberation which forces the world to undergo a decisive change leading to the realm of Shalom at the end--which is the essence of God's promises. The church will always be a church dominated by Jesus Christ, the Liberator. In different social structures, however, people look upon this basic fact from different angles, and this presentation will be dealing with the question of what the church in a socialist society really is like."

1. The Church in a Socialist Society Dominated by Jesus Christ Our Savior.

The realm of Jesus Christ remains a dominion of our crucified Lord, and His reign is service for others, rather than a build-up of strength and power—even after He had risen from the dead.

A. A church dominated by the crucified Lord is not doomed to accept the status of being powerless; it has been liberated to accept it voluntarily. Confrontation, argument on the level of a worldly power is not the business of a church which considers itself to be just a guardian, i.e. the church should not denounce people or society for misbehavior. Yet abstaining from conflict does not necessarily mean to
be evasive. "Even our atheist partner ought to get a feeling of the fact that he or she is a part of the realm of our merciful Lord. State officials know exactly the roots of our intentions when there is a talk with members of the church. This situation is characterized by the formula 'Church in Socialism.' Namely, in a negative way, the church does not fight socialism as a fifth column of the West nor does it play the part of an otherwise non-existent opposition. We are not developing our own alternative against socialism. 'Church in Socialism' is a search for finding our own position within a socialist society. We are not wavering between East and West, since we belong to the people of the GDR with all their joys and sorrows, their stories of success and defeat, and stand by their side. We want to form this society, too, so that the people learn to like it. But the main point is, of course, that the church wants the people to realize that they need not live without Christ our Savior. That is the reason why we decided once and for all to abide by the people who stay in the GDR or who must stay in the GDR. We do not discuss the word 'emigration'; we do not look furtively for a loophole. If you are preaching the gospel, you should thoroughly live the life of your own people—even the thought of emigrating ought to be ruled out forever."6

"Church in Socialism," however, is not only a search for finding one's own position, but also a clearly defined program. The church wants to invite the people and help them to be agents of God's love in society. Following the scriptures, the church does not want any worldly power. This powerlessness, on the other hand, is a major reason for the undeniable fact that the church is a church of inspiring confidence. "In short, our 'Church in Socialism' could be described as a test period which God wants us to undergo in the socialist world. We were given clear instructions and are on probation. We think that not only Christians are living in the realm of our Savior but society as a whole. The result is freedom from fear and an amazing amount of liberty. We are free to go on the narrow path between opposition and opportunism, between revolt and conformity, between a sweeping Yes or No and the abuses of human bondage. We are living a critical solidarity while taking full responsibility in society. We want to be a church in socialism, yet we intend to remain a church in socialism—an important
factor in life which is not easily passed by."

B. The church labors hard to find its way. "We are a church in a socialist society, that's true, but there is no tendency of amalgamation of the Marxist citizen on the one hand and the Christian on the other. In socialist theory the church is looked upon as a dying relic of capitalism. The Christian faith is regarded as a wrong and pre-scientific consciousness; there can be no co-existence in the field of ideology. How does this situation work out in daily life then? Is there a state of undeclared war? On the other hand, if you try to cooperate with your opponent, is it more than just a matter of being polite? In fact, there are many reasons to look out for a spirit of true understanding on either side.

1) There is a difference between socialism in real life and the official dogma. Ideologically, socialism explains society in a historical and social context; it is a strategy in the field of economy and politics which aims at ethical and humanistic values and therefore is regarded as a very important factor in social life. But there are many others, too. New developments in society and politics influence ideology, of course. Once you have been educated in historical criticism, you must come to look at even Marxism-Leninism as caused by historical situations which undergo radical changes. And if you are used to thinking in terms of eschatology you will never believe in the stability of human affairs, either.

2) If you think of Marxism-Leninism as a counter-religion, you might fail to notice that in the first place it wants to be a theory of social action (though it is true that we, too, often thought of Marxism-Leninism to be a messianic doctrine, a prophetic religion dressed up as a social and economic policy). Its economical, sociological and political ideas can be discussed even by people who disagree with its atheist criticism of religion and its materialistic outlook in philosophy and history.

