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DEMOCRATIZATION AS A SPIRITUAL-MORAL EVENT:
A STUDY OF EAST GERMAN THEOLOGICAL-POLITICAL RHETORIC

by John P. Burgess

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It is already becoming academically fashionable to argue that the recent, radical changes in Leninist states were historically "inevitable." At the time, however, the events beginning with the "New Thinking" of Mikhail Gorbachev and coming to symbolic climax in the dismantling of the Berlin Wall took the entire world by surprise, most especially the people living under "communism."

Scholarly theories of democratization have proved problematic in explaining this unexpected fragility of Leninist regimes. Zbigniew Brzezinski, for example, argued that democratization of Leninist states would occur as their inefficient, command-structure economies faltered. Yet, Brzezinski's economic determinism is finally unpersuasive. Writing in 1988, he predicted that countries such as economically-strong East Germany would be among the last to experience democratization.1 Indeed, his model is more generally problematic because the depth of economic crisis in Leninist states tends to remain unclear until well after the democratization movements successfully challenge the Communist Party's monopoly on power.

Other political scientists have focused on cultural factors. Ralf Dahrendorf has suggested that democratization depends on the rebuilding of civil society, i.e., autonomous, intermediate institutions that allow people to participate in shaping society. Leninist states

maintain themselves by destroying civil society. Yet, Dahrendorf’s reasoning proves circular; one could as well argue that the rebuilding of civil society depends on democratization. He does not account for the rise of opposition, reform movements that seek to rebuild civil society in Leninist states, nor for the fact that this rebuilding of civil society appears to unleash not only democratic forces but also ones seeking to reclaim primordial identities, in association with new forms of authoritarian nationalism.

Yet other scholars, such as Samuel Huntington, have emphasized that, besides economic and cultural preconditions, certain political factors are necessary to the process of democratization. A political crisis, for example, may force an authoritarian regime to share power. "A central requirement would appear to be that either the established elites within an authoritarian system or the successor elites after an authoritarian system collapses see their interests served by the introduction of democratic institutions." Yet, this approach is also problematic. Writing in 1984, Huntington predicted that democratization had its best chances in South America, not in Leninist states in Eastern Europe or elsewhere.

None of these approaches acknowledges in fact what has been most important to many of the opposition, reform movements themselves. For them, the first problem in Leninist states has not been economic, cultural, or political, but nothing less than what they could term "spiritual," i.e., what concerns people’s deepest affections and passions, what gives their lives "ultimate" meaning and dignity. In consequence, these movements have also argued that fundamental moral concerns are at stake, i.e., how people express their loyalties and allegiances, how they trust and love and serve "the good."

These movements did not precisely distinguish terms such as "spiritual" and "moral." They could easily appeal to either in articulating the basis of their opposition to the state. In their view, the Leninist state sought to deny any dimension to life outside the scope of its own ideology and power. Because the state masked this ideology in the language of instrumental reason, the movements sought to reclaim life’s "spiritual" dimension, especially through the language of art, poetry, and philosophy. This language, they believed, grounded common moral responsibility in universal, humanistic ideals of equality, toleration, and democratic participation.

2 Ralf Dahrendorf, "Has the East Joined the West?" New Progressive Quarterly (Spring 1990): 41-43.
5 Ibid., 215-217.
Those thinkers, such as Hannah Arendt, who have recognized this spiritual-moral dimension of democratization, have not, however, predicted the role that religion could play in articulating it. Indeed, they have tended either to ignore religion altogether or to associate it with traditional, authoritarian forces that emerge as the Party loses its hood over repressed cultural impulses.\(^6\)

In East Germany, however, a significant part of the opposition, reform movement emerged in a specifically theological context. During the 40 years of communist rule, the Evangelical Church, the nation's major religious body, represented the most important ideological and organizational alternative to the state. As political discontent grew, theologians, pastors, and people in church-related "alternative" groups played a leading role in organizing opposition and envisioning change.

In this paper, a careful analysis and assessment of the theological-political rhetoric of the East German church demonstrates the validity of interpreting democratization in spiritual-moral terms. Moreover, it shows the way in which explicitly religious language could provide people a conceptual framework for critiquing the spiritual impoverishment of the Leninist state. In East Germany, this language contributed powerful symbols, often drawn from Scripture, that helped people examine and challenge their own complicity in the system; it offered them, moreover, a moral vision of responsible political engagement.

