

The Church and Change in the GDR

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During the first week of October 1989 tension in the GDR was almost intolerable. It was as though the second hand was pointing at one minute to 12. Public demand for change had reached an extraordinary level: people clamoured, both in private and in public, for the right to demonstrate, for the right to travel, for free elections, for honesty in the media, for an end to political imprisonment and political education of the young, for fair treatment by officialdom, for a state based on law rather than on the whim of the party, and for an end to corruption in high places. The reaction of the Socialist Unity Party (SED) personified in its leader Erich Honecker, was that of a stone wall. Nothing would change. The slightest concession would be an attack on the very fabric of socialism.

Something had to happen — but what? It was clear that nothing radical would take place before 7 October, the 40th birthday of the Democratic Republic. There were many foreign statesmen in East Berlin, and they must be shown the public rejoicings, and the people's support for the regime. The clash, if clash there were, would come just afterwards. Of rumours there were plenty. Almost everyone had noticed the praise given in the media to the Chinese governments's handling of events on 4 June in Beijing; television had shown the grinning face of Egon Krenz, Honecker's presumed successor, praising the Chinese authorities and being feted at banquets. The conclusion was not hard to draw. It was reported that the party was giving orders to the part-time militia (*Kampfgruppen der Arbeiterklasse*) to fire on unarmed demonstrators in the big cities. It was even whispered that the security forces had prepared secret internment camps where, at a given signal, members of the 'opposition' (non-voters, writers of appeals, but especially *churchgoers*) would be confined without trial. Rumours were given some substance by the high degree of police violence used in Berlin, Dresden and elsewhere during the first 24 hours after the 7 October celebrations.

The big trial of strength was expected in Leipzig on the evening of Monday 9 October. For some while regular intercession services had been held on Mondays at Leipzig's *Nikolaikirche*, and the end of the service had become the signal for some kind of demonstration in the square outside the church. During the summer these demonstrations had increased in size, and by the end of September involved tens of thousands of citizens. On 9 October intercession services were duly held, both in the *Nikolaikirche* and in other churches. A vast assembly of 50 or 60,000 people then gathered; some say even more. The demonstrators were almost all non-violent and well-behaved. It was a moment of the most intense relief when the marchers came up against the police ranks — and the police did nothing. To all those with eyes to see and ears to hear the signs were obvious. 'People power' had triumphed. Within a few weeks the fabric of the German Democratic Republic — in the shape it had had for 40 years — would disintegrate.

The Religious Inheritance

To analyse the role taken by Christians in recent events is no easy task. The attitude of the Catholic Church has been markedly different from that of the Protestants. Nor can one overlook the vast differences of approach on the part of groupings within the same church. Various factors have helped to shape the attitudes of Christians to the state, and it is necessary to examine the situation in the years — even the centuries — before 1945.

More than four-fifths of the present total of six million nominal Christians in the GDR belong to one or other of the eight provincial Protestant churches. Of these eight, three (the churches of Mecklenburg, Thuringia and the Kingdom of Saxony) represent a strictly Lutheran tradition; the remaining five 'United' churches, though strongly influenced by Reformed principles, also maintain important aspects of the Lutheran heritage. The history of all eight churches affords many examples of uncritical loyalty to the state. The Prussian principle of 'Throne and Altar', much in evidence during the 19th and early 20th centuries, plays a part here.

The attitude of the GDR churches to public affairs has been profoundly influenced by the bitter experiences of the Third Reich. There were, of course, many millions of church members — of almost all confessions — who drifted miserably before the prevailing wind; they saw nothing, heard, nothing, said nothing. Ignorance was the magic clue to survival, for the person whose watchword was 'I know nothing about politics' ranked as a supporter of the regime. The passivity of so many churchmen was a sad sight, yet the number of

active Nazis in the church was exceedingly small, made up of a tiny fringe of mountebanks, careerists, with perhaps a few genuine idealists of the 1930s who realised too late that they had nailed their colours to the wrong mast, and were dragged along willy-nilly in the sinking ship. Of such mettle were the *Deutsche Christen* ('German Christians') — the Nazi supporters among the Protestants. Some were advanced to leading positions, controlling church policy in many provinces, but most were removed from office after the war.

