

# THE CURRENT STATUS OF THE DIALOGUE BETWEEN CHRISTIANS AND MARXISTS IN THE G.D.R. CONCERNING ETHICS

by Helmut Fritzsche

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dialogues in nine U.S.A. cities which he and three of his colleagues from the university conducted from September 15 to October 29, 1989. These remarks were written prior to the transformations that took place a few weeks after their tour.

Abstract:

Part one, starting with the establishment of a Center for Peace and Dialogue at Rostock University in Spring 1989, delivers a survey of dialogue activities in the GDR and Hungary, in connection with other developments in socio-political and church life in the GDR.

Part two develops theoretical reflections about the chances and limits of a dialogue, respectively a discourse between Marxism and Christianity today. Both camps are challenged by the world-wide crisis of humankind's "instrumental reason." The two sides are aware of particular crisis in their own hitherto approaches to the essential questions of humanity. Will they succeed entering into a discourse in benefit of the people living in socialism and the entire world? It remains an open question.

Part three makes a case for a communicative or discourse ethics to be a modern kind of humans' cooperation regarding the moral point of view in socio-political issues.

This paper will begin with a description and end with an analysis. The first part will describe various kinds of dialogue taking place in the context of the present multilayered and tense relations between the churches and official society in the GDR. The second theoretical part will try to analyze these phenomena, asking whether the two sides are in fact ready and able to enter into a dialogue with each other, which may very well prove to be essential for the further development of society, institutionalized religion, and culture in the socialist world.

## **I. The Dialogue as an Element in the Relations Between the Church and Official Society in the GDR**

1. In April 1989 at the University of Rostock we founded a University Center for Peace and Understanding. Its sponsors are the Departments of Theology, Marxism-Leninism, and Latin America Studies. The latter is taking part because it is developing a research

program into the theology of liberation. The University Center is the first such institute in the life of the university or of GDR society in general in which Marxists and theologians may address each other as peers in trying to come to an understanding concerning world views or as the marxists like to put it, questions of ideology. A professor of Marxism and a professor of theology are its equally ranked co-presidents.

The Center's research focuses on the dialogue between Christians and Marxists in the GDR and around the world. The dialogue must be approached as one not for its own sake but in connection, on the one hand, with the much-needed efforts to reach understanding across and beyond international borders and systems today and, on the other hand, with the need for a basic social consensus within the GDR. "The unity of dialogue without and within" is valid for our Research Center too, to take a formula that Rolf Reissig applies to a focal point of current sociological work in the GDR. Thus we have agreed to do research together on, among other points, conditions for the internal as well as external peace of the nation, religion, the socialist understanding of society, and the question of responsibility.

Another dialogue program is the conference series, "Guestrow Colloquys," begun by Rostock University in the early 80s. Marxist theoreticians, university and seminary theology professors, and specialists in the humanities come together every other year to hold a dialogue on questions of ethics. Its fifth meeting that met in 1989 took up issues related to teaching peace in the GDR educational system. A previous meeting concerned ethics in medicine, with special attention to intensive care and the artificial prolongation of life. Earlier colloquys had to do with issues of personality development and the behavioral sciences.

A third dialogue program deserves mention. It is organized by Rostock's theology department in cooperation with the Federation of Evangelical Churches in the GDR and seminaries in Hungary; it is called the "Conference of Systematic Theologians from Socialist Countries," and it meets regularly with Marxists from both the countries involved. Its fifth meeting this year was built around the theme "New Thinking and Dialogue." In this conference series the discussions not only turn on the different courses of development within socialist countries but also on the effect that international developments between East and West have on the dialogue between Christianity and Marxism.

A core of about sixty theologians, and most of them from the younger generation, is grouped around the three dialogues named. They come from universities as well as the various church institutions and are joined by about twenty-five Marxists social scientists. These disproportionate numbers are not an indication of relative interest. On the Marxist side there are simply still too few who consider themselves competent to participate in such dialogue. The conferences do not take place behind closed doors. The state's media as well as the churches' report them thoroughly, albeit the response to them in public organs other than the churches' is at present greater than in the GDR.

