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WINDS OF CHANGE?
RELIGIOUS ASPECTS IN NEW LITERATURE FROM
THE GERMAN DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC*

by Wieland Zademach

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Introduction

Since high level talks held between church and state leaders in the GDR [East Germany] on March 6, 1978, some aspects of the relationship between the two have changed for the better. These improvements were indicated not only by the anniversaries celebrated the following years (Luther, Bugenhagen, Bach, Schütz, Händel, Friedrich II, etc.), but also in plans for the 750th anniversary of Berlin in 1987, which include numerous church events in East Berlin. Skeptics in the Federal Republic of Germany should not ignore these changes. This article will show that religious aspects also glint through new literature from the GDR--aspects that at least were not observed before.

Whether there is interaction between the inclusion of religious aspects in literature and the increased importance of religion and the church overall is open to question, although there are grounds for making such an assertion. In any case, the GDR is regarded as a nation of avid readers, with a per capita sale of books higher than almost any other country in the world. People stand in line to buy a sought-after book much as they do to buy meat or tropical fruit. Television in the GDR (certainly not high class!) has not diminished the importance of books, in contrast to the pure consumerism to which it has degenerated our affluent society. The reason for this lies not so much in the printed status of Marxist-Leninist ideology as in the "socialist pluralism" which is just beginning to appear in literature. Here, the experiences, encounters, and problems of everyday life may be presented in a reasonably unvarnished way. In his Dialog mit meinem Urenkel [Dialogue with My Great-Grandchild], senior scholar, economist, and political scientist, Jürgen Kuczynski, came to the

¹Translated from the Korrespondenzblatt, No. 2, February 1987, by permission of the author.

conclusion that "conflicts in the GDR society are more likely to be found in novels than in history books."¹

Literature, then, is the natural medium for "socialist pluralism"; like nothing else, it serves as a mirror in which the socialist society of the GDR confronts the importance of religion, religious feelings, and the church. That a large part of literary criticism has overlooked this relationship until now is due to the fact that, for obvious reasons, faith and the church have not been the central themes upon which the new GDR literature is built. There is also a widely prevailing disinterest in religious-ecclesiastical content among literary critics because subconsciously they consider it irrelevant. Viewed in general, though, this complex seems important enough to be treated in greater detail. If the Evangelical Church in the GDR has, to a large extent, lost its meaning as the Volkskirche, it still has considerable--perhaps even increasing--relevance as a vehicle of culture.

The following questions will therefore be raised: "How do authors deal with the phenomena of faith and the church and which problems and forms of adaptation emerge? What is the network of relationships between the church and the socialist society? How are the mutual challenges of belief and unbelief portrayed? What value is placed on religion? In short, what are the functions of faith and the church in literary texts?"²

Unfortunately, the limits of a short essay restrict the discussion to a few aspects and detailed textual examples. Hence, a complete review of lyric poetry has been omitted. As attractive as it would be to treat it, as well as the "aesthetic treatment of the Christian message of faith,"³ this topic will only be considered in passing. The "poetic plan" of such "aesthetic treatment" precludes rash religious demands on literature. On the other hand, it makes clear that socialist literature does not necessarily have to exclude Christian content; but that, indeed, this part of humanity's legacy can be taken into account. In the words of Peter Hacks: "Religion has aesthetic consciousness to thank for its place of residence in the afterlife; this is the origin of its immortality. Aesthetic consciousness owes religion (which, while it was alive, considered itself as an explanation of the world) an important inheritance of the poetic, already fleshed-out reality. The author is not exclusively concerned about preserving the beauty of Christianity. What she or he wants to talk about are the insights of Christianity that are worthy of preservation."⁴

1. Christian Religion as the Protector of Socialist Utopia

In the secular literature of authors in the GDR, the religious

thread of the story is naturally not--at least not "objectively"--the main thread. Within the framework of this essay, only the religious thread will be pursued, with the question: What concrete purpose does the author have in mind when pursuing a literary work of religious content? An interesting aspect in this context is the reversion to religion as the salvation of the utopia of socialism.

