



## Lukas Vischer: The Theme of Humanity and Creation in the Ecumenical Movement

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### 2. Historical Context

After the UN “Earth Summit” in Rio de Janeiro, June 1992, the Visser't Hooft Endowment Fund sponsored a consultation on “sustainable growth” at the Ecumenical Institute Bossey near Geneva, from June 14-19, 1993. Lukas Vischer contributed one of the preparatory documents.

### 3. Summary

Creation is a latecomer to ecumenical discussion, as the relevance of the Gospel was seen in its claim on human beings, and church unity had broken up over other issues. It was at the 1961 WCC Assembly in New Delhi that Joseph Sittler tried to present a cosmic Christology. In the following years the Commission on Faith and Order developed the study “God in Nature and History” (1967). In the 1970s, the WCC Department on Church and Society held a series of conferences and studies on science, technology, the Christian faith and ethical principles. At the Bucharest conference, 1974, the concept of a “sustainable society” was introduced into the debate. The 1975 WCC Assembly in Nairobi adopted the concept of a *just and sustainable society* as the goal of the ecumenical movement. Charles Birch underlined that *the rich must live more simply than the poor may simply live*, and he demanded an all-embracing liberation movement. The Boston Conference 1979 dealt with ideological aspects of science and technology and the limits to scientific research on ethical grounds. All creatures are fellow creatures; human responsibility extends to the whole of creation and the intrinsic value of all created entities. This raised the question of how human rights and the rights of nature can be reconciled. Important is the biblical *covenant*, an image used both for God's relationship with people and creation. In the 1980s the Commission on Faith and Order showed in a study on the “Apostolic Faith” that the Trinitarian understanding of God is the essential precondition for a proper understanding of God's relation to the world as his creation. The WCC Vancouver Assembly 1983 called on the churches to join together in a conciliar process and common commitment to justice, peace and the integrity of creation. The World Convocation in Seoul 1990 underlined the urgency of commitment to the integrity of creation but was unable to suggest practical solutions. Feminist theology pointed to the connection between the hierarchy of male over female and of humans over nature. The WCC Assembly of Canberra 1991 felt the need for deeper creation spirituality and stressed the need for rapid action as never before.

In view of a theology of creation, three issues cannot be ignored: 1) Humanity's lifetime is no longer guaranteed by nature but has to be kept open by human beings themselves. 2) Must Christian freedom not respect the right of fellow creatures just as the rights of human beings? 3) Human beings try to fend death off by achievements of science and technology, but as they try to break through their allotted limits they are causing death – first of their environment, ultimately also of themselves. The resurrection of Christ is the fundamental reason which enables us to live, even in face of death, our life in love of God and our neighbour and the whole created world.

**SUSTAINABLE  
GROWTH –  
A CONTRADICTION  
IN TERMS?**

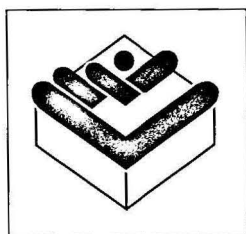
**ECONOMY  
ECOLOGY AND ETHICS  
AFTER THE EARTH SUMMIT**

# SUSTAINABLE GROWTH — A CONTRADICTION IN TERMS?

Report of the Visser `t Hooft Memorial  
Consultation

The Ecumenical Institute, Château de Bossey

June 14-19, 1993



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# THE VISSER 'T HOOFT ENDOWMENT FUND FOR ECUMENICAL LEADERSHIP

## Preface

The Visser 't Hooft Endowment Fund, established as a service to the ecumenical movement, aims to provide new resources for the development of ecumenical leadership. Throughout his life, W. A. Visser 't Hooft was deeply conscious of the need for women and men who could deal with "the radically changing situation in the world and in the church."

The Fund's Board of Trustees believes that interdisciplinary research on crucial world issues confronting the churches today is an essential part of meeting this need. The Fund, while still seeking capital to fulfil its role as a new source of funding for leadership development opportunities for young people, also aims to sponsor a Visser 't Hooft Chair at the Ecumenical Institute at Bossey, which will be devoted to research and teaching in this area.

Two years ago, the Board decided to sponsor a first consultation at Bossey in 1993, designed to identify the kind of major theological and intellectual challenges a Visser 't Hooft Chair should address, while contributing to the present ecumenical work on contemporary issues confronting the churches and their witness in society. To ensure concrete results in a consultation of a few days, it was decided to concentrate on one key topic. The issue that emerged is that of "sustainable growth."

