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CHRISTIAN-MARXIST COOPERATION IN THE GERMAN
DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC SINCE 1945*

by Helmut Fritzscbe

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1. Introduction

At the outset a summary is provided emphasizing the main tendency of current Christian-Marxist cooperation. The cultural situation, and particularly the religious life situation in the socialist world today, differs from country to country.

The unique situation in the German Democratic Republic is an encounter of Marxism and Protestantism. Protestantism is characterized by two features. First, it is the only religion in the world which has gone through a thoroughgoing Enlightenment. Philosophers like Kant and Hegel are nearly as authoritative as Jesus and Paul. Religious fundamentalism is practically overcome. In dealing with moral questions, Protestants take into consideration the philosophical and scientific views as well as biblical sources.

Second, Protestantism has a strong tradition of social and political engagement of all its members. According to different traditions in the Lutheran and the Reformed Protestant churches the latter shift was particularly active in fostering social advancement. Lutheran Protestantism tended toward a more conservative posture. The Federation of Evangelical Churches in the GDR founded in 1969 unites both these traditions of Protestantism. Due to these two features Marxism and Christianity could not meet in East Germany in a mentality of

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mutual indifference. It would be either confrontation or cooperation—*tertium non datur*.

In the forty-two years since World War II the encounter of Marxism and Christianity has developed from a relationship marked by mutual misunderstandings, false diagnoses, and mistrust to a more and more trusting cooperation based upon a realistic evaluation and reciprocal respect. The cooperation developed from very few instances in the field of charity (for example, care for the sick) to the current levels of widespread cooperation in many areas of public life. Today cooperation and dialogue are focused upon the fact that the socialist society is an imperfect one marked by many tensions and contradictions and that to develop it, it requires the efforts of all people with their different world views interacting in a mutual openness.

The development of this cooperation will be the main focus here. Special attention is given to the changes and advances which are happening today brought about by tendencies which were at work during the past couple of years. Without any pretensions to completeness my explanations are dealing with selected aspects which are of special interest for the situation in the GDR.

2. The Historical Background of Christian-Marxist Cooperation

Cooperation of Marxists and Christians is an outcome neither of academic teaching nor of philosophical reflections. It is the result of about fifty years of experiences.

There are the awful memories of fascism. My former professor mentor Heinrich Vogel, a close friend of Karl Barth, Heinrich Grueber, and Martin Niemöller, was jailed during the Nazi era. I learned a lot from his experiences of community with communists in the Nazi concentration camps. We went through World War II and the bombings. The threat of a nuclear war extends deep-rooted anxieties of all the peoples in Europe.

Christians and Marxists shared together the time of the Stalinist personality cult with its violations of human rights but also the advances of the socialist society. Now we are looking ahead to a social and personal life which brings forth more and more the potentialities of socialism.

Such experiences have created a feeling and a practice of togetherness now strong enough to survive tensions which are unavoidable in an openminded cooperation between such two different movements like Marxism and Christianity. The current advances in cooperation of Christians and Marxists are, particularly in the GDR and Hungary, more and more accompanied by a dialogue which includes aspects of the different world views. It is a symptom of a more trusting cooperation too.
3. **Four Ground Rules for Christian-Marxist Cooperation**

The cooperation is based upon four ground rules agreed by both sides:

**First:** Any attempt to mix up Marxism and Christianity is counterproductive and emphatically rejected. Marxism is a method to interpret social and political developments, and, furthermore, it is a theory of social advancement. On the other hand, Christianity is a special religious world view with a strong ethical concern. Christianity is not to be used as an instruction for how to organize a society. All kinds of Christian fundamentalisms, like Thomas Müntzer's idea of a Christian society ruled by the influence of the Holy Spirit, have been refused. Christianity is not tied to a specific social system, neither feudalism, nor capitalism, nor socialism. Cooperation between Christianity and social systems depends upon the developments and challenges of the concrete historical situations.

**Second:** Christian-Marxist cooperation is consciously based upon common concerns. Efforts to ban the threats of a nuclear war and advances toward a more just society based on social and individual human rights are the most important items. The combination of both these aspects is the main point according to the principle that peace and justice are inseparable components of a sustainable world.

**Third:** Both sides, Christian theology, namely the churches, and Marxist materialism, are willing to learn from each other. There are items in both world views which can stimulate the other side to acknowledge blind spots and wrong assessments in their own approach to human and social problems.

