

PROTESTANT REVOLUTION

by Jens Langer

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Two hundred years after the French Revolution, with its enormous significance, the revolutionary changes at the end of the twentieth century are also particularly striking. In their decisive phases, the "Carnation" revolution in Portugal in 1974 and later the nonviolent Catholic folk uprising in the Philippines were accomplished peacefully. Likewise, after the Sandinista conflict in Nicaragua, no campaign of annihilation against former opponents took place, even though, in addition to partisan U.S. aggression, serious mistakes were made, for example, towards the Mesquito Indians.

These revolutions at the end of our century are inconceivable without Christians. All the outbreaks also bear the stamp of ideas which are generally socialist in nature, even if they are carried out in opposition to counterrevolutionary tendencies, as, say, in the Philippines. There, Father Edicio de la Torre, the Asian Bonhoeffer, advocates, for example, the continuation of the revolution.

The peaceful and democratic revolution of the Light since October 1989 in the German Democratic Republic belongs in part to this group and evinces its own unmistakable characteristics as well. Up to this point, like other revolutions before it, this one carries the clear stamp of the prayers and actions of just people. Bonhoeffer has described both of these activities as the authentic expression of Christian faith in the twentieth century. The churches do not play a definitive role, but they serve the people decisively and in a clearly defined way. For example in many places in the GDR, prayers for justice and abstention from the use of force have been offered for weeks on a round-the-clock basis. The weekly church services where intentions are expressed are a focal point of the uprising. The new premier actually did recognize the role of these services in his government policy statement, when he gave credit to the constructive contribution of "church representatives" to the renewal of society. He also expressed both his respect and recognition for the church's "moderating influence" in critical situations. Granted, that may be simply a statesmanlike formulation, which may seek to compel its realization by Christians. What is called "moderating influence," when translated into clear language, means in theological and political terms that the churches call for abstention from the use of violence in the name of the Prince of Peace, Jesus Christ, because God's power is realized in the weak, and because the peacemakers will inherit the earth.

For years, the churches have been more or less gently pressured into these kinds of obvious social roles by ethically-oriented groups. The priesthood of all the faithful is therefore connected, at least in part, with the people's full exercise of the adult responsibility in Kantian terms (i.e. the attainment of their full majority). In this way, clericalization is hindered. Furthermore, evidence of the results of a thoroughgoing reformation of the church, too, as a whole, and of its rules of governance, must take place in the coming months, if credibility is not to be lost.

Among the special qualities of social change in the German Democratic Republic are numbered definitive Christian voices, who are still very much concerned with "the realization of the ideals of socialism," despite bitter experiences. (Full Congress of the Protestant Student Unions in the German Democratic Republic, October 22, 1989). This realization of ideals cannot come from experiences which we have already had, but stems instead from theoretical insights and presumably also from an often denigrated idealism, which is more congenial to socialism than to vulgar materialism. At the same time, this idealism will be severely taxed, if the realization of a socialist utopia is challenged or deferred by economic forces and relegated more and more to the borderline of possibility.

In the previously mentioned special circumstances, it is clear what it means to emerge from one's minority and to make use of one's intellect in an enlightened way, speaking from the perspective of the history of ideas. By the way, the affirmation of Enlightenment ideals is consonant with a growing closeness of the Liberal Democrats (LDPU) to Protestant positions and persons, which has been going on for years, and which has been noted with sharp criticism in the Christian Democratic Union (CDU).

The special circumstances in the GDR illuminate our relationships to and differences from changes which have taken place in Poland. In Poland, it was actually charismatic leaders with worldwide recognition who determined the direction of new developments. Here in East Germany there are many women and men, who combine a clearly discerned personal appeal with significant political acumen. Here in the German Democratic Republic there exists a church which has been vital since the Age of Enlightenment and can therefore deal with Enlightenment ideas to a significant extent. The fruits of the church's witness in society are a secure partnership, civil courage, non-conformity, and compassion--despite the fact that the origin of these traits is not always clear to all protesters. Furthermore, Protestant culture originates in the church and directly affects society. Now and then it is salutary to remember this fact so that the sources of our vitality remain visible and are not blocked by our own tendency to forget them.

Above all, the Protestant character of the beginnings of the thorough changes in the GDR must be manifested publicly--in the ecumenical community. The words of the Polish pope to his bishop in Berlin are pertinent here: "Make every effort to align yourself--even as a small flock--with all people of good will, particularly with Evangelical Christians, in order to renew the face of the earth in your home, using the power of the spirit of God." (Papal message, November 11, 1989). In such openness, which is connected to contrition, a Protestant monopoly, which might have envisioned only institutionalized Lutheranism, will be avoided. Especially the free churches deserve to be given credit for their

contribution to change. And that goes, above all, for the people as a whole, too. The people, in their diversity, may know little of the sources of Christian faith, but, in any event, they know more about them than they did a year ago. In fact, people are getting acquainted with a church which is connected to them--and connected by the substance of faith itself. The experience of this encounter can change those of us who are participating in it as a group for a significant portion of our lives.

We are still poised at the beginning. "Be sober and watch," says Holy Writ in larger contexts and it recalls to us our present situation, in spite of the Biblical context. Self-congratulatory jubilation, on the other hand, would be harmful for the church. Inherent in Protestantism is the insight that we are a small church and we will remain so if also different from before, presumably with more trials and triumphs than we can presently anticipate. Contrition before the face of God means therefore, as it always has, the genuine renewal of our church as well as of our society.

Translated from German

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