The Party Secretary Visits a Village Minister

Such a visit occurs in the novel Betriebsausflug⁵ [Company Outing], by the Romanian-German author Andreas Klotsch, who has lived in the GDR since 1951. Eduard Kremp, Party secretary in a shoe polish factory, is presented as an advocate of the more idealistic socialism--the opposite of the factory manager, Pink. He endeavors, albeit with little success, to battle against the windmills of bureaucratic socialism. His excursion to a remote village, where a nearly-forgotten friend of his youth is a minister, seems, in terms of the novel, to be the conceptual counterpart to a company outing--the "real" theme a collective escape from everyday routine in a socialist order which is felt to be repressive. During a brief tour of the minister's house, "Edu" finds himself in the church meeting room. The walls are empty,

no framed government personages; they didn't hang up any bishops or a Pope. No table in the room, just chairs, carefully positioned in a circle, a mute meeting of stools facing each other. And no draped pulpit. . . . Edu sat down on one of the chairs, looked out at the arena of chairs, felt the chairs were checking him out with a hint of suspicion, slid to the next and the next, and every time he had a different perspective, another constellation of chairs before his eyes, and he was always the center; here, every chair was the center. How do the chairs have to be set up so that they give the impression of democracy? And Edu says loudly: "Amen." And the walls echoed back Amenamenamen.⁶

So the placement of chairs in a church becomes an unmasking of the undemocratic Party meeting and itself a model of democracy.

The dramatic climax in the meeting between the two school friends, however, is the "confession" of the Party secretary, a confession in a double sense. In the first sense, Eduard Kremp came to his friend Horst Holzengel to confess an old sin. In 1953, he denounced Horst for having read Mein Kampf. This was the reason for Holzengel's arrest and his prohibition from studying despite being a gifted physicist. For lack of any other possibilities, he became a pastor. Kremp tries to create an open atmosphere between the two, but

his attempts at camaraderie fall flat. One possible reason is that the pastor tries to hint at his own failures.

The second, more important part of the Party secretary's confession succeeds splendidly--a parody, in which a few serious sins of the realer Sozialismus [really existing socialism] are brought to light. In a dialogue between the two school friends on the topic of environmental protection, Edu takes responsibility for making mistakes and allowing them to happen in his shoe polish factory, "Gloria." Owing to lack of money and the stubbornness of the authorities, his contribution to environmental protection merely consists in whitewashing the factory's gray wall. In so doing, he whitewashes the spraypainted slogans of righteously outraged neighbors and local citizens. The graffiti ridiculed the moral superiority "of a bright and friendly socialism which has been cleansed of all the evil practices of capitalism." Edu goes on to say: "Now 'Gloria' is bright and friendly up to its neck, but above that, it belches out smoke and soot just like always. . . . It really hurts to see the good, beautiful slogans painted over. It's gone so far that it seems to me we're whitewashing socialism. In the devil's name, why?"⁷

Despite the author's claim to be criticizing the socialist order from within the legitimate sphere of "criticism and self-criticism," he argues against it from outside. In so doing, he highlights a systematic defect which leads to psychological suppression. This, in turn, inspires a search for an authority outside the system--for a utopian socialism clothed in religion. In this way, the socialist critique of religion is corrected, at least in a literary sense. This critique of religion, however, is not simply a part of the overall Marxist analysis of society; rather, the critique of society and realer Sozialismus reverts to religion because it would seem to preserve the idealistic utopian heritage. This also means that socialism must be interested neither in overcoming religion nor in simply tolerating it, but in preserving it. Otherwise the socialist society may be in danger of losing its sense of utopia and hope.