Many of the materials incorporating this distinctive East German rhetoric appeared only in underground publications. Though some have since appeared in West German collections, they are not widely known elsewhere in the West. As scholars begin to analyze the church's contributions to the democratization process in East Germany, and to the formulation of a specifically East German vision of a unified Germany, these materials, however, may shed valuable light. Indeed, they may eventually contribute as well to renewed thinking about a Christian understanding of democratic responsibility, of broader significance in both East and West.

The Spiritual-Moral Crisis of the Leninist State

A key theme of recent East German theological-political thought has been the spiritual-moral crisis of the Leninist state. Especially representative is Heino Falcke, an East German theologian and churchman, whose writings reflect his close ties both to the world ecumenical movement and to the alternative groups that were instrumental in founding a political opposition.

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Significantly, Falcke does not separate the spiritual-moral crisis of the Leninist state from broader currents in the West. He sees an entire civilization deep in crisis. In part, the crisis has to do with the way in which people understand and exercise power. To many, power means domination and self-assertion; they try to control reality; they are obsessed with guaranteeing their security, even by means of force; they are driven by acquisition, consumption, and accomplishment; they find identity and purpose by "delimiting" themselves (practicing Abgrenzung) from others, and by putting them down.\(^7\)

The result is two-fold. On the one hand, this kind of power threatens the very existence of the world. Falcke speaks of powers of death: the danger of nuclear war, the widening gap between the world's rich and poor, and the growing threat to the environment. On the other hand, this power, through exercised by humans, has caused them to feel profoundly powerless. They are spiritually and morally impoverished, "at their end," "discontented." In a scientific, technological age, alienation is a wide-spread phenomenon. Though frightened by issues of global survival, people feel powerless to respond.\(^8\)

Falcke locates the roots of this crisis in the basic human experience of "anxiety," i.e., people's insecurity and fearfulness about the value and worth of their lives. People turn to those "gods" that seem to promise power and security. In the modern world, people especially worship a scientific-technological rationality that promises power through knowledge and manipulation. Yet, the very reliance on science and technology has led to the modern crisis. Humans use science and technology in ways that dominate nature and each other. They understand their own worth in terms of "having," rather than "being," and are constantly driven to achieve more power and control. Such an ethic ultimately results in more anxiety, rather than relieving it.\(^9\)

This theological critique of the modern situation draws extensively on biblical themes. Falcke finds particular significance in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, which asks people not to be anxious about what they shall eat or drink or wear (Mt. 6:25-33). Jesus' critique of "having" expresses the same truth as Paul's critique of "achieving" (i.e., "works-righteousness," as developed by Lutheranism).\(^10\)


\(^8\) Ibid., 95, 146, 157-161, 171-172, 253, 286; and Heino Falcke, "Kirche Fuer andere' in der DDR," Dirche im Sozialismus 12 (April 1986): 62.

\(^9\) Falcke, Mit Gott Schritt halten, 15, 96, 99, 164-165, 281; and Heino Falcke, "Unsere Kirche und ihre Gruppen," Kirche im Sozialismus 11 (August 1985); 149.

\(^10\) Falcke, Mit Gott Schritt halten, 290.
The spiritual-moral crisis of the modern world assumes a special shape, however, in the Leninist state. First, in making the "scientific worldview" its official ideology, the state denies the possibility of alternative ways of envisioning and constructing reality. Second, in asking people to work and sacrifice for the sake of a future kingdom of material wealth, it justifies socialist economic arrangements primarily in terms of their supposed ability to satisfy consumer needs. Third, its centralization of power hinders public participation and involvement in political life, resulting in pervasive social attitudes of apathy and irresponsibility.\(^{11}\)

