

Consensus

Volume 24

Issue 1 *Leadership into the 21st Century*

Article 16

5-1-1998

The church for others: Protestant theology in communist East Germany

Henriette T. Donner

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus>

Recommended Citation

Donner, Henriette T. (1998) "The church for others: Protestant theology in communist East Germany," *Consensus*: Vol. 24 : Iss. 1 , Article 16.

Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol24/iss1/16>

This Book Reviews is brought to you for free and open access by Scholars Commons @ Laurier. It has been accepted for inclusion in Consensus by an authorized editor of Scholars Commons @ Laurier. For more information, please contact scholarscommons@wlu.ca.

The Church for Others: Protestant Theology in Communist East Germany

Gregory Baum

Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996
173 pp. \$22.25

At the end of the Second World War, East Germany became a soviet-occupied territory. During those Babylonian years, the protestant church (the Lutheran churches representing about 87% of the population) still belonged to the German church, the Evangelische Kirche Deutschlands (EKD). In 1954, the political creation of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) as an autonomous but communist state remade East Germany into a new, separate country. This event automatically placed the leadership of the East German church in exile. Gregory Baum wonders: what kind of theology motivated and allowed the East German Protestant Churches to relinquish their organizational link with the West, and eventually declare themselves as a church—defined as “a community of witness and service”—in a socialist state?

In 1990, the two Germanies were reunited. The *Anschluss*, as Baum calls the subsequent dismantling of communist institutions, ended the separate existence of the East German Lutheran Church, that is to say, its organizational expression, the Federation of Churches or the *Kirchenbund*. The myth that this church had been revolutionary and crucial to the people's uprising against the communist regime, was short lived. A new myth, that it cooperated and even spied for the former regime, was spread by the news media.

Neither myth was justified. The Church existed in the narrow space between endorsement and rejection of the GDR, where “the atheist worldview is the foundation of society and imposed in dictatorial fashion upon all citizens” (Werner Krusche, 1991). Extreme positions existed: pastors who endorsed Marxist-Leninism, and pastors who refused to accept the GDR. However, the *Kirchenbund's* motto became “Neither total refusal nor total accommodation”.

The motto surfaced in the next three decades as “Not beside, not opposed to, but inside a Socialist State”, “Life in a socialist country without offended conscience”, and, “Neither a global Yes, nor a global No”. This stance of neither for nor completely against did not mean paralysis. The church walked “the narrow ridge between total assimilation and total repudiation”, with all the excitement a ridge suggests (64). Indeed, the narrow ridge became wider and wider. Raising the question of “space” for itself and its work, the church became creative in finding and using it.

Sympathetic to the just economic order implied by socialism, Baum claims that the East German church developed “a brilliant contextual theology”, that it reached a new height of Christian spirituality. Since only three of the regional Churches were confessional Lutherans, and the remaining five were Union (Reformed-Lutheran), the *Bund* had to reconcile

two traditions concerning the church's cooperation with the political order: Luther's Two Kingdoms, and the Calvinist, "Kingship of Christ". This legacy of pluralism served the *Kirchenbund* well. It enabled a tolerant consensus in its theological practice, especially on the question of "discipleship", *Nachfolge*.

According to Baum, several factors made Protestant theology in the GDR contextual. 1) The past, especially Weimar, the Third Reich, and Auschwitz, placed an historic responsibility on the Church. This responsibility was spelled out in the "Theological Declaration of the Confessional Synod of Barmen" (1934). Barmen, an example of theological unity, rejected faith as a private matter. 2) The spirit of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, particularly his call to the mature modern individual to realize his or her faith through "action" spoke through Berlin-Brandenburg Bishop Albrecht Schoenherr, through Heino Falcke, chair of the "Our Congregation and Their Groups" Commission, and through various documents produced by the East German church. 3) Bonhoeffer's spirit influenced the decision not to respond to socialist theory, but to a socialist society.

The East German church's self-definition, being and acting as a "community of witness and service", inevitably brought it into conflict with the state. Government was offended by the idea of a "reformable socialism" that dialogue between church and state implied. The claim of "being a learning church" was seen as a reprimand to the state for blotting out religion in the state schools. The engagement of youth in peace activism, the memorial dedicated to honour the victims of *Krystallnacht*, the demand for debate about Chernobyl—each decision to "walk along" with co-citizens of the GDR became political opposition. Yet, had the church decided to do nothing but to contemplate its own piety, the non-action would have furthered the aims of the GDR *against* its citizens. (Indeed, the success of active state attack on Christian thinking is revealed in a 1990 survey which shows that only 20% of East Germans believe in God or a creating Spirit, contrasted with 97% Canadians.)

Simply holding on to the Christian belief that all areas of life need Jesus' justification and sanctification put the East German faith community against an order that, although it had emerged from biblical roots, now claimed its ideology to be a sufficient explanation of all reality. Baum's book leads us to realize that this conflict exists for Lutheran churches not only in the former GDR, but in all modern states.

Henriette T. Donner
Waterloo, Ontario