2. Loss of Meaning and Christian Faith

Direct experiences within the socialist society build the backdrop for the literary works which we will now discuss. The works show that, given the specific experiences of alienation within the socialist society, one must pose questions about God and Christian faith anew.

a. Thick Skin as a Mighty Fortress

In 1982, dramatist and prose writer Christoph Hein published the novel Der fremde Freund [The Strange Friend]. It appeared shortly afterward and in many editions by Luchterhand Verlag under the title Drachenblut⁸ [Dragon's Blood]. Viewed superficially, the content is banal: Claudia, a well-established doctor, divorced and childless, reports on an odd, distant love affair with her "strange friend," Henry, who is married and the father of two children. Henry seeks to live for the moment and follows the scent of danger; even so, he cannot escape the meaninglessness that marks his life. When he stumbles into a fist fight outside of a bar, he meets an accordingly senseless death.

Christoph Hein shows that the attempt to compensate for loss of meaning through a surrogate life cannot solve the problem of human alienation. The failure of this attempt is treated in what might be termed the third dimension of the book. Among the ensemble of characters in the novel is Claudia's friend Katherina. While Claudia was raised in conformity with Party rules, Katherina comes from a family of faith. The friendship between the girls runs deep. When they both turn 14, the girls conspire to find a common answer to the question of faith, assuming each other's willingness to accept the other's philosophy of life. Claudia "gets used to the idea" that she "might have to surprise her parents."⁹ Yet, the friendship falls apart under the pressure of the anti-church campaign of the 1950s, and Claudia betrays Katherina in a discussion, publicly ridiculing the faith.

The death of her friend Henry prompts a new longing in Claudia to see Katherina. This yearning is coupled with a remembrance of the repression of the 1950s. Now Claudia's shame over her betrayal has turned into defiance of the repressive system:

I am ready for anything; I am armed against everything and I won't be hurt anymore. I've become invulnerable. I have bathed in dragon's blood and no linden leaves have left me vulnerable. I won't come out of this skin anymore. I will die of my longing for Katherina inside my invulnerable shell. I want to be friends with Katherina again. I want to get out of the thick hide of my fear and mistrust. I want to see her. I want to get Katherina back again. My impenetrable skin is my mighty fortress.¹⁰

A shattering text. A human being who has made herself invulnerable purely out of the need for protection dies from fear and mistrust inside her armour. Nevertheless her longing for another form of life remains, a longing represented by the believing friend of her youth. Moreover, her own loss of meaning is linked to the loss of this friendship. And something else: Where God is lost as a "mighty

fortress," human beings are thrown back on their own existence and must secure it through their own means. The loss of God results in defiant insensitivity and imprisoning loneliness.

b. Deadly Withdrawal of Love or Sacrificial Love

Günther de Bruyn's novel Neue Herrlichkeit¹¹ [New Glory] also deals with the relationship between the loss of meaning and Christian faith. Often with bitter irony, the author exposes the feudal dictates of the GDR's system of rule but shows the world of the little people with great sympathy. The contrast between two worlds is symbolized by two nursing homes, one run by the state and the other by the church. Faith and the church are the main themes. The novel deals with an old woman's consignment to a home for getting in the way of a young couple's plans for the future--a banishment practiced not only in socialist societies.

A doctor from the state-run nursing home bitterly comments:

A sick woman doesn't fit into our utilitarian world. As long as she can manage a household and look after the children, she is still essential. But if she needs looking after herself, we put her into a home. In other words: we condemn her. Inability to work means guilt and the punishment is banishment and dispossession . . . loss of home and the withdrawal of love.¹²

This withdrawal of love is institutionalized; the nursing home as the last stop, a place remote as a world without love. The path to the nursing home leads past neglected graves in a cemetery and ends at a barrier. Admissions are carried out in ghostly anonymity; cards in a file, registration number, checking in luggage, numbering suitcases, run-down accommodations. Dark associations spring to mind.