In sum, Falcke's theological critique of the modern situation in general leads him to make a devastating critique of the Leninist state in particular. Not only does he argue that its key problem is its spiritual impoverishment, but he suggests how this spiritual impoverishment produces a citizenry that is morally indifferent and immature. When people understand life only in terms of a narrow, instrumental rationality, they fail to experience and exercise moral passion for any good higher than their own self-interest. They live only for the satisfaction of material needs and have little sense of a common good. In claiming that it alone can define and shape reality, the state disempowers people; indeed, it dehumanizes them in the sense of denying their capacity for responsible, moral action. Humans find themselves in a spiritual-moral crisis. The only way out, suggests Falcke, is a new kind of relationship with God, based on confession and repentance.\(^{12}\)

**Alternative Groups and the Rhetoric of Crisis**

These themes also characterized the rhetoric of the alternative groups in the East German church. These groups, drawn to-and protected by-the church's "free space," originally gathered around issues of peace, justice, and environmental protection. Though experiencing considerable pressure and intimidation from the state, they eventually became the backbone of the political opposition that successfully challenged it.\(^{13}\)

From the beginning, these groups drew on the church's biblical, theological analysis of the modern situation to critique the spiritual-moral failure of the modern world. Ultimately, they argued, this crisis had to do with "the self-destructive form of civilization" common the

\(^{11}\) Ibid., 95, 171-172, 286.

\(^{12}\) Ibid.

\(^{13}\) For a good overview of the history of the alternative groups, see Pedro Ramet, *Cross and Commissar: The Politics of Religion in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press), 80-96.
East and West. They asserted that a rationalistic, deterministic ideology, with its roots in
the modern world's narrow understanding of power, had become incapable of responding
to threats of nuclear war, social injustice, and environmental pollution.

Yet, the groups went further than the church in applying the language of spiritual–moral
crisis specifically to circumstances in East Germany. Their rhetoric, as recorded in their
underground publications, was direct and sharp.

The groups, for example, did not hesitate to apply their critique to the church itself. In
the mid-1980s, some groups argued that the institutional church had become more concerned
with maintaining itself than with serving people. It was restricting every expression of
spontaneity, self-initiative, and self-determination. It was failing to address the urgent,
existential issues of the day—"the already occurring war (against people; through armament;
against the environment and against the Two-thirds World)." Its structures and practices,
such as the state's, were characterized by bureaucratization, incompetent leadership,
disempowerment of people at the "base," wasteful expenditures on "objects of self-
representation," and a militaristic-type internal discipline. The church in appealing to
"necessity" and "reality" to limit the groups' political engagement was simply reflecting the
kind of deterministic rationalism typical of modernity.

The groups focused their critique, of course, on the East German state. By the late
1980's, they had identified "delimitation" (Abgrenzung), which Falcke treats theologically, as
the nation's key political problem. They argued that the state—by restricting travel, contact
with foreigners, and democratic participation—had delimited East Germany from the rest
of the world, and especially the West. Moreover, the state was delimiting power to itself,
as dramatically reflected in its manipulation of the 1989 election returns. According to the
groups, the experience of delimitation was making East German society morally sick.

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14 See *Dir Opposition in der DDR: Entwürfe für einen anderen Sozialismus*, ed. Gerhard Rein
(Berlin: Wichern Verlag, 1988), 141. All translations are my own.

15 Ehrhart Neubert, *Reproduktion der Religion in der DDR Gesellschaft*, mimeographed text
(Berlin: Theologische Studienabteilung beim Bund der Evangelischen Kirchen in der DDR, 1986).
99–103.


17 Ibid. Also, see "Kirchentag von unten: Flugpapier 1," mimeographed text (dated June 1987).
The groups regularly charged the state with bureaucratism, corruption, conformism, dogmatism,
arbitrariness, and condescension undermining public response to global, life-threatening issues and
damaging the socialist promise. See Ueber das Nein hinaus: Aufrisse zwei, ed. Stephan Bickhardt,

18 "Kirchentag von unten: Flugpapier 1."
Isolated and powerless, people were living with apathy, resignation, stagnation, denial, and lack of responsibility. They were excessively narrow and incapable of openness. Social dialogue, communication, and cooperation had become increasingly impossible. State and society were characterized by growing fear of each other.\textsuperscript{19}

