

Documents

An Address by Bishop Leich: Two Versions

On 3 March 1988 Erich Honecker held talks with Dr Werner Leich, Bishop of Thuringia and Chairman of the Conference of Protestant Church Leaders of the GDR. The discussions took place almost ten years after the meeting of 6 March 1978 between Erich Honecker and the executive of the Conference of Protestant Church Leaders, headed by Dr Albrecht Schönherr. (For an assessment of these discussions see Dr Albrecht Schönherr, "Ten Years On", RCL, Vol. 16 No. 2, pp. 126-34.) We publish below two

differing accounts of what was said by Bishop Leich at the 1988 discussions between church and state. The Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung of 8 March published the full text of Bishop Leich's speech. On 4 March Neues Deutschland published an account of Dr Leich's address. It is interesting to note that the same issue of Neues Deutschland devoted approximately four times as much space to the address given by Erich Honecker than to that given by Dr Leich. Readers are invited to compare the two versions.

From the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*.

Dear President,

Thank you for offering me a personal meeting. I have accepted it with pleasure and have great expectations from it. The meeting gives me the opportunity of thanking you for your personal involvement in securing peace among peoples with the aim of eventual disarmament and complete freedom of mankind from atomic weapons. This involvement has on several occasions been acknowledged with gratitude by the Conference of Protestant Churches in the GDR. It creates a great deal of common ground, which you can recognise in the support which your initiatives —

for example for nuclear-free zones — receive from our churches. This is also expressed when the Protestant churches of the GDR declare their commitment to peace in the international bodies of world Christendom. This has occurred frequently and unambiguously and will continue to do so.

In your conversation of 6 March 1978 with the chairman of the Conference of Protestant Church Leaders, common concern for the maintenance of peace was already an important link between state and church. Today we can look back on a ten-year development since that conversation. We acknowledge its fruits with gratitude: we have been able to build parish rooms or churches in

new housing areas, extend our pastoral work in nursing-homes, celebrate the Luther year with widely-respected public events, hold church assemblies with the visible support of the state and broadcast regularly on television. We also look with gratitude on efforts to bring about the principle of equal rights and respect for Christian citizens at all levels. Both you, Mr President, and the then Chairman of the Conference of Church Leaders have said that it is necessary that discussions of principles should percolate down to the smallest municipality and parish, even if this takes a long time. Bishop Schönherr established at that time that the relationship between church and state was as good as the individual citizen experiences it on the spot in his social situation. Today we can say that we have moved forward and the way is not closed. Indeed it is not possible to close it, for society, state and church are parts of the variety exhibited by people in their life in their communities.

There is no alternative to the principles of 6 March 1978. With the constitutional separation of church and state, all questions which affect both church and state are discussed in the framework of this constitution in an open and objective dialogue on the basis of a trust that has grown. After ten years we now have the task of thinking about how to deal with the results of the discussion on principles in view of present and possible future developments in society and the church. As Protestant churches we want to perform this duty from the position described by the formula "the church in socialism". We wish to accept God's will to serve Him as God's church in a socialist society side by side with a socialist state. We wish to do this as a partner bound to the will of God and cooperating constructively, as a

partner which supports the welfare of the community and the possibility of socialism as a more just form of cooperation among men. We see our task as neither to be an opposition party nor to give the state our blessing. When we say "thank God" we will be ready to cooperate, but when we cannot do so, we will say so and speak out openly.

Frank Discussions

In recent months we have come to sense the dynamism inherent in a society in which various communities live together. This dynamism has also brought difficulties in the relationship between church and state. There is nothing extraordinary about this. It is this dynamism which is putting the relationship between church and state to the test. The decisive question is whether such a test can be worked through by open discussion. I see this as our task today and I would like to tackle it.

