

Challenges for East German Baptists in Times of Change after 1989

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Preliminary remark

To talk to you about challenges of East German Baptists makes me feeling uncomfortable, because I personally have not lived in East Germany before the times of changes 1989 and therefore I can only offer you a West-East-perspective. To give you a not totally unbalanced impression, I consulted some east German Baptists before I wrote this paper, read some new books, which explored church life in East Germany, and I personally at least have some experience as a visitor of the GDR in the years before 1989 and I have been a minister of a local Baptist Church in East Germany from 2004 to 2007 in Ilmenau (Thüringen). Nevertheless my paper can not be a scientific or historical view, but it should offer some fresh reflections on the changes and challenges for East German Baptist in times of change after 1989.

I General observations

a) Difference of mentalities

Stefan Stiegler, the former director of the Theological Seminary of the Baptist Union of Germany in Elstal, just wrote an article¹, where he described the difference of culture of East and West Germany. He himself was born in East Germany, studied in the Theological Seminary of East Germany in Buckow and had his first duty as a minister in a local Baptist Church in East Germany (Greifswald). Stiegler used a picture of the mentally difference of East and West. The picture of a visit of a restaurant. When you visited an restaurant in East Germany, you waited before someone placed you. In West-Germany you sat down, even if there was a sign „reserved” on the table. Because the culture or mentality in West-Germany has been: Everthings is allowed, what is not explicitly forbidden. But the East-Germany paradigm was: Everything, what is not allowed explicitly, could be forbidden... Therefore culture of thinking in east and west differed.

Sabine Schröder has published a dissertation thesis in 2007 with 308 pages which titles: „To reach people without confession – church planting of free-evangelical initiatives are the turning-point 1989 in East Germany”.²

Because mission needs inculturation and contextualisation Sabine Schröder explores how the East German culture developed difference to the culture in West Germany. 40 years of government of the SED (the so called party of social unity of East Germany) had great influence of the mentality of habitants of East Germany.

Sabine Schröder describes some characteristics of the GDR and their effect of the mentality of its inhabitants, which I´m going to summarize and think further:

¹ Vgl. Stiegler, Stefan: Die Zusammenführung der Theologischen Seminar im BEFG nach der Wende – Buckow zieht nach Hamburg, in: Freikirchenforschung 19 (2010), Münster, 247-257.

² Schröder, Sabine: Konfessionslose erreichen – Gemeindegründungen von freikirchlichen Initiativen seit der Wende 1989 in Ostdeutschland, Neurkirchen-Vluyn 2007. [308 Seiten]

b) Organisation and Planning

The East German society has been a society of organisation. There has been a lot of institutions and organisations you should belong to, if you want to be part of society. From this life was strongly pre-structured. After the change, daily life suddenly worked differently. Planning of life became insecure. The fear to lose your job and mess unemployment is a new experience, because the GDR had the right of work as part of their constitution.

c) Ideology against Religion

The official Ideology of the GDR has been the Marxism-Leninism. This world-view supposed to be scientific and pushed away the so called non-scientific religion out of public life. Therefore East-Germans are quite sceptical to christian belief, because Marxism-Leninism substitutes Religion.

e) Three kinds of publicity

The GDR developed a strongly controlled official publicity, the official way of reading and understanding something. Art has been half-public and could imply critical thinking about politics and the political party undercover. Of course artists were kept under surveillance of the secret police. Inside the big churches (not the free churches) developed an opposition to public. People of the GDR had to switch from real and fictitious world. Officially, children were trained as „new human beings“ in the „social education-system“ to be responsible, honest, courageous to critic and self-criticism, but in real life you had to be suitable and opportune. As an inhabitant of the GDR you did not have the freedom of speech and could say publicly what you really think. Therefore talking privately and so called talking in the living-room was the effect of the tension between official and real thinking.

f) A secular culture of ceremonies and rituals

The party SED tries to reach the youth and to effect them with a anti-religious and ideological alternative: „No heaven, no hell, just science“. Therefore they pushed the ceremony of „Jugendweihe“ (consecration of the youth) to substitute the confirmation-ceremony of the churches. Instead of „religion“ they established the subject „social morality“ at school. The ceremony of „Jugendweihe“ has such a strong effect on the mentality of East Germans, that even after 1989 it has nearly the same importance than before. It became part of family life and biography. And it includes a negative identity of being not a christian, because to be without confession has been the daily life experience.