The size and strength of the Protestant resistance to Hitler is often underrated. On the one hand, there were the faithful bishops and other church leaders who resolutely refused to make way for Hitler's men; they carried on, often at great risk to themselves. The provincial churches concerned were known as the 'intact churches', and their leaders remained in office after the war. (In the provinces of what later became the GDR, however, the 'German Christians' had gained the day.) On the other hand, the main resistance was carried by the so-called *Bekennende Kirche* (Confessing Church). This was a movement or society, rather than an actual church; it had membership cards and membership roll, and at times numbered several hundred thousand members. The heroism and faith of the Confessing Church's martyrs (a recent GDR publication lists 29, of whom Bonhoeffer is one) are unsurpassed in the history of the Christian Church. Their witness remains an inspiration and a model for the Protestants of the GDR. In addition, the prophetic thinking of Bonhoeffer (particularly in the realm of 'religionless Christianity' and the 'Servant Church') has profoundly influenced the theology of the GDR's Protestant Church.

Experience in Nazi times has also had an important effect on the policy of the Catholic Church in the GDR. A decision to conclude an agreement was presumably taken by Rome in the early 1930s, when it was still remotely possible to view Hitler as a statesman who, despite his idiosyncrasies, aimed to defend Christian civilisation against the barbarities of Marxism. A concordat was therefore signed in 1934, according to which the Nazis promised not to interfere in the internal affairs of the church in return for a guarantee that the church would keep out of politics. Vatican policy was to preserve the fabric and independence of the Catholic Church. It was thus left to individuals whether bishops, priests or lay people — and not before the early 1940s — to speak out clearly against the enormities of Hitlerism. There were a number of martyrs whose devotion matched that of the Confessing Church. Sometimes that witness had an ecumenical flavour, such as the joint action in Lübeck of three Catholic priests and a Protestant minister, which brought about their execution on the same day. Generally speaking, however, there was no co-ordinated resistance on the part of Protestants and Catholics.

Another attitude to the Third Reich should receive at least a brief mention, if only because the church concerned is the third largest religious community in the GDR. The New Apostolic Church (an offshoot of the Catholic Apostolic Church, which came into being in the United Kingdom in the early 19th century) has at least 100,000 members in the GDR, and during the late 1980s was reported to be still growing in numbers.¹

It has the striking — or melancholy — record of having survived the Prussian monarchy, the Weimar Republic, the Third Reich, the Soviet occupation and 'state socialism' without any noticeable harassment by the civil power. The New Apostolic Church has a strongly disciplined structure, based on rigid obedience to Apostles and to the 'Chief Apostle'. Its creed includes a declaration of loyalty to the ruling power; being God-given, the aim or ideology of that power is irrelevant to the New Apostolic Church's life. It was therefore quite appropriate for the 'Chief Apostle' to send messages of support to Hitler in the early days of the regime; spokesmen of the New Apostolic Church have from time lauded the religious policy of the GDR leadership, and young members of this church have been noted for their enthusiastic membership of the party's 'Free German Youth'.

The Church in Socialism

During the latter stages of the war the Protestant resisters were faced with the problem: should they co-operate with the *Rote Kapelle* (the communist underground) in the common cause of overthrowing Hitler? The decision was 'no!' — on the ground that it was not a common cause; the communists would swindle, deceive, betray, torture and murder in order to gain the victory of the party. After the final collapse in 1945 the new leaders of the Protestant Church were faced with a similar question: should there be any collaboration with the forces that had destroyed Hitlerism? Some sort of camaraderie had developed in prisons and concentration camps where Christians and Marxists had lived side by side, yet Protestant leaders felt no doubt that the avowed aim of the party was to destroy religion and the church.

Various developments, however, during the Soviet occupation (1945-49) combined to win over a fair number of Protestant sympathisers for the new regime. Several 'independent' parties, for example, including the Christian Democratic Union, were launched.

¹See Arvan Gordon, 'The New Apostolic Church: The GDR's Third Largest Religious Community', *RCL* Vol. 16 No. 1, pp. 26-35.

The CDU was supposed to rally all Christian believers in the Soviet zone, and safeguard their interests. In particular, it was supposed to be the channel through which Christian citizens would make their contribution to 'socialist society'. The CDU's first leader, Otto Nuschke, was a man who was widely respected. (It should be pointed out that there was at first a fairly enthusiastic response, though the number of members decreased markedly during the later 1940s; by this time it had become evident that all vital policy issues would be controlled by the Socialist Unity Party.) It also soon became apparent that the Soviet occupiers had no intention of appointing a commissar to control the churches; the Protestants were able to set their own house in order. The traditional legal structure of the church was maintained, despite the wishes of the Confessing Church who hoped to make their 'Council of Brethren' the framework of a new Protestant Church. 'German Christians' in leading positions were thus deposed in a duly legal manner, and without Soviet intervention. There were even Soviet commanders who encouraged the work of the churches: an example was Colonel-General Bersarin, who astonished Protestant church-leaders with the words: 'I want you above all to teach the children reverence for God'.