Though the groups were small, they helped articulate the underlying frustrations and resentments of the entire society. By the fall of 1989, the sense of national crisis had become increasingly public and extreme. Thousands of East Germans were hoping to leave the country, and when the Hungarian government opened its western border, they saw their chance. In response to this mass exodus, the groups began to organize themselves as a national, political opposition. In their public statements, they frequently used words such as "loss" and "destruction" to justify their decision. Society was falling apart, with the danger that much good would be irretrievably lost. The social achievements of the past—social justice, solidarity in community—were threatened. State policies were destroying the environment, as well as the nation’s cultural heritage. The moral foundations of society were also threatened, as evidenced by people's ever increasing lack of social responsibility. The government and the people mistrusted each other. Communication between them had completely broken down.\textsuperscript{20}

Yet, not only church and state, but every individual had failed. In regard to the emigration issue, for example, Friedrich Schlorlemmer, an East German pastor active in the alternative scene, could speak of a mass psychosis: "We are sick and apparently contagious."\textsuperscript{21} People had become so obsessed with the question of whether to leave or stay that they were focusing only on themselves rather than on more critical social and global issues.\textsuperscript{22}

In sum, the groups saw the state's rationalistic, deterministic ideology issuing in spiritual-moral crisis. Spiritual impoverishment had in turn resulted in popular moral failure. People had no sense of a good beyond themselves. They had no moral commitment to changing their society; they were incapable of working for positive political change. Paradoxically, however, the groups argued that this crisis might actually begin to awaken people. It had reached the breaking point; it become personally and socially inescapable. Like Falcke, the

\textsuperscript{19} See the statements of the "Initiativkreis 'Absage an die Praxis und Prinzip der Abgrenzung'" ("Initiative Group 'Repudiation of the Practice and Principle of Delimitation';") in Aufrisse: Absage an Praxis und Prinzip der Abgrenzung, ed. Stephan Bickhards, Reinhard Lampe, and Ludwig Melhorn, mimeographed text (from 1987), 4-5; and Ueber das Nein hinaus. 19. The first also appeared in the West as Rechte stroeme wie wasser: Ein Arbeitsbuch aus der DDR (Berlin: Wichern Verlag, 1988). Also, see Die Opposition in der DDR, 65-66.

\textsuperscript{20} See the statements of the new opposition parties in Die Opposition in der DDR, 13, 34, 59, 84.

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 140.

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid.
groups therefore found biblical themes of confession and repentance helpful as they sought to articulate how spiritual-moral crisis might eventually lead to spiritual-moral renewal. No longer could people simply blame the state for their problems. Every individual shared guilt for a preoccupation with personal self-realization that was ignoring, and contributing to, world disaster.\(^2^3\) Every individual was guilty of practicing delimitation and failing to respond to the larger problems at hand. Every individual had to reason to examine himself or herself.\(^2^4\)

**Responding to the Crisis**

This theological critique of the spiritual-moral crisis of the Leninist state served as the basis for helping people examine and challenge their own complicity in the system. Drawing on powerful religious symbols, church leaders and thinkers developed a distinctive religious rhetoric of "peace, justice, and the integrity of the creation" to analyze the concrete political failings of the established order, to relate spiritual-moral renewal to universal, humanistic ideals, and to envision a new kind of nation and world.\(^2^5\)

Falcke is again representative. He argues that, in the twentieth century, issues of peace, justice, and the environment have become "confessional" because they have to do with the very survival of the world. God's word has a contribution to make such a world, nothing less than a hope for its survival.\(^2^6\)

With the help of Scripture, Falcke develops a social ethic corresponding to this hope. God's word is Christ, who rules all creation. Christ has entered the human condition, suffered its depths, and been raised to new life. Through his resurrection, his example and teaching (summarized, for Falcke, especially well in the Sermon on the Mount) have become authoritative expressions of the new life available to all.\(^2^7\)

This christological orientation has important implications for the way in which people can understand and live their lives. Christ is present to every human. Every human therefore has the possibility of encountering Christ and his love. In this encounter, humans

\(^2^3\) Ibid., 139-141.

\(^2^4\) The groups could appeal to Falcke himself, as did the initiative group against delimitation. See Aufrisse, 83. Also, see Schorlemmer's remarks in Ueber das Nein hinaus, 32-33; and in Die Opposition in der DDR, 140-141

\(^2^5\) In the meantime, peace, justice and the integrity of the creation have also become central emphases of the World Council of Churches.