2. At roughly the same time as the university was getting ready to open its Center for Peace and Understanding, controversy erupted in the GDR over the announced re-founding of a Free Thinkers League. The goal of the League is to be a help for everyday living, which is natural enough in view of the more than fifty percent of the GDR population which subjectively and objectively has cut itself off from the church. Help of this sort is without a doubt a problem of first-rank political relevance. The increase in alcoholism (the only obtainable drug in the GDR), a considerable suicide rate, (though hard to establish with any exactitude in the dim light of officially published statistics), and finally the continuing high number of divorces (around 40% of married couples) signal worrisome instabilities in carrying out our personal lives and consequent problems for upcoming generations. These phenomena show that, to say the least, in the GDR no less than in other comparable modern industrial states the stabilizing power of traditional life orientation is dissolving, and we have not been able to make up for this lack. Using a very broad concept of religion, one might say that the founding of the Free Thinkers League points to a growing religious deficit. It remains an open question whether linking up with the Free Thought tradition will in fact have this desired effect.

In the second decade of this century Free Thinkers Leagues were known to be the culminating points of anti-religious and anti-church polemics, to which the churches replied with scarcely less questionable answers. These memories lead to concern in the GDR today over whether the announced re-founding of the leagues has a new edition of old controversies as its goal. Thus the Mecklenburg church weekly has published in May remarks on a Free Thinkers League paper under the title "The Spirit of Yesteryear?" and comments on it saying, "the result achieved by the talk between state (E.Honecker) and church (A. Schoenherr) on March 6,1978," - generally understood as having opened up the possibility of dialogue in the relations between Christians and Marxists in the GDR - "dare not be mistaken for scrap paper by anybody on either side." Naturally, one must await his or her practice before drawing a judgment upon this latest edition of the Free Thinkers League. Nonetheless, this side of current reality must also be kept in view when speaking about the dialogue underway in the GDR today.

3. The new candor at least hinted at in this brief citation from the Mecklenburg church weekly points to yet another important phenomenon of relevance to us. That is the ever more concrete stands taken by church synods, leadership committees, theological study groups and, not least, the ecclesiastical media themselves on domestic and foreign problems.

In contrast to relations prevailing in other socialist countries, GDR churches have been able to maintain a relatively broad framework of organizational autonomy and hence a free space for their own independent pronouncements on the life of the church and society. This amount of elbow room was noticeably enlarged by the above-mentioned accord in 1978. The rights guaranteed at that time and on the whole preserved until today respecting a limited access to public media have provided the institutional basis for the church's astonishing return to the public's awareness in the GDR despite its dwindling membership.

Until the 1970s there were scarcely any churchly pronouncements worth mentioning on international national policy issues in the GDR. That changed abruptly with the arrival of the pan-European peace movement and its acme on account of the missile-stationing debate at the beginning of the 80s. The Protestant churches developed their own peace strategy as their annual synods accepted and broadcast their paper against the Spirit, Logic, and Practice of Deterrence. Borrowing from the Palme Report's slogan "mutual security," they even anticipated essential aspects of Gorbachov's policies, among them the idea of a unilateral disarmament initiative. More chances for GDR citizens to travel abroad, as well as greater trust in domestic affairs, were made the themes of proposals promoting the cause of peace long before such measures became a matter of official GDR policy. Equally persistent themes have been the preserving of human rights to freedom of religion and conscience in the day-to-day life of the GDR, particularly with respect to education, the refusal of the military draft, and the bureaucratic conduct of the authorities.

