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THeses ON THE ROLE OF THE CHURCH IN THE GDR

by Peter Wensierski

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The following ten theses were developed at the 14th Convention of GDR scholars at the European Academy in Lerbach (West Germany) in June, 1981. At this annual meeting of over 100 scholars from various scholarly institutes in West Germany and West Berlin, an attempt was undertaken to provide a balance sheet of 35 years of SED¹ (the single political party in East Germany) policies. For the first time, church policies of the SED were also discussed.

I. The Protestant churches in the GDR continue to be a factor which the SED must take into consideration despite the secularization of GDR society. This fact remains true despite the fact that the original number of tax-paying church members has been reduced by 50%, to a present figure of 7 million. The actual number of active Christians is considerably smaller. Compared to nearly all other Eastern European countries, the weight of the churches in the GDR has become relatively small.

¹Sozialistische Einsheits Partei (Socialist Unity Party).
The percentage of believers among the GDR population has been estimated at 20%, but only about 10% are believers among the youth. In addition, the numbers of new members through baptism, confirmations and church marriages have stagnated.

The power of the church, then, is not one of quantity, but rather of quality. One simple, important fact is that the church is the single remaining organization in the GDR that has retained its autonomy within the fact of the monopolistic power of the SED. This fact produces a special role for the church in the GDR which the church in the FRG (West Germany), imbedded in a nation with a myriad of other autonomous social groups, does not or cannot have.

This independence bases itself on the increasing historical importance of an organization with an ideological orientation which the SED cannot ignore. The GDR is the only socialist country in which the majority of believers are Protestant. However, the churches in the GDR are not considered social organizations, but merely "social quantities," although in political practice the church has formally received social importance and consequence and is considered "an independent social power." This recognition has evidently established itself beneath the official ideological level in an active political form.

The social role and participation of the Protestant churches is rather traditional but it still varies greatly (Reformed, Lutheran, United) among the East German states. Bishop Schönherr at the East German synod of 1981 stated that "The church is not an integrated social organization under the leadership of the working class, but must make its way independently."

The extensive autonomy of the church has historically always been threatened by the SED. On the one hand, the government presents the strict division of church and state as historically the most progressive solution, yet the GDR media continually attempt to show considerable identity and agreement between church and state in matters of politics (especially the peace movement), while also omitting critical statements by the church (e.g. concerning GDR militarism). Discussions between government officials and church leaders (and exclusively with leaders) behind closed doors are referred to as "constructive and full of trust.
and confidence." Behind the attempt to establish a cooperative relationship with the church hides the wish to have a politically dependable church and to solve problems internally without any public criticism. The SED attempts--with varying degrees of success--to either help in or expand the church's latitude, according to expediency. Hence, there is always an area of conflict.

II. The question as to the future and stability of the relationship between state and church in the GDR may be answered by taking into consideration the ideological and political/pragmatic motivation of these policies. Has the SED learned only from Marxism or is the political leadership trying other tactics for political and pragmatic reasons?

Bishop Schönheir has repeatedly spoken of a "learning process on both sides." The formation of the National Luther Committee has certainly shown a changing attitude by the state toward religion. Schönheir believes that the state no longer fights religion as "erroneous consciousness" and therefore tries to further its demise, but rather they now attempt to understand the origin of human need of religion and recognize that religion will accompany socialism in its long historical process until the establishment of "mature communism." Atheistic propaganda will no longer be the main means of overcoming religion, but rather the gradual dissolution of its economic, social, and political causes.

In a report by the East German religion critic, Olof Klohr, in the fall of 1980, the conditions for a constructive living together of church and state are justified, less ideologically and more politically, and pragmatically. The suppositions are not only new religious insights, but primarily:

--the successful and stable development of socialism at all levels of society;
--the increasing positive experiences and insights of the majority of believers and clergy concerning the peace-loving and just concerns of socialism, plus religious freedom in the GDR and the misanthropic nature of imperialism; and
--the influences of changed balance of power in the revolutionary world process.
Klohr, however, described exactly those factors which determine the present relationship between church and state. It must be assumed that the confrontation with the actual material situation of the GDR society forced the SED to correct its former political positions, instead of continuing its deep permeation of reality by Marxism.

III. The SED basically failed politically with its policy of opposing the churches in the '50s and '60s. On the other hand, the question of power has been conclusively solved, which enables the government to maintain a more relaxed policy towards the church. It is clear that the church cannot give up its Christian beliefs, and that the SED will not abandon Marxism/Leninism. The state fluctuates between restrictions (i.e., censoring the church press, or preventing Western journalists from attending GDR synods and church meetings) and relaxation, even permitting the building of new churches and parish centers in areas of new construction. The SED seems to regard the special role of Protestantism as an historical experiment, which is for both parties a chance and a risk. The cooperation of state and church is for "the good of the individual and society." The test of the compromise situation will take place primarily at the local level, and whether the "learning process" takes place only by the church (and not by the state).

IV. The independence of the East German churches from those of West Germany, namely the founding of the GDR Church Federation, while separating from the West German EKD, was a prerequisite for relaxation between church and state in the '70s. Church policy has always been closely associated with the overall Germany policy (Deutschlandpolitik) of the SED. The background for the easing of domestic tensions was the "Ostpolitik" of the West German SDP under Willy Brandt in the late '60s. The SED was in favor of the recent consultations between the GDR Church Federation and EKD [Evangelical Church of Germany] concerning questions of peace, as long as they corresponded to their own policies and took place on the basis of two independent partners. During the Afghanistan crisis the church even sought to raise the consciousness of the population (within strict boundaries, of course) as well as served as
mediator in conversations between Bonn and East Berlin.

