

The GDR: Servant or Subservient Church?

PETER HEBBLETHWAITE

Propaganda, of an extremely unarresting kind, is the first thing that strikes a visitor to the German Democratic Republic. It hits you from all sides: posters, flags and banners; press, radio and television. The second striking thing is that it uses language in a topsy-turvy way. Thus "peace-loving" is not incompatible with being armed to the teeth, "revolutionary" comes to mean arch-conformist, and the ubiquitous "democratic" is best translated by autocratic. A gap opens up between what has to be publicly proclaimed and what is privately believed.

So the East Germans come to live in a surrealist world in which verbiage sets out to create a superstructure which has little to do with what actually happens. The result is a sort of national schizophrenia. The only way out of the all-pervasive surrealist jargon is what was called in the Nazi period "inner emigration". That means that I live here as though I were elsewhere. I concentrate on loving my family or playing Bach or praying in private. And I let the rest wash over me.

This might seem to provide the Churches with a unique chance: they could be the last refuge of truth and honesty. The first impression is that the opportunity is not being grasped. The GDR is the land of Luther, and it is dominated by the Evangelical Churches. Their story is one of steady statistical decline. In 1950 Protestants made up 80.5 per cent of the population; in 1964 the figure was 59.4 per cent; by 1973 it had slumped to under 50 per cent. Active membership is much lower than these figures suggest. Even so, the GDR remains the only country in Eastern Europe in which it is the Protestant response which counts most. In Dietrich Bonhöffer they have a hero whose Christian and anti-Nazi credentials cannot be challenged.

But on the whole the East German Lutherans have not chosen to emulate Bonhöffer. Their leaders have preferred the path of integration. They have justified this by an appeal to "the theology of *diakonia*", which stresses the Church's serving role. The old Church, which was established, powerful and triumphalistic, is denounced. They now say that the Church should not be thought of as "against or alongside socialism, but rather within socialism". This phrase, which became something of a slogan,

comes from the Synod of the Federation of Evangelical Churches held at Eisenach in 1971. The next step, which some have actually taken, is to say that socialism is not only a possible environment for Christians but a desirable one.

At this point one has not so much a servant Church as a subservient Church. It can on the whole be relied upon to support the government in its campaigns against General Pinochet or South African racism. Anyone in the GDR may complain about the infringement of human rights – provided the infringement happens elsewhere and under “capitalism”. It looks as though the Church is as docile and conformist as everyone else. And this is the “official” picture, the one that is encouraged by the State.

But it is not the whole story. Behind the facade of the official Lutheran Churches, the real life of the Church goes on. Younger pastors admit that the old folk-church of German Protestantism is gone for ever, and that they now have to begin again with a new generation. They see themselves as back in the New Testament situation: weak, scattered, small in numbers, in a hostile milieu.

In August 1976 Pastor Oskar Brüsewitz poured a petrol can over his head at Zaitz near Halle, and prepared to set fire to himself. Before lighting the match, he explained why he was taking this extreme step. He could no longer bear the atheistic pressure on his children. He was appalled by the timidity of the church leadership. He believed that it was out of touch with ordinary Christians, and conniving with evil. He lit the match. A bystander put him out, and Pastor Brüsewitz lingered on for another four days before dying.

No one I met in the Evangelical Church was prepared to regard Brüsewitz as a prophetic martyr. But they did want to counter the government propaganda which has presented him as simply mad. Brüsewitz, said a pastor friend, was a Christian brother who became understandably frustrated. He wanted to see Christ's Lordship manifested immediately, here and now. But the only sign we have of the Lord's presence is the Cross. It was all so very Lutheran.

But Brüsewitz's dramatic gesture points to one way ahead. A theology of *diakonia* is all very well, but it cannot be used to endorse the perpetual twisting of minds and the corrupting of language. The first *diakonia* in socialist society is that of speaking the truth.