Addressing issues such as these led of course to new tensions, resulting in the seizure in 1988 of several issues of church weeklies. Nonetheless, they persevered in the new candor. One can point to the latest number of the MKZ in this connection, on the occasion of Sunday's communal elections. They weekly printed a statement of Bishop Leich's under the headline "Be plain in expressing your convictions," in which the bishop struck out against "any fellow-traveling for reasons of personal comfort or opportunism" and ended by saying, "we must avoid even the appearance of purely formal elections, whereby those who get elected wind up with more sayso than those who elected them." In the context of the GDR that is very plain talk, comparable to very little that has been said at any previous election.

4. Finally, there is a phenomenon that is especially important when it comes to dialogue. That is the widespread base-community movement that has grown up in the GDR churches in the last eight years. This is the church rally movement and the conciliar process aimed at preparing the world's assembly on Peace, Justice, and the Preservation of Creation, which has been carried out in no country more intensively than in the GDR. Likewise there are the multi-faceted activities of those groups which operate neither within the church nor at its edges but under its organizational roof. These represent a broad spectrum of groups concerned with peace, the environment, the Third World, women's liberation, and human rights. They compose a picture that is hard to absorb all at once. Again, the assessment varies. It runs the gamut from a very high estimation of them as a renewal movement in the church, whose engagement in behalf of solemn witness should be accepted by the church as a call to repentance, all the way to their condemnation for politicizing the gospel in a manner contrary to the Christian tradition of the churches. It is characteristic not only of these groups but also of the base movement in the churches that the difference between Christians and non-Christians scarcely applies any longer. Very often, for instance in student parishes, those who are not members of any church have become involved because of the free intellectual atmosphere open to them, at the same time that they seek no further confessional link with the church. This fluctuating base is currently one of the central phenomena of the GDR churches.

Consequently, the following three conclusions may be drawn.

1. With respect to dialogue between Christians and Marxists an important question is certainly how great the churches' social and political significance is in socialist countries, especially in the GDR. It is impossible to answer the question precisely and indeed, given the fluctuations in the social base, it could not be clarified even with the use of empirical polls. My own observation would seem to confirm that observers in the West tend to overestimate the churches' actual significance for social developments in the GDR, whereas church members at home are inclined to underrate it. Presumably the right estimate lies somewhere in the middle. Quite apart from the question of current influence, it is important to affirm that their potential influence is considerable. What matters is how the church speaks out in concrete situations.

2. Since the beginning of the 1980s churchly and theological declarations, as well as the pertinent Marxist publications, have expressed the intent to enter into a dialogue about worldviews and to reach a consensus on common goals. There have, to be sure, been talks and forms of collaboration in the past. What is new is that so called "ideological," i.e. world view, questions of the sort that distinguish Marxists and Christians from one another as well as unite them have themselves become the theme of such discussions. Some of the Marxists who have been heard from are above all the authors Kleim, Olof Klohr, Hans Lutter, and Welsch. On the theologians' side, last year Manfred Stolpe whom the GDR news agency ADN attacked sharply a short while ago, worked up "Ten rules for the conduct of Marxists and Christians in dialogue." Among these: do not dispute the other's rights to exist; respect the fact that the other is not there to be converted and respect the other side's potential as well as their limits. This brief reference to what has appeared in print may serve to show that, among the base in parishes and groups as well as in both Marxist and theological publications, the dialogue has a real place in the GDR.

3. In conclusion the dialogue between Marxism and Christianity is closely intertwined with global human issues. Although I have depicted life as lived in the GDR as the *Sitz-im-Leben* of dialogue, it should not be seen in isolation. In the long run it is international developments, coming along on a broader scale, that are going to jolt us into dialogue. Nor can one forget the ways in which humanity continues to endanger its own existence nor the effects of Gorbachov's politics of dialogue. Finally, it is essential to keep in mind in this regard that world religions in general and fundamentalism in particular are more and more becoming a political factor, as is apparent not least in the Soviet Union.