\(^2^6\) Falcke, Mit Gott Schritt halten, 146-147, 282.

\(^2^7\) Ibid., 90.
become receivers. They discover that their value and worth are ultimately not an achievement, but a gift. Christ's love challenges and changes their lives. It drives them to "crisis" and "repentance" (Umkehr, i.e., turning around). They are liberated from anxiety and therefore from obsession with power and from a world driven by "having," success, and economic growth.  

Christian freedom implies social responsibility. Indeed, the Christian ethic is one of "higher responsibility." "Instead of wanting to replace God, humans can correspond to God in answering him as liberated, responsible partners." Christian freedom included freedom for others and creation. This sense of responsibility is fed by hope. Because Christ has entered history, the possibility of conversion and change is not only personal, but social. Christians see history as "an alterable, open process moving towards the kingdom of God." "We then see our world no longer as something set, causally determined . . . and unimproveable." Even when they see little visible success, Christians believe that they can change the world and that the world can surprise them with new possibilities. They live in trust and with a willingness to risk experimentation.  

Christian responsibility is also characterized by commitment to community because "in corresponding to God, humans are relational beings." In describing the nature of this community, Falcke appeals to two important biblical symbols: "covenant" and "the kingdom of God." Both terms bear theological significance. First, they express that God initiates this community. Second, they express that Christ, through his life, death, and resurrection,
makes this community a real historical possibility. Third, they express that every human effort to realize this community needs renewal and correction.\textsuperscript{35}

The covenant and kingdom help express the community's commitment to peace, justice, and protection of the creation, and to their integral interconnection. In creating covenant, God gives peace, "shalom," which the Old Testament prophets describe as living, sound, and therefore just relationship. In the Book of Deuteronomy, God commands Israel to observe every seventh year as a year of covenant renewal and of "remission." Debts are forgiven, and relationships characterized by unjust dependency are annulled. Other parts of the Old Testament connect covenant to the integrity of the creation. The year of covenant renewal is the sabbatical year. The land is allowed to rest.\textsuperscript{36}

These concerns find new expression and depth in the "new covenant" established by Christ. Through the Lord's Supper, Christians participate in the "new covenant." They repudiate false gods and celebrate God's liberating power. They become a community. The Lord's Supper speaks to issues of peace, justice, and the environment by, for example, symbolizing the priority of relationship over consumption.\textsuperscript{37}

Peace, justice, and protection of the creation as characteristics of community are also implied in the symbol of the "kingdom," which the Sermon on the Mount explicates especially well. The promise of God's kingdom frees people from anxious worry about themselves. First, they are able to practice peace (expressed in loving enemies). Such peace is not simply an absence of war, nor an enforced state of security, but vital, positive community. Second, they are able to practice justice (expressed in the beatitudes, which bless the poor and suffering). Such justice demands a thinking that begins from the perspective of those who suffer, including those who suffer from structures and practices that could eventually threaten humanity itself. Falcke emphasizes solidarity with the poor and the Third World. He calls, moreover, for measuring the impact of science and technology on those who suffer their impact, for example, the inhabitants of industrial areas. Third, the promise of God's kingdom frees people, in their relations with nature, to practice a "solidarity in conflict."

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., 125, 141. Repentance, therefore, is not once and for all, but an ongoing process. People must ever again confess their complicity in the world's problems and make a new beginning. Every form of human liberation and community is temporary and incomplete, produces new ideologies and forms of enslavement, and needs renewal and correction through God's offer of freedom in Christ. See Die Opposition in der DDR, 223.

\textsuperscript{36} Falcke, Mit Gott Schritt halten, 136-137.

