Revisiting the church in socialism

by Max Stackhouse in the September 23, 1998 issue

By Gregory Baum, The Church for Others: Protestant Theology in Communist East Germany. *(Eerdmans, 173 pp.)*

By John P. Burgess, The East German Church and the End of Communism: Essays on Religion, Democratization and Christian Social Ethics. *(Oxford University Press, 208 pp.)*

By William J. Everett, Religion, Federalism, and the Struggle for Public Life: Cases from Germany, India and America. *(Oxford University Press, 240 pp.)*

A recent visit to the heavily guarded border between South and North Korea reminded me of going through Checkpoint Charlie at the Wall between East and West Berlin in the 1970s and '80s. The stiff efficiency of soldiers working the gates, the hard eyes of security people, the sound of heavy boots on stone roads, the guard's sudden disappearance with one's passport, the zigzag traffic around tank traps--all this came back to me. I remembered the blaring martial music, red flags, banners emblazoned with slogans, and heroic proletarian statuary that greeted me as I entered East Berlin. Only a few places still mark the divide between pluralistic societies and those forms of socialism that seek to liberate humanity through a state monopoly of ideology, politics and economics.

Countries that have been divided the way Germany and Korea have are of special interest to political analysts, since such key factors as religion, cultural history, geography, ethnicity and technological capacity are relatively constant in both regimes. The issues that arise with the reunification of such countries are equally revealing. Hong Kong has been reabsorbed into the People's Republic of China, but tensions between the raw forms of capitalism of the one and the raw forms of socialist statism of the other suggest that many issues remain unsettled. Taiwan is among the countries watching closely.

North and South Vietnam were united by a victorious socialist state, but they are now divided between factions reluctantly adopting the capitalism they had defeated

and those exploiting what they now control. North and South Yemen tried to join and have split again. North Korea seems to be collapsing, while South Korea undergoes readjustments brought on by the wider East Asian crisis.

Only the experience of East and West Germany provides a useful model of reunification, though it is fraught with ambiguities. The Wall is gone and the massive cleanup of ecological and social damage in the East is under way, but many of the older generation are still wandering in the wilderness, with little taste for manna or hope of glimpsing any promised land. Many in the East are nostalgic about the socialist days when they willingly made sacrifices for the promised new society. No one easily forgets causes for which a great price has been paid.

Many "Ossies" (former East Germans) resent the "Wessies" for thinking that they know better about everything, and many East German youth are contemptuous of their elders for supporting or tolerating the old system and not preparing them for the new. People sneer at the former communist "true believers" who have now become capitalist managers, and they make snide comments about "foreigners'' who migrate from Eastern Europe and are willing to work for less money than Germans are. A certain cynicism makes people unwilling to trust any program, institution or belief system. Marxist anti-idealism and atheism succeeded too well.

The German case is significant not only for Asians who face the problems of reunification but for Christians everywhere. In East Germany, the Protestant church had a chance to be the "church in socialism." Though few church leaders and public intellectuals would still argue that Stalinism, Leninism or Maoism is the way of the future, a belief in socialist values and a Marxist understanding of capitalism remain pervasive.

John P. Burgess, recently on the staff of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and now professor of theology at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, has artfully woven together a series of essays on East Germany written between 1984 and 1996. He begins with an account of the limits imposed on the church by the state, the difficulty of a serious dialogue between the church and the Communist Party, and the church's decision nevertheless to become the "church in socialism." In some ways, this was the only option for the East German church. It would have lost its identity entirely if it had simply been "for" socialism. No firm consensus about being "against" socialism could have been marshaled among its theologians and pastors. And the conviction that the old "two-kingdoms" theory had contributed to the rise of

fascism in Germany made the church deeply ambivalent about being simply "beside" socialism.

Burgess traces the church's role in the movement toward democracy. An early chapter treats the roots and operative definitions of the idea of "liberation." In official party and state rhetoric "liberation" meant both freedom from capitalism and militarism (and thus from fascism and imperialism, since the first two were presumed to lead by the "logic of history" to the second two) and freedom for socialism and communism (the one seen as a stage in the transition to the other).