## **II. Reflections on the Theory of Marxist-Christian Dialogue, in Particular Between Marxist and Christian Ethicists.**

In the second theoretical part the question concerns the general, intellectual conditions, possibilities, perspectives, and methods of communicative encounter between Marxism and Christianity at the end of the decade of the 1980s with a view to a culture of cooperation of one kind or another.

To begin the following two questions must be considered:

1. Are Christians and Marxists today ready and able to enter into dialogue with one another in the GDR and worldwide? This does not mean the dialogical competence of individual persons measured by what they bring with them in terms of the necessary subjective openness plus some knowledge of their opposite number. By capacity for dialogue on the part of Christianity and Marxism, is meant something fundamental, namely the capacity, given one's own basic doctrinal views and whatever room they leave for maneuvering, to seek a consensus with one's partner and to let oneself be questioned and corrected without thereby losing one's identity but, on the contrary finding it renewed.

2. Is there some sense in trying to focus the discussion on common goals and tasks, or, as the Marxist theoretician Hans Lutter recently phrased it, a "community responsibility"? In what follows I shall like to state just how far I can answer both questions with a cautious and, with a view to future developments, a rather hesitant "Yes." For the undeniable fact is that both--that is the question as to either side's capacity for dialogue as well as the question as to the meaningfulness of looking for concerns of which we might reach consensus--are hotly contested, and by both camps. Marxists doubt the capacity for dialogue of Christians, the church, or religion in general as much as the theologians doubt that of Marxists who operate in the institutional framework of Marxism-Leninism. At any rate, the meaningfulness of possible dialogue is challenged to the extent that the latter is felt either to undermine the Party's claim to ideological leadership or to draw the churches onto a political terrain where they have no business being. For those who disparage dialogue in the GDR are not at all the theologians of the opposition; they are rather those who have made their peace with the amicable divorce and property settlement now obtained between church and state under the aegis of Communism.

My careful "Yes" then is not to be understood as representing the theology of the GDR nor as referring to its Marxism. I do hold, however, that my position can lead to consensus within the compass of the dialogue program outlined above and indeed has emerged out of it.

Are then both capable of dialogue, and does such a dialogue make sense?

Involuntarily and fatefully brought together as they were through the evolution of history, through the crimes of the Nazi era and through the Second World War, the liberation from National Socialism, the geographical situation of Central Europe, and the politics of certain personages such as Stalin and Adenauer, both partners are now capable of dialogue with each other in view of their respective political, social, and intellectual premises.

Again, dialogue between the two is possible and moreover has already begun. What it will lead to depends on the moral will of both parties, Christians as well as Marxists, which is to say on whether they can derive the requisite moral force from their respective positions. Success will depend, too, on certain political conditions on the circumference, that is, developments in the international situation, detente, economic factors, and in the end on what you here in the West do or do not do.

Hence, dialogue is both possible and open. This view of the matter coincides with that of the Marxists who are saying in the GDR that Christian-Marxist dialogue has the backing of the laws of history. Their formulation is, of course, to be understood strictly in terms of the Marxist theory of history, which means roughly that dialogue and its success have become an irreversible tendency in history, irreversible, to be sure, on account of Marxist historical optimism. Our intellectual paths part here. Contrary to many Marxists, I hold the downfall of dialogue or severe setbacks in it to be just as likely as the collapse of human civilization in general. Marxists are often times greater "believers" than Christians.

I was speaking with a Marxist in our circles the other day who was given to using the formula, "Dialogue between Marxists and believers." I told him that I did not like the formula. In contradistinction to the English and American term "believer," German "Gläubiger" sounds condescending and means roughly "naive" or what we often call "wide-eyed," just as it has a disparaging ring in popular speech when talk is of a "Communist true believer" (in sense of credulous, gullible). That convinced him. He too now speaks of Marxist-Christian dialogue.

The more detailed position may now be developed in three parts, having in mind the questions, What is dialogue? Why is it possible? How open is it?