\textsuperscript{37} Ibid., 29, 139, 173.
which, though unable to eliminate human manipulation of nature, can limit it and make humans more sensitive to their impact on the environment. 38

Falcke believes that the church can inspire the world to adopt this ethic only if Christians first exemplify the biblical understanding of liberation and community in their own way of life. To realize peace, justice, and protection of the creation, the church itself must have democratic structures and practices. Falcke therefore asks the church, first, to encourage openness. Such a church will not be elitist or exclusive. It will promote openness of discussion and information. It will be "for others," especially those who experience suffering, including social and ideological marginalization. Just as Jesus associated with outcasts, Christians will seek to exercise love beyond every social boundary (Abgrenzung). Their "covenant" will be open to all. The Lord's Supper, correspondingly, will also be open to all who seek its promise of peace. Second, the church will encourage participation "from below." It will bear with plurality and allow experimentation. It will emphasize consensus and domination-free communication. It will be critical of authoritarian arrangements. It will be open to renewal from the base. Third, the church will seek binding, but tolerant, relationship. It will practice solidarity and reconciliation. 39

The church will also promote these democratic characteristics in society as a whole. In terms of openness, it will encourage widening the public realm. It will oppose a state policy of "delimitation" (Abgrenzung) based on friend/foe thinking. It will promote contact with others and the idea of a community of peoples. In terms of participation, it will support involvement "from below," decentralization, and democratic structures that check power. It will seek a politics that activates responsibility in all its citizens. In terms of binding relationship, it will encourage a "socialist" alternative that recognizes the primacy of social justice. 40

In sum, Falcke draws extensively on Jesus' example and teaching, as well as on biblical concepts of covenant and kingdom, to envision the church as an "alternative community." Through his resurrection, Jesus encounters every human being and offers the world peace, justice, and the integrity of the creation as real possibilities, not just distant ideals. Their realization, however, depends on humans first experiencing crisis in such a way that they

38 Ibid., 100, 105, 117, 166, 174. Also, see Die Opposition in der DDR, 226. Falcke ties justice to the integrity of the creation. The kind of consumerism that leads to unjust distribution of the world's resources and ecological devastation can only be transcended if people find their lives fulfilled beyond it. See Falcke, Mit Gott Schritt halten, 171.


40 Falcke, Mit Gott Schritt halten, 25, 96, 128, 165, 172, 286; and Die Opposition in der DDR, 226, 229.
repent, i.e., that they relinquish their obsession with "having and "achieving," and assume a higher responsibility for their society and world.

**Alternative Groups and Biblical Imagery**

The church-related alternative groups also appealed to many of these basic biblical themes as they coined a distinctive, oppositional political rhetoric. As with Falcke, the emphasis fell on the way in which confession and repentance could become the basis of a "higher responsibility" to peace, justice, and the integrity of the creation.

Jesus' example and teaching was central to these groups. Typical of their rhetoric is the assertion that Jesus comes "from below." Born in a stall, he belongs to the lowest social class and lives in opposition to all forms of political, religious, and social domination. His practice of forgiveness offers people freedom from the culture's legalistic morality. He founded a liberated, liberating community characterized by domination-free communication, compassion, solidarity, equality, and responsibility. His sayings about work (e.g., the parable of the laborers in the vineyard, Mt. 20) challenge the presuppositions of a competitive, achievement-oriented society. Moreover, he appears neither to have money nor to pay taxes. Similarly, his "politics" are apparently "anti-politics," a complete rejection of state power (Mk. 10:42).

At times, this rhetoric depicts Jesus as nothing less than an alternative group member. "If we were to translate the charges against Jesus into the language of today's laws, they might be: state-hostile agitation, state-hostile group building [a reference to two East German laws to which the state appealed to threaten alternative groups]."

This Jesus calls people to repentance, i.e., to changing their ways and opposing every form of evil and injustice. He himself constantly challenges every social limit and cultural barrier (*Abgrenzung*) by going to the weak and marginalized. Christian faith today also seeks ways of solidarity and reconciliation "across borders, beyond limits." Christians break taboos and speak the truth. They call for openness, understanding, and trust in place of delimitation. By repudiating the state policy of delimitation, the church would speak a "liberating word" on behalf of the marginalized, promote free and responsible citizenship, and witness to peace. Drawing on the Sermon on the Mount, Christians see that their "first duty . . . is to overcome enmity . . . enmity that has found political form in the practice and principle of

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42 Ibid.
[the state policy of] delimitation."43 In a world threatened by destruction, to follow Christ, in opposition to delimitation, is to stand for life. Repudiating the state policy of delimitation is a "confessional" matter. Through practicing repentance, people assume responsibility for radical political reform and for new moral values equally emphasizing world peace, environmental protection, and Third World justice.44