**Fourth:** Cooperation and dialogue are for the benefit of both sides. Any attempts to gain superiority by cooperation and dialogue is counter-productive.

4. **Secularization and the Early Attitude of the Churches**

According to Lutheran World Information (January 1987) of the seventeen million people in the GDR nearly 6,800,000 are official members of the Evangelical Churches. About 8 percent belong to the Roman Catholic Church. With about fifty percent of the population officially members in a Christian Church, the GDR scarcely differs from other European states in the West or in the East.

The number of people who are really attending church services and actively working in the church is only about 10 percent, and in some areas of the country only about 5 percent. Furthermore, in smaller settled areas there are few church buildings and many small villages are without a Christian congregation.

This development, namely, the change from being a majority to being a minority of the population, happened nearly everywhere after
World War II. In the GDR and the other socialist countries--except Poland--this "secularization" moved faster than in Western Europe. The influence of atheist education, and the strictly observed separation between state and church, accelerated the decline of religion which is also taking place in many developed countries in the world.

During the first two or three decades after World War II church life in the GDR was often characterized by a mood of complaining about losing the privileges of a state religion. The effects of the period of personality cult (Stalinism) added further burdens. Many pastors and lay people did not discern the impact of secularization and of establishment of socialism as it affected, each in its own way, the decline of church membership. Viewing the advance of socialism they mostly felt uneasy regarding the future of church and religion in the East.

5. The Current Situation

The turning point in the history of the Evangelical Church in the GDR came in the late 1970s. Official arrangements between the Federation of Evangelical Churches in the GDR and state officials in March 1978 provided, for example, access of the church to television and other spheres of public and, especially, cultural life. But more important than these new opportunities was the fact that the post-World War II generation of Christians and pastors began to accept the minority status as well as the separation of state and church experiencing it as being free from the burden of the former state religion, and as being a social base for independent social engagement.

The current standing of religion and churches in the GDR does not continue the former Lutheran loyalty to state, the "religious right," namely a state religion which always sanctifies the state and its representatives as the former alliance of "Throne and Altar" did.

The "religious left" which uncritically supports the ruling segment of socialist society with biblical ideals is likewise not to be seen as an adequate symbol for the church's current standing in our society. What is going on since the late 1970s is a coming out with a very new independent engagement to the benefit of human individuals and social advancement of the socialist society.

The new situation includes both the support and the criticism of the moral, economic, and political reality. Tensions between the Christian approaches to social issues and Marxist ones are unavoidable. But since the official arrangements between church and state in 1978 mentioned above the tensions never reached the level of serious confrontations like in the early 1950s. Here we see an example of the improving conflict resolution ability of public life in the GDR.
6. Recent Religious Renewal

Since the early 1980s a relatively significant religious renewal is taking place. People, mostly young people without religious background in their families, come to the church not in order to become members but as independent co-workers. It is a phenomenon which burdens churches and parishes with some difficulties. Nevertheless it is a social reality.

Western observers sometimes interpret this phenomenon of a new religious interest or involvement as being an effect of the "religious wave" coming from America and going through Western Europe in the 1970s. I do not think so. There are scarcely any religious fundamentalists in these groups gathering around the traditional churches in the GDR. Furthermore, the mystic or meditative attitudes which were relatively strong in the western religious renewals are very marginal aspects in the GDR.

My thesis is that these religious renewals are indigenous to socialist countries primarily caused and moved by homemade factors. The new cultural openness in the society, the yearning of many young people for a transcendent answer to the question of the meaning of life and particularly a new attractiveness of the church and Christian engagement in improving social achievements are the most convincing explanations of the phenomenon of religious renewal today. The new attractiveness of the church in the GDR is to a large extent an outcome of its ability and readiness to learn from the Marxist criticism of religion.

In any case, religion and churches in the GDR changed from a rather marginal phenomenon in the very beginnings of the socialist society to a serious factor in public life today. This tendency is based on a number of objective factors. It is too early for a long term assessment but in any case, it is a significant fact. Of course, the number of members can never be the only indicator of the social importance of the church. The real influence of the church in the GDR today is neither due to the 40 percent official members nor the 5 to 10 percent active workers in the parishes. The important factor is the sympathizers around the congregations, which is not easily measured.