In spite of the tendency to view religion as an ally of capitalism, militarism, fascism and imperialism, East Germany granted the church a position of marginal but decisive privilege as a result of the state's legal guarantee of "freedom of religion" (which often meant freedom for personal belief, expressed in private only). Since the Communist Party assumed that religion would fade away with the increased socialization of society, it saw no reason to alienate older workers who still had religious illusions.

Thus, unlike all other organizations, the church was guaranteed the right to hold certain meetings and to publish some materials. This gave it a distinctive "social space"--a term Burgess uses often, though he does not cite the literature that developed this idea of the church's place in society generally or in East Germany specifically.

"Pluralist" societies tend to view persons as individuated selves with rights and duties, who may form or leave independent political, social, business or religious associations; but "socialist" societies incorporate the self into an organic whole that guides each self and controls independent groups and associations. If the first often leads to an abstracted, voluntarist self, the second leads to an enforced collective solidarity. In one, the church becomes a source of fellowship, participation and institution-building; in the other, the church becomes the locus of an alternative worldview and, possibly, increased individuation and pluralism.

Focusing on church decisions in the late 1980s and on key theological leaders, Burgess documents how the church moved from offering a cautious, even veiled statement of an alternative worldview to advocating alternative institution-building. For instance, while the state celebrated the heroic struggle of the socialist workers standing in solidarity with the Soviet Union against "Hitler fascism," several

theologians in the mid '80s suggested that Germans needed to confess their collective guilt for their participation in the Nazi atrocities. While the state portrayed itself as a "peace society" that had exterminated the causes of war--capitalism and fascism--and opposed NATO armaments, the church spoke of the priority of peace in personal and interpersonal life because God has reconciled the world through Jesus Christ.

Burgess points out that theologians almost never commented on the radical militarization of East German (and Soviet) society, although paramilitary training was a part of every school program. Nevertheless, because the church provided an alternative rhetoric and organization its "social space" attracted political dissidents (and misfits) as well as convinced believers and eager seekers. As a result, many semiunderground groups developed within the churches. They were particularly attractive to young intellectuals, just as semi-illegal pubs for rock and punk music (and much too much beer) attracted young workers. These workers were deeply alienated from both the church and the dull training, boring work and slogan-filled patriotic clubs provided for work groups.

Burgess argues that a set of specific theological developments were most important in increasing the church's influence. These included "openness to the world, concern for the suffering and marginalized, and commitment to personal and social liberation." These concerns generated the impulses toward a democratic, political ethic in opposition to the old Lutheran two-kingdoms ethic and allied the church with various attempts to turn the state toward a more authentic, humane democratic socialism. Such hopes increased when Mikhail Gorbachev began to advocate glasnost.

In this context Burgess discusses the ideas of church leader Heino Falcke, a former assistant to Karl Barth. Falcke offered one of the most sensitive treatments of the underground groups, arguing that modern societies were falling apart due to the triumph of instrumental reason. He claimed that only a theology rooted in Christology, a sense of confession in the tradition of the Barman Declaration, and a renewed ecclesial practice could preserve humanity.

Though Falcke did not propose an alternative social philosophy, the idea that something (not capitalism) outside socialism could improve socialism challenged many--and threatened some party leaders. But other participants in the oppositional groups agreed more with sociologist Ehrhart Neubert, who maintained that

dehumanizing forms of socialism were themselves generating and perpetuating marginal forms of religious life. These people wanted to move more quickly into direct forms of public discourse, demonstration and political formation.

Some church leaders took important stands between these two views. Wolfgang Ullmann, a church historian, saw in the dissident groups a chance for people to cultivate a trust whereby they could speak their minds without fear and find the courage to demand human rights and ecological responsibility. After the Wall fell, he formed one of the first nonsocialist parties, which later merged with the "Greens." Richard Schröder, a pastor with a high regard for the ancient Greeks and for Hannah Arendt, joined the Social Democrats. He was elected to the transitional parliament and helped shape the stance toward reunification. Ullmann and Schröder took some of the first steps toward a "public theology" able to shape civil society and set the framework for the formation of persons and the reformation of the common life.

Burgess also discusses Heinrich Fink and Wolf Krötke. Fink was the rector of Humbolt University and an active leader in the Christian Peace Conference (which was closely tied to the U.S.S.R.) in the 1980s. He was later dismissed from his university post for complicity with the secret police. Krötke was a theologian at an independent seminary and is now chair of the theological faculty at Humbolt. Burgess rightly compares Krötke's work to that of Stanley Hauerwas and John Howard Yoder. He had a kind of ecclesiologically based antipolitical theology that was the antithesis of Fink's militantly political theology. Fink and Krötke represented the extremes of a two-kingdoms theory in that situation, though neither was influential in the transition.