There were features, too, of the newly established GDR (proclaimed on 7 October 1949) which persuaded some Christians that they were living in a socialist republic of a peculiar kind — that granted special protection and privileges to the churches. Sundays and the major church festivals were recognised as national days of rest. School premises might be used — after school hours and on a voluntary basis — for religious instruction, though this right was later withdrawn. The property of the churches — their half-million acres of land, their forests, buildings, including hospitals, old people's homes, kindergartens and other institutions — were unaffected by plans for nationalisation. The right of the churches to govern themselves was upheld. Even the strange statement of 1949 that 'there is no state church' (how could there be a 'state church' in a Marxist country?) tells its own tale. Many Christians, and indeed not a few non-Christians, think of the GDR Protestant Church as having a special responsibility towards GDR society.

Not a few observers, looking over the short history of the GDR, feel that the republic has a 'gentlemanly' quality which the other East European states and the USSR lack. True, believers and unbelievers have been given savage sentences on the most flimsy of pretexts. The *Staatssicherheitsdienst* (security services) has been well organised, and is said to have had over 100,000 part-time informers from outside its ranks. The churches have been harassed by all kinds of chicanery and dirty tricks. On the other hand, church leaders have not been

murdered or despatched to labour camps. The political arena has been governed by understood rules; discredited political leaders have closed their careers in dishonourable retirement rather than at the end of the hangman's rope. Awkward 'dissidents' have been sold to the West rather than consigned to torture.

It is essential to bear in mind these aspects of life in the GDR, when considering the attitudes of believers towards the state. At the end of the war the Protestant leaders in the Soviet zone of occupation tried frantically to avoid blind prejudice against the communist system. Studying the words of Jeremiah and other prophets, they wondered if the Soviet invasion was a dispensation of Providence, sent by God Himself to discipline and instruct the German people. Had not the church failed to grapple honourably with the problems and concerns of the workers? Should not commonly accepted ideas about private property be reviewed in the light of the teachings of Jesus Christ? Had not the church accepted the idea of 'freedom' in a strictly bourgeois sense? Should not the church give positive support to the new regime?

Naturally enough, different churchmen answered these far-reaching questions in different ways. Some, including a number of Roman Catholics, could say with Otto Dibelius:

After long reflection, I learned, as a man of 70, to say 'no' to communism and to everything it thinks and does . . . I learned it not on political grounds, but for the sake of the Christian religion. For the sake of that religion, there could be no weighing in the balance of reason what was good in the communist social order and what was less good. The only thing was to penetrate to the roots and to recognise the spirit permeating everything.²

Bishop Dibelius was not speaking for himself only; he believed that it was the duty of the church to say 'no' clearly and unambiguously.

Many believers, however, have found it impossible to say 'no' in the way in which Dibelius did. A smallish minority (though practically no well-known leaders) has given its support to the Christian Democratic Union, and therefore to the policies of the Socialist Unity Party. The fact that on one occasion, — the submission of laws governing abortion — there were contrary votes from members of the CDU, underlines that on every other occasion the CDU has voted with the ruling party. Among the thousands who support or are members of the CDU are many honourable people; they no doubt admit that it is quite impossible to make an impact on major issues, but are convinced that a small amount can be achieved when policies are being debated or new laws framed. It is more difficult to find Christians who accept the party's propaganda line — that the SED's policy, both at home

² Otto Dibelius, *In the Service of the Lord* (English translation, London, 1964). p. 174.

and abroad, is Christianity in action, and that the only quarrel with the church is on the level of faith and ideology, about which there can be freedom to differ.

Most churchpeople have taken the view that there is an essential difference between nazism and communism. With the former there could be no compromise. Nor indeed could there be any compromise with the fundamental ideology of the latter. The practical policies of the SED are another matter; some are downright evil, some are misguided, some have merit. It is the duty of the church to denounce what is wrong, but to foster and encourage all that is good. This outlook has long been summed up by the title 'The church in socialism' (or 'critical solidarity'). The expression 'the church in socialism' has for some while been recognised as vague and ambiguous. One could argue that it simply recognises that the church is working in a 'socialist' environment — a statement of fact. On the other hand, many interpret the phrase as the church giving its blessing to 'socialism'. Following recent events many church people have been stressing the vagueness of the word 'socialism'. The author of a letter to the *Mecklenburgische Kirchenzeitung* argued:

The Christian religion has been in existence for more than 2,000 years, and is something much greater than political systems, which come and go. How can it be claimed that 'socialism' alone (which in any case is in deep trouble in a number of countries) is the political system to be derived from the Gospel?

