

The Luther Quincentenary in the GDR

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The Protestant Church in the GDR began preparations for the Luther celebrations as long ago as 1978. An appropriate motto, "Fear God, love and trust Him above all things" (taken from Luther's own small catechism) was chosen and announced. Plans were made to hold seven separate *Kirchentage*¹ each attended by 10,000 to 100,000 people. It is significant that the Church's special Committee to prepare for the Luther anniversary (which represented all the main Protestant bodies except the Free Churches in the GDR) was set up in 1978. On 6 March that year there had been a meeting between Erich Honecker, Chairman of the Council of Ministers, and a church delegation headed by Bishop Albrecht Schönherr, the then Bishop of Berlin-Brandenburg; certain agreements had emerged, and it was felt in some quarters that the meeting foreshadowed a new era of understanding between State and Church. At the same time, certain churchmen professed to see a new style of socialist "Established Church" emerging from the discussions. Schönherr himself, in a much-quoted statement, emphasised that the worth of the new relationship could be tested only by events.

The Church's work of planning had been under way for eighteen months when, on 13 June 1980, the formation of another body, the (state) Martin Luther Committee of the GDR, was announced. The new committee had a hundred members, and its task was to analyse and celebrate the social, economic, political and cultural aspects of the reformer's work. The importance attached to the new body by the regime was made clear by the appointment of Erich Honecker himself as its chairman, and of Gerald Götting² (Vice-Chairman of the Council of Ministers) as his deputy. Apart from appointing four ecclesiastics whose brief was to observe and liaise with the State Committee's work (Bishops Krusche and Leich and Drs Rogge and Zeddies), the Church committee continued to make plans independently, emphasising that it was concerned only with the religious dimensions of Luther's work.

There is no denying that the image of Luther presented by the State Committee during the years after 1980 had novel features. However, though it has been suggested that the new portrait was a crass contradic-

tion of that current during the early years of the GDR, the nature of the change has been exaggerated by most observers. True, a school textbook in 1958 described Luther's standpoint as follows:

The reformation programme of Luther, and the attitude he adopted at the Diet of Worms, demonstrate that he aimed at the reformation of the Church with the help of and in the interests of the nobility. He had no thoughts of any basic change in economic and political relationships, or of any improvement in the living conditions of the masses. His only aim was to do away with feudalism in its clerical guise. The revolt of the peasants filled him with fear, and he attempted to calm them down. All these factors estranged him from the masses. The true representative of the revolutionary forces was Thomas Müntzer [. . .]³

Despite these deprecatory comments, however, the same textbook had introduced Luther as the "national herald of the German people". While admitting that the ninety-five theses were basically academic in nature, the book declared that:

The people saw in the theses an attack on the Catholic Church, and therefore they had the effect of a "spark in a powder-barrel" (Friedrich Engels) [. . .] The theses were translated into the German language and swiftly distributed throughout Germany. Luther received an enormous degree of support from all sections of the populace [. . .] Backed by the popular movement, he refused to withdraw what he had written [. . .]⁴

The official description of Luther, as it emerged during the 1980s, did not contradict the foregoing in any significant respect; it was never denied, for example, that he opposed the cause of the peasants in 1525. It was, however, astonishing that extraordinary prominence should be given to Luther in "Karl Marx Year", and that the mere "herald of the German people" should be proclaimed by Erich Honecker himself as "one of the greatest sons of the German people".

A number of different reasons have been advanced for the new image of the reformer. It is not enough to point to the many millions in hard currency contributed to the GDR's coffers by the pilgrims of 1983: the economic aspect cannot have been far from the thoughts of the state planners, but it can hardly have been the deciding factor. Some official spokesmen, indeed, claim that the celebrations will entail a financial loss to the State. The Church's intention of holding a Luther celebration, declared at so early a stage, doubtless influenced state policy-makers. The idea of a joint celebration, in which the state organisers might well have hoped to become the senior partners, found no favour with church

leaders. In these circumstances it would have been difficult indeed to let 1983 pass without any kind of Marxist counterblast. After all, the secular authorities could argue very plausibly that the life and work of Luther (however devoted he was to his faith) had an enormous effect on social and economic affairs, on politics, on literature (particularly through his translation of the Bible), on music, and on culture in general, and that it would be perfectly appropriate to commemorate these achievements apart from the religious aspect. Indeed, it is perfectly logical from the regime's point of view that — once the decision had been taken that Luther was a vitally important figure in German history — his career and personality should be analysed in terms of orthodox dialectical materialism, for this method would be seen as the only valid method of getting at the truth. It was therefore inevitable that he should be seen in some respects as a “progressive” and in others as a “reactionary” figure — a man with the natural characteristics of his class and age: “the tragedy of Luther lies in the fact that he was rooted in the contradiction between his role as the initiator of a great revolutionary movement, and his own inability to recognise its social justification.”⁵ The State Committee had, of course, no interest in an academic historical exercise. Its aim was to use the name and moral authority of the reformer in the service of current policy. In view of these facts, it is not in the least surprising that the church leaders proved unwilling to be involved in any kind of joint celebration.

