RELIGION AND...

Preaching Peace in East Germany

Behind the facade of Communist harmony and unanimity religious life continues to play an important role in East German society. East German churches have become more assertive and outspoken in the last few years, even to the point of challenging accepted government policies and priorities. During the past year many Western observers were startled to find these churches allying themselves publicly with the nascent peace movement that has begun to catch on among large segments of East Germany's young population.

In the first decade of East Germany's existence the Communist regime attempted to supress its churches outright and to mandate "scientific" atheism. In the 1960s, however, this approach was exchanged for a policy of grudging tolerance. The regime tried to win over religious believers to its political causes by arguing that Christian goals and Communist goals were essentially the same. Yet a fundamental antagonism remained to strain church-state relations, and practicing Christians were still treated as second-class citizens. Only in the 1970s did the state seem to begin to move toward any kind of serious accommodation with its churches.

This may have come about because of the tempering influence of East-West détente. But the East German leadership also seems to have become increasingly convinced that religious institutions hold an important key to the government's credibility in the eyes of its ever-skeptical population. The official press began to modify much of its antichurch rhetoric. The churches were granted privileges that had been frequently denied them in the past. Priests and ministers were regularly allowed to travel outside the Communist bloc for meetings with their Western counterparts. Schools that had seemed impenetrable began to open up to Christians. Building permits materialized to allow new churches to be built. On March 6, 1978, this sense of rapprochement seemed to be confirmed as policy when Communist party chief Erich Honecker openly declared that the churches should expect to play an active role in the country's future development and that all Christians could count on being guaranteed the same rights and privileges as other East German citizens.

Honecker undoubtedly hoped to cash in on the grass roots support and contacts enjoyed by the churches. It is quite likely, in view of subsequent events, that he failed to anticipate the full consequences of his action. Church authorities began immediately to put their new-found rights to a test. With the active support of the country's largest religious body, the Lutheran Federation of Evangelical Churches, they have pressed the government for guarantees of Honecker's assurances that Christians will enjoy equal educational opportunity, that they will be protected from discrimination in seeking jobs and in the conduct of their vocations, and that all religious believers will be allowed to pursue their convictions without government intervention in their private lives.

But the most radical step the churches have undertaken has been to link themselves directly with the East German peace movement, loosely organized and sporadic as it is. Protests normally are encouraged only under strict government supervision and are expected to serve government interests rather than complicate or conflict with them. The churches' involvement, however, would seem to alter this situation by bringing a semblance of order to otherwise inchoate sentiments.

Probably the best-known issue with which church officials have become identified is the call for a social-service alternative to East Germany's military draft. Church support for this pacifist alternative came after thousands of draft-age youths had signed petitions to their provincial synods to endorse it. This flew right in the face of the government's long-standing insistence that alternative service could be performed only within the military itself. One synodal leadership has even gone so far as to accuse the government of "militarizing" East German society. Church authorities have spoken out repeatedly against mandatory military and paramilitary instruction in primary and secondary schools, and they have also criticized the high-pressured recruitment of reservists out of the country's universities and technical schools. On occasion, religious officials have come out publicly for East German disarmament, even for cutbacks in Warsaw Pact tank strength and in Soviet SS-20 midrange missiles.

These are daring stands. It is particularly surprising that the East German Party government has not yet taken steps to rein in its new critics. Certainly no one in the country doubts the government's power to crush even the slightest sign of discontent. This has been demonstrated all too frequently in the past. Nevertheless, on these popular peace issues the Party seems to have backed itself into an ironic corner. Over the past year the official East German media have given extensive, highly positive coverage to the wave of antinuclear and disarmament demonstrations that

has hit virtually every major city in Western Europe. On numerous occasions, and especially when demonstrations have taken on an anti-American tenor, Party officials have embraced enthusiastically the cause of "peace and brotherhood" as played out on the streets of London, Amsterdam, and West Berlin. Only with extreme difficulty, then, can the government turn around and argue that such a peace movement is less welcome in its own country.