The term 'socialist future' is glibly used without being properly defined. I know many people who have the greatest difficulty in defining the term. Even Christians, as a result of their own experience, find a lot that is objectionable about the idea. What are, then, the much-trumpeted 'virtues' and 'values' of 'socialism?' Let us admit that the free market system and open frontiers (for which we thank God) will bring us the inevitable problems that they have brought to other lands.

We hear about 'publicly owned property'. I have certain comments to make, based on my own experience. Such property belongs to nobody; most people do not identify themselves with such property; they deal with it according to their own whims and do not treat it to advantage. This leads to a great deal of inefficiency and the supposed social benefits just do not result. I myself have often observed this situation in the health service and the social services of the GDR.

Nevertheless, the phrase 'the church in socialism' did have its day, particularly during the 1970s, and was used as a watchword by respected Protestant leaders who sought change. The founding of the

'Federation of Protestant Churches in the GDR' (distinct from the 'Protestant Church in Germany', the organisation in the Federal Republic) paved the way to 'the church in socialism'. In turn this approach culminated in a meeting on 6 March 1978 between church representatives, led by Bishop Schönherr, and Erich Honecker and some of his colleagues.

Though Erich Honecker described the meeting as a 'crowning of past effort and a new beginning', it was more of a dead end. If new 'summit' meetings between church and state leaders were contemplated, they did not take place — apart from a couple of sessions in the 1980s that were confrontations rather than discussions.

No new measures were hammered out at the 6 March discussions. It was a talk rather than a negotiation, and Bishop Schönherr commented afterwards, 'The test of church-state relationships is the experience of the ordinary Christian citizen in the place where he lives.'

Moreover, it should be stressed that the church leaders particularly associated with the 'church in socialism' approach such as Heino Falcke, Werner Krusche and Albrecht Schönherr were no starry-eyed or feeble collaborators. They knew the pitfalls, and spoke up boldly for the needs of the church.

In contrast to the efforts of the Protestant churches to carve out a place for themselves within socialism, the Roman Catholic Church has generally adopted a more quiescent attitude. Roman Catholics in the GDR have never constituted more than eight per cent of the population, in spite of the hundreds of thousands of Catholic refugees who settled in the Soviet zone after being expelled in 1945-46 from Silesia or Pomerania. The Roman Catholic Church always felt itself to be a minority in a double sense: on the one hand, outnumbered four or five to one by Protestants, and on the other, assailed by state anti-religious policies. Its primary aim in the GDR has always been to maintain the integrity and the pure doctrine of the Catholic Church. There has always been a strong strand of Catholic opinion which regards the socialist states, the GDR, as wholly satanic, utterly foreign to the Gospel of Christ. Two quotations illustrate this viewpoint. One comes from a layman, a student at the Erfurt seminary.

The Protestants have their slogan 'the church in socialism', and imagine that they can achieve something by cooperating with the state. How naive they are! I know that communists seem on the face of it to be more humane and civilised than Nazis. The truth is that they are more cunning and sophisticated. Their aim is to get total control of society — and of the individual — just as surely as the Nazis did.'

The second was spoken by Dr otto Spülbeck, Apostolic Administrator of Meissen, at a Catholic assembly in Cologne in 1956. It was addressed to a nameless state functionary in the GDR.

Minister, you are a Marxist. I am a Catholic Christian. Our philosophies of life have therefore nothing in common. There is no bridge over the chasm that separates us . . . We Catholics, however, live in a house whose foundations we have not built. These foundations we believe to be based on falsehood. If we are going to live together in this house, the only subject for us to discuss is — please forgive the trite saying — whose job is it to clear the staircase.

It is not surprising, therefore, that the Catholic Church has made it a general rule to avoid comment on political and social matters. Exceptions have been made where vital Catholic principles have been at stake, such as abortion laws, the rights of the family, compulsory school education in Marxism or discrimination against believers.

