

# The Church in East Germany

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The East German government has always preferred obtaining the support and cooperation of the churches to persecution, but the problems of leading a truly Christian life in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) are none the less real for being undramatic. An independent religious community presents not only an ideological challenge to the government, but also a political one, for the clergy have endeavoured to maintain close contacts with their counterparts in the West, and therefore form a potential fifth column to aid the forces of imperialism. In its early years, the East German government was not sufficiently confident of its control over the population to force the churches to commit themselves to the socialist state, but now that the leadership feels itself firmly established, it is applying increasing pressure.

The churches have to a certain extent acquiesced, in order to avoid an all-out attack on their existence. They accepted the formation in 1969 of "The Federation of Protestant Churches in the GDR", although this meant separation from the West German churches, because the Protestant clergy at least retained the strength of organisational unity. For similar reasons, they voted for the formal division of the diocese of Berlin-Brandenburg, because for many years the bishop in West Berlin had been refused permission to enter the Eastern half of the city, and the East needed its own structure of authority in order to negotiate with the state. However, the churches have tried to define the limits of their separation from the West: in the Protestants' report of March 1972 they stressed that, while the government policy of *Abgrenzung* could not be totally resisted, "the Protestant Church in the GDR can be separated from other churches only when these teach or act against the gospel of God's atonement".

The government's view was explained by Albert Norden in October 1972 at the congress of the state-controlled Christian Democrats (CDU - Christian Democratic Union). He told his audience that, in a reactionary class society, the Church was the ally of the ruling minority, but some Christians had seen the need to put spiritual power at the service of the popular struggle and had broken free. They had become citizens of Christian belief in a socialist society, who had nothing in common, either politically or ideologically, with Christians of the imperialist world. The CDU is used by the government to persuade Christians to acknowledge

that justice and peace can come only with socialism, and to abandon any attempt at independent thought. In 1971 the government backed up such exhortations with an unpublished administrative regulation which obliged the churches to seek official permission for any activities outside the regular services. Discussion groups and confirmation classes were the particular objects of state attack, and many of the clergy are still resisting the injunction, despite the heavy fines which they incur.<sup>1</sup> Financially they are dependent on voluntary contributions since they are not allowed to levy an official tax on their congregations. However, 50 per cent of their income comes from West Germany. They are losing their facilities for preaching and teaching, as the state does not often subsidise or even permit the construction or restoration of church buildings. What is more important is that they are losing the younger generation, which receives no religious instruction at school, and is discouraged by teachers and group pressures from obtaining it elsewhere. Entry into the high schools requires "a good record in social involvement and materialist ideology", which often means that otherwise competent Christian students are rejected. Many parents fear to teach their children a religious belief when it could mark them as second-class citizens.

It can be seen that, while the state is persuading the churches to submit to political authority, it is also interfering in the sphere of their religious life, and trying to force them into the ghetto mentality of an isolated cult. The East German clergy are well aware of these pressures, and have protested on several occasions. Bishop Schönherr of the Eastern diocese in Berlin-Brandenburg listed the difficulties in November 1972 (see Appendix) when he spoke of the financial and manpower problems, the unavailability of modern theological texts, and above all, the disadvantages suffered by young people openly professing their faith: "State educational policy has aroused great concern, yes even anger, among a great number of Christian communities. Daily the church leaders are told of pupils not being taken into the high schools, being refused places at university, even when admission was originally granted, and being expelled. We understand that, for reasons of historical justice, the proportion of workers' children among those accepted is high, but we cannot understand why, when not only the freedom of religious belief, but also the comradely and friendly tie between Christian and Marxists is conceded, religious affiliations still have negative consequences."

The Protestants have remarked in the past that the Roman Catholics

<sup>1</sup> It appears from recent information that this regulation has now been quietly dropped by the authorities (Editor's note).

are subject to less state control than they, out of consideration for the government's relations with the Vatican. This is still true to some extent, but over the last year, government organs have begun to call for the integration of the Catholic Church into East German society, at the same time as the Vatican has been pursuing its own version of "Ostpolitik". At present, only the bishopric of Meissen has all of its territory in East Germany: the other administrative areas are all part of dioceses which extend into the West, and only Berlin has its bishop in the East. As the West German bishops have not been allowed to visit their East German congregations for many years, commissioners have been appointed by the Vatican for pastoral care in the East, but the state is now pressing for these to be upgraded into apostolic administrators, with the eventual aim of creating separate dioceses. The official line now, as reported by the CDU newspaper *Neue Zeit*, is that – "The Catholic Church in the GDR, which is a sovereign state, should no longer be dependent on institutions in the GFR" or "What is rooted in the treaty on relations between East and West Germany applies to the Church as well". Furthermore, East Germany insists on a new legal agreement with Rome, as it will not see itself as the inheritor of the Reich Concordat made by the Pope with Hitler.

