

DOING THEOLOGY IN THE CONTEXT OF EASTERN EUROPE

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1. Doing theology in the context of Eastern Europe means repentance

In order to understand the tasks and responsibilities of the present time we have to remember the past. For many of the burning issues of today result from the insufficiently extinguished fires of yesterday. To speak from the perspective of the German Democratic Republic about "Eastern Europe" therefore, has to remember that this term for at least twelve years in German history meant mainly three things:

- The territory occupied by racially inferior Slavic/Asiatic peoples which had to give place for the superior German race "without space".
- The territory largely ruled by the evil empire of atheist/Jewish bolshevism (= Soviet type of communism) to be destroyed at any rate.
- The territory on which the extermination of 6 million European Jews of all countries was ruthlessly implemented without Western civilization being bothered by the smell of the combustion furnaces.

Reflecting seriously from an East German perspective about elements and preconditions of a relevant theology in the context of Eastern Europe, therefore, has to start with a confession of guilt. It at the same time has to face the fact, that the undescrivable crimes of German people in the countries of Eastern Europe have not only been committed in the name of Adolf Hitler, but also in the name of God:

"The Confidential Council of the German Protestant Church, gathering for the first time since the beginning of the decisive struggle in the East, assures you, my Führer, in these enthusiastically moving hours once again of the unchangeable support and commitment of all protestant Christians in the Reich. You, my Führer, have banned the danger of bolshevism in our own country and are now calling our people and the people of Europe to participate in the decisive battle against the deadly enemy of all order and all Western Christian culture. The German people together with its Christian members thank you for this deed of yours. (...)"

This telegramme to the "Führer" was the official message of the German protestant church on the occasion of the fascist invasion of Soviet Union in 1941, which had been preceded by the conquest of Poland in 1939. The war in the East, which cost the lives of 5 million Poles and 20 million Soviet citizens - one third of them being civilians - was waged with a historically unprecedented brutality. Mass massacres, eradication of hundreds of villages including babies and grandmothers, a policy of starvation; 36 000 Jews of Riga being shot within two nights in the roadside ditches outside the town in November 1941; 900 000 people dying during the hunger blockade of Leningrad. All this belonged to a systematically implemented plan to create "living space" for Germany in the East by depopulating and colonializing large areas of the Soviet Union, making use of the rich natural resources and enslaving the remaining population as cheap labour for the German "Herrenvolk" (ruling nation).

The ideology underlying all this horrible concepts, figures, details was a sharp dualism, which had on its dark side the Eastern Empire, ruled by the double headed devil of "Jewish bolshevism" being accompanied by gloomy notions of "asiatic barbarism" (The hordes of Genghiz Khan!), to nourish the idea of an imminent "danger from the East".

German theology, apart from a very few exceptions, was not able to resist this ideology. On the contrary: Some of the main elements of German fascist ideology such as antisemitism, anticommunism, racial/cultural arrogance were corresponding to or even rooted in the very structure of theological thinking patterns, which had been handed down and shaped through the centuries of crusades, witch-hunting, pogroms, colonialism, and the alliance of the "throne and altar". Doing theology in the context of Eastern Europe, thus, again and again has to start with the question of what must happen to Christians, in order to make them ready to think the unthinkable and to accept the unacceptable: a policy of burnt earth and burnt flesh as defense of "order" and "Christian culture", the holocaust as preparing the way of Christ.

As mass extermination is an ongoing reality in the two-Thirds world today, and the nuclear holocaust in the meantime has become a threat to the whole of human race, this question is the most urgent one, both in the Eastern and the global context.

2. Doing theology in the context of Eastern Europe means liberation from the ties of the "Christian West"

After the foundation of two separate German states in 1949 the church in the Eastern part had extreme difficulties in accepting its new non-western contextuality. For at least 20 years more it lived physically in the East, but continued to belong to the West, both in terms of church structure and of theology/ideology. Although two major declarations of guilt were given (Stuttgart 1945/Darmstadt 1947), repentance in the profound Biblical sense of "metanoia" = changing mind/practice on the whole did not take place. Self-pity, self-justification, self-preservation prevailed over self-criticism. Liberation from fascism was perceived as breakdown of Germany, the suffering of German people as a result of the war silenced the question of who had initiated this war. Accusing the crimes of Stalin became more popular than speaking about their own share in Hitler's crimes.

"... We went astray when we began to build up a 'Christian front' against emerging necessities of renewing orders in the social life of people. The alliance of the church with the forces preserving the old and traditional revenged itself badly upon us. (...) We have denied the right to revolution, but tolerated and approved the development towards absolute dictatorship. (...)

... Not the slogan: Christianity and occidental culture, but turning back to God and turning towards the neighbour... is the one thing which... especially we as Christians need. (...)"

