

Editorial

A surprising agreement has been made very recently between the ruling Party in East Germany and the Protestant Churches. On 6 March 1978 Erich Honecker, the leader of the Socialist Unity Party (SED), met Bishop Schönherr, the presiding bishop of the Federation of Protestant Churches. According to Paul Oestreicher (see pp. 95–6) this “summit conference” could transform the relations between Church and State in East Germany.

The political leaders have made concessions affecting many matters which have for long been contentious. Firstly, permission has been given for the Protestant Federation to build 55 new churches over the next two years. Previously the state authorities helped to restore many historic churches, but refused to allow the building of new churches in the large new housing estates. Only ten new churches have been built over the last 20 years. Secondly, at the March meeting, assurances were given that discrimination against Christian children would end. The pressures put upon young Christians have been the subject of frequent protests from the Churches. For one thing, to be confirmed and to attend church often meant that the way to university was closed. Thirdly, the Protestant Churches and the Roman Catholic Church are to be given time on radio and television – something which is so far inconceivable in the Soviet Union. Each week there is to be a broadcast of a church service followed by a religious commentary, and a 20-minute summary of church news. On television too, during major church festivals, religious programmes will be transmitted. Already one such programme was permitted on Good Friday this year, when Bach’s St Matthew Passion was broadcast and followed by a meditation given by Bishop Schönherr. Fourthly, until now anyone who worked for the church in hospitals, kindergartens, old-people’s homes or homes for the handicapped, were excluded from the state pension scheme and received no social security. The Protestant Churches’ leaders demanded that church employees, of whom there are many thousands, should receive pensions. This has been granted. In addition the State promises to subsidize the 500th anniversary of Luther’s birth in 1983, and guarantees that church congresses (*Kirchentag*) will

now be permitted in the GDR. In West Germany *Kirchentags* are held every two years, last a week and can involve 20-40,000 people.

All this looks good. But is there a snag? Some church people in the GDR suspect that there is. They ask, what will the Churches have to give in exchange? The leaders of the Protestant Federation insist that the Party has conceded all their demands, but a number of pastors and church leaders at lower levels are critical. Any pact with a monopolistic Party is dangerous, they would claim, and could tarnish the Church's purity. Under Hitler the "confessing Church" learnt through hard experience how to withstand a totalitarian system, and there is fear that the "confessing" tradition may be betrayed.

Why has the SED Party suddenly become so conciliatory towards the Churches? At this stage no one can be certain, but over the years the Party has gradually come to accept that religion is not going to die away quickly. Therefore a *modus vivendi* must be found. Furthermore, some political commentators suspect that Erich Honecker, the Party leader, may be facing some opposition within the Party and that therefore he needs the support of the large section of the population whose sympathies lie with the Church. If so, this shows that the Churches have become stronger than was thought.

No such picture of strength, however, is presented by Peter Hebblethwaite in an article (pp. 97-100) written after a visit to the GDR last autumn. The Protestant Churches' theology of the Church as a servant has led some Christians, he claims, to argue that communism "is not only a possible environment for Christians but a desirable one" (p. 98). In Mr Hebblethwaite's view, we have here not so much a servant Church as a subservient one. According to an East German Roman Catholic priest, the Church has been allowed to survive only "because the regime needs an appearance of respectability".

Be that as it may, no agreement with the ruling Party can be entirely relied upon when the Party's power remains unlimited. It is still within Caesar's power to define what in practice belongs to God as well as what belongs to Caesar. So, as Bishop Schönherr pointed out after his meeting with Honecker, the value of the agreement will be shown in the way it affects ordinary Christians in their daily lives. Only in the months to come will this become clear.