The Endowment Fund is pleased to have convened the consultation on "Sustainable Growth: A Contradiction in Terms?" at the Ecumenical Institute, Bossey, from June 14-19 this year. The report which follows is shared in the hope that the findings may help the churches and other interested groups to inform and strengthen their commitment, identifying concrete areas for action and reflection to better the prospects for life.

Professor Dr Hans Visser 't Hooft  
President

W. A. Visser 't Hooft, born in 1900, had a vision for this century of the unity of the churches which would give new credibility to their message in a world torn by conflict. As General Secretary of the World Student Christian Federation in the early thirties, Visser 't Hooft developed a network of ecumenically committed young Christians, many of whom became leaders in their churches and in Christian movements for justice and peace. Under his pioneering leadership the ecumenical movement developed to the historic moment in 1948 when the World Council of Churches was officially constituted. Visser 't Hooft was named the first General Secretary of the Council and remained honorary President until his death in 1985.

# Sustainable Growth: A Contradiction in Terms?

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## Introduction

This report on "Sustainable Growth: A Contradiction in Terms?" presents the findings of an ecumenical consultation organized by the Visser 't Hooft Endowment Fund with the extensive cooperation and support of both the Ecumenical Institute at Bossey and the Programme on Justice, Peace and Creation of the World Council of Churches.

The meeting was convened as the first Memorial Consultation in honour of Dr W. A. Visser 't Hooft, a pioneer of the ecumenical movement, the first General Secretary of the World Council of Churches, and one of the founders of the Ecumenical Institute. The organizers hope that it will lead to a series of consultations on critical theological-ethical issues facing the churches around the world.

The topic chosen, around the issues of economics and ecology, is not surprising. Since 1971 the ecumenical movement has participated actively in the debate about the world's economic and ecological future. The 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development — the "Earth Summit" in Rio de Janeiro — was followed closely by leaders of the world Christian community. It seemed therefore appropriate that one year after Rio the churches should sharpen their role in pursuing its directions and contributing to realization of an ecologically responsible world community.

This report is inevitably a preliminary examination of the critical issues as discussed by 24 persons representing rich and poor countries and a variety of viewpoints. The findings are necessarily provisional and derive from the aim to define the critical issues for deeper inquiry at this point in history. The report itself makes clear that the findings "give rise to [and] involve many questions that need further attention — economic, political, technological, ethical, and theological." The consultation urgently recommends further consultations "to advance this unfinished work and to keep abreast of changing world conditions." It also expresses the hope that this initiative will lead eventually to a "larger meeting on these matters which would enable the next World Council of Churches' Assembly (1998) to set before the churches a more complete and substantial account of the prospects for humankind and the obligations and responsibility before all people."

## Abstract

Economic growth is a concept still underlying many discussions of "sustainable development." But "sustainable growth," even qualified by environmental cautions, is a contradiction in terms.

The consultation describes a sustainable society as one which leaves the world as rich in resources and opportunities as it inherited. This means that renewable resources are consumed no faster than they can be renewed, that nonrenewable resources are consumed no more rapidly than renewable substitutes can be found, that wastes are discharged at a rate no greater than they can be processed by nature or human devices.

There are many indicators that the present global mosaic of economies is not sustainable. Although infinite quantitative **growth** is impossible in the finite system of the planet and its atmosphere, sustainable **development** is still possible. A major shift in patterns of production and consumption is called for, beginning with the wealthy nations, and the dominant "development" model is called into question as economically and environmentally unsustainable, morally unjust, and spiritually debilitating.

A conceptual reorientation of today's economies must take into account:

- the decrease in the world's capacity to absorb the consequences of human activity in the global economy as it is currently organized;
- the devastation of resources fundamental to life on earth as we know and use it, resources once considered unlimited and indestructible;
- a perspective of the economy as a sub-set of a larger cultural and environmental whole;
- a definition of "abundance" based not on growth but on sufficiency which includes values such as love and human caring;
- that massive poverty and the lack of basic resources for millions are integral to the environmental problem;
- the primary responsibility of industrialized countries to take immediate steps to transform their current economic systems into models which could be sustainable elsewhere.

