

REALITY OF THE CONSTITUTION AND REALITY OF LIFE REGARDING FREEDOM OF BELIEF IN THE G.D.R.: THE VIEW OF A YOUNG PERSON

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1. The Right of Legal Religious Practice in the G.D.R.

It seems that the antagonism between capitalism and socialism has made the discussion of the fulfillment of human rights into an ideological dispute. But in order not to risk the fulfillment of human rights, the different aspects of it must not be played off against each other. Namely, one should not place the bourgeois idea that insists on the fulfillment of individual rights as opposed to the understanding of socialist countries insisting on the fulfillment of social human rights in the first place.

The society of the G.D.R. sees itself as a successor of the bourgeois revolution, which means that a socialist country has to offer an increase in civil rights. Statements which I am going to make about the deficiency in realizing individual freedoms will therefore have to be seen against this background. My concern is especially the right of freedom of belief. This was guaranteed to all citizens of the Soviet-Occupation-Zone according to the constitution of 1948. In this constitution can be found very concrete statements regarding the legal claims of churches, for example, the church as a corporate public body was given the right to deal in public with vital questions from a religious point of view. In addition church employees had the right to give children religious instruction in schools.

In 1968, in the G.D.R., a new constitution was passed in which it was guaranteed that every citizen had the right according to Article 19 to religious liberty and freedom of conscience too. This was underlined by Article 39. But in comparison to the constitution of 1948 the statements are more general. The part of giving religious instruction in schools is missing; the church as an institution is not even mentioned. The practice of religion became a private affair.

This constitution and its policy were the consequence of a Marxist criticism of religion that culminated in the argument that, with increasing consciousness and increasing knowledge of the processes of nature, religion, as an opium for the people will lose its function and consequently will die off.

At the beginning of the sixties, which the process of transforming traditional rural structures was successfully finished, in other words, when private land and the means of production were transformed into co-operative property, a fundamental change in the structure of villages began, i.e. an accurate division of labor, fixed working time, and centralization and intensification of agriculture. In short, the industrial production in agriculture began. Consequently, this also influenced church life in villages. A similar process could be observed as the one which took place at the beginning of our century when the proletariat came into being; a large number of the population left the church. This process was described generally as a process of secularization. But what does that concretely mean and what conclusions does it have for the church and for religion in general?

At present the number of members of the Protestant church in the G.D.R. amounts to 3.9 million. The total population is 16.8 million. During the last fifty years the Protestant church has lost more than two thirds of its members. That is certainly alarming. The question as to the reasons was asked very often, but the answers were mostly insufficient. One answer that has been given very often was that in a country in which the philosophy of life is an atheistic one, it is very hard to be a Christian and that is why many left the church. This answer is absolutely wrong, but it does not explain the complexity of this process.

Naturally every Christian experiences the situation, in which he or she has to proclaim that he or she believes or has to make a decision whether he or she still wants to belong to the church or not. Professing one's belief is not everybody's interest. This is why leaving the church is often accepted as the lesser evil. Nevertheless, there is a kind of helplessness about the question as to what the church is and what it should currently be and what is its historical place in society and what should its identity be.

The church and theology itself is guilty of the helplessness of Christians and non-Christians in this respect,

as they have failed to reflect upon the new social situation. For a long time, the church had been the guardian and the keeper of civil norms, for example property, family, public and private morality. But what are the norms of the Church today? This question seems to be open. It seems that the majority of believers and representatives insist on the old structures, the old dogmas and statements of the church. The church would have to travel a long distance before it could become an authentic church in a socialist and industrialized country.

2. Short Survey of Relations between State and Church since 1945

The legal separation between state and church has existed since 1919 and the establishment of the Weimar Republic, but at that time there still existed a close relation between church and state regarding finance and organization; even during Fascism the church had some privileges, for example, confessional schools, hospitals and other charitable homes.

After the destruction of Fascism liberty of action by the church was given by the Soviet Occupational Forces and it was possible to constitute itself in a liberal way. But the representatives of the church wanted to continue in a manner which was destroyed in 1933 by the Nazis. The aim of the church was the re-Christianization in all fields of society. This failed to correspond to the situation of the young developing socialist state of the G.D.R. Instead of asking, what the goals of this society were and agreeing more or less with them or accepting this state as an alternative to Fascism, the representatives and the majority of believers were afraid of a loss of power and prestige. Because of the organizational relations between the churches of East Germany and West Germany a lot of conflicts arose between state and church in the G.D.R.

The climax of these conflicts was the so-called "Militärseelsorgevertrag" of 1957, in which representatives of East German churches were also involved. The government of the G.D.R. accused the church of cooperation with the NATO. Some years ago there was a discussion about the members of the "Young Parish" and the introduction of the so-called "Jugendweihe" (a counterpart to religious confirmation). In the turbulence of these years many pupils who belonged to the "Young Parish" were expelled from the extended secondary schools, having been accused of being agents of the U.S. secret police.