The Catholic Church has, therefore, not as a rule acted as a force for social change in the GDR. There was something of a new approach after 1986, in which year more than one church pronouncement called on Catholics to play a greater part in social affairs. Yet there have been few signs of the unofficial groups which have been so much to the fore in Protestantism. The only exception has been the *Aktionskreis Halle* (Halle Action Circle). Founded in the late 1960s by a small number of priests and lay people, it came into prominence in 1982, when it issued a statement calling for the Catholic Church to play a more active part in the current peace debate.

Independent Groups and the Church

Many kinds of autonomous social groups working for change have been tolerated, housed, protected and even encouraged by the Protestant churches, yet the relationship between them is not always an easy one. One source of division in churches is almost as old as the church itself, and is clearly hinted at in the Epistle of St James: on the one hand, the established leadership of a congregation — mostly elderly, conservative, knowing how things ought to be done, prim, officious; on the other the new converts, informally dressed, full of ideas and new life, sure of themselves, enthusiastic, impatient of red tape and traditionalism. It is a situation constantly found outside 'socialist' countries, and would have existed in the GDR Protestant churches even if Marx had never lived.

Despite these tensions the churches have a long tradition of concern for society. After all it was Niemöller who declared to Hitler himself that the churches had a responsibility to the German people which nobody could take away from them, and Bonhoeffer who stressed that the church is there 'for others' (for the weak, the friendless and the persecuted). The Protestant churches were vigorous in taking up the cause of the young men who were imprisoned as conscientious objectors after the introduction of conscription in January 1962. Indeed, only two years passed before the introduction of unarmed service (the so-called 'construction units'), a change following pressure from the churches. The pastoral care of conscripts, whether armed or unarmed, is a matter that has often preoccupied the Protestant churches.

Throughout the history of the GDR the Protestant churches have been officially involved with the care of the old, the mentally ill, the handicapped. Such work is recognised and subsidised by the state. It was during the 1970s that most provincial churches extended their care to the so-called 'asocial' elements — mostly young people involved in petty crime, alcoholism, and drug-taking, particularly in the great cities. Such young people are indifferent to the church, suspicious of established values, and sullenly hostile to all authority — especially to Marxism. It was hardly to be expected that the state would subsidise church efforts of this kind, especially as 'asocial' behaviour did not officially exist in the GDR, other than on the tiniest scale. The church was even accused of opening its doors to 'anti-socialist' youth. Not a few of the young people involved were indeed influenced, to a greater or lesser extent by the Christian Gospel.

On other occasions, from the late 1970s onwards, young people anxious for political change were brought into Protestant churches. In 1979 the so-called *Blues-messen* (blues masses) were initiated in East Berlin's *Samariterkirche* by the local minister Rainer Eppelmann, (whose name became better known a couple of years later). The 'blues masses' were folk services involving music, poetry, and discussions aimed especially at young people. Discussions of peace issues became more and more common on these occasions. As time went on, people came from great distances, and congregations of over 5,000 were the rule. Needless to say, the state regarded the 'blues masses' not as religious worship, but as political subversion.

Services of this kind were the initiative of a minister who, though not a maverick did not represent the majority opinion of the church in the GDR. However, in November 1980 the churches organised officially what was to become a significant annual feature, and one that must have had some influence upon events. These were the annual 'peace weeks' (more strictly, 'peace decades,' or 'ten days for peace').

The 1980 activities were planned to end at 1.00 pm on 19 November (the church's Day of National Repentance) with the ringing of church bells throughout the republic. Such a demonstration could scarcely be formally forbidden; it was, after all to take place on church property. Although, the church's programme was disrupted by the hasty arrangement of a national test of air-raid sirens on the day in question, some bells were duly pealed. The 'peace weeks', always held in November, developed and became more influential as the 1980s advanced; there were services and discussions, prayer meetings and sacred music — but also 'peace festivals', with poetry; music and songs. The spirit of Rainer Eppelmann, and those who thought like him, seemed to have spread to the leadership of the church.

There was a notable growth in concerts of rock and other popular music, held in church buildings. Opening and closing prayers gave a cloak of respectability to such concerts, whilst the disciplined bearing of thousands of young people as they filed past plain-clothes security men at the church doors, their utter silence at appropriate moments and their rapturous reception of the songs all lent the concerts an impressive dignity. The state policy was always to be present and observe, but not to interfere.

The numerous *Kirchentage* (an untranslatable word: both 'church congresses' and 'church festivals' are misleading) have done much to rally believers, but have also had their effect on those outside the church. These three-day or four-day festivals cover an enormous amount of ground. A *Kirchentag* involves services which may attract a congregation of 20 or 30,000 or more but also, prayer sessions, quiet times, exhibitions of art and sculpture, choral and orchestral concerts, discussions, talks from well-known invited speakers, dramatic presentations, often on vital social or political themes, special presentations for young people, and spiritual counselling.