Traditionally Baptist Churches in West and East Germany offers a „bible study and church course“ for two years for children in the age of 12 to 14. In West Germany normally this competes with communion in the lutheran church and therefore Baptists emphasize that this course is not a substitute for being baptised, becoming a christian or a church member. In East Germany the „bible study and church course“ has to compete with the secular Jugendweihe and therefore the celebration of the dismissal of the course as much greater than in West Germany. The process of secularisation was increasing in West and East Germany, but west germans are secular of one's own free will and east germans were

enforced to be secularised.³ Parents didn't baptised their infants because of pressure of politics and poor chances to receive a higher education in the GDR-system as a christian.

g) Decrease of influence of the church to public life

The political regime of the GDR more and more pushed the churches to be off side. Through celebrating new ceremonies the official politics becomes a substitution of religion, which totally concentrates on this side of earth (Diesseits). Because for a long time any experience with church life or christianity in general is totally missing in the biography of a lot of inhabitants of the GDR they have difficulties to understand religious thinking at all. In the times of change churches were very much involved in public life, because they opened their churches for open discussions, for candle-light-prayers, for demonstrations and round-table-talks. But in the years after the change the influence in East Germany is decreasing again, because the mentality has been shaped for so long in a different manner. This development is linked to the general secularisation of society of East and West, which is a process of decreasing importance of religion for social life. After 1989 the churches of East Germany suffered because of the number of people who left the church was increasing. Obviously people did not find help in church for mastering their challenges to transform their life to new situation.⁴

h) To be without confession as normality in East Germany

To be without any confession is a mass phenomenon in East Germany. 1949 92% of the inhabitants of East Germany belonged to the Catholic oder Lutheran Church. 1964 it has been 68%. 1989 a rest of 30%. This trend continued after the change of 1989, even though not so dramatically any more. The number of people leaving the church is still higher than the number of people entering it. Even the quantity of members of the Free Churches is decreasing. 70% of the East Germans are without any confession! In West Germany the number of church-membership has been more or less stable. Especially after the 1950's a lot of Germans left the church, because politics were repressing the churches and christians had disadvantages in applying for education, career choice, choice of employment. To be a christian and the institution of church were socially outlawed. Studying Theology was devaluated. Christian life became an experience of a minority. It became normal not to think about God and not to reflect on things which were not materialistic or earthly.

³ Vgl. Meulemann, Heiner: Erzwungene Säkularisierung in der DDR – Wiederaufleben des Glaubens in Ostdeutschland? Religiöser Glaube in ost- und westdeutschen Alterskohorten zwischen 1991 und 1998, in: Atheismus und religiöse Indifferenz, hg. v. Christel Gärnter, u.a., Opladen 2003, 271-287, 271ff.

⁴ Vgl. Polack, Detlef: Säkularisierung – ein moderner Mythos? Studien zum religiösen Wandel in Deutschland, Tübingen 2003, 263.

Here some statistics to be without confession (from Müller/Pickel/Pollack)

Tabelle 1: Kirchlichkeit in Ost- und Westdeutschland am Ende des 20. Jahrhunderts

	Westdeutschland 1991	Westdeutschland 2000	Ostdeutschland 1991	Ostdeutschland 2000
Konfession				
evang. (inkl. Freikirchen)	45	41	29	26
römisch-katho- lisch	42	42	6	3
and. Religions- gemeinschaft	3	4	0,7	0,1
konfessionslos	10	13	65	71
Kirchgang				
wöchentlich oder öfter	15	11	4	2
1-3-mal im Monat	10	10	3	2
mehrmals im Jahr	22	22	11	10
seltener	32	33	22	23
Nie	21	24	60	63

Quelle: Eigene Berechnungen auf Basis von ALLBUS 1991, 2000; alle Angaben in %

Tabelle 11: Religiosität und Kirchlichkeit im europäischen Vergleich

	Gottesglaube		Gottesdienstbesuch		Vertrauen in die Kirche	
	1990-91	1998	1990-91	1998	1990-91	1998
Italien	86	88	24	21	27	5
Portugal		92	20	22		21
Spanien		82	18	19		-3
Irland	95	94	41	38	-2	-1
Frankreich		52	7	8		-38
Österreich	78	81	18	16	-14	-14
Niederlande	55	59	11	10	-21	-14
Schweiz		73	11	10		8
Deutschland (West)	67	62	13	10	-8	-14
Großbritannien	69	68	11	10	-22	-22
Nordirland	95	89		27	23	
Schweden		46	5	5,5		-23
Dänemark		57	5	5		1
Norwegen	60	58	5	5	1	-3
Polen	95	95*	37	33*	6	23
Slowakei		77*	22	20*	-	8
Slowenien	61	61*	14	11*	-3	-21
Ungarn	64	67*	8	8*	25	1
Deutschland (Ost)	25	24*	3	3*	-31	-45
Tschechische Republik		32*	9	5*	-	-31
Lettland		72	6	7		9
Estland		47*		3,5*		
Albanien		86*		8*		
Rumänien		98*	17	14*		
Bulgarien		66*	6	6*		-24
Russland	47	63*	4	4*	67	4
USA	94	92		21	22	25