Despite the reluctance of churchmen to collaborate, the religious celebration could not be entirely independent. Co-operation between Church and State was inevitable if the ambitious church plans were to be realised; official assistance was essential in organising special buses and trains for the various *Kirchentage*, for the use of radio and television, the provision of overnight accommodation and special supplies of food, the provision of publicly-owned premises for church use and the millions of marks provided out of public funds for the restoration of churches and Luther sites owned by the Church. During 1983 church spokesmen publicly and gratefully acknowledged such help given by the State; in the circumstances, it would have been dishonest as well as unwise if they had failed to do so. State leaders no doubt trusted that thousands of visitors from overseas, largely unaware of the subtleties of church-state relationships in the GDR, would be impressed by the gratitude being expressed to the authorities by the Church, by the seemingly astonishing measure of publicity given to a Christian reformer by a socialist government, and by the apparently wide scope of the Church's activities. Such visitors would conclude that most Christians give unqualified support to the regime, that the State supports and encourages the Church, and that there is a happy and harmonious relationship between the two. Of course, there may have been a number of members of the party who were convinced that the Luther celebrations (irrespective of their propaganda value) would

significantly improve relationships between Church and State. Few of those in authority are deceived by the cosy official propaganda; they understand the tension that exists between Marxists and believers, and would like to see the situation improved.

Perhaps the most significant factor in the State's decision to take part in the Lutheran celebrations is the so-called "search for historical roots". The GDR has always claimed to be the true heir of all that is "socialist" in German history. In recent years, however, a much broader definition has emerged of all that is "progressive" and "reactionary". Great figures in culture like Goethe, Schiller, Beethoven, Handel and Bach have been claimed as antecedents, the argument being that their "humanistic" heritage is given a living expression in the GDR (as opposed to being disfigured, as in the Federal Republic). Frederick the Great, Clausewitz, Scharnhorst and Gneisenau have all received favourable mention recently, and fulsome praise has been accorded to Heine, Wagner and Einstein. In such a climate of opinion a reappraisal of Martin Luther was inevitable.

When the Church's preparations for the quincentenary began, there were some Christians who felt that the festivities would have little or nothing to do with reality — "a mere commemoration of dead traditions", as one GDR churchman succinctly prophesied. From the very first, therefore, the church planners strove to compile a programme that would underscore the relevance of Luther's theology to the problems of the GDR in 1983. They concentrated on the seven *Kirchentage* during the spring and summer: at Erfurt (12-15 May), Rostock (10-12 June), Eisleben (17-19 June), Frankfurt-an-der-Oder (17-19 June), Magdeburg (23-27 June), Dresden (7-10 July), and finally at Wittenberg (22-25 September). In this way all parts of the GDR were covered, with four of the centres (Erfurt, Eisleben, Magdeburg and Wittenberg) being specially associated with Luther's life. The programme for the Dresden *Kirchentag* is typical:

Dare To Trust — In Order That We Can Live

You are invited to take part in one of ten groups, which will begin and end with plenary sessions.

Discussions in groups of about fifteen people — Bible study in discussion groups — meditations — praying and singing together — creative possibilities — counselling — opportunities for children. Communion services in the host churches on Thursday evening. Programmes in speech, music and prayer on Friday evening.

On Saturday:

Special events for children and young people

Special opportunities for visitors

A chance to meet other people
“Market of possibilities” — exhibitions.

On Sunday:

Separate services in all the parishes of Dresden, followed by a special programme in three centres.

Main assembly in the Elbe meadows.⁶

Plans were made for a final assembly of about one hundred thousand people. The attendance may have exceeded this figure, and was certainly the largest number attending a church gathering in the GDR for thirty years.