Today this seems to be absurd and unrealistic, but those events at that time produced deep mistrust in the relations between church and state. I think it was a great mistake to fight out a conflict on the shoulders of young people who were not able to resist. The interests of the state authorities were to stop the influence of the church in society and to set an example. The interests of the church were to force an alternative: either engagement in the church or in the society and its organizations. This put the individual person in an extremely difficult situation and created more damage than benefit. The discussion focused mostly on the sector of education and continued until the middle of the sixties.

In 1968 a new constitution in the G.D.R. was passed, in which society described itself as a socialist and autonomous one. Because of the new constitution the Protestant church of the G.D.R. was forced to organize itself autonomously. Common synods and councils of churches in both countries became more difficult as a result of the fortification of the frontier, and as a result of this development the Protestant church in the G.D.R. founded the Federation of Protestant Churches in the G.D.R. in 1969. This was the precondition to accepting the reality of the situation in the contemporary society.

In 1971 at the synod of the Church the slogan "Church within Socialism" was formulated. The function of this slogan was to determine more or less in a dynamic way the point of view of the church within a socialist society. Today the slogan is under discussion again. The brevity of the slogan gave ground for misunderstandings. The word "within" has to be described either more dynamically or more profoundly.

It is evident that theological thinking needs both contextual thinking and contemporary reflection. The image of the church has to be changed. Nowadays the church and perhaps society have discovered the religiousness of secular people. The present question involves looking for a fulfilled and meaningful life. This question signifies the attempt to become emancipated. The emancipation of the citizen is a problem for the church as well as the state. At the theoretical level it is now clear that socialism is a transient society, in which the presence of Christians and certainly their readiness to cooperate in some fields in society is to be expected.

As the church is open for those searching for their place in society, it offers a platform for discussion to a widespread variety of persons and groups. There are the so-called marginal groups, which are looking for room to get the opportunity to assemble, for example, ecological and peace groups, feminist and homosexual groups, punks and emigrants and dropouts. These groups exist beside the regular work of a parish or church community, to which other groups belong as well, for example alcoholics or people who have gotten into conflict with the law. At first

sight it may be seen as positive that the church is open for a lot of people irrespective of their confession, but on the other hand, new conflicts arise, not only on the governmental level but also within the church itself. Some say that the church must be open for everyone. Others say yes, for everyone, but not especially for drop-outs. The answers to this problem are varied. Some say that although the church did not create these problems, these people have come to the church seeking protection by it. The focus of this discussion is whether the church can be seen as a political alternative in the G.D.R. or not. The church does not see itself as a political organization, but it opposes the contemporary attempt of the state to restrict the influence of the church to religious things only.

Christians engaged in political state organizations say that the church is accepted by the constitution of the G.D.R. as the unique organization that does not agree with the basic ideology of the state. The alternative which the church represents nowadays is only possible on the basis of liberty of religion. As long as the church does not change its own understanding of itself as an alternative to a miscarried socialism, the consequence will be that it will become increasingly a center for opposition groups. And really the majority of these groups are not interested in questions of belief so that the function of the church in this case is a little bit ambiguous. The parishes themselves react differently to this problem. Some of them have threatened withholding taxes in the case of the continuing support of drop-outs. They find it impossible that the church intervenes in the current policy of the state and besides this forgets the problems of the parishes.

3. Equal Opportunities

The problem of equal opportunities is very ambivalent. In conformity with the constitution everyone has the opportunity of education and all areas of education are open. In the G.D.R. it is compulsory for everyone to attend the polytechnical school till the 10th grade. After attending school there is the possibility of serving an apprenticeship depending on the availability of professions in the region. Up to this level there is normally no problem. The question of equal opportunities comes up when a Christian wants to participate in higher education and also very often in the case of prospects of promotion. Higher education means in the G.D.R. extended secondary schools and studying at institutions of higher learning. Besides these there are also other possibilities for further qualification, but to make it clear I want to concentrate on the regular steps of higher education. There is a limited capacity of enrollment at the extended secondary schools as well as at the universities. That is why not all children can attend it if they had good grades. The principal argument for the selection is that equal opportunity does not mean that all persons can go into the same profession. On the contrary, it means that the members of the class, which used to be underprivileged and oppressed now get the opportunity for advancement. So the rejection of applications very often affects Christians. In this case the argument is: if a person goes to the university he/she will gain responsibility in the more distant future as a head of department or manager, and is then obliged to do the job in the interest of the state.

Christians are under the suspicion of being anticommunists or being subversive; that is why it is mostly impossible for them to occupy the position of department head or a job of similar effect.

This is a little bit dramatized here but there is a great deal of disappointment in this field, and not only with Christians, because the modus of promotion was manipulated according to the principle of selecting leading personnel. The criteria of selection are not only the ability or the qualification of the person. But it must be said that the strongest restrictions exist in schools and in the army. In both institutions old Stalinist positions and reservations against Christians have held for a long time. In the official talks between state and church these are the points of conflict which are not openly discussed. There is not change in the foreseeable future.