Quelle: eigene Berechnungen auf der Basis von WVS 1990; ISSP 1991, 1998; * PCE 2000; *Gottesglaube*: „Ich glaube an Gott, habe aber früher nicht an ihn geglaubt.“ + „Ich glaube an Gott und habe immer an ihn geglaubt.“ (in %); *Gottesdienstbesuch*: Zahl der Gottesdienstbesuche auf das Jahr verteilt (Mittelwert); *Vertrauen in die Kirche*: 5-er Skala, Anteil der Personen mit Vertrauen (1-2) minus Anteil der Personen ohne Vertrauen (4-5) (in %)

Tabelle 13: Alternative Religiosität in Osteuropa

	<i>Astrologie/ Horoskope</i>	<i>Wunderheiler/ Geistheiler</i>	<i>Wirksamkeit von Zen/Yoga</i>	<i>Botschaft von New Age</i>
Albanien	25 (10)	35 (7)	5 (69)	5 (74)
Bulgarien	18 (10)	20 (7)	8 (42)	2 (64)
Tschechische Republik	17 (0)	12 (1)	21 (14)	2 (52)
Estland	26 (2)	24 (5)	31 (15)	4 (66)
Ostdeutschland	11 (3)	6 (3)	13 (20)	2 (40)
Ungarn	24 (4)	31 (4)	23 (16)	8 (27)
Polen	8 (3)	27 (3)	8 (26)	2 (50)
Rumänien	23 (4)	9 (4)	11 (19)	2 (50)
Russland	47 (4)	49 (4)	35 (22)	8 (54)
Slowakei	22 (3)	39 (1)	19 (19)	3 (57)
Slowenien	17 (1)	16 (1)	20 (11)	8 (29)

Quelle: eigene Berechnungen auf Basis von PCE 2000; Anteil derjenigen, die „sehr stark“ bzw. „etwas“ glauben (in Klammern: „weiß nicht, was das ist“); Angaben in %

II Specific observations

a) The role of the minister/pastor in the local church

Before the reunification of West und East Germany local Baptist churches in East Germany could afford a minister, even if the congregation has been small. Therefore they were used to have a pastor. After the reunification it was for economical reasons not possible any more to pay a whole wage of the minister. This was enforced by the strong western german currency (D-Mark), which replaced the east german currency. This change was not easy to understand for the local communities. In this aspect they did not benefit from the german reunification.

When I have been called to serve as a minister of the local Baptist Church in Ilmenau (Thüringen) in the year of 2004, the congegration of 70 members did not have a minister for eleven years. And they have been able to afford a part time minister (half-time), because they got a special sponsorsphip for it. In Thüringen a lot of ministers work in part-time-ministries, because of the lack of finances. Some churches are calling one minister for three churches or for a region to answer the need of pastoral work with little financial essources.

b) Baptists went into politics

In the years of change there was a great request of characters, which had a good reputation and were not in political responsibility of the former German Democratic Republic. Therefore suddenly quite a lot of Baptists were willing to be in political responsibility and were elected in political duties. Lay people and ministers were elected even as local gouverneurs.

c) The exodus from East to West Germany

In times of the German Democratic Republic it was not easy for christians to reach the highest level of school and university, because of the socialistic regime. After the reunification christians had access to the highest school (Gymnasium) and to university to study. One consequence of these circumstances changed the attractiveness of some cities without university or a small infrastructure. A lot of families and young people moved from

East to West Germany to seek for better opportunities of education and work. Therefore some of the membership of Baptist Churches in East Germany were getting older quite quickly. Quite less (young) people moved the other way round from West to East Germany.

d) Partnerships between West and East

A lot of Baptist Churches in West Germany were intensifying oder seeking partnership between West and East. People were visiting each others across the border and churches were building stronger relationships. The numbers of partnerships right after the reunification were enormous. And some Baptist church in East Germany could only survive after the „change” because of the help from West Germany. Quite a lot of these partnerships are sleepy today and personal relationships were not strong enough to keep in touch over the years.

e) New sects and esoteric offers

East Germany Baptist churches before the „change” were quite often a quiet and undisturbed place. The small Baptist community was often a comforted and comfortable room. After the reunification a lot of sects, esoteric offers and christian tendencies got in contact even with Baptist life and challenged the local christians.

f) East German Baptist went for social work

Just after the change east german Baptist Churches could aim for doing social work in there community as an institutions. Baptists founded homes for elderly people or child-care-institutions (kindergarden). Even hospitals could be run by baptist diaconal institutions.