The alternative groups never simply called for individual freedoms and rights. Rather, freedom was joined to responsibility for their society and world. Only through broad public participation could the state address problems of peace, justice, and the integrity of the creation.45 Moreover, the groups linked to the survival of the nation to the very survival of the world. Problems of peace, justice, and nature were not merely East German but global. By addressing the East German situation, people could also make a global contribution. By opposing the state, they could reclaim their "peace potentiality," which, one group argued, the world would need, if it were to survive.46 By acting on a new vision of peace, justice, and the integrity of the creation, East Germans could address the very crisis of modernity, which the Leninist state has embodied rather than resolved.

Even though the rhetoric of the groups became more narrowly political and less explicitly biblical as they became opposition political parties, it continued to reflect elements of the powerful social vision. All the new opposition parties had a vision of a new kind of society. They sometimes saw themselves as representing a new socialism, a necessary alternative to Western consumerist societies, a "survivable community" in a time of global dangers. Several expressed their commitment to building a "community of solidarity" (solidarische Gemeinschaft). In some cases, they also emphasized the need for a new personal lifestyle, for the sake of the social good and the natural environment.47

The words "social" (relating to social justice) and "ecological" appeared with particular frequency and emphasis in the political rhetoric of the new opposition parties.48 ("Peace," the major issue of the early 1980s, though less emphasized, undoubtedly because of the

43 Aufrisse, 7. Also, see pp. 3–4, 13, 18–19.
44 Ibid., 3, 17. Also, see Ueber das Nein hinaus, 32–33; and Die Opposition in der DDR, 149.
45 Neubert, Reproduktion der Religion; compare the rhetoric of the new opposition parties in Die Opposition in der DDR, 60–61, 69, 85–86.
46 Aufrisse, 9.
47 Die Opposition in der DDR, 30, 34, 43, 59–60, 65, 85.
48 Moreover, "social" and "ecological" are often highlighted together. One opposition group labelled itself "Demokratischer Aufbruch -- sozial, oekologisch" (Democratic Awakening -- social, ecological). The Social Democratic Party called for "an ecologically oriented social democracy." See Die Opposition in der DDR, 86.
relaxing relations between the superpowers, remained important for characterizing defense matters and international relations. Interestingly, the economic area, while addressed, did not initially play a major role in the oppositional rhetoric. Though the economy had many problems and inefficiencies, the East German standard of living was relatively high. Economic reform would be primarily for the sake of expanding individual freedoms and protecting social and ecological priorities.

In sum, the idea of an "alternative community," which found considerable development in East German theological-political thought, also became the central focus of the alternative and opposition groups. Though little interested in the particular theology underlying the church's social vision, they did appropriate key biblical images and themes, especially those relating to the example and teaching of Jesus. Even as the groups left the roof of the church and formed a public opposition, they continued to envision an alternative politics that would build a society similar in character to that envisioned by the church. Confession and repentance would become the basis for a higher responsibility both to the nation and to all mankind.

Wider Implications and Applications

The language of spiritual-moral crisis, confession, repentance, and higher responsibility also finds significant parallels in the opposition, reform movements that have emerged in other Leninist states, though these movements have not often appealed to explicitly religious language. A number of prominent East Bloc opposition leaders, for example, have argued that the crisis of the Leninist system is primarily spiritual-moral. People trade truth and freedom for material security. They submit to the state ideology not out of conviction, but out of a need to deceive themselves about the emptiness and crassness of their lives. They learn to live in a lie.

Vaclav Havel especially has given forceful articulation to the causes and consequences of this way of life.

The profound crisis of human identity brought on by living within a lie, a crisis which in turn makes such a life possible, ... appears, among other things, as a deep moral crisis in society. A person who has been seduced by the consumer value system, whose identity is dissolved in an amalgam of the accoutrements of mass civilization, and who has no roots in the order of being, no sense of responsibility for anything higher than his or her own personal survival, is a demoralized person.

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49 Ibid., 14, 62.