The reception in the church-run home to which Viktor and Thilde consign their grandmother Tita is completely different. Obstructed by no barriers, they pass an empty guardhouse, go freely through a portal, and find themselves in a chapel unobserved, in which "all the residents are busy praying."¹³ The Mother Superior Benedikte (!) also notices that a young couple is getting rid of an old person. But the difference is that the deadly withdrawal of love is not taken for granted; on the contrary, the homey atmosphere inspires a living love.

This living love finds its source of strength in spirituality, which is expressed symbolically, especially in the cross. Reception and farewell take place under the "crucified Jesus" which hangs "almost large as life" near the guardhouse. The crucifix, a symbol of life and death, is also symbol of the commitment to sacrificial love.

Finally, a conversation between Viktor and the Mother Superior, which takes place before pictures of St. Hedwig and the Madonna, unmasks the "new glory" of the ruling caste that belies the claim to a classless society. De Bruyn's novel is a sharp critique of a utilitarian world that breeds dehumanization. A humane society is unthinkable in political and economic categories alone; politics and economics must draw their humanity from a transcendent source.

c. Dignified Life, Dignified Death

In his novel Bild des Vaters¹⁴ [Picture of Father], Sorbian author Jurij Brezan gives literary witness to the dignified death of an old man in the intimacy of his home and family. Tobias Hawk, patterned after Brezan's own father, consciously bids farewell to his family and the world.

Tobias Hawk dies in community. For his last days on earth, he organizes a party. He invites his son and daughter, grandchildren and great-grandchildren to a banquet--as his own father did before him. His father asked his friends to a final gathering at his table: a good community, one which could be relied upon in life, in which everyone believed in their own concept of heaven. In the circle of his family, Tobias remembers his own father's gathering and his memory passes over into a dream on the threshold of death where he is welcomed by those who were loyal to him and went before him in death. It is a community of people stretching far beyond death. So it makes sense if this death has pockets with a "quid of tobacco" in them for those "buddies" who long had to do without it. The old man lays out his wedding clothes so he can be buried in them instead of a shroud: an expectation of the new, festive community. In Tobias Hawk's unsentimental faith there is room for friendship with those who do not believe in heaven, those with whom he once lay in the same foxhole during a hail of grenades. And while he mutely prayed his "Lord's Prayer," the former quietly sang ". . . may human rights be won."¹⁵

One could almost call Egon Richter's Der Tod des alten Mannes¹⁶ [Death of the Old Man] a Protestant counterpart to the Bild des Vaters. The focus of Richter's book is also a farmer who thinks and talks about biblical relationships and who knows that trust and guilt are part of human life. With these books, the GDR has been given two unprecedented examples of rural prose. They describe a rural world that the socialist reorganization was supposed long since to have overcome.

In view of the growing crisis of meaning in East German socialism, reading these books becomes a challenge to deeper reflection. In the GDR as well, the time seems to have come for asking about the nearly-forgotten values that are essential to human dignity in life

and death. That this reappraisal of the taboo word "death" is not limited to literature is shown by a discussion presently underway, not only among pastors, but also among physicians and Marxist philosophers. At its center lies the call to make a humane death possible. In his book Wenn ein Mensch stirbt . . . Ausgewählte Aspekte perimortaler Medizin [When a Person Dies . . . Selected Aspects of Perimortal Medicine], Dr. Kay Blumenthal-Barby admits to discrepancies between living and dying conditions: "For the dying, the best is just good enough." Among other things, this includes being able to die at home, a wish expressed by 80% of all GDR citizens. Yet almost every second person dies as an in-patient. According to the author, this overtaxes doctors and nurses, who are thus only able to provide technical and medical support. The dying "receive excellent care from a medical point of view: their heart and pulse rates are attended to, they are given infusions and transfusions. But they lack what Christians call pastoral care: the warm hands to hold when their own grow colder."¹⁷