1. What is dialogue? For the currently popular notion of dialogue I substitute the concept of understanding or of reaching understanding. This is the sense incorporated in our German word "Verständigung." E. O. Apelt and Juergen Habermas have worked out its content in various connections such as in "community of understanding," "ethical discourse," "communicative action" and "understanding oriented action," or, as a catch-all, "communicative reason." I propose the substitution of "understanding" for "dialogue." I presented this concept as a partial bridge between Marxism and Christianity or between Marxists and Christians in my introductory lecture "Dialogue and Understanding" at the opening colloquy at the University Center mentioned at the beginning of my talk. Understanding (in this connection I would just as soon use the concept, the "culture of understanding") describes the normative content of genuine dialogue between Christians and Marxists or any such interlocutors.

Dialogue, respectively discourse, is one of the three kinds of regular conflict resolution, contrary to a resolution of a conflict by violation. The other two kinds of regular conflict resolution are use of legal power and negotiations. To settle a conflict by legal power is necessary in every body politics. The problems are the adequacy of the means used by the people in power and the legitimation of the power using instances at all. Negotiations are speech acts in order to reaching compromises. Negotiations are necessary and meaningful in all cases in which the rules, laws, and institutions for settling conflicts are a framework more than a maneuvering selfevident for the people concerned.

Discourses are speech-acts oriented to reaching a free consensus of all the people concerned. Discourse is a coercion-free exchange of arguments by the partners concerned. People in discourse are raising and redeeming validity claims of their

speechly utterances. There are in principle three validity claims--I refer to Jürgen Habermas--namely validity claim to truth, rightness and truthfulness. In a domination free discourse, what counts finally is the better argument. Thus the partners of a discourse are free partners who are acknowledging the rules of argumentation.

Let these brief clues suffice; talks are dialogues when both sides recognize in principle common and consensual norms for reaching an understanding. A Marxist said to me about this, "So you're trying to sneak Habermas in on us!" And I answered, "My only concern is that we arrive at some norms for understanding, and I can find nobody these days who has done a better job of getting at them than Habermas." In addition, understanding as a philosophical category has made its way into philosophy in the GDR for some time now, as can be seen in any number of examples, and which shows that a genuine need for a theory of understanding exists in all modern societies. The demonstrable influence of Habermas, however, is no defect; on the contrary, it is a hopeful sign for philosophizing in a way that transcends state boundaries. Moreover there was apparently a massive turnout of GDR philosophers in Halle recently to attend a guest lecture of Jürgen Habermas there.

2. So, then, the question as to whether dialogue and/or coming to an understanding is possible between Christianity and Marxism. Such an understanding is possible--theoretically, indeed, relatively easy - insofar as both sides are rooted in the same Judeo-Christian-Hellenic tradition. The kernel of each contains closely related rationally ethical, emancipatory, and utopian principles and visions.

Some years ago when it was politically somewhat more strenuous, a Danish newspaper interviewed me. The reporter asked, "How do you make out here with the great contrasts between Christianity and Marxism?" Seen from the watchtower of a Tibetan monastery, the difference between a Christian theologian and a Marxist philosopher dwindles down to a very minimum. The reporter replied, "May I write that, or will it get you in trouble?" Well, he wrote it and I had no trouble on account of it; on the contrary you could say I even got an unofficial nod or two.

Nowadays in the GDR one can define with great precision where those things Christians and Marxists have in common also have a common reference point in the modern history of ideas, and that is in the young Hegel, more particularly his rationally utopian notion of popular religion as a moral realm in which the freedom of the individual is inconceivable without the political, economic, and intellectual freedom of all other individuals - a realm Hegel believed was realized by way of anticipation in the Christian parish itself. Habermas expounds on the futuristic utopian contents of Hegel's popular religion. In the GDR Wolfgang Bialas has analyzed it thoroughly and it has most recently been invoked in the analysis of liberation theology.