I discussed these matters with Q, a Catholic priest of great experience. I call him Q because he insisted that he should remain anonymous and undetectable, and because *Quelle* is the German word for source. Q carefully locked the door before we began. He said that the corruption of language could not be lightly shrugged off. The purpose of this incessant propaganda, said Q, is to “change the way people think”. And to some extent it works. All serious conversation about religion or politics has

been made impossible: the concepts are not there. "Our children", he said, "are split in two: they have one set of words for use at school and another for home use. We have learned duplicity in an atmosphere of fear." Q added another effect of the propaganda battering. People are "deprived of the joy of thinking for themselves". The habit of non-committal vagueness became second nature. Q admitted that he himself, knowing that his letters and phone calls were monitored, had got into the habit of using words to say nothing. "My sister in the West", he said, "has stopped writing to me because I send her such dull letters in reply."

"Don't present us as a Church of martyrs", Q went on, "still less a Church of heroes. What the propaganda says is true to this extent: you will find no priests in prison here. But what you will find are lots of priests who feel that their work is impeded and undermined on all sides. We live in a ghetto in an atmosphere of fear and mistrust."

The 'phone rang. It was a local Party official who wanted to see Q. An appointment was made. I asked him what the relationship was like, and what sort of questions they discussed. "He is very friendly", said Q, "and treats me as though I were an important industrialist he had to win over. We never discuss theoretical or political questions. He once asked me what I thought about the Party. I said that in the Party, as in the Church, there were good men and bad men, but that in the Church there were greater extremes: the good were very good and the bad very bad."

He kept coming back to the word "integrity". He thought that some of the members of the Party had integrity. But there were others who had simply climbed on the successful bandwagon. Being a Party member brought many advantages in terms of money, housing, holidays, medical care and education. But, said Q, the most important privilege is access to information. "Truth", he said, "has become so rare and precious that it becomes a privilege to know it." Inner-party reports on, say, the situation in a factory, are precise, detailed and soberly accurate. But the workers never see these confidential documents. They have to make do with the slogans."

"We are fortunate", said Q, "that German thoroughness has never been applied to the Church. The war stopped Hitler from carrying out his plan of destruction, and the end of the Stalinist period brought us some respite. The Church is allowed to survive now because the regime needs an appearance of respectability. But it is a facade-Church, intended for export. The idea is to give the impression that all is well, that the Churches are free, that human rights – and incidentally the Constitution – are respected."

Yet there have been many conflicts over the *Jugendweihe*, the "consecration of youth" ceremony which happens at the age of 14. It is clearly intended to ape and replace Confirmation. It consists in an oath of allegiance to socialism and the nation. As such it might be relatively in-

offensive. But no one hides the fact that "socialism" includes atheism of a rather crude kind.

The Roman Catholic bishops have repeatedly condemned the ceremony, and called on Catholics to boycott it. Even so, 85 per cent of the children attending catechism classes go through with the ceremony. One might regard this as the most spectacular act of disobedience in church history. But parish priests are more tolerant than the bishops. They realize the social and educational consequences of refusal. They understand the pressures to conform.

But the ceremony is a serious matter, and one cannot get away with lip-service. The proof is that the children of Protestant clergymen are not expected to go through with it. "The 15 per cent who refuse", said Q, "are the real heroes. Though higher education may be closed to them as a result, they win respect even from Party people. They have integrity. They are credible. We need credible people more than anything else."

Q was guardedly optimistic about the future. Like the Lutherans, he saw the Church surviving, but with a loss of traditional members and a new clientele emerging from among the young, the disenchanted, the stifled. But Catholics in the GDR are only 8 per cent of the population. They have few resources, intellectual or financial. Many of them feel they do not belong in the GDR: they were driven from the Polish "recovered territories" in the East and simply failed to make it to the West.

"Every country finds its own place in the life of Christ", said Q finally. "We in the GDR belong to that strange period when Jesus realizes that his mission to the Jews has failed, though he has not yet been arrested and the Agony in the Garden still remains in the future. The Russian Orthodox Church", he added mysteriously, "is further on: it has lived through Good Friday and reached dawn on Easter Sunday. We are not so far ahead ..."