The agenda for further study and debate focuses on both a new orientation for economic activity (quality) and its contextualization in the physical environment (scale). Specific follow-up areas for study and action identified by the consultation, include the following:

1. **Transformation in economic, environmental, and ethical thought on:**
  - a. *Limits to material expansion:* new measures based on contribution to sustainability.
  - b. *Sustainable scale of production and consumption:* how and where to set limits.
  - c. *Consumption to conservation:* shifting the underlying economic perspective from a "flow" to a "stock" orientation to preserve and to improve economic and natural stocks.
  - d. *Economic redistribution:* moving from maximizing the growth of output (or GNP) toward minimizing the throughput of resources and the production of pollutants.
  - e. *Immediate needs and long-term perspectives:* in many places, the immediate task is to build the market economy and the basic institutions for a democratic political system. Steps to advance new economic paradigms or alternative models must be taken first by industrialized countries.
2. **Implementation of economic and social changes:** strategies at the level of individuals, organized groups, corporations, governments, international organizations.
3. **Theological understanding and the role of the churches** in meeting this challenge, specifically:
  - a. *Place and role of human beings in the whole of creation:* understanding the economic system as a sub-system of the eco-system challenges theology and anthropocentrism.
  - b. *Development in the context of the fullness of life:* reorientation from material growth toward qualitative development questions the moral and spiritual values underlying human society; understanding

abundance within biophysical limits and true "quality of life."

- c. *Hope in a period of survival*: the contemporary meaning and resources of Christian hope. After the collapse of utopian thinking in central and eastern Europe and confronted with ecological destruction, hope is required to face the mortal danger of our time without disillusionment, pragmatism and fatalism.
- d. *The role of the churches*: contributing to the re-orientation of society; facing the challenge to historic models of church life posed by understanding the role of human beings as participants in the wholeness and diversity of creation. There is need for:
  - i. A PROPHETIC VOICE, a place for dialogue and a common search for new solutions, as well as admission that past teachings on creation often promoted an exploitative approach to nature.
  - ii. ACCOMPANYING society in the painful processes of change, even conflict, and through their life and witness create conditions which reduce the risk of disruption and disintegration.
  - iii. COMMITMENT TO THE ECUMENICAL MOVEMENT, the vision of a universal community, transcending the barriers which divide, promoting reconciliation and peace with a plausible model of "unity in diversity."
  - iv. A place for the CELEBRATION OF HOPE: new ecological awareness needs expression in liturgy and worship, powerful and fruitful areas for people to begin integrating this new vision of the role of humanity in creation into their lives.

Consultation recommendations center on the need for further interdisciplinary and ecumenical study and action on the agenda for change as outlined and highlight the need for human diversity in such efforts.

# **Sustainable Growth: A Contradiction in Terms?**

## **Report of the Visser 't Hooft Memorial Consultation**

### **I. The Peril and the Challenge**

#### **A NEW SITUATION**

In this momentous time in human history and in the wider history of planet earth itself, amid the great diversity of human societies, needs, and ideologies, two tendencies of global proportions can be observed: on one hand, spectacular advances in scientific technology, medicine, and communications have opened immense possibilities for enriching the quality of human life; on the other, there is a growing consensus that the dominant global economic system is impoverishing vast numbers of people. At the same time, this system is causing drastic depletion of resources, massive pollution of the air, the water and the soils, and the destruction of other living creatures throughout the world. Through the depletion of the ozone layer, extensive soil erosion, the extinction of species and global warming, current economic patterns threaten the regenerative and assimilative capacity of the biosphere.

The end of the Cold War reduced the greatest perceived risk to survival, that of nuclear war, and brought hope to many people.

Freed from preoccupation with this ideological struggle, they have time and energy for fresh thought and action on the future of humankind. But if they look to the industrial economies of the North Atlantic as models for the rest of the world, they soon see that these societies are disturbed by deep discontents. They may also recognize that these systems of production and consumption cannot be generalized for the five and a half billion people who inhabit the globe.

#### **THE CURRENT EMPHASIS ON "SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT"**

These insights have emerged during a journey of discovery that has been underway in different quarters for the past few decades. The trenchant critique of the present world order — and disorder — comes from the combined wisdom of scientists, economists, political leaders, and people from grassroots organizations and churches sharing their knowledge and diverse experiences.