Nevertheless, these common intellectual holdings of Christians and Marxists, of which many other examples could be cited, are not the decisive point when it comes to the possibility of an understanding, at least not when one takes into account the controversies lodged in the real world of current domestic foreign policy. I view it as a weakness of the

first great Christian-Marxist dialogue of 1968 that, initiated as it was by the events of the Prague Spring that year, nevertheless remained in the realm of intellectual generalities without reflecting political reality.

Without slighting all the rest that can be said about our commonalities, dialogue is possible on other grounds, namely, that both partners, Christianity and Marxism, have entered into a social and spiritual crisis that has common roots and contains common challenges. In times of crisis there are two possibilities: those who are commonly affected either close ranks or fall out with each other and indulge in mutual recrimination. Both things are occurring today.

Thus to what extent is the present crisis situation causing and enabling mutual understanding? This point will be examined beginning with Christianity. As it is well known, Christian doctrine at its most condensed has two basic aspects: in traditional language that we call Law and Gospel. Those terms do not lend themselves, however, to mutual understanding. Expressed more generally in philosophical terms, let me say that the Christian interpretation of religion as such emphasizes on the one hand the relation of personal transcendence. This anxiety--reducing consolation usually and correctly is seen as the religious kernel that has withstood both the Enlightenment and Modernity. Inextricably bound up with it is the primarily rational social side, social ethics. This always has its utopian traits, too, at any rate in early Christianity. Today it is projected not from the side of dominant ideology " from the top down" but from the viewpoint of the weak. In the end, the persuasive power of the transcendental relation stands and falls with this social ethics, and vice versa.

Beside Hegel, whom has already been mentioned, none but Schleiermacher has so cogently demonstrated the inextricability in religion of those two aspects: transcendence and immanence.

The crisis of the Christian religion has been brought on by the crisis of the impotent dominance of instrumental reason and hence by the profound discrediting of the Enlightenment utopias of European Modernity, which can be reduced to the formula: greater productivity, greater domination, greater equality, greater happiness, and more religion. The crisis has engendered an aporia, a religious dilemma. The urgent world situation demands nothing so much as social-ethical action; the ways and means of such action, however, have lost the plausibility it takes to inspire confidence. Thus religion wavers (to grossly oversimplify for methodological reasons) between the private overcoming of contingency and a protest against instrumental reason, on the one hand, and a desperate clinging to the utopian contents of Modernity, on the other.

These two extremes can be plainly recognized particularly in the GDR. There are theologians who see the utopian contents of European-Christian tradition preserved in already existing socialism, and who believe that their task is to tend to the private overcoming of contingency, that is, furnishing consolation amid those things over which human beings truly have no control in their individual lives and, in a narrow sense, their lives with others. Others however are of the opinion that the day of a religion of anxiety-

reducing consolation is over in a disenchanted and science-dominated world, so that what is called for now is to reject and protest the rule of instrumental reason. Thus, one finds those groups whose thrust is protest yes, prayer no.

The way out might, could, and should be: religion as a transcendental relation plus social ethics, thus valorizing the rational contents of utopia--one might say, the utopian contents open to understanding and communication. Paradoxically however, religion, or the church as a religious community, cannot reaffirm the value of both the transcendental relation and a rational social ethics all by itself but, in this modern, pluralistic, secular world, only together with everybody else. But that means coming to an understanding with those who, having taken power, are in power, and who thus are experiencing the dilemmas of powerlessness, for example, regarding the real influence of the mind of the people, and that means the Marxists.

So, the crisis of religion is driving it to come to an understanding--not just for the obvious tactical reasons but motivated by its own intent to provide a transcendental relation along with social ethics. The crisis drives religion to reach an understanding with others--not about just anything nor in a space without contours--but precisely about those rational contents of a social utopia that allow of communication and are open to the process of understanding. It follows, moreover, that Christians need to reach an understanding with Marxists about that practice which joins them together, a practice stemming from their respective traditions and from the world as they each experience it.