3. Dialogue with the Christian Heritage

In order to at least hint at the variety and breadth of religious aspects in recent literature from the GDR, examples from a children's book will conclude this article. In her slim volume entitled Der Engel mit dem goldenen Schnurrbart (Berlin, 1984, 2nd edition) [The Angel with the Golden Moustache], Christa Kozik has the angel Ambrosius appear as a stimulating element in the imaginative world of children. Departing from the "party line," Ambrosius shares his view of the origin of the world and of life in the form of the Biblical Genesis story: "On the seventh day he rested from his heavy labor and looked with joy on his work. This day is Sunday, the seventh day of the week. This is why we should lay aside our work, in remembrance of this day." The teacher's reaction bespeaks pedagogical wisdom: "Herr Becher didn't interrupt him. He allowed him to finish and thanked him for his contribution," because he "didn't want to offend Ambrosius." But the class's behavior is even more interesting: "The school children argued for a while longer about the different origins of the world. Some were for Creation in seven days, but most thought it took millions of years." By the way, the author stresses Ambrosius' high marks "in history, German, geography, English, and other subjects,"¹⁸ thereby allowing the reader to conclude, with reason, that the angel's belief in the Bible does not stem from lack of intellectual ability or "backwardness."

Given the significance of books in the GDR, which is clearly manifested in the high number of copies printed despite a serious paper shortage, even such a comparatively unprepossessing children's

dialogue takes on exemplary meaning. It is an example of the dialogue between present-day society and the Judeo-Christian heritage already being nurtured here and there in the literature--one that still remains to be fully exploited by the official church and Christian communities in their dealings with literature.

Translated from German by Janice Hill
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Endnotes

¹Jürgen Kuczynski, Dialog mit meinem Urenkel, 2nd edition (East Berlin: Aufbau-Verlag, 1984).

²Th. Mechtenberg, "Christliche Religion und sozialistische Utopie. Glaube und Kirche in der neuen DDR-Prosa," in Die DDR-Gesellschaft im Spiegel ihrer Literature (Köln: G. Helwig, 1986), pp. 164ff. Insofar as the sources are not accessible in the West (because they are out of print in the GDR!), I support the following with textual examples from this book, as well as with an article from J. Langer, "Blickpunkt: Literatur. Lebensweisen in der Darstellung durch DDR-Schriftsteller," in Kirche im sozialismus, (West Berlin), Vol. 11, No. 2 (1985), pp. 57-63, which offers a good initial overview.

³Stephan Hermlin, for example, applies the Biblical story of Emmaus in the same way in his autobiographical prose piece Abendlicht (East Berlin: 1979).

⁴Peter Hacks on "Adam und Eva," in P. Hacks, Die Massgaben der Kunst: Gesammelte Aufsätze (East Berlin: 1980), p. 381.

⁵A. Klotsch, Betriebsausflug (East Berlin: Aufbau-Verlag, 1981).

⁶Ibid., pp. 203ff.

⁷Ibid., pp. 244ff. Stefan Heym, Ahasver (Gütersloh: 1981) and Karl Heinz Berger, Im Labyrinth oder Spaziergänge in zwei Landschaften (East Berlin: 1984), deal differently, but with great commitment, with the problematics of "Marxism and Christianity."

⁸Chr. Hein, Drachenblut, 5th edition (Neuwied: 1984).

- ⁹Ibid., p. 109.
- ¹⁰Ibid., p. 184.
- ¹¹G. de Bruyn, Neue Herrlichkeit (Frankfurt a. M.: 1984).
- ¹²Ibid., p. 198.
- ¹³Ibid., p. 155.
- ¹⁴J. Brezan, Bild des Vaters (East Berlin: Verlag Neues Leben, 1982).
- ¹⁵Ibid., p. 103.
- ¹⁶E. Richter, Der Tod des alten Mannes (Rostock: Verlag VEB Hinstorff, 1983).
- ¹⁷Manfred Wolter in the East Berlin weekly Weltbühne, November 25, 1986.
- ¹⁸Langer, op. cit., p. 59.