1983 the Luther Quincentary, was a noteworthy year for *Kirchentage*. The state had its own programme of celebrations, presenting Luther — naturally enough — as an outstanding revolutionary. It was the policy of the Protestant churches to keep their events separate from the state celebrations. Many observers had thought that 1983 would afford examples of harmony between church and state; after all, the socialist state was taking great pains to celebrate the church's hero, and had given the church special help on a whole range of practical matters (such as transport and the use of public property). There was the prospect of the 'church in socialism' paying a great deal of tribute to Caesar, but as things turned out, the church maintained a thoroughly independent line. Not only was its picture of the 'great revolutionary' very different from the state's, but

there was a great output of critical and even hostile comment at each one of the seven *Kirchentage* that year.

Though the churches adopted an increasingly critical stance during the early 1980s, there remained a degree of tension between hierarchy and some of the 'uncomfortable sons' among the clergy, especially those working as youth chaplains.

One such man, Rainer Eppelmann, has already been mentioned. A brick-layer by training, he was sentenced in the mid-1980s to eight months' imprisonment for refusing to take the military oath after being conscripted. He then served as a 'construction soldier', and went on to study theology. In 1975 he became pastor of the *Samariterkirche* in East Berlin, where he organised the already-mentioned 'blues masses'. In 1981 he wrote a letter to Erich Honecker, requesting him — among other things — to work for the withdrawal of all troops from central Europe and gradual total disarmament. His letter began with a phrase that has later become famous, 'It is five minutes to 12.' In January 1982 Eppelmann was the leading figure in the composition of the so-called 'Berlin Appeal' which called for the removal of nuclear weapons from Central Europe, and made several demands that the church had already made officially, such as the renunciation of 'war-toys', peace studies in schools, and the introduction of 'community peace service' as an alternative to conscription. The letter went on, however, to suggest the conclusion of a treaty with the Second World War victors and the withdrawal of occupation troops from both Germanies. Eppelmann was arrested on 9 February, only to be set at liberty 24 hours later. The state prosecutor, pressed hard by the church, abandoned a judicial enquiry into Eppelmann's activities. A statement issued by the Church of Berlin-Brandenburg, however, while supporting some aspects of the appeal, advised church members *not* to sign it. Undoubtedly the bishop and his colleagues had been put under pressure by the state. On the other hand, the appeal dealt with international affairs in a way that went against the usual church policy of keeping out of political concerns, other than to proclaim the direct demands of the Gospel. The church did protect Eppelmann; he remained at the *Samariterkirche*, and was not disciplined by the church leadership in any way.

Another influential, if awkward, figure, is Friedrich Schorlemmer. From 1971 to 1978 he was a youth chaplain in Merseburg. He is now a lecturer at the Wittenberg Protestant Seminary, and preaches at the *Schlosskirche*, the very church on whose door Luther nailed his 95 theses. Schorlemmer became prominent in 1983, when he set out to mould a sword into a ploughshare. Very soon a picture of the Soviet sculpture 'swords into ploughshares', based on the prophecies of Micah and Isaiah and donated to the UN in 1961, was used by many

people as a badge or emblem. Its use in this way enraged the GDR authorities, and it was later forbidden. Schorlemmer retained the confidence of the Church of Saxony even when his utterances became more and more critical.

To suggest that the official church was hopelessly at odds with some of its younger pastors is, however, completely untrue. As the 1980s advanced other divisions were coming to the fore. By the opening of the decade many parish churches, especially in the big cities, had nurtured groups of church members concerned about questions of the day. The earliest of such groups worked for peace. By 1984, or thereabouts, it seemed that tiny unofficial groups had no real chance of achieving anything in the face of the international juggernauts. Groups found it better to concentrate on what seemed to them to be practical goals: protecting the environment, human rights, women's liberation and so forth. It is not surprising that such parish efforts attracted supporters among people who rarely or never attended service. There were no public buildings which might be legally used for such activities, whereas the church was recognised by the state as an 'independent organisation within socialist society'. Questions were often raised, both at parish and provincial level, asking whether some kind of official recognition should be given to such groups. The problem was discussed at more than one provincial synod. For example, the church leadership of the Province of Saxony (Dresden) issued a document on the subject in 1987, putting forward several helpful suggestions. The document did *not* give official recognition to any of the groups, nor did it say that they should be restricted to members of the church. Rather it stressed that:

A Christian community must be committed to the cause of the weak; to the peaceful solution of conflicts; to the preservation of the environment; to the cause of truth. If, as a result, the church becomes involved in political activity, all that is said and done in its name must spring from the primary duty of loyalty to the Gospel.