(Darmstadt 1947)

As these words of Darmstadt remained widely unheard, the old "fronts" and "alliances" continued. Consequently, theology and church got quickly reintegrated into the trench system of cold war. Neither reconciliation with the Soviet Union nor reorientation with regard to marxism/communism were on the Christian agenda of the fifties and sixties. When in the heated debates about nuclear armament of the Federal Republic of Germany one participant felt compelled to exclaim, that "Jesus Christ did not die against Karl Marx, but for us all" (G. Heinemann, 1958), his was only a small voice both in East and West Germany. The christian way of thinking was largely anti-Eastern. This made church and theology completely incapable of counterbalancing the developing East-West-confrontation, which up to now has become a heavy burden and deadly danger to the whole globe. It is yet another of the failures of German church history that christians after 1945 in the face of 55 million killed people and an uncountable amount of destruction all over Europe were not able to liberate themselves radically from the ties of the past.

It is no wonder that the persisting pro-Western orientation created severe difficulties in the living together of Christians and Marxists, church and state in the GDR. Marxists experienced Christians as just confirming the old experience of social and working class movements in Germany, that the churches were always standing on the other side. Christians defined socialism in the categories of "atheism", "materialism", and "totalitarism", developing attitudes of "wintering" or passive/active resistance. To understand and appreciate socialism as a serious effort to weed out the evils of fascism and racial discrimination, social injustice, and war by their structural roots, was beyond the horizon of reflection in the majority of Christian congregations.

The foundations of an independent church Federation in the GDR (1969) together with the self-definition as "church within socialism", not against or apart from it (1971) mark two decisive steps in the Exodus out of the Western capitalist system towards a more unprejudiced acceptance of the Eastern context. This indigenization, promoted by the detente in the East-West-relations of the seventies, is an ongoing process necessarily full of contradictions and tensions, errors and misunderstandings, but on the whole promising and with no other option.

Learning to take seriously the socialist context and resist the constant temptation (reinforced by a permanent Western media presence) to escape theologically, ideologically or even physically back to the "fleshpots" and "golden calves" of the Western world becomes the basic precondition for Christian existence gaining credibility, Christian witness being heard, and Christian criticism becoming relevant and acceptable to Marxists.

### 3. Doing theology in the context of Eastern Europe means cooperation and dialogue with marxists within a socialist society

In spring 1988 a film went into the GDR cinemas which was running for weeks in sold out houses and warmly received by the audience. It dealt with christian-marxist relations in the fifties. A young pastor and a

young police officer, both of them deadly sick with tuberculosis, happen to share a room in a sanatorium. The film which bears the significant title "Bear you one another's burden", shows the relation of the two changing from hostility, rivalry and distrust into mutual acceptance. Its central message focuses on the comment of one of the doctors: If you don't learn to get on with each other here in the face of death, neither your Christianity nor your marxism is of any use...

In the process of christian-marxist encounter both sides will have to learn from each other. The film, produced by a marxist, shows a high appreciation for the traditional values of christian ethics such as charity, unselfishness and the pastoral capacity of handling the ultimate questions of death, disease, suffering, which often have been deplored as the "blind spots" of marxism. Not without reason the probably most successful field of state-church cooperation in the GDR in the last decades has been the care for sick, old, and handicapped people, where the work of Christians has gained high social value.

Christians, on the other hand, will have to learn something from the specific marxist approach about the relevance of social structures, economic interests and struggles, to counterbalance the one-sidedness of the Christian tradition nearly exclusively shaped by individualism/idealism. This learning process will lead to new insights and orientations in the field of social ethics/politics, showing the dependance of individuals on social structures, of social structures on economy, of economy on interest groups, of interest groups on financial/commercial/political mechanisms and aims, which in the present-day world order mainly function towards injustice, war and undoing creation.

In this perspective the basic impulse of the socialist order, to develop a less destructive, non-competitive economic and social structure/morality becomes a profound challenge to re-think the traditional Christian value system, e.g. with regard to the long prevailing overestimation of individual freedom and neglect of social justice. As these two values in none of the presently existing societies are fully realized together, priorities have to be put, giving community-oriented patterns of life preference over a freedom which with its niceties inevitably always includes the freedom to exploit others, to wage wars, to destroy nature for selfish interests. The guiding principle of evaluating (and also criticising) socialism cannot be the question of what it is lacking in comparison with western capitalist societies in terms of consuming, traveling possibilities etc., but the question of what it is able and obliged to contribute to the survival of the Two-Thirds as well as of the whole world.

On this basis authentic patterns of consent and criticism may develop, making sure, that criticism - which is an undeniable requirement of any social progress - is not founded on the old values of the "christian occident", but directed towards a more comprehensive development of socialist qualities and possibilities on the different levels of society (e.g. with regard to working ethics, relation to private and social property, social responsibility, exercise of power, solidarity with the Third world, awareness for ecological necessities and re-orientations).