The World Council of Churches has addressed these concerns since its beginning. Its First Assembly in 1948 called for a "responsible society" in an international context.

In the 1960s, with increased membership from the "Third World" (or "Two-Thirds World"), it championed a "just and participatory society." In the 1970s, heeding a heightened ecological awareness, it expanded the term to "a just, participatory and sustainable society" (1974 WCC conference, Bucharest: "Science and Technology for Human Development, The Ambiguous Future — The Christian Hope").

The ecumenical conciliar process on justice, peace and integrity of creation, which emerged in the 1980s, builds on this legacy and alerts Christians to the fact that, while working to alleviate dehumanizing poverty and to promote human rights and justice, Christians are also called to protect the integrity of God's creation.

The United Nations was also recognizing the issue. In 1972 it convened a Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm. From 1983 to 1987 the UN-appointed World Commission on Environment and Development, the Brundtland Commission, searched for ways to both promote development and protect the environment. Its report, Our Common Future, published in 1987, thrust the term "sustainable development" into public discourse. The widespread coverage of the 1992 United Nations Conference on

Environment and Development (UNCED), helped make sustainable development a buzz word in political, developmental and environmental circles.

## DEFINING SUSTAINABILITY

The definition of this term is elusive. Indeed, its very vagueness has lent it popularity. Some take it to mean that old-fashioned economic growth, qualified by a few environmental cautions, can continue. Others understand it to require a radical redirection of the world's economic processes. Still others, observing the tension between economic growth and ecological sustainability, see it as a contradiction in concepts.

In the understanding of this consultation, a sustainable society leaves the world as rich in resources and opportunities as was the world inherited from the past. This means that renewable resources are consumed no faster than they can be renewed, that nonrenewable resources are consumed no faster than renewable substitutes can be found, that wastes are discharged at a rate no greater than they can be processed by nature or human devices. In its richer meanings, sustainability is more than survival. It includes some appreciation of nature in its own right — of lakes and mountains, flowers and animals not strictly instrumentalities for human exploitation.

The present global mosaic of economies is not sustainable. However, the abundance of inherited resources still provides an unknown amount of time to alter the current pattern. Beginning corrective processes now may forestall the disastrous crash that is otherwise likely. Local catastrophes are already taking place in areas where people now starve or suffer as a consequence of deforestation, soil erosion, desertification and contamination of food or water supplies.

#### THE NEED FOR NEW MODELS OF DEVELOPMENT

Although infinite quantitative **growth** is impossible in a finite system — a virtual axiom — sustainable **development** is still possible. It will require continued quantitative growth in production of food and other necessities in some parts of the world. But for most of the world, qualitative improvement must replace quantitative growth. One example is the rapid development of information and communication systems, still incredible in the recent past, at modest costs in raw materials, energy, and wastes. Although human imagination and intelligence can redirect technology to enhance life, a transformation of values is also necessary. The words of Charles Birch at the Nairobi Assembly of the World Council of Churches (1975) bear repeating:

**"The rich must live more simply that the poor may simply live."**<sup>1</sup>

The change demands a major shift in patterns of production and consumption, especially among the wealthy nations. The world situation calls into question the dominant "development" model in three ways.

- 1) *Economically it is unsustainable.* The good life, or development as commonly understood in the west, cannot be sustained by the earth and cannot be extended to the five and a half billion people alive today, much less to the 10 billion who will inhabit the planet within four or five decades. Imagine Beijing or Calcutta with the number of cars per capita of the United States!
- 2) *Morally it is unjust.* The poor are getting poorer and the rich are getting richer, as is well documented in UNDP's 1992 Human Development Report. In 1960 the richest 20 percent of the world's population had incomes 30 times those of the poorest 20 percent. By 1990 the figure had increased to 60 times.<sup>2</sup>
- 3) *Spiritually it is debilitating.* Alienation and frustration are common in consumption-sated societies. Hard experience teaches many that

life is more than food and raiment, more than earthly treasures.

One consequence of the present international order is the burden of external debt that is crippling many countries. Some nations must export products, sorely needed at home, to acquire the foreign exchange required to pay or service their debts. The combination of such external (re)payments and internal structural adjustment programs, worked out by international agencies and implemented by governments, may preclude nations from meeting the basic needs of people for food, clothing, shelter, health services, and education. They also exacerbate environmental degradation.