The programmes of groups — insofar as they need support from the church — must be based on the solid ground of God's commandments.

Groups hope for toleration; they must therefore be prepared to extend toleration to other activities and viewpoints.

The church must be prepared for the expression of uncomfortable or unwelcome truths. Some people or groups are given shelter for this very reason!

The publicity given to groups' viewpoints through church channels depends on the degree to which the views of the church

and the groups are in harmony.

The question of whether or not a particular person or group should be admitted is the responsibility of the local church council (advised by the Superintendent).

Such guiding principles, logical as they were, gave little pleasure to the state. On the other hand, church leaders recognised that tension within the church was inevitable — there was never any effective central organisation for the groups; it was difficult to keep track of where they were, who they were, or how big they were. Their main strength was in the cities, but they sprung up throughout East Germany. In 1989 a new group appeared, the so-called *Staatsbürgerschaftsrechtler* (Civil Rights Activist). It had a ready-made membership: the thousands, possibly tens of thousands, of citizens who wished to leave the GDR, and had had their applications refused. The church authorities were in an extremely difficult position. On the one hand, the right to travel and emigrate was one of the basic human rights which the church had defended and would continue to defend; on the other hand, the church had suffered and continued to suffer from the loss of thousands of members who had 'deserted' the GDR for the Federal Republic. For all kinds of reasons, the church had no wish to encourage a new wave of emigration from the GDR. All the same, the state believed — or professed to believe — that the church was giving shelter and comfort to a large 'dissident' class who had turned their back on 'socialist' values.

During the summer of 1987 the tension between the Protestant Church and one particular group developed into an open breach. From 1982 to 1986 the Berlin-Brandenburg Church had held a series of annual peace workshops'. It was becoming ever harder to justify the 'workshops' as genuine church activities, and the decision was taken not to hold one in 1987. Meanwhile, permission had been granted by the state for the holding of a *Kirchentag* in Berlin. It was in these circumstances that a new group, *Kirche von Unten* ('the Church from Below', or 'the Grass-roots Church') was founded. The 'grass-roots church' was not merely a society for representing the concerns of the person in the pew to church leaders. It claimed to be a group of Protestant church members, and in no way a new church or sect; but on the other hand, had its own highly distinctive interpretation of the Faith. Jesus, it is said, had his origin in the very lowest stratum of society; he came to free those who had nothing to lose but their chains. He brought a new life style in which men and women were equal, there were no official leaders, no membership register, no rules. Such a movement inevitably came into conflict with the *Amtskirche* (the 'official church') which the 'grass-roots church'

regarded as timid and bureaucratic, too bound to tradition, dictating to ordinary lay people, and sometimes acting as an arm of the state. It is not surprising that the 'grass-roots church', having seen the 1987 peace workshop cancelled, bitterly regretted its virtual exclusion from the Berlin *Kirchentag*. The group retorted by threatening to occupy a church for its own activities at the *Kirchentag*. In the event, two church buildings were officially allotted to the 'grass-roots church', and the group was able to run its own (well-attended) series of events, side by side with the official *Kirchentag* and yet not part of it. The gap between the viewpoints of the official and the 'grass-roots church' was plain for all to see, but proved in the end to be no unbridgeable chasm.

Towards the Revolution

The opening of the last act in the collapse of the GDR regime can be dated — 25 November 1987. In the events of the next two years the Protestant Church, and latterly the Roman Catholic Church, played a vital part. 25 November saw a midnight raid by the security forces on the East Berlin Zion Church; the premises were searched, unofficial journals were seized, and people arrested. It was clear that any comfortable interpretation of 'the church in socialism' was at an end; the Protestant Church had been driven into a position of opposition from which there was no chance of retreat. Various 'dissidents' were arrested as time went, on including Vera Wollenberger of the *Kirche von Unten*, who, despite her bitter opposition to the 'official church' received support from the church leadership, and was much heartened to see Bishop Forck in court during her trial. There was a great deal of plain speaking at the four *Kirchentage* of 1988, held at Görlitz, Erfurt, Rostock and Halle. At the last-named, for instance, Friedrich Schorlemmer and his colleagues advanced 20 far-reaching 'theses' for the renewal of GDR society. The document had been worked out among a group of church people, and was published with the full authority of the Saxon Church. As a result of this boldness, the state authorities attempted to prevent the publication of the more 'offensive' Synod reports. In some 50 cases issues of church journals failed to appear, or had to be drastically re-drafted. However, this effort to muzzle the voice of the church was dropped by the end of 1988. During 1989 the conflict intensified. The official results of the May elections (which showed a remarkable increase in the numbers refusing to vote, or voting against the official list of candidates) were generally known to have been falsified, and several church publications called attention to corrupt practices. A number of special church services were held to mark the Beijing massacre of 4 June; bells