The questions which have affected our Protestant churches — especially those in Berlin-Brandenburg — in recent months are questions which arise from socio-political sources. They do not have their origin in the work we are doing in our churches. Acting as we are for both state and society, we have had to take note of the debate on these questions. We did not seek out this role. Those to whom an appeal was actually addressed have given no indication that they are prepared to engage in a dialogue. We meet people who have suffered grievously and who seek changes inside socialist society. We meet citizens who see in forfeiting that citizenship the only solution to their own lives. In every case we as the church have reminded them that they should remain in our community. In cases of special hardship and when we see clearly that every effort to

achieve reconciliation is in vain, we have asked that permission to emigrate should be granted quickly. In the last ten years I myself have almost always found understanding and attention when making recommendations in local discussions. The number of people who wish to leave our country and who have applied to do so has risen considerably. We are concerned about this. We see in this a development to which we as a church have given no encouragement, which we indeed have opposed publicly and categorically.

I can see that the present situation is influenced by a whole range of factors which merit attention. The appeal by state and society to every individual to stand up personally for the preservation of peace has challenged many people to think for themselves and led to a readiness to perceive their own responsibility in the matter. In this I see a positive result for our country. Now this theoretical thinking, which has developed in several directions, needs a concrete outcome in the shape of institutions in state and society which are prepared to engage in dialogue with citizens. The foreign policy of our state has stressed the survival of society as the main concern of the human race. It has made an essential contribution to the easing of problems affecting East and West, and has led to a change in the relationship between the two German states. We are thankful for this success. Trends in domestic policy, however, have not kept pace with this process. Our citizens experience this tension in their everyday life within the state. Very often, Mr President; I have quoted your remark that "there must be no bureaucracy or heartlessness in our relationship with our citizens." Many citizens are very grieved by the fact that criteria for travel, generous in themselves, remain a secret to them. Every application is liable to

be met by a refusal. As a rule reasons for refusal are not given. This produces the feeling of being treated as a minor, incapable of understanding decisions.

In direct dealings with administrative departments the citizen learns how political power is used. Frequently, premature decisions are made without any attempt to put forward convincing reasons, or indeed without listening receptively to the citizen. The climate of trust between the state and citizens is harmed when, instead of hearing meaningful reasons, they merely receive the distant decision of authority; and a citizen's critical response is immediately looked upon as an expression of hostility towards the state.

I also view with concern the wide gap between the real world, as we experience it day by day, and the way it is presented in the media. Citizens are well acquainted with difficulties in everyday life in our society. In the media these are only hinted at. This situation produces the impression that the actual problems are not recognised, or at best only partially, by those responsible. The spelling-out of difficulties could encourage citizens to play their part in thinking about them and taking them on. The readiness to do so is certainly there. Moreover, in many cases, our media leave the reporting and commenting on events to media in the Federal Republic. As a rule these media are critically biased against the GDR, and through a choice of negative reports build up their own picture of what the news really is. Many of our citizens confuse speed of news-coverage, detailed reporting and varied commentating with accuracy and objectivity. Our media in the GDR could counter these far more effectively if they followed a policy of giving reports and commentaries from different viewpoints. There

were the first signs of this at the Berlin *Kirchentag* (Church Assembly) and the Catholic meeting.

At the beginning of 1986, the Committee of the Conference of Protestant Church Leaders at its inaugural visit, together with the leadership of the West German Synod, put to the State Secretary for Church Affairs the fundamental questions which underlie what I have been saying. In May 1987 we spelt out these questions in detail, in a carefully prepared form, and asked for discussions on them. These were agreed for the autumn of 1987, but were then cancelled. A great deal was expected from these discussions in our parishes, especially among our younger members. I therefore ask that the discussions in the form planned for the autumn of 1987 on questions of military service, education and relationships between the state and the citizen should nonetheless be held. I am convinced that, if they are held, there will be a very great effect on the expectations for the future of many citizens.

Signals for the Future

We need in state and society such signals for future development. Those who live from one day to the next, and give up hope because their expectations of the community are disappointed, must be shown a way forward. Those who long impatiently for clear signs of hope for the future are ready and willing to play their part in our society; they should be enabled to do so. There are many fields for such action by state and society which would have a significant effect on expectations for the future:

1) A formal requirement to state reasons for particular decisions in response to applications of any kind,

which affect the personal life of the citizen, would be a step forward.

2) The publication of procedures and conditions for foreign travel would also be a step forward.

3) An early attempt should be made to return to a form of dialogue between applicants for emigration and state officials; in the event of failure to achieve this, a minimum waiting time should be set before emigration. This procedure would reduce feelings of frustration and the communication of such feelings to others.