Comparison of reports on the various *Kirchentage* in the secular GDR press with newspaper items appearing in the West reveals the difficult position of the GDR's Protestant Church very clearly. A GDR agency report on the Dresden *Kirchentag*, for example, stated:

[. . .] The address was given by Kurt Domsch, President of the Saxony regional church office, who said that the threat of the fatal destruction of a nuclear war had to be prevented. Speaking at a reception, Hans Joerke, acting Mayor of Dresden, said that the fate of Dresden must never be repeated. Regional Bishop Johannes Hempel and Johannes Cieslak, Chairman of the regional committee of the church congress, praised the state authorities' generous support in the preparation and holding of the congress.⁷

A report in *The Times*, however, ran as follows:

Church leaders declared their support for East German pacifists here yesterday as more than 100,000 people gathered in the biggest Lutheran rally in this country since 1954 [. . .] The Church said that they would continue supporting young East Germans who refused induction into the armed services, a crime punishable by jail. The bishop [Hempel] said Christians must reject the Leninist principle of just and unjust wars in the light of today's atomic weapons. The church would never bless weaponry, he said.⁸

Both reports are misleading. It is, perhaps, unreasonable to expect the press to dwell on the vital but unspectacular work of the *Kirchentage*: the countless hours of unpaid labour put in by members of parishes and special committees in preparation for the arrival of tens of thousands of visitors, the long periods of prayer and worship, the sessions spent wrestling with difficult passages in the Bible, the imaginative arrangements made for children, the original and sometimes inspiring quality of Christian art on display, the hundreds of young people confronted for the first time with the Gospel, and so forth. The public speeches deserve care-

ful study. For example, Manfred Stolpe, the East Berlin Consistorial President, emphasised that the reports of many western media were less than helpful to the Church in the GDR. He objected to the way in which the Church's function as critic was constantly highlighted, for it is not and does not claim to be a focus of opposition to the regime. Bishop Hempel asserted that the Church was anxious, on the basis of the Gospel, to discuss any subject with the state authorities. Practical difficulties were created at the Dresden *Kirchentag* by the notion of the "Church in Socialism": the Church could not undertake to give support for minority groups which, professing only the most nebulous loyalty to Christian principles, wished to use the *Kirchentag* as a vehicle for the expression of their views. The Church disowned at least two such minority groups at Dresden. Valour was in evidence, however, as well as discretion. Support was expressed in various ways for two prisoners (Youth Deacon Lothar Rochau, arrested in June, and Roland Jahn, expelled to West Berlin about the same time*). Problems of education and of the rights of conscientious objectors were also discussed openly. The *Kirchentag* served to bring to the fore some of the chief questions which inevitably cause conflict between the Church and a Marxist regime, for example, the difficulties of bringing up children according to the Christian faith, discrimination against believers, and the approach to peace and war.

The principal aim of the final *Kirchentag* (held appropriately at Wittenberg) was to explore, on the basis of the words of Luther, seven current theological issues. These were:

- 1) Understanding of the Bible;
- 2) Faith as the basis of our life;
- 3) The freedom of a Christian;
- 4) Confession and pastoral affairs;
- 5) The worshipping community;
- 6) Responsibility in society;
- 7) The renewal of the Church, and the consequences of such renewal.⁹

In preparation for these sessions a special study book *Mit Luther im Gespräch* (Discussions with Luther)¹⁰ was published by the Church. Clearly, a range of topics was covered; there was no special concentration on sensitive areas, but no attempt was made to avoid them. To take just one example of the latter; the seventh edition contains the questions:

As regards the question of persuasion and force, Luther was at pains to distance himself from the positions of Andreas Karl-

*Rochau was sentenced on 16 September 1983 to three years imprisonment for anti-State activity; Jahn was arrested in September 1982 and expelled to West Berlin in June 1983: it is believed that his peace activities were the reason.

stadt and Thomas Münzter. What should be our attitude to this controversy?

Is the question of truth, even in the Church, a question of power?

Are there still "heretics" in the Church?

How do we deal with "heretics" today?

Or in another section:

For centuries the Church has claimed power in a political sense, citing theological grounds for so doing. In this way the Church has obscured its true role.

In the GDR there is separation of State and Church. In what way can and should the Church operate in the political sphere?

On other occasions Marxist writers are cited, including the "Theses concerning Martin Luther";¹¹ one section quoted articles from the Constitution of the GDR. There is therefore every reason to think that the Church has been willing to face the burning issues of the moment in connection with basic biblical and theological problems.

The state Martin Luther committee, like the church committee, made no secret of its desire to make the celebrations as relevant as possible to the major issues of the day, but all too often a woodenly stereotyped presentation resulted. Certain Marxist quotations were encountered again and again, for example, that of Engels:

He did not only cleanse the Augean stable of the Church, but also that of the German language; he created modern German prose, and composed the text and melody of that triumphant hymn which became the *Marseillaise* of the sixteenth century.¹²

Almost every exhibition mounted under the auspices of the State Committee insisted that Luther, as the initiator of the fight against feudalism, led directly to the revolution of the Netherlands against Spain, to the English revolution and thus to 1917.