7. Rethinking of the Relationship of the Church and Politics

A result of Christianity's encounter with the Marxist criticism of religion is a deeper rethinking of the relationship of church and politics. Theology as a critical instrument in bringing forth the compelling Christian message has to reflect upon the social role of the guiding God concept and other theological issues like salvation, sin, and Christian ethics. Karl Marx unveiled the static role of
religious individualism and otherworldly orientation in the bourgeois society. Marx also explained that religion in his time, consciously but mostly unconsciously, masked social injustice, social tensions, and helplessness in the interpretation of socio-political developments, especially economic crises.

Any church or theology which today consciously or unconsciously masks or sanctifies social tensions, injustice, or avoidable suffering is to be criticized as Marx did. That is also valid for the church and theology in socialism. Here we see the crucial point of rethinking in theology and church life caused by the encounter with Marxist thought. Theology must be rooted in the economic-political dimensions of reality of the respective society. The church must point out contradictions in socialist society.

The church did so in the synods held in the 1980s. Their request for more openness in the government's information policies, for more public discussions of bureaucracy and violations of rights, and for more personal exchanges between individuals from the East and the West, are examples for compelling theological engagement.

The main point for us is that the socialist society is an imperfect one. It is on the one hand characterized by the fact that the basic needs of everybody are met. Practically everybody is enabled by education and social structures to meet his or her basic needs. But on the other hand the socialist society does not provide a dreamlike, carefree life to him or her. The lives of individuals as well as the social life are marked by many contradictions or tensions. The contradictions between the ideal and the reality of equality, or between the income of self-employed and the workers in the state enterprises, the educational changes in small villages and big cities, are some of the tensions which are very controversial today.

A church-based ethics which overlooks these tensions is either irrelevant or consciously or unconsciously a support of social stagnation, a veiling of reality. By facing the issues squarely the church has gained a new social standing in the socialist society of the GDR. That is what is meant by saying that Christian theology learned from the Marxist criticism of religion.

8. New Marxist Approaches to Religion

A result of Marxism's encounter with Christianity and other world religions today is its more realistic, tolerant, and cooperative approach to the world of religions.

In his "Towards a Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right" Marx criticized religion as "the sign of the oppressed creature, the sentiment of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions." One can hardly contest that Marx pointed out a very essential feature of
the face of religion of his own time seen in the aspect of its social function.

This negative aspect of religion is valid in our age, too. One of the most negative and dangerous aspects of religion today is its current irrationalism. Both the religious right in its praising of nationalistic myths and the religious left in its attempts to apply the prophetic perspectives of the Bible uncritically to present-day political reality are the kind of irrationalism which needs to be criticized today like Marx did in his time. Nor has Marxist criticism of religion lost its justification with regard to many abuses of religion in veiling and sanctifying social injustice and racism in many parts of the world.

Criticism of religion dominates the literature of Marxist classical authors. Today another positive aspect--already seen by Marx and Engels--becomes more and more important, namely, religion is valued as a subjective factor able to stimulate a sense of responsibility in individuals.

The Luther-jubilee 1983 in the GDR was a breakthrough of this new evaluation of religion. Even earlier Luther had been acknowledged as a forerunner of the bourgeois revolution, its elevating the role of the individuals, their need of personal freedom, and the importance of individual consciousness. A new approach to Luther emerged in 1983, regarding him now as a theologian, as a religious thinker, who was stimulated and moved by his religious belief. His Christianity was the reason for his consciousness, of his awareness of responsibility in all fields of church and society.

Like Luther, religious people should be working today as humans with a high level of awareness of responsibility rooted in their belief. This is the new Marxist evaluation of religion.

Additional steps were made the following years. Aspects of Prussian culture and the Enlightenment idea of tolerance are now firm components of the GDR culture.

Thus cooperation of Christians and Marxists is not only a social practice but is backed by a new philosophical understanding of religion in its ambivalence and its role in human history.

9. The Guestrow Colloquies

An example of Christian Marxist cooperation which includes philosophical and ideological aspects is the convening of the "Guestrow Colloquies." Sponsored by the Wilhelm Pieck Universitaet in Rostock and arranged by the Faculty of Theology, regular dialogue conferences were held every other year. About 50 to 70 semi-official Marxist philosophers, scientists, and theologians from the universities and church seminaries met for three days.
The "First Guestrow Colloquy" was held in 1981 with the topic of the moral implications of evolution. The question under discussion was not religious objection to Darwinism. In contrast to American Protestantism anti-Darwinism did not emerge in German Protestantism. In this colloquy Christian theologians agreed with Marxist materialism: the human being is the result and subject of evolution and therefore now responsible for its continuation, particularly in overcoming the gruesome biological laws, for example, the selection of the fittest in the struggle for survival.