50 Ibid., 16, 36, 63-64, 87.
The system depends on this demoralization, deepens it, is in fact a projection of it into society.\textsuperscript{51}

In response, these movements, like the one in East Germany, have called for spiritual-moral renewal. This "spiritual-moral imperative" has taken different social forms, however. In China, the tone of the students involved in the Tianenman Square protests was nationalistic. They saw the Chinese government as caught in feudalistic patterns and unable to advance national interests. They wanted to save the nation.\textsuperscript{52} Boris Kagarlitsky, a leading Soviet intellectual and dissident, has called for reform for the sake of saving Russian "culture" and renewing the humanistic vision that he finds in Marx.\textsuperscript{53}

In other cases, intellectuals, in a way more similar to East German theological-political rhetoric, have linked spiritual-moral renewal with the very salvation of civilization and the world. Fang Lizhi, the Chinese physicist and dissident, has asked intellectuals to have a strong sense of social responsibility and concern for peoples's physical as well as spiritual-moral needs.\textsuperscript{54} Havel has called for a new sense of social responsibility in a world threatened by scientific-technological domination.\textsuperscript{55}

In calling for social responsibility, these leaders have also articulated a distinctive notion of national identity. In contrast to those who would dismiss Leninism as an alien ideology imposed on the nation from without, they have called for national repentance, i.e., acknowledgement of the entire nation's complicity in the Leninist system. In contrast to those who would support a narrow, even reactionary nationalism, they have called for national commitment to universal, humanistic ideals.

This brief review demonstrates that religious language was not the only language that could help articulate the spiritual-moral concerns of the opposition, reform movements. The fact that religious language did, however, play such a significant role in East Germany undoubtedly had to do with the unique position of the church as a "free space" in which alternative groups could gather. Indeed, as the groups left the church and were able to organize as a public, political opposition, they too appealed to more general moral formulations to articulate their concerns.


\textsuperscript{53} Kagarlitsky, The Thinking Reed.


\textsuperscript{55} Havel, "The Power of the Powerless," 89-92.
Conclusion

This linking of spiritual-moral crisis, confession, repentance, and higher responsibility can make a significant contribution to Christian social ethics in both East and West. For East Bloc thinkers such as Havel have been quick to suggest that the West suffers under its own forms of spiritual impoverishment and moral irresponsibility.\(^56\) As the two Germanies united, East German church leaders too rearticulated these themes as their distinctive contribution to a vision of a new Germany.\(^57\)

In sum, East German theological-political thought suggests three key points. First, Christian social ethics will begin with an analysis of the spiritual impoverishment of the modern situation. It will attend to the degree to which mass consumer society makes "religious" claims, i.e., emphasizes "having" and "achieving" as solutions to anxiety and powerlessness, while in fact creating new forms of anxious dependency and misuse of power. It will critique all ideologies that reduce the meaning of life to a narrow understanding of human reason and control.

Second, Christian social ethics will call people to confession and repentance. Every person in a mass consumer society has succumbed to ideologies of "having" and "achieving" at the expense of peace, justice, and the integrity of the creation. Through confession and repentance, one can seek a new way of life. One can become responsible to a good higher than self-interest or group-interest.

Third, Christian social ethics will contribute to the building of an alternative community capable of responding to problems of peace, justice, and the integrity of the creation. This task begins in the church but has implications for society as a whole. In either case, democratic values, such as openness and participation are not ends in themselves but means to promoting a higher responsibility for life—individually, socially, globally.

Moreover, East German theological-political thought suggests the degree to which Scripture can help describe the nature of this kind of Christian democratic responsibility. It especially reclaims the Sermon on the Mount and interprets it as a social rather than simply sectarian vision.

This remarkable vision that emerged in East German theological-political thought remains a valuable resource to Christian social ethics. Christians in the West would do well


\(^{57}\) See, for example, Christof Ziemer, "Der Lüge widerstehen, die Wahrheit leben," *Die Union Tageszeitung* (July 2, 1990): 4.
not to forget too quickly the charismatic images of people dancing on the Wall. In a time in which Americans hear almost exclusively about economic and political reasons for social change, East Germans and other Eastern Europeans would remind us that history also has a spiritual-moral dimension. Indeed, if they are correct, the very survival of the world--East and West, North and South--depends on our reclaiming it.