The way to deal with this selection in higher education is a petition and very often the decision will be changed after a petition. The other possibility is to attend evening classes or to choose a combination of extended secondary school and apprenticeship. But the reproach against Christians that they are anticommunists is sometimes not totally wrong; it corresponds with the reservation of the church towards cooperating with the state. The church sees the activity of the state or the society as being directed against it. But this does not correspond to reality because the church has become almost insignificant within the process of society and does not attract as much attention as it appears from the perspective of the church. The issue which attracts public attention is the enforcement of individual rights referring to liberal travel and to crossing the frontiers to the West and so on. This public interest transforms the church into a political institution. In this relation the church becomes a matter of political interest, but this has no influence on daily church life. The most recent conflicts happened when emigrants or drop-outs were looking for protection in the church and its representatives stood up for them.

To my mind there is no general rule as to what is to be done in such cases. It is not very useful to be decisive in each case. It will consume a lot of energy and, in the long run, the church will be overburdened with

regard to capacity and possibility. So it would be better to fight for general regulations and initiate a public discussion in this field. I think that is happening now.

Another important aspect is the support of individual rights as one aspect and the support for social rights and justice in the world as another. Because of the problems of the Third World it is clear that liberty without justice is absurd. Against this background the majority of citizens, including Christians, thinks that socialism has quite a lot of potential to change the social structure into more just one. That is why it is very important to make socialism more attractive than it is now, and this can only be done by an open discussion. One way towards this is the Christian-Marxist Dialogue.

4. Christian-Marxist Dialogue

It is not sufficient to proclaim good will in order to determine the relation between church and state. I think we have to establish a theoretical basis to profoundly reflect the conditions of that relation. In the past it was regulated by practical facts and aspects, so it was possible that the balance was very often disturbed and the dialogue underwent vacillations.

The aim is now to investigate the basis of every kind of dialogue between partners of different philosophies and points of view and to practice a productive exchange of view without overrunning each other. The pluralism of opinion is one possibility to give new impulses for developing socialism, and in this field the church and the Christian-Marxist dialogue have a definite task. The practical aim of the dialogue is to define (as far as possible) the cooperation of Christians within the socialist society. For example, how is it possible from the core of Christian thinking and from a Christian ethic, to be engaged in solving concrete problems in society? The ability of conflict resolution also belongs here. Many conflicts in our society at places of employment and in family life are solved by cold war methods. The ability of people to recognize conflicts and to try to solve them mentally and linguistically is an old Christian aim of education that will be very topical and worthwhile for dialogue.

On the Marxist side the offer of dialogue will be accepted by some Marxist philosophers, though they know that in the past and perhaps today within the church, there still rules a more or less anticommunist spirit, so to speak prejudiced against socialism. But they admit and hope for the ability of learning by both partners.

The society of G.D.R. nowadays does not claim to be an atheistic one because believers also take part in governmental power by means of a Christian party and mass organizations. The Marxist philosophers want to work towards a profound knowledge of the Christian ethic of peace, Christian charity, the Christian conceptions of work and justice. For their part the believers should take the Marxist analysis seriously, for cooperation should be possible, if one does not refuse to accept the basic orientation of the other.

If this theoretical stage is successful, then it could initiate a new discussion about the Marxist criticism of religion, which has to be corrected in the sense that the presence of Christians will still continue for a long time. It seems they will be part of socialist society and perhaps they will never die off. At present it is important to correct the image of Christians in our society that it does not mean that they are anti-socialists if they protest against something. The Christian-Marxist dialogue in the G.D.R. wants to work for this. There are attempts to establish such a dialogue, for example the Güstrow Colloquium established in 1982, which is an annual conference of theologians, Marxist philosophers and scientists. At this conference they are taking the first steps in exchanging opinions about questions of mutual interest. A similar project with international participation is the International Conference of Systematic Theologians of Socialist Countries, and as the name suggests, the participants come from socialist countries like the G.D.R., Czechoslovakia and Hungary.

These are only little steps and are very regional, but the problem loses its force if it is treated more generally and not concretely in the affected countries. That is why I want to talk about other possibilities of promoting the Marxist-Christian dialogue on the theoretical level, and for this reason an Institute for Peace and Understanding was founded at Rostock University. This institute includes members of the Latin American Studies department, Marxist philosophers and theologians. Because the work is still at its beginning, it is difficult to judge its chances of success. It is not to be denied that the necessity for this is increasing. The situation is a little bit vague, because the Marxist-Christian dialogue wants to make the first steps towards an inner opening of the society in the G.D.R., and it needs a kind of openness such as Gorbachev is initiating in the Soviet Union. We will see what will happen. Nevertheless the main topic now in theology and the church is the change of theological thinking into a contextual one. If the dialogue fails there will perhaps be other chances, for example, the fear of disturbing each other may be overcome and the emancipation of the citizen may not be seen as a rebellion.