Injustice, exclusion, and environmental debasement is also evident in global trading relationships, especially between the industrialized powers and the developing countries. Political and economic strength is often misused at various levels in society, from the local to the global. Women, marginalized groups, today's children, their unborn children, and nature itself are vulnerable. The armaments industry has skewed northern economies and radically deformed many economies in the south. The violence unleashed against the weak and defenceless in many parts of the world is linked to the misuse of power.

Finally, economic trends over this century, which have at times glorified individualism and, at others, glorified collectivism, have undermined and torn apart stable, supportive human communities.

The idea of a just, sustainable society provides the basis for a critique of all systems and regnant ideologies. It also calls for imaginative, yet rigorous explorations of new possibilities.

## **HISTORICAL ROOTS OF THE SITUATION**

The newness of our historical situation has burst on humankind with jarring suddenness. Efforts to reflect anew about it are cramped by old habits of thought. The historical roots of this situation are worth examining, even briefly, inasmuch as they continue to shape our identity and understanding.

The European Renaissance and then the Enlightenment burst traditional boundaries. Confidence in progress, even inevitable progress, reshaped culture. Rationality and indomitable will imbued consciousness. Modern technology and the industrial revolution enhanced human powers. The expansion of European civilization led to colonialism, only recently in retreat. Western mindsets, practices, and rapidly changing technology — sometimes called modernization — spread through

most of humanity's social and economic relationships.

In some ways this new outlook was a biblical heresy. It echoed the biblical sense of historical dynamism, a secularized version of the belief in a God who can "do a new thing." To some, it was liberating: freed from traditional restraints, they were enabled to express creative powers. To others, it brought domination from outside and alienation from communities where they had felt at home.

In theological terms, the emerging new world order failed to take into account that humankind is made of dust, akin to all of nature. It distorted the biblical sense of dominion away from a notion of responsible care of the earth into a license to plunder. Theologians occasionally talked even of the humanization and the hominization of the universe — language as alien both to the book of Job, with its awe before the mysteries of creation, as to contemporary astronomers investigating myriads of galaxies and black holes.

#### **THE NEED FOR COMPREHENSIVE RE-EVALUATION**

A new chastening is upon us. There is spreading understanding of jeopardy inherent in weapons that can destroy civilization. And awareness is expanding that the burgeoning application of many proud achievements from the last

century is changing the ecosphere, imperiling the health and life of many species, including our own. Hope remains that science and technology, which have cured some diseases and met many human needs, will diminish some present dangers. But it is impressive that some scientists, highly skilled in their professions, state repeatedly that certain problems have no "technical fix." That is, their answers require ethical, even spiritual re-evaluation of present ways of living and strengthened ethical commitment to preserving life resources.

#### **INTERDISCIPLINARY LISTENING AND QUESTIONING**

Faith offers no glib solutions to these new problems. Theology cannot prescribe policies. It was not from faith that learning came about ozone depletion, the CO<sub>2</sub> effect, nuclear radiation, the erosion and desertification of crop lands, the extent of starvation and pollution-induced diseases. The churches must learn to listen, with some modesty, to the findings of scientists — physical scientists, biological and medical scientists, social scientists. But people of faith will not listen as passive consumers of knowledge: scientists, economists, technocrats and other specialists will be interrogated about the values, sometimes hidden, in their findings and prescriptions. The idolatries that infect society and ourselves

must be identified and exposed: idolatries of mammon (wealth), race, sexism, economic growth, status, the domination of other peoples and of the natural world.

In affirming commitments to God and to humanity, in celebrating appreciation for earth and sky as God's creation, people of faith must resist sacrificing life to economic systems, must keep such systems in perspective based on the fullness of life.

### CONFLICT AND CREATIVE TENSION

Even in making such affirmations, perplexities remain. Most human situations involve conflicts of values. Although we value peace, we cannot cry peace when there is no justice. Concern for living persons must be related to concern for future generations. And to acknowledge that a human life is worth "many sparrows"<sup>3</sup> must be linked to respect for non-human species. The present tension between justice and sustainability must be faced, along with the recognition that over time, each requires the other. In the kingdom of God, we trust that authentic values cohere. In the mortal world, a creative imagination and a building of community may bring apparently conflicting values into a synergism that enhances the common life. But not all conflicts can be avoided: this document does not try to skirt necessary confrontation.