We disagreed in regard to the evaluation of Christian ethics especially in respect to its realistic view of the self-destructive forces coming from within individuals as well as the high regard of Christians for religious symbols promoting a conscientious individual lifestyle.

The second colloquy in 1983 was about "Consequences of Behavior Research" and dealt with questions raised in Europe by Konrad Lorenz and in the USA by O. E. Wilson. The tensions between the biological heritage and the cultural challenges particularly in education were the points in which agreements and differences were discussed. We agreed with Marxism that civilization and modern high technology have not ended; on the contrary. But on the other hand, we need to pay more attention to the biological predetermined natural talents and abilities, and the biological needs of individuality. In this regard the current practices in education and lifestyle were criticized by both sides. The Christian proprietor was stressed in maintaining special aspects of individuality.

A third colloquy in 1985 dealt with moral and psychological aspects of personality. The latest colloquy was held in January 1987 about actual aspects of medical ethics. The moral responsibility regarding genetic engineering was one aspect. Another dealt with the questions of death and dying. We agreed with the Marxist view that the care for the dying needs to be improved but disagreed in the interpretation of death.

10. "The Conferences of Systematic Theologians of the Socialist Countries of East Europe" with Marxist Theoreticians

Parallel to the Guestrow Colloquies, an international Christian-Marxist dialogue program of theologians and Marxist philosophers from Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and GDR was started in 1984. The essential target of this institution is the expansion of Christian-Marxist cooperation in the field of theory and philosophy.

The "Conference of Systematic Theologians of the Socialist Countries" was organized by its three co-chairmen, namely Professor Helmut
Fritzsche (East Germany), Professor Elemér Kocsis (Hungary), and Professor Josef Smolik (Czechoslovakia).

The first meeting was held in Debrecen, Hungary, on the theme, "Experiences and Outlook of the Christian-Marxist Dialogue." The Marxist philosophers István Konya, József Poór, and József Lukács spoke about the Marxist affirmation of the dialogue situation today, particularly in the socialist world. Theological papers were presented by the chairman of the conference, Professor Elemér Kocsis, and among others, by Professors Pröhle (Hungary), Smolik, and Fritzsche.

The second conference also took place in Debrecen in 1985. Among the participants in the meeting were the Marxist professors, Tamás Földesi and E. Aucerl (Hungary) and Hans Lutter (East Germany). The subject of this conference was "Moral Implications for Humanity."\(^{11}\)

The third conference was held in 1986 in Guestrów, East Germany, in the "Haus der Kirche" church conference center. This meeting was organized by the Faculty of Theology of the Wilhelm-Pieck University in Rostow. Conference chairman was Professor Fritzsche. Thirty-five theological professors, assistants, and students from Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and East Germany, met with fourteen Marxist philosophers from Hungary, and particularly from East Germany. The theme of this conference was "The Meaning of Life and Labor."\(^{12}\)


The following kinds of peace groups are active in the GDR today:

- The state sponsored "Peace Council of the GDR." Non-Christians and Christians are working together in various meetings, conferences, and publications.

- The Prague Christian Peace Conference movement, founded in the late 1950s. It unites many Christian denominations in East Europe but also many Christians in the West and the Third World. This movement arranges world conferences, regional conferences, and publications.

- The peace work sponsored by the Federation of Evangelical Churches in the GDR. Members of the church and co-workers who are not members of it work together in groups gathered in the congregations and special committees.

- The so-called "independent" peace groups, meaning independent from both state and church. In them Christians and non-Christians work together in very small groups. I estimate their membership to be about two hundred persons. They are aiming for political goals which are mostly in opposition to the principles of official policies of the GDR. For example, some of these groups pleaded for neutralization of both German states and for a total renunciation of nuclear energy.
Here are a few examples of the work of the peace groups and peace activities sponsored by the Federation of Evangelical Churches in the GDR. Three activities are of outstanding interest:

First, the "Swords to Plowshares movement" in the early 1980s was a very spontaneous movement which surprised both church and state authorities. Young people gathered and demonstrated in churches, schools, and other places for a world without military deterrence. Peace church services brought together thousands of young people, members and non-members of the churches. They opposed the planned deployment of the cruise missiles and Pershing II in the West but also the SS-20 missiles in the GDR and other Warsaw Pact countries.