3) Christians would falsify the relationship between Christian faith and Marxist philosophy if they began to build up something like an anti-ideology, e.g. an anti-communist Christian socialism. Christian faith is embedded in the trust in Jesus Christ who cannot be integrated
into a political system or abused as an illuminated advertising."\(^8\) The church is critical about Marxism-Leninism just because cooperation, not delimitation, is envisioned. "Being responsible for the world and its future we have no need for alternatives. We must endeavor to find means of cooperation wherever possible. For the time being the unifying bond is the survival of humanity. Ideological differences count less once you have found practical solutions for common problems. We do not want to find an original solution to those problems with capitalism on our right hand side and socialism on our left. We try to follow our Savior in socialism and our problem is how to be steadily aware of our task here: Can we help the people in socialism to live under God? Is more engagement necessary in certain fields? Do we have to refuse cooperation or object to certain developments at times? Examples: We welcome the definite support of families by our government, but we do not overlook (and publicly denounce) exaggerations in the educational field, especially the amount of intolerance we have to put up with. Since social rights affairs are of great importance in the GDR, the church must take special notice of where and when individual rights should be improved and people suffer from society. Temporary hardship of the individual citizen is a reason to take remedial action by bringing in state officials."\(^9\)

C. "The church also is freed to await hopefully the coming splendor of the reign of our Lord. We can only think of the future world as a world under God. The realm of our Lord does not come from history. It will certainly invade history to change it completely towards the forthcoming shalom. God is active in history: quite naturally we look upon socialism very differently than do followers of Marxism-Leninism. We think socialism to be an open system in world history which is subject to God's intentions. Since we can afford to judge socialism in this way we have no need for false alternatives. We are not afraid even of its eschatological pathos. What we know is the simple fact that we cannot create our own world: therefore we must go to work in a down-to-earth manner and help the people to promote society amidst the prevailing humane ideas of socialism. On the other hand, however, we are equally aware of many future disappointments which are inevitable in
human affairs, because we know of the difference between the realm of
God and an expected society without prejudice and classes. We simply do
not make the mistake to think the penultimate as final."10

2. The Duty of a Church Following Jesus Christ the Liberator.

A. The duty of a church following Jesus Christ the Liberator is
ready to convey the Gospel of God's mercy upon humanity to all who want
to hear it. At the present time apologetics stay in the background in
favor of the development of spiritual welfare which is regarded as a
real support of the people fighting their day-to-day problems. The way
to do it is simply to tell the people of one's own experiences in life.

"We once again learned to appreciate the spirit of freedom which
emanates from St. Paul's doctrine of justification. In a society
characterized by sharp efficiency measurements there is a tendency to
value a person's work mainly by his or her actual performance. If you
know about the Christian spirit of freedom you learn to accept your life
as a child of God who takes full responsibility for it. Your individual
performance is not rendered useless, but efficiency is no longer an end
in itself. A Christian is a lot more than merely the equivalent of his
or her work done. He or she is even more than he or she can accomplish
in his or her life. The consequences for the disabled, for the weak, for
the sick and unsuccessful are quite obvious. But the church, too, lives
in this spirit of freedom. A church built upon the doctrine of
justification can be critical about its own history and need not react
nervously against Marxist attacks on religion. The problem of the
identity of a church is no longer important; you can even take it--as
exemplified by St. Paul himself--for something else (I Cor. 9:22). The
church feels strong to stand hand-to-hand combat. There is no use any
more to watch carefully your vest lest it be stained with white or
violet bobs or even red ones! This church living on justification can
afford to make mistakes and is not afraid of stumbling. It is free for
innovation without any constraint to be successful by all means."11

B. Summary:

"We are not a church which is persecuted. We are a church whose freedom
of action has been restricted as compared with earlier times or other
churches. But in spite of this restriction we still are at pains to fill up the remaining fields of action with useful work. We are a church doomed to die, according to Marxist doctrine, and there is no sign whatsoever of the slowdown of this process. Yet our Marxist partners seem to accept the fact that the church still will exist for some time at least, and apparently the spirit of useful cooperation is increasing on their part. There will be tensions, of course, because freedom of conscience as well as religious freedom are constitutional rights, whereas the policy of imposing a socialist weltanschauung on all citizens seems to be incompatible with religious freedom. We know that smooth solutions to this problem are hardly possible, but perhaps we shall come to enduring agreements in the future. We can well believe in Him. What we need, He will give us: candor, confidence, the spirit of love and of hope, and a spiritual community with our brothers and sisters abroad. It is an experience which gives us strength again and again."

Translated from German by Dr. Diether Eibach Bergisch-Gladbach, West Germany

NOTES

1 The details in this section were taken from DDR-Handbuch. 2 edition (Cologne: Ministry for Inter-German Relationships, 1979). The article about the churches was written by R. Henkys.

2 Ibid., p. 592.

3 Ibid., p. 595.

4 Published in Kirche im Sozialismus, Berlin 2, 1978, pp. 21-32.

5 Ibid., p. 22.

6 Ibid., p. 23.

7 Ibid., p. 24.
8 Ibid., p. 25
9 Ibid., pp. 26f.
10 Ibid., p. 28.
11 Ibid., pp. 29f.
12 Ibid., p. 32.