Burgess's careful, even guarded, treatment of people and themes is shaped by his sense of a struggle between "progressive" and "conservative" stances. For him, "progressive" means "good, and mildly socialist but not too radical," and "conservative" means "perhaps rooted in classic traditions, but not fully in tune with current liberal thought." Though this "liberal-conservative" spectrum preoccupies many Americans, it is not the decisive issue for churches, societies or theology generally.

Gregory Baum covers some of this same ground but offers a different interpretation. A Canadian, Baum is well known for his work on theology and society and his sympathy for a liberationist perspective. As a Catholic, he is attentive to the statements of bishops (especially Albrecht Schönherr and Verner Krusche). And he

explores a version of "contextual theology" that is formed by a community of faith that does not try to be a "universal church"--which is both a notable contrast with developments in the Roman Catholic Church and an affirmation of accents from "liberation theology." Baum also pays more attention that Burgess does to economic developments, to official statements by socialist parties, and to those church leaders who quote from Marxist sources or speak of learning from Marxist insights. Clearly, he is seeking resources to resist the tide of capitalism that is now shaping the world.

But Baum's chief contribution is his emphasis on the fact that many leaders of the East German churches identified with the spirit of the confessing church and were deeply indebted to Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Baum wants to study this tradition. He acknowledges that "Barmen had actually been a weak document, lacking courage: it only opposed Hitler's violation of the Church's autonomy and had nothing to say regarding his violation of human rights, the persecution of the Jews, the philosophy of German superiority and the preparation for a world war." Baum notes an ambiguity in Barmen's assertion that there are no areas of life in which we do not belong to Christ: Who is the "we"? Only Christians, or everyone in society?

The church's resolve to be a "church in socialism" allowed church leaders to acknowledge a claim of the state on their lives as Christians, and implicitly allowed them to believe that, though their society was atheistic, it was not really "against God." Barmen helped the church seek to be a faithful community of witness and service, but it did not require it to develop a prophetic, "watchman" or public theological role, shaping the moral and spiritual architecture of civilization. Indeed, in its attempt to keep the church from identifying itself with the Nazis it distanced itself equally from all social theories and political systems. In asserting that the gospel stands far beyond all forms of human wisdom, Barmen limited the church's capacity to develop modes of discourse and social convictions necessary for creative participation in society.

Baum recognizes Bonhoeffer's impact in this context. Bonhoeffer argued that the attempts to preserve the church often reflected a too-high veneration of the state, a de facto support of traditional social values, and an unduly weak view of human nature. Thus, the church itself was in need of a true conversion, a new solidarity with the excluded, the poor and the persecuted--all that was entailed in taking the risk to be a "church for others."

However, Bonhoeffer also saw that society's leaders had reached a certain maturity--thanks to science, technology and management methods which were universal in implication in ways that the traditional church claims no longer could be. He wanted the church to recognize the positive aspects of this: people no longer needed the old props and were open to new ways of thinking about God, humanity and creation. But this view makes for a certain ambiguity. We are to oppose, even have contempt for, the bourgeoisie but believe according to the fruits of the bourgeois world.

While Baum states his admiration for Bonhoeffer, and compares him to such Catholic thinkers as Maurice Blondel, Karl Rahner, Johann-Baptist Metz and several Latin liberation theologians, he is puzzled by Bonhoeffer's repudiation of metaphysics. Though Baum understands the rejection of an "otherworldliness" that refuses to encounter the realities of this world, he is aware that metaphysics does not require such otherworldliness. He is puzzled that Bonhoeffer and his disciples make all sorts of metaphysical statements (e.g.,"The world is God's creation"; "Christ was incarnated") that contradict their rejection of metaphysics. His most telling point is that "denying metaphysics in principle has been interpreted as saying that God, Christ, and salvation constitute a healing and liberating discourse without any reference to a transempirical order. Speaking of Jesus Christ is here only a way of saying that there is hope for the human project of building a world of freedom and love. There are theologians who hold this view: it is sometimes called Christological atheism."

