

The Protestant Compromise with the East German State (May 25, 1977)

Abstract

When East German Protestant church leaders severed their organizational ties with the West German church, one of the last remaining connections between the two Germanies succumbed to the pressures of division. East German church leaders redefined their role in the GDR—they would now lead a “church in socialism.” The term could be understood either as a simple geographical reference or as an ideological endorsement of the regime.

Source

Report of the Conference of Protestant Church Leaders

[...]

What “church in socialism” is must be measured, first and foremost, by whether the individual citizen in the socialist society of the GDR can fully live as a Christian, with his family, and can rest assured that he and his fellow Christians will also be able to do so in the future.

It has been often and strikingly said, most recently by the Chairman of the Council of State, General Secretary Erich Honecker, at the first session of the newly elected People’s Parliament: “Our socialist society offers every citizen—regardless of age and sex, worldview and religious confession—safety and security, a clear perspective, and the chance to fully develop his abilities and talents, his personality. This is something to which we hold fast.”

For us, this sentence seems to express without the shadow of a doubt that the full development of the individual personality should also be guaranteed to the Christian citizen, now and in the future.

Apparently, such clear words have yet to become commonplace enough for their effect to be felt everywhere. In programmatic statements on Communist education, absolutely no room is left for any fundamental viewpoint other than Marxism-Leninism (consider the section “Development of National Education and of the Communist Education of Youth” in the party program of the SED). The problem is precisely the one identified at the Federal Synod in Züssow in 1976: “The tension between the assurance of freedom of belief and conscience, on the one hand, and the educational goal of [forming] the Communist personality, on the other, needs to be resolved in a manner that is effective for the children and young people in our congregations.”

In the spirit of that “good, trusting togetherness” that is always being invoked, it is not auspicious when a Christian has to ask: when it comes to building Communism, is the Christian faith perhaps really just a relic that must be eliminated?

We have already said numerous times: cases of outright discrimination, when they have been mentioned together with names and addresses, have been examined and generally stopped. But they keep recurring, especially in the area of national education. Where does this come from? Those who instigate this kind of discrimination have probably had few personal experiences with the church. Could it be that the general party line hasn’t been put into practice down to the level of education and training? What is the purpose of books like *What is Communism?* which are published for mass circulation? Teachers who

hear that “bourgeois morality” is something that pretends to be “eternal morality outside of society and class struggle” and that this “is incompatible with our moral outlook”—are they not virtually compelled to apply this verdict to Christian morality? How does the image of religion and morality presented in this case relate to the assertion that the ideological differences between Marxist ideology and Christian faith are no longer antagonistic in nature? Does the increasingly noticeable fact that Christian children are pestered by their classmates lie beyond the scope of the teacher’s capacity for pedagogical influence? It is clear that the worldview of the party incorporates a substantial critique of religion. But it troubles us that this critique is not transmitted in the form of a positive presentation of one’s own convictions and with respect for the convictions of the other. In the interest of their children’s future, parents are frequently warned—from positions of power, which teachers certainly hold in great measure—against letting their children participate in Christian instruction. This forces an appeal to the courage of conviction. But is this good for the state and for the kind of trust that needs to be promoted? To use Brecht’s words: should there be “no need for heroes” in our country? For many Christians, it is also hard to understand why the SED’s constitutionally anchored claims to leadership so frequently lead to the conclusion that even the smallest entities should be led solely by party members. Should the claim to leadership really be understood in the sense of exclusivity? Tried and true experts who acknowledge the Christian faith are allowed to occupy important posts. But dedicated young Christians have little prospect of obtaining these posts, even when they prove the most competent experts and good colleagues.

Now as always, we advocate admitting members of construction units^[1] [*Baueinheiten*] to university study. The fact that the government of the GDR has allowed for conscientious [military] objection is a sign of strength. But restrictive measures are clouding this bright spot. The unease that is repeatedly being expressed is thus understandable. Occasional outbursts show that people at the “grass roots” level are highly sensitive and inclined to mistrust the leaders of the church and their efforts at securing greater common ground. That the mass media of the GDR was reporting on the electoral participation of leading clergy on election day itself was a mistake that did more than a little to encumber the relationship between state and church, among the churches, and between leaders and congregations. Who has a stake in developments like this? Commentaries in the GDR press from August 31, 1976, on the self-immolation of Oskar Brüsewitz have yet to be retracted. Whatever one may think of what he did, these commentaries show a lack of respect for the dignity of a fellow Christian citizen.

[...]

NOTES

^[1] Brigades fulfilling military service without weapons—trans.

Source: “Kirche im Sozialismus: Aus dem Bericht der Konferenz der Evangelischen Kirchenleitung von 1977,” *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, May 25, 1977; reprinted in Christoph Kleßmann and Georg Wagner, eds., *Das gespaltene Land. Leben in Deutschland 1945–1990*. Munich, 1993, pp. 430–32. Republished with permission.

Translation: Jeremiah Riemer

Recommended Citation: The Protestant Compromise with the East German State (May 25, 1977),
published in: German History in Documents and Images,
<<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/two-germanies-1961-1989/ghdi:document-173>> [May 08, 2024].