4) The introduction of a civilian alternative to military service would solve the problem of those who refuse to serve; it would release powerful energies for socialist society among young people, even if they do not actually make use of this alternative.

5) A clear statement on the equality of opportunity of all citizens in the field of higher education would bring a feeling of hope for the future. There should be more readiness to engage in dialogue and a greater will to work together with citizens who are deeply concerned about the preservation of the environment; in this way it would be possible to unite people of many different backgrounds in working for a secure future.

6) The availability of some serious newspapers from the West in our newspaper outlets would help citizens to assess media reports in a discriminating way.

These thoughts on actions which would have a signal effect on expectations for the future come from our experience of conversations with members of our congregations. They are in no way intended as an attempt to undermine socialist society. Indeed we assume that socialism, judging by its goals, has no difficulty in coming to terms with the suggestions we have put forward.

Looking back on the road we have travelled together since 6 March 1978 encourages us in the common tasks of the present. Much is being achieved now; the expectations for the future are becoming clear, and are being made accessible to the individual. On the extent to which Christian citizens can be included in the common tasks of the present will depend the common road which lies ahead of us. For this reason we ask for decisions and actions which will have a signal effect on expectations for the future — expectations which are available to all citizens equally. We realise that economic development in the world is beset by considerable difficulties. It also demands a great deal from our country. But the meaning of life depends not on increases in the standard of living, but on human values; this principle is, after all, shared by communists and Christians. Human values are present in our society and we can appeal to them. For this we need that confidence in the future that is so essential to life. It leads the way in the securing of peace, in the maintenance of living conditions and in the fostering of human relationships and contacts.

Our present meeting also reminds me, Mr President, of our meeting on the occasion of the reopening of the Wartburg after its successful restoration on 21 April 1983. The event was the first high point in the Luther year, which aroused such world-wide interest. Both Luther committees had made preparations, each with its own objective, yet at the same time were actively concerned with each other's tasks. This concern was enriching. Before us lay the big events which we were waiting for and to which we could look forward. The common road up to that point and the common expectations for the future brought us very close together. In the

chapel on the Wartburg I said to you that this closeness is also present when we Christians are gathered together simply to honour God in a service of worship. I said: "Christians in prayer bring their requests about religious, political and personal life before the throne of God. In doing so we remember you, Mr President, and all who carry political responsibility. This prayer is the inner reason for our seeking an open conversation with the representatives of our state and in doing so to speak for those to whom we are committed."

Today and in the future I will act according to these principles.

Translated from German by Arvan Gordon.

From Neues Deutschland

Bishop Leich expressed his thanks for the talk [i.e. the conversation with Erich Honecker — *Ed.*], which corresponded to a long-cherished wish on the part of the churches. He thanked the government and the Chairman of the Council of State for their work for peace and disarmament, which the churches valued highly. The concern for the preservation of peace had been an important link between church and state even in 1978 and had remained so until today. The Bishop expressed gratitude for what had been achieved in the intervening years. Many of the problems addressed at that time had been solved. Above all, however, the principles stressed at that time of equal rights, equal respect and equality of chances for all citizens, as well as the necessity for dialogue, had proved to be both viable and beneficial. There was no alternative to this.

While recognising the constitutionally-established separation of church and

state, and on the foundation of trust which had increased in the years since 1978, dialogue had to be continued today on the new issues which had emerged as a result of the dynamics of the development of human co-existence. The fact that problems arose during development of both church and state determined by these dynamics was nothing out of the ordinary. It was merely a question of how to overcome these problems. The church wished to help in this matter as a constructively cooperating party bound to the will of God, which was seeking the benefits of coexistence, and which said "yes" to the possibilities of socialism as a more equitable form of coexistence

among people.

The Bishop then went into the problems which exert an influence on the relationship between state and church. He asked that, if the churches were to seek the continuation of "information talks", this should be seen as an expression of readiness to cooperate in thinking about and taking responsibility for the vital issues facing our people. Those issues on which the churches felt they had to speak, as a result of their experiences with members of their congregations, have been submitted to the State Secretary for Church Affairs by the Executive of the Conference of Protestant Church Leaders.