Authentic criticism presupposes substantial knowledge and responsibility, a fundamental readiness to take over "the other side's burden" as well as to self-criticism: It remains one of the "missing links" in German church history, that much debate about reformation and reformability of socialism took place in the church, but little proof was given to society of the liberating reality of the permanent, Spirit-guided reformation of the church itself...

Clarifying and respecting each other's diversity and cooperating in matters of common responsibility, have to be done together. This new culture of getting on with each other in the marxist-christian relationships is not only required to mobilize the inner reserves of the socialist society for its further development, but also in the face of global death threatening humanity.

4. Doing theology in the context of Eastern Europe means witness towards coexistence with the West in solidarity with the South

When in April, 1945, American and Soviet troops met at the Elbe river in Torgau (today GDR), this marked the last stage in the defeat of Nazi Germany. The small nations of Europe and the two leading countries of capitalist and socialist system together had won the victory over the most inhumane and destructive forces of fascism. This historic experience of cooperation, which could have laid the basis for a peaceful post-war order, unfortunately got lost too quickly. Antifascism as the common basise for divergent ideologies/economic systems to cooperate for the survival of civilised humanity was turned into anticommunism and cold war, the two systems since then wasting enormous amounts of money, energy, natural and intellectual resources against each other, at the expense of the whole humanity, especially in the Third world, and at the expense of natural environment. If this dynamics of life-consuming East-West-confrontation, which developed in and focuses on Europe, but dramatically affects the whole world, is not reversed in the near future, it will lead to an extermination of humanity. The spirit of the Anti-Hitler-coalition needs to be revived in a worldwide Anti-extermination coalition.

The task to solve does not consist of "reconciling" or hiding the divergences and conflicts between the capitalist and the socialist system; rather these conflicts have to be acknowledged but prevented from extending into a military/nuclear conflict - preventing them secondly from absorbing more and more quantities of economic, social, ecological potentials which are urgently needed for development and safeguarding life on local, regional and global scales.

It doesn't need arguing about the responsibility, which Christians and churches do have in this field of building confidence and converting confrontation into cooperation. But Christians in the East will be able to become a tool of peace and coexistence between East and West only to the extent to which they have been capable of developing authentic patterns of an Eastern European contextualization: liberating themselves from the ties of their Western past, resisting the temptation of being dragged into mechanisms of cold war and anticommunism again and again, building up convincing models of christian-marxist cooperation and

dialogue, finding a clear identity as "church within socialism", not against, nor apart from it. It seems, that this task of identity-finding marks the actual test-field for the relevance and maturity of a theology in the context of Eastern Europe, as well as in the context of the East-West and the North-South relationships.

New ways of perception have to be learned: Not seeing the 2nd world through 1st world eyes, but looking at the 3rd world, then at the global problems, and then back at the 2nd world. Such a new contextual world view is closely related to new ways of Bible interpretation, rather a totally new rediscovery of the Bible in the context of the 2nd world, which is only just starting. Re-reading the Bible with 2nd world eyes will come across the long neglected relevance of social options and aspirations in the texts and their historical contexts, together with the central importance of the concept of integral justice throughout the whole corpus of Biblical books. Liberating the Bible from the philosophical and political thought patterns of the Constantine epoch (including the long prevailing dichotomies of faith - world, justification by faith alone - social justice, spirituality-political struggle etc.) will create new insights into the central message of the Scriptures. Bible reading in the context of Eastern Europe will have to learn a lot from the Exodus-interpretation of Liberation theology in Latin America. At the same time, it has to develop its own understanding of the complex dialectics between the radical vision of the "promised land" and the "Kingdom of God" on the one hand, the necessity of compromises and realism in the historic process on the other hand - making clear, that socialism is certainly not the Kingdom of heaven, nor the Empire of Evil, but a historic step on the way of humanity towards bringing about more justice and equality.

When two years ago the radioactive clouds of Tchernobyl were polluting both East and West, capitalist and socialist countries of Europe, this became the symbol of border and system transgressing threats and challenges of global dimension. Once again: It is not the task of theology and churches to attach eschatological labels to the social-economic systems as such, but to encourage both of them to deal constructively with the burning issues of survival, without wasting more energy on the preparation of death. Good and Evil, sheep and goats in the final judgment will not be recognized by their confessions, theologies, ideologies, but by the readiness, creativity and effectiveness, which they were able to mobilize for feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, housing the homeless, healing the sick. The capacity to deal with the life-threatening and life-consuming economic, military, ecological questions of our world is the ultimate criterion for both capitalism and socialism, as well as for any Christian practice and theology. Christian theology, thus, has to be done as the confirming reflection for the rediscovery, and proclamation of the Biblical God, who is a God of life against death - a God of justice, peace and integrity of creation. Not only in the context of Eastern Europe but also with the contexts of the South and the West.