Marxism, too, is in crisis worldwide. The crisis arises from the fact that far too long and far too naively Marxism believed in the regime of that instrumental reason which was set free by the revolution. The crisis has been coming on for a long time, not just economically and politically, but intellectually as well. Gorbachev has made it plain for all to see.

Marxism's intellectual crisis can be read today in its two chief doctrinal holdings. One is the doctrine of class struggle, and the other is the matter of the rational content of the communist utopia.

As for the first, allow me to refer once more and for the last time to the opening colloquy at Rostock. For two days a number of brief presentations by Marxists and Christians were heatedly discussed. Only virtually at the end of the meeting did the notion of class struggle come up. It was invoked by a theologian, reflecting on his personal experiences in the Third World. That stirred a Marxist, feeling shocked and self-critical, to ask how it was that "we Marxists" no longer talk about class struggle, least of all when speaking with theologians.

The question is not all that hard to answer. The doctrine of class struggle has a dual function in Marxism. One, it is an analytical category applied to the analysis of structural dominance, that is, of how the power structure in capitalism acts as effectively as it does with the help of the economy, ideology, the state apparatus and the rest. Social scientists throughout the world apply the viewpoint and concept of class struggle today with just

that analytical purpose. Liberation theology would be unthinkable minus this analysis of structural dominance in the countries for which it has been conceived. The whole problem of North and South as well as East and West cannot be seen for what it is in all its logical and actual dilemmas without thus analyzing the structure of dominance in the countries of the Third World, and, for that matter, in the First and Second Worlds too.

However, when it comes to already existing socialism the insights of class struggle and dominance structure do not get applied, with a single exception, namely ideology. Here, class struggle is reflected in the principle that socialist and bourgeois ideologies, the latter including religion, cannot co-exist. However if dialogue is what is desired, than this has to change, and a central issue in Marxist philosophy today is its work on a new concept of religion.

On the other hand, class struggle is the basic revolutionary category, meaning in classical Marxism, world revolution. However this notion is not at home in the political landscape at the end of the twentieth century, where "new thinking" has become aware that, rationally considered, neither nuclear nor conventional warfare can any longer be carried out in the centers of civilization. "Peaceful competition between systems to the mutual advantage of both," "the capacity--in principle --of capitalism to live in peace," "Europe, the common house of all Europeans," and " the internal development of capitalist societies toward some sort of socialism" are current international prospects. It goes without saying that intellectually they can be more than a little disturbing.

That upset is harmless however by contrast with the enduring problem of socialism's internal development today and hence frankly the real contents of the communist utopia. For decades this question has been suppressed in the GDR, where the supreme formula - as transparent in its power politics as it was intellectually void--was "learning from the Soviet Union means learning to win!"

How deep a shock have Gorbachev's reforms really sent through the socialist camp, with the different developments they have led to in the various countries? We cannot tell yet, even today. In any case I do not mean to delve into day-to-day political ups and downs here but to reflect on one basic aspect. Given the abrupt disappearance of the formula about the Soviet Union as the teacher with all the explanations, the GDR has been practically and, what may be more important, theoretically tossed out of the warm nest, forced out of the protective shell of its prefabricated model of socialism.

There is a breath of freedom here for the theoretician who looks beyond day-to-day politics, but there is also a taste of bitterness in acknowledging that for decades one had missed the chance to work out a rational social project, capable of national consensus, for this small socialist state in the heart of Europe and at the boundary of the two world systems.

For decades social theorists had to be content with what was called low-g geared research. The pre-set model--namely socialized means of production, ever growing productivity, socially assured security for the people in their continually growing material and mental

needs, and the all-around development of human personality as perceived by science--got spelled out in greater and greater detail in more and more specific areas. Now however, the time has come to make some changes on the basis of the more mature insight that, in view of its unsolved global and internal problems, the way into the future can no longer be thought in terms of the triumph of instrumental reason. Here, then, is where crisis steps in and furnishes the main ideas of the socialist rational utopia with an horizon within which one can and must reach agreement about the world of current experience as well as politics. This utopia, run by people and not by a super-ego, requires the understanding of those who take part and are affected. In other words, crisis is driving Marxism also to the point where it must pay attention to the communicable content of its most original ideas. To that degree I can say that dialogue is possible from this side too.