The "Swords to Plowshares movement" was a broad one with many different groups mostly motivated by emotional rather than rational concepts. In those years, the churches were rather unprepared for a discussion about the real problems of ending the arms race and the deployment of new missiles. In the very beginnings of this movement there were fears of returning to a state-church confrontation like in the 1960s and mistakes were made on both sides. Now the church-sponsored peace work is characterized by a high level of information and a real discussion with various political specialists.

Second, the Federation of Evangelical Churches in the GDR composed a study, often cited in both East and West, about "peace education." Its fundamental thesis was the statement, "peace is more than absence of armed conflicts." What has to happen is a trustful togetherness of all people based upon justice, a competition between the social systems for the benefits of both sides and furthermore efforts to peace education which overcomes the friend-enemy dichotomy as early as kindergarten and school.

The peace education study also offers support for young men in the GDR who serve as "Bausoldaten." It is a legal way of non-weapon carrying service for conscientious objectors.

Third, the basis for all church-sponsored discussions and peace work is a statement of the Synod of the Federation of Evangelical Churches in the GDR from 1982, which is the "refusal to the attitude, logic, and practice of deterrence." The main goal of this declaration is overcoming the political, social, and psychological conditions in which military deterrence seems to be necessary today.

Going along with the 1975 Helsinki declaration, the church statement claims to do "new thinking" which is grounded in "confidence" and the political concept of "common security."

On the basis of this church paper a broad discussion and opinion-making process started in the churches and gave contents to the Soviet moratorium of underground testing of nuclear weapons and Gorbachev's initiative to ban nuclear weapons by the end of this century.
12. Outlook

What has happened the last few years? What is going on now? What I proposed to do in this short paper was to explore some aspects of advantages and changes in the socialist world today. Cooperation and dialogue between Marxists and Christians based on a fair and mutually respected partnership agreement and aiming to the advancement of socialism is one aspect of openness which is going on for the last couple of years. What may be the future and the outcome of these beginnings?

The German Democratic Republic is a small country and certainly not the navel of the world. There are other states with much more political and economic power. But there is one point very special for us. We are the only country in which Marxism meets a predominant Protestant church tradition. I think that Protestantism is a religion with a very high level of rationality, much more than Russian Orthodox or religions like Hinduism or Buddhism. The Christian-Marxist dialogue may help to bridge the gap between Marxism and the world of religions for the benefit of a better understanding between both sides and advance to a more trustful relationship between all peoples and social systems.

Endnotes:

1 The Christian-Marxist dialogue in the 1960s sponsored by the Paulus-Gesellschaft was particularly focused upon the philosophical problems.


3 New aspects of the dialogue from a Hungarian view are given by the Marxist philosopher, József Lukács, "Die Verantwortung des Menschen in der Welt von heute," in ibid., pp. 165-78.

4 The dialogue situation from the perspective of a Marxist philosopher from the GDR is given by Hans Lutter, "Zu einigen ethischen Konsequenzen der Humanität für die Zusammenarbeit von Marxismen und Christen," in E. Kocsis (ed.), Die ethischen Konsequenzen der Humanität (Debrecen, 1986), pp. 127-35.
5 Similar goals and ground rules regarding the Christian Marxist dialogue are given by the Hungarian theologian H. Proehle in "Einige inhaltliche Fragen des Dialogs zwischen Christen und Marxismen," in Kocsis (ed.), Ergebnisse und Möglichenkeiten des Christlich-marxistischen Dialogs, pp. 61-82.


7 A new regard for tolerance according to modern Marxism is given by Vera Wrona, "Sozialismus, Humanismus, Toleranz," in Deutsche Zeitschrift fuer Philosophie (8-9/1984), pp. 756-66. She says: "Marxism continues bourgeois humanism which fought for a scientific world view but it goes further. The Marxist understanding of tolerance is based upon the conception of community between all world views and attitudes which feel committed to the humanistic concern of wellbeing and good fortune for all" (p. 761). The aspect of tolerance was furthermore stressed in the statements made at the Philosophy Congress in the GDR, 1985.


11 All the lectures of these conferences are published by E. Kocsis (ed.) cited in endnotes 1 and 3.