When questioned about individual freedom and the rights of conscience (with Luther's celebrated declaration at the Diet of Worms in mind) Erich Honecker insisted that the reformer, in seemingly following his own conscience, was in fact embodying the "progressive" view of his time. The tradition in which Luther stood, in Honecker's understanding, is significant:

The bow is stretched from Spartacus to Danton and Robespierre, through Janusz Korczak, Pastor Paul Schneider and Father Maximilian Kolbe and thus to Georgi Dimitroff and Ernst Thälmann. Naturally their attitudes are of importance in grasping the modern conception of freedom, which attains real meaning only in socialist society.¹³

In the same interview Honecker was at pains to emphasise the common interests of Marxists and Christians:

The meeting of 6 March 1978 stressed the continuity of our policy. We are always interested in church-state relations that are sincere, constructive, based on trust and in accordance with the Constitution. Undoubtedly the events of 1983 have emphasised the rightness of the 1978 meeting. Nobody stood to benefit from any other kind of development, least of all citizens of Christian faith, who help — by means of their constant daily labour — to build socialist society in the “Motherland of the Reformation”. They are respected citizens of our State, with the same rights and duties as everyone else”.¹³

Honecker’s peroration continued inevitably:

A policy of working for the benefit of the whole people, which we have in the GDR, is wholly in line with the basic desires of Christians [. . .] In particular, we receive the support of believers in avoiding the danger of a nuclear world war; this is the principal task that confronts humanity today”.¹³

The consequences of the Luther celebration in the GDR are not simple to assess. There are some churchmen who regard the whole affair as a meaningless exercise in public relations: “*Parturient montes, nascetur ridiculus mus*”.¹⁴ Unquestionably 1983 has brought forth a great deal of hollow ritual and empty speech-making, but this is not the end of the story. There has been real co-operation between Church and State. Enquiries made among unsophisticated church members have almost always revealed a favourable view of the Luther Year: “after all, we got a new church door out of it”, said one — and this was not at a major Luther site. In less tangible ways the morale of the Church, low in some isolated country places and many new housing estates, has increased. The arrival of large crowds of foreigners, some of them sympathetic pilgrims, has given a degree of inspiration. Despite the obligatory Marxist glosses, even the state presentations have brought a number of GDR citizens, to whom until 1983 Luther was a mere name, into direct contact with the work of the reformer; indeed, credit must be given to the State Committee for the painstaking and honest quality of the Luther exhibitions at Wittenberg and elsewhere. Among the 250,000 or more visitors to the seven *Kirchentage* there must have been many, particularly young people, who were faced for the first time with the demands of the Gospel. Nor should we forget the readiness of many Roman Catholics, particularly some leading churchmen, to reassess the reformer’s significance. A number of quiet new contacts between Protestants and Roman Catholics might be recorded as some of the gains of 1983.

Whether or not 1983 has marked a decisive stage in church-state relations only future years can tell. What is certain is that the picture of happy harmony painted by many state and a few church spokesmen is very far from the truth. All the signs point to a continuation of the now familiar GDR policy — of handling affairs in a highly pragmatic manner, side by side with pious declarations of Marxist orthodoxy. The Church has not used 1983 as an occasion for blunting the edge of its message. The very fact that the Church can display, with impunity, such a measure of virility and independence, based on the Gospel, is evidence of a not too unhealthy state of society. The moral authority of the Church can scarcely be disregarded by party leaders. Of course, the chosen path summed up by the term “The Church in Socialism” involves constant pitfalls. The experiences of 1983 underline the fact that the Protestant leaders can never relax.

¹“Church Day” — an occasion, sometimes lasting several days, when Lutherans assemble for worship, prayer, music, Bible-study, youth activities, discussions, exhibitions and other activities.

²A Roman Catholic churchman — leader of the GDR’s Christian Democratic Union.

³*Mittelalter, Beginn der Neuzeit* (History textbook for senior schools in the GDR). Berlin: Volk und Wissen Volkseigener Verlag, 1958.

⁴*Ibid.*

⁵From an interview with Honecker by a representative of the GDR periodical *Lutherische Monatshefte*, published in *Neues Deutschland*, 6 October 1983.

⁶From the official programme “*Vertrauen wagen — Kirchentage in der DDR im Lutherjahr 1983*”.

⁷*Allgemeine Deutsche Nachrichtenagentur* (central news agency for the GDR), 7-10 July 1983.

⁸*The Times* 11 July 1983.

⁹*Loc. cit.* (see note 6).

¹⁰*Mit Luther im Gespräch*. Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1983.

¹¹Produced under the supervision of Professor Bartel in preparation for the philosophical assessment of Luther.

¹²Quoted by Wolfgang Landgraf in *Martin Luther, Reformator und Rebell*. Berlin: Verlag Neues Leben, 1981.

¹³From interview with Honecker, *loc. cit.*

¹⁴“The mountains are in labour; a ridiculous mouse will be born” (Horace, 65-8 B.C.).