As long as such activity is directed against Western measures (NATO rocket decisions) it is encouraged; should the church carefully criticize the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan, however, then the church press is censored (fall of 1980). The overall political situation dictates the scope of inner-German activities. What was possible before the strikes in Poland in the spring of 1980 was no longer allowed in the autumn, for example.

In addition, one must consider the internal contradictions within the SED. On the one hand, those in favor of the SPD [West German Social Democratic Party] policies of easing of tensions and, on the other hand, the majority who are for the orthodox-conservative policies which are oriented more towards Soviet interests than towards national ones.

V. The secularization of the GDR is a problem for the SED as well as for the church, which explains a special role of the church for the SED which was impossible during the earlier years of the republic. The main attraction of actual socialism became the federal social policies which guarantee the individual "security and safety." Within this framework the mass of the population pursue their private interests, while also satisfying minimal political duties. Marxism/Leninism, socialist morale, ethics, and ideology touch merely a minority.

But economic integration alone is not enough to satisfy any population. The GDR press reports an "ideological deficit." This problem exists in all modern industrial societies which in the West may be called "loss of values." West and East share many of the same problems: destruction of social relationships, dissatisfaction among the youth, rising criminality, drug misuse, alcoholism, nervous disorders, etc.

The SED cannot be satisfied with its social status quo. It is required to encourage political idealism and attempts this in many ways--hence, a new interest in the church. A minority of active Christians is interested in the social/missionary area (youth work, aid for drug addicts, etc.), but also in humanistic, peace, and general social affairs. These people represent a more important potential for the SED than the masses pursuing their private interests. While many SED
comrades as well as many in the church are unwilling to try new methods together, there have already been numerous forms of cooperation (limited to the local level), i.e., work with problem youngsters and drug addicts, plus cultural work.

A special source of disturbance is the nearby presence of the Western public; this fact is frequently used by the SED to make certain problem areas taboo. As long as reading the Western press is taboo and consequently public discussion of important social problems is suppressed, it will remain a problem—a "homemade" one. One overlooks the fact that the Western publication does not hurt, but is merely used as an excuse for state restriction; the cause is to be found in the political culture of the GDR. On the other hand, problems in the GDR are sometimes used by the Western press or FRG politicians to heat up the political debate, or to "polish up the picture of the enemy."

VI. The separation of church and state in the GDR has been fully accomplished. The church enjoys some privileges (access to media, Western travel, etc.) and suffers a lack of the same, where Christians are at a disadvantage in the educational sector. The SED seeks to "build bridges" to the church in an attempt to create connections and therefore dependence of the church to the state—for example, in respect to finances. This attempt is, however, being retarded by fears inside the church.

VII. Despite the areas of conflict and the narrow confines of the church, the expectations on the church exceed its capacity to fulfill them. In nearly all areas workers are lacking. Parish work goes undone for want of pastors. Not until the 1990s will enough new pastors be trained. The state is careful to control the expansion of church influence, thus creating a permanent area of conflict.

VII. The Protestant Church in the GDR seeks no further constitutional privileges. It attempts to utilize and expand the existing latitude for societal participation without abandoning its Christian identity. This is also a source of conflict within both state and church. Examples:
work for peace, i.e. introduction of alternative service instead of military, environment, youth work, function of the synod as (very limited) forum for public opinion in GDR, reaction to state propaganda, abortion, thoughts concerning achievement/consuming oriented society, increased foreign aid, the role of a Christian on the job, cooperation in parent organizations at school, etc.

Individual criticism is practiced, but criticism of general GDR policies does not exist. The church in the GDR does not represent the total social spectrum as in the FRG, for no church member may become a member of the SED. In addition, the free passage of information (the basis for public criticism) is missing. Church members also criticize the lack of punctual information concerning conversations between church and state officials. The flow of information functions from top to bottom, not from bottom to top.

IX. The church in the GDR is neither a tool of the state nor a receptacle for opposition in society. Both tendencies exist simultaneously, in a permanently varying relationship. The church does not join socialistic opposition groups, but argues for the right of free expression and offers oppressed voices (songwriters, authors) the opportunity to articulate themselves.

X. The social basis of the Protestant Church lies in the former bourgeoisie, the middle class, educational circles, and some farmers. There are very few connections to the working class, which explains the limited role the church can play in the GDR (compared to the Catholic Church in Poland, for example).

The church in the GDR must succeed in developing her own theological identity to support her social engagement. Perhaps a GDR-oriented, emancipatory theology could develop considerably more explosive power than is presently the case. In view of the GDR as a highly developed industrial society, the church must not only decide how to further develop contacts with the working class but also how to respond to new social movements: ecology, youth, peace, women, and the Third World.
Recently there have been examples that the church is seeking to discuss or even play in intensive role in the peace and ecology issues. It is conceivable that the church could become a resource for the SED for a new ecological humanism.

The SED remains silent on these questions. The social relevance and the astoundingly complete autonomy that the Protestant Church enjoys in the GDR can only be maintained if she continues to wrestle with current challenges, does not shy away from either domestic or foreign conflicts, and calmly goes her own, narrow way.

Translated by
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