The problem of episcopal boundaries may be one which concerns the East German government and the West German bishops more than the East German Catholics themselves. Like the Protestants, they are prepared to accept organisational conformity to state requirements if that means that their pastoral activities will be left unhindered. Their immediate concern is to combat atheism: between 1950 and 1964 the declared Protestant proportion of the population fell from 80.5 per cent to 59.3 per cent and the Catholic community from 11 per cent to 8.1 per cent. Indeed the problems and the attitudes taken towards them are similar for all East German Christians, although they as yet seem unable to unite in their endeavours. Their view is that the Church can live within a socialist society without denying God, and in fact has a responsibility to engage itself in that society. Bishop Fränkel expressed this in a lecture he gave in Görlitz in March 1973: "Matters become especially distressing when the desire to conform politically is coupled with the warning to limit ourselves to the 'purely religious' – the Church is brought into a crippling situation of insincerity and unreliability. . . . The Church cannot limit itself to the care of the past and of pure worship, and allow itself to be confined in its public witness to the agreeable part of the truth." Christians should support the state in the search for justice, but be prepared to criticise its shortcomings too, even at the price of personal

advancement. As Bishop Fränkel said on another occasion: "We are trying to maintain loyalty to our state as the Gospel commands us, but to do so in the freedom which Christ gave us." The churches have shown willingness to cooperate with the state in matters other than those of faith, and have even accepted that they should not forbid young people to take part in the state dedication ceremony (*Jugendweihe*), yet their members still find themselves at a disadvantage within society. It is this harassment which causes churchmen to be pessimistic about the future, since those articles of the constitution which guarantee freedom of worship seem to count for little. Article 39 states that "Each citizen of the GDR has the right to profess a religious faith and to take part in religious activities." Maybe Christians in East Germany are not openly persecuted for their faith, but there is no doubt that they suffer for it.

## *Appendix*

SPEECH BY BISHOP SCHÖNHERR

*This report was made by Bishop Schönherr to the East Berlin synod on the occasion of his election as Bishop of East Berlin and the surrounding province on 4 November 1972. Although concerned about the particular problems of divided Berlin, he spoke mainly about the difficulties faced by all the churches in East Germany . . . namely discrimination against Christian students, and the limitations imposed on the church's social activities, despite the state's assurances that members were free to be "socialist citizens of Christian belief".*

The relationship of the organs of state with the church leadership has witnessed an improvement since the founding of the Federation of Protestant Churches. This is shown for example in the fact that it is now easier to take part in ecumenical meetings or visits. . . . The basic questions underlying the existence of Christian churches in a socialist state are being discussed. The talk between the State Secretary for Church Affairs and the executive committee of the Federation on 26 June was especially important. Although the views of the government representative were not particularly flexible, lucidity seems to us more helpful than distortion and ambiguity. We hope to continue the discussion in as courteous a fashion as it has begun.

Among the statements of the State Secretary, two matters were mentioned which have constantly given rise to difficulties. His remarks did not show any fundamental change of view. State educational policy has aroused great concern, yes even anger, among a large number of Christian communities. Daily the church leaders are told of pupils not being taken into the high schools, being refused places at university, even when admission was originally granted, and being expelled. We understand that, for reasons of historical justice, the proportion of workers' children among those accepted is high, but we cannot understand why, when not only the freedom of religious belief but also the comradely

and friendly tie between Christians and Marxists is conceded, religious affiliations still have negative consequences. Now there are even Christians who are ready to work for and support their socialist state, and do so at all times, yet who for reasons of conscience do not want to take up arms or join the Youth Association, which requires a full commitment to Marxist-Leninism, with all its ideological implications. In many cases, this attitude is clearly considered when it is being decided whether the parental home offers the guarantee of a socialist upbringing, or whether the father or mother should be able to belong to the Parents' Association. A considerable number of Christian parents, including the clergy, gladly take up this form of social activity, because they can give genuine help to backward children in an inconspicuous way. Although the other parents realise this, in many cases, clearly following central directions, they have barred them from membership of their Association. . . . The responsible officials in our society should consider whether our state does not harm itself when it bars the way to capable and willing young people who could serve the whole community. .

The other point which the State Secretary mentioned on 26 June had already been the object of discussion on 5 January this year. It is to do with the law on meetings. . . . The administration of the decree has shown – we are referring in particular to events in the district of Perleberg – that the distinction between meetings which need and need not be registered is understood in the sense of practices which are purely liturgical or which contain other elements and are therefore to be controlled. We have nothing to hide. On notices and information sheets, and from the church pulpits, we make our activities known. Yet we cannot concede that because, for example, a religious service is fuller and more unconventional than usual . . . it is no longer a religious service and must therefore be registered. It has always been the exclusive right of the church leadership to watch over the administration of the liturgy. As for the content of church assemblies, it must be said again: because biblical texts elucidate human life in all its aspects, because in the church the commandment to love God and one's neighbour applies, and because there are the first and second tables of the Ten Commandments – sermons, bible study, community evenings and youth groups must concern themselves not only with prayer, but also with the themes of family and marriage (4th and 6th Commandments), the preservation of human life, (5th Commandment), property (7th Commandment), and honest witness (8th Commandment). Naturally the communities will have to take care that they do not neglect the relevance of these topics to the Christian message, and do not give rise to misinterpretations or false expectations by choosing divisive themes. . . .

The church leadership is pleased that a number of requests for residence permits in Berlin have been granted; it regrets that others have been refused, although communal living space would not have been taken up. . . . The Federation of Protestant Churches in the GDR has tried at the synods of Eisenach and Dresden to express the position of a church bound to the confession of Christ in a socialist society. It has become clear that this will be a wearying and difficult task.