3. Will dialogue succeed? This is an open question. This leads to a few summary, concluding remarks.

The theme of this paper has been the present status of the dialogue between Christian and Marxist ethics. Until now, however, I have been describing and analyzing what has been happening in this dialogue. In these few concluding remarks I should like to turn to the theory of ethics.

Dialogue between Christian and Marxist ethics is possible and has taken at least its first few steps. It has led to what we in the GDR call a learning process, which is of course mutual. A better understanding of the other and of one's own position in relation to the other's begin to emerge.

Christian ethics is in process of taking a first step from the traditional ethics of intent to a modern ethics of responsibility, taking into consideration the historical consequences of one's acts for the future. One can note here the essential influence not only of Hans Jonas but also of Marxist ethics with its strong orientation on ethics' concrete involvement in history. Moreover, Christian ethics is also taking a second step, moving from an ethics of responsibility, which often still bears paternalistic traits, to an ethics of understanding or communication.

In so doing, it quite explicitly makes a point of the church's place in the GDR's socialist society. That place is on the margins of society, where the church participates neither in the exercise nor in the legitimizing of either state or economic power. It is a place that confers an extraordinary entree to the perspective of the weak, the afflicted, and the voiceless. It does not mean that the church is one-sidedly bound to people of that layer, but the horizon of their life-world is a heuristic plus when it comes to recognizing what is good for all. As Hegel pointed out some time ago, the church's marginal existence enables it to exhibit before others and before its time real, free intersubjectivity. The church reentered public life in the GDR the moment it consciously accepted the opportunities of a life on society's margins. In this, a Christian ethics of communication, respectively discourse, can be counted on to reflect its concrete social anchoring in the church as well.

Marxist ethics is similarly in process of taking a first step, in this case from ethics as a theory of class consciousness or class struggle to an ethics of responsibility. It takes into account, among other things, the historical situation in which modern war can no longer be waged. Marxist ethics is taking the second step: power's conscious consideration of its powerlessness when it comes to persuading people and hence its orientation on reaching an understanding with all. Greater humanity, more freedom stand out as values in present discussions of ethics among Marxists in the GDR. These values expressly include that of coming to an understanding.

Finally, can a society-wide dialogue succeed between Christians and Marxists or between Christianity and Marxism, as we have become aware of it in the dialogue over ethics? That remains an open question. Everybody knows what is at stake. The first thing is human life. The culture of understanding is always a culture of life. This involves the practice of democracy as well as progress toward mastering all those things in individual life that were mentioned earlier. It is virtually impossible to help others live in modern society without a culture of understanding that lets individuals express themselves verbally. For another it is taking responsibility. This key problem in modern societies always has two sides. One side is the individual on whom a certain competence is conferred and who takes a certain attitude and the other is society, which can only function as such when its culture of understanding is as free as it is argumentative.

At stake is the peace of Europe and the world. In contrast to Poland and Hungary, the GDR is a country in which there is no pre-conceded basic, national consensus. Therefore we have no choice but to create a permanent discourse, the very culture of understanding we have been talking about. What may happen if instability should be aggravated in Central Europe is beyond prediction.

Hence, the outcome of a dialogue between Marxists and Christians is still open; ultimately it is a dialogue between all who are affected by and have a part in our changing society. That is, of course, precisely its charm, not the least for theorists. Theory has nothing to declare here about what is going to happen, come what may; it can only say what - for the sake of humanity and because it is possible - ought to happen. In this sense ethics is just exactly the theory of the open future, taking future to mean what human beings (as those who participate in it and are affected by it) should and can shape in common.