were tolled to show respect for the fallen. Such actions by the church were deeply offensive to state leaders, who gave the Chinese army high praise for 'bold and decisive measures taken against dangerous counter-revolutionaries'.

During 1989 the Roman Catholic Church in the GDR became a great deal more vocal on political affairs. Bishop Braun of Magdeburg, for instance, issued a bold statement during the summer on the need for change. In Berlin Bishop Sterzinsky proved much more outspoken than his predecessor had been. Perhaps one of the reasons for this new approach was the groundswell of opinion among Catholic lay people, who felt that in previous years far too little had been said by the bishops about matters of public interest.

In the course of 1989 the existing groups working under the shelter of the Protestant Church gained in numbers. Some leading activists held that the ideas of freedom and democracy which they stood for owed little or nothing to Christian doctrine. They felt that the existing links with the church were becoming more and more irksome. It was therefore not surprising that — in the crisis atmosphere of September 1989 — new and independent associations came into being. The first of these, *New Forum*, aroused great public interest. Its leading figure, Bärbel Bohley, had been well-known for years in opposition circles; others among its founders, such as Rolf Henrich and Jens Reich, were known 'dissidents.' A few clergy joined, including the Protestant academic, Hans-Jochen Tschiche. Various rumours circulated in church circles, such as the report that 'pastor X' or 'superintendent Y' had signed on as members. It was common knowledge that *New Forum* was an illegal or unconstitutional organisation, and that membership of it might be a criminal offence. In Mecklenburg it was known that a local pastor had signed. Not he but his ecclesiastical superior had been called to the police, it was said, and threatened with heavy penalties; the suggestion was that he could be charged with treason and given up to twelve years in gaol, should the pastor concerned not withdraw his membership. Bluff, perhaps . . . but it was not time for the faint-hearted to join the new grouping.

By the end of September the news spread that two other new movements had come into being. *Democracy Now*, like *New Forum*, was secular in character. It was initiated by three recognised activists: Hans-Jürgen Fischbeck, Ulricke Poppe, and Konrad Weiss. its aims were more specific than those of *New Forum*, and it seemed to have more of the qualities of a political party in the making. At the same time it became known that yet another independent movement had been founded: *Democratic Awakening*. It was led by three vigorous and determined Protestant ministers: Rainer Eppelmann and Friedrich Schorlemmer (of whom a good deal has already been said)

and Edelbert Richter, whose critical views were no secret in the city of Erfurt. *Democratic Awakening* was obviously intended as a Protestant Voice. The Protestant Churches, however, (like the Catholic Church) carefully refrained from official support to any party or grouping. To try to break down the numbers of those actively calling for change under headings such as 'active church members' — 'church members by baptism, but little else' — 'sympathisers' — 'indifferent' — 'agnostic' and so forth is a hopeless task. People with all these attitudes to faith were found in groups sheltered by the church. The great majority of the GDR's 17 million citizens were discontented, but accommodated themselves to an uncomfortable situation. They were like sheep without a shepherd. There were some socialists to be found, faithfully following the red banner after the collapse of the Socialist Unity Party — but they were few and far between. There was no other prominent ideology. Throughout the history of the GDR citizens have looked on the churches at least with respect, and sometimes with admiration. The churches have always linked their political witness with the witness of the Gospel; justice, peace, truth preserving the environment, the defence of the weak and those who suffer — all these things have been linked to the teaching of Christ. Perhaps the greatest tribute to the vitality of Christians in the GDR has been the attitude of the Socialist Unity Party. For 40 years the party tried unsuccessfully to infiltrate and subvert the churches. In the last days of the regime there was (as has been pointed out) plans to arrest considerable numbers of churchgoers. Such schemes would never have been necessary had the party leaders been dealing with a handful of protesting bishops, unsupported by masses of faithful lay people.