Baum turns to examine three "metaphysical theological" claims that have dominated much of Germany's (and Protestantism's) larger tradition: Lutheran two-kingdoms theory, Calvinist sovereignty-of-Christ theory, and modern ecumenical developments. He traces the conflict in Germany between Lutheran and Calvinist conceptions of the relationship of theology to society, and shows the problems of each when faced with socialism.

The two-kingdoms theory allowed too much disengagement on one side and too much acceptance of state authority on the other. The Calvinist theory was powerful in the thought of Falcke and Günther Jacob; but in the hands of some it became only a Marxist revisionism, inviting the church to improve Marxism in the name of Christ. It finally could not, or at least did not, fundamentally challenge the Marxist interpretation of democracy, constitutional government, human rights or economic life.

This view, however, comported well with themes developing in ecumenical circles during this period. The Dutch missiologist J. C. Hoekendijk had argued that the mission of the church was less to expand the church than to help all see that God, through Christ and the Spirit, was engaged in history. The church had a role in this activity of reconciliation, but other historical forces, including non-Christian or even atheistic ones, were servants of this mission and instruments of liberation, justice and peace.

This view never became official, but it fit well the needs of the East German church. It helped its members understand how to be good citizens in a socialist land without forsaking their faith. But it also contributed to their blindness about the fact that socialism was falling apart at home and around the world. It too easily identified every effort claiming to be on behalf of liberation, justice and peace as part of the missio dei. Young members of the underground groups began to ask, "What good is the church if we are liberated and have achieved more justice, and the cold war is over?" When the Wall was breached, Baum writes, ''the church ceased to play an important role" in the common life.

William J. Everett takes up the East German case in the context of a wider study of the relationship of "covenantal" theology to social life, with comparative analyses of India and America.

His wider-angle lens and larger historical interests allow him to see dynamics Burgess and Baum don't capture. For instance, Everett, a professor of ethics at Andover-Newton Theological School, notes that the confederations that eventually led to self-governance in some German cities and to democratic efforts such as the Weimar Republic after World War I had been deeply embedded in hierarchical and royal structures, with a high degree of centralized control. Further, the formation of synods and federations in the churches, which conducted their affairs on parliamentary and electoral principles, took place under the guardianship of the princes who had supported the Reformation against Rome. Thus, authoritarian polities and the churches' adjustment to them in 20th-century Germany, East and West, was not new.

Still, Everett argues, German history included a governing federal order within which protodemocratic and voluntary associations could exist. These gave rise to "public corporations," such as churches, with distinctive rights and privileges. These precedents made it difficult for the socialist state to close the church entirely.

Everett is surely right that the church's historic place in society is what made it host to the dissident groups, although the church did not know how to treat them. Deep theo-historical realities have powerful, unintended consequences.

Most interesting in Everett's account of the events traced also by Burgess and Baum is his analysis of changing relations between church, society and state. He gives special attention to the relation of religion and law, of theology and jurisprudence, and thus of ecclesiology and federal polity. He shows that religion always plays a role in legitimating, critiquing or delegitimating the governmental project. The question is what kind of religion is available to shape the larger society and what its basic "metaphysical-moral" or "theo-social" convictions are. He makes a strong case that the idea of covenant, drawn from scripture and developed variously in different cultures and societies, is particularly suited to support public, just, pluralistic, federalist structures within the church and in the government.

The East German churches did develop this possibility more fully than had ever happened before in German society or in East German socialism. They nurtured a relative independence from the state that has been too quickly swallowed by the established church after reunification, and too quickly forgotten by theologians and ethicists elsewhere. Its promise was not fully developed in the sense that it did not generate a genuinely public theology, a social ethic able to withstand the change, or a philosophy or religion that allows dialogue between both Christianity and other religions and Christianity and jurisprudence.

But Everett agrees with Burgess and Baum that the church in socialism did not betray the faith, that in many ways it did show the way toward a vital, nonestablished church in a secular environment. Other reuniting countries can learn from this experience. As we enter the emerging global society and are all drawn into new unities in a postsocialist world, we all can learn from this history. Not only the confessional legacies of Barth, Barmen and Bonhoeffer but also the Catholic metaphysical and the Protestant covenantal public theologies will surely be necessary if churches are to offer a faithful and effective witness.