Naturally, the churches have been only too happy to remind the regime of this and of the importance of its credibility. The government itself is partly to blame for the emotionally charged nature of the peace issue within East Germany. For years, government leaders have purposefully cultivated a spirit of imminent confrontation and war readiness among the population, and many East Germans are left with the expectation that the final conflict is just around the corner.

Under the circumstances, all the regime has been able to do is keep a close watch on its youthful peacemarchers and their church sponsors and hope that the movement does not get out of hand. The Party has tried to isolate both from outside contacts. For the first time in years, for example, Western reporters were not granted permission to attend last fall's regional Lutheran congresses. Also, as most observers expected, the churches' demands for a draft alternative were brusquely rejected. In a summary of the official mood, one Party Central Committee member, Werner Walde, defiantly declared that his government would never allow its enemies "the chance of using the phrase of so-called 'social peace service' as a way of impeding the necessary military strengthening of socialism." As Walde added, curiously, "These people forget that our whole republic is an instance of social peace service." In subsequent months the East German regime responded with its own kind of peace demonstrations, in which thousands of members of the Free German Youth, the Party's youth organization, marched to the theme "The peace must be defended—the peace must be armed."

In fact, the closest that the government has come to an outright confrontation with its new critics has been to ban the small swords-into-plowshares patches that many have begun to wear, on the grounds that they are provocative and antisocialist. Those who have defied the decree have encountered trouble at their places of work and in their studies, and some have even been detained temporarily by the police. Here again the regime has had to defend its actions at the risk of self-contradiction. As the churches and the youthful critics have pointed out, the design of the peace patches was directly modeled after a statue the Soviet Union presented to the United Nations over two decades ago and which still graces the U.N. entrance in New York. In addition, church officials have pointedly reminded the East German regime of its own frequent use of the swords-into-plowshares theme.

Though the East German Government probably finds its hands tied more than it would like, the country's churches still do not enjoy anything like free rein in criticizing their government's political and military priorities. The clear limits the regime sets on critics became apparent last February, when a noted East Berlin Lutheran minister, Rainer Eppelmann, collaborated with East Germany's most famous dissident, the late Robert Havemann, to petition for the removal of all nuclear weapons from European soil and for the pull-out of all occupation troops (evidently including those of the USSR) from both parts of Germany. This petition, subsequently known as the Berlin Appeal, was signed by over two thousand people. It unleashed a torrent of controversy within East German religious circles, notably because it was immediately followed by the ban on the peace patch. Fearing a crackdown on churches throughout the country, several prominent religious leaders concluded that Eppelmann had gone too far in his demands and had acted unwisely in linking the churches' concerns with a political figure as controversial as Havemann. Eppelmann was urged to refrain from collecting further signatures, and on several occasions church leaders explicitly warned against "misunderstandings" that might result from taking the Berlin Appeal too seriously.

These political constraints on the critical posture of the East German churches are matched by institutional limitations among them. Unlike Catholic Poland, with a highly centralized church organization, East Germany is mainly Lutheran. Its churches are bound in a broad federation, and it is much harder for anyone to govern religious practice throughout the country. This makes it that much harder for the churches to form a united front before the regime. It also opens up church organizations to dissension, for there are many churchgoers who simply do not want to risk losing what they have already gained from the state. As one young pacifist put it, "Many ministers don't want to sacrifice their precious right of travel to the West in the name of lofty ideals that can't be realized anyway!"

Despite these serious limitations, East Germany's churches will not be easily ignored. In the peace movement they command a broad following. Some are religious and some only hope to use the churches as a vehicle for expressing their political sentiments; but this is still a large and important segment of the population that remains stubbornly distant from government control. The churches may be able to use their authority over these youthful followers as a lever with which to extract concessions from the regime on religious life and practice. In an as yet undefined way, the churches have the potential to provide a persistent challenge to Party government. In a country where life choices usually are framed in terms of total devotion to the Party or total withdrawal into the world of private concerns, the churches can offer an attractive middle course to citizens who seek an alternative to apathy and disinterest.

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