g) New opportunities to do evangelism

Even before the change east German Baptist werde doing evangelistic work. After the change the oportunities raised: They could initiate contact to schools, for prisenor. The so called „tent-mission” was for some years quite an attraction in East Germany and experienced a fresh spring. But as soon as east Germany became more and more western these forms of doing evangelistic work become less interesting in times of new media.

h) The power of relationship was decreasing

In GDR-times the attitude of life of local Baptist Churches happened often to be a very close to the family. To have a strong fellowship and to be a place of true relationships in a enemy-world outside. Even in daily life the social net has been strong, working in groups („Kollektive”) and the importance of family-life. After the times of change this feeling of strong fellowship was decreasing. Furthermore the church had to face other churches and their program and style of worship. Therefore it was not everything to belong to a strong

community but to feel well and to find his own and the more and more diverse style of church life.

i) The „reunification of the two Theological Seminaries (Buckow and Hamburg)⁵

From 1880 until 1959 the German Baptists had one Theological seminary to train their students for the ministry. After the Second World War, students from East Germany could study in Hamburg until 1959. In 1953 it was planned to establish an own seminary in East Germany, but the uprising of east-berlin workers against the communistic disposal („Aufstand der Arbeiter in Ost-Berlin gegen kommunistische Willkür“) the 17th of June 1953 led to some better conditions in some cases, and in our interest the decision that it was guaranteed that east Germans Baptist can study in the West German Hamburg. In 1958, difficulties with the sending of students to Hamburg and therefore the East German leadership of the Baptist Union in the German Democratic Republic decided to call all students back to a new own seminary. This started in Buckow (Märkische Schweiz) as guests at the 'Diakonissen-Erholungsheim' and had their own building in 1986.

After the „change“ the whole Buckow Seminary moved and integrated in Hamburg. Stefan Stiegler, who studied in Buckow, has been Pastor in Greifswald before the times of change and has been a teacher for practical theology and hebrew language in Hamburg later (and later on the director of the seminary), called the reunification of the seminaries as lucky, because it was well prepared, there has been a lot of contacts in the time before, the director Edwin Brandt has been a good moderator, it was a task for the teachers from east and west to make out a new concept for education and both parts learned from each other. 1997 the seminary moved to East Germany to Elstal as part of a new concept of education of lay people and future ministers.

III Outlook

East Germany is a like a not discovered country for mission, but it is nearly resistant for any attempts to mission.⁶ Joachim Wanke, roman-catholic Bishop of Erfurt, meant: „Someone from Thüringen without confessions becoming a christian seems to me more important, at least much more difficult, than to baptise an animistic african.”⁷

Free Churches had to overcome the attitude, that inside the free church it seems to be good and to be outside the free church seems to be bad. Quite some christians in free churches developed the view, that a not christian culture had to be denied and are reserved not to be similar to the „world“. But especially in East Germany you have to explore and understand

⁵ Vgl. Stiegler, Stefan: Die Zusammenführung der Theologischen Seminar im BEFG nach der Wende – Buckow zieht nach Hamburg, in: Freikirchenforschung 19 (2010), Münster, 247-257.

⁶ Vgl. Schröder, Konfessionslose 156.

⁷ Wanke, Joachim: Missionarische Herausforderungen im gesellschaftlichen Kontext. Aufbruch zu einer missionarischen Ökumene. Ein Verständigungsprozeß über die gemeinsame Aufgabe der Mission und Evangelisation und Mission in Deutschland, hg. v. Evangelisches Missionswerk in Deutschland, u.a.m Breklum 1999, 135-140, 138.

culture, which developed in 40 years of SED-regime, if you want to reach out to people outside the church and even to co-operate with the brothers and sisters inside the church.⁸

Baptist Churches has to discover their freedom to speech in the political sphere and have to overcome their apolitical attitude.

To communicate the gospel christians need to learn, how to speak about their belief with relevance for daily-life. The assumption „everybody is interested in religion“ is not true for most of East German socialised people.⁹ Values like security and trust could be attractive for East-Germans, because these values are lost after the change. Churches can offer rituals for non-christians for special stages in one's life and can offer their religious education for children and youth outside the church. The challenges for Baptist Churches in East Germany are great, but even better are the opportunities to reach generations of Christ.

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⁸ Vgl. Schröder, *Konfessionslose* 90.

⁹ Vgl. Tiefensee, Eberhard: „Religiös unmusikalisch?“ – Ostdeutsche Mentalität zwischen Agnostizismus und flottierender Religiösität: Wiedervereinigte Seelsorge. Die Herausforderung der katholischen Kirche in Deutschland, hg. v. Joachim Wanke, Leipzig 2000, 24-53.