Because differing human groups have a stake in various values, conflicts of values often become contests of power. All the resources of faith and wisdom are needed to know when to try to transcend such conflicts, when to seek mediation and compromise, when to denounce predatory might.

For issues to be addressed honestly, the broad participation of people is required. The need for conversation among church people and scientists — who are sometimes but not always the same people — has been mentioned. Others are also needed: women and men, young and old, from different ethnic, social, national, confessional, ideological, and geographic groups.

Consultation participants from "the south" have spoken poignantly of desperate poverty, crushing foreign debts, water and air poisoned by pollutants. For some in affluent industrialized nations, the nearest "south" may be found in pockets of domestic poverty and racial ghettos. People suffering from the oppression of present systems have experiences and perceptions of the world that are usually hidden from the more affluent, at times by careful artifice. Because oppressed people suffer inordinately and do not have access to the major communication media, strenuous effort and intentionality are needed to assure their participation in the conversations and in the

communities of decision-making.

### **The agenda for change**

The Brundtland Report and the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development have helped draw world attention to these issues. But the steps taken thus far to repair a precarious situation are pitifully small in proportion to the overwhelming destructiveness to life of present social and economic systems.

The consultation saw the need for a major reordering, both of the world economy and of regional economies. Both centrally controlled and unrestrained market systems have contributed to the present perilous situation. The future will require a combination, yet to be articulated, of personal freedom and responsibility with lawful obligations and restrictions to personal liberty.

Needed changes will not come without pain and resistance. Their structural adjustments will threaten many privileges. Only a less lavish consumption of resources by some and a more generous opportunity for others can lead to a more promising future, a sustainable planet full of life.

And the changes need to be more than economic. The economy is a sub-system — a big and important sub-system — within the broader system of human social

organization and the ecosystem. All human societies are called to rethink the nature and destiny of human life and community. The churches, in particular, have to rethink the understandings and actions related to their beliefs about God, about being both sinners and human beings created in the image of God, about the meaning of the whole creation.

This moment of peril and opportunity arising from the contradiction in the terms of current economic models and environmental survival calls for more detailed investigation in three areas: 1) the conceptual reorientation of today's economies; 2) the implementation of economic and social changes; 3) theological understanding and the role of the churches in meeting this challenge.

## Appendix I.d

# The Theme of Humanity and Creation in the Ecumenical Movement

by  
Lukas Vischer

To what extent has the subject of creation been taken up in the ecumenical movement? Since the Vancouver Assembly (1983) the World Council of Churches (WCC) has talked about a "conciliar movement for justice, peace and the integrity of creation," and in recent decades it has spoken at length on the aspects of "justice" and "peace." But what about "integrity of creation" ? Can we point to an equally rich and varied discussion in this area, as well?

This is by no means obvious. For a long time the theme of "creation" took a back-seat in ecumenical discussion. Attention focused on the understanding of Christ and his Gospel, on the salvation bestowed by it on humanity, and above all on the church and its unity which had to be shown in a new light. The theme of "creation" is a latecomer to ecumenical discussion.

How did this come about? The reasons are not hard to find. Firstly, in this respect as in many others, the ecumenical movement mirrors the churches. In recent decades the message of the New Testament has been understood in theology first and foremost in terms of interpreting history and human existence in history. In discussion with the exact sciences we have increasingly backed away from the subject of creation. Of course, God continued as always to be confessed as the Creator. But it was taken for granted that the spheres of nature and history were different, not to say even separate and distinct from one another. It was left to the sciences not only to investigate nature, but to interpret it as well. The real relevance of the Gospel was seen in its claim on human beings -- as individuals and as a community. The encounter between theology and the sciences was not seen as an urgent task in the ecumenical movement any more than in the churches.

There was, however, a further reason why the ecumenical movement was not immediately brought face to face with this theme. Its prime concern was, after all, to seek the unity of the church and common witness in the world and in this its starting point was Jesus Christ, the source of salvation. For many years the Basis of the ecumenical movement was formulated in purely Christological terms. "The World Council of Churches is a fellowship of churches which confess Jesus Christ as God and Saviour..." He is the foundation on which the churches stand. He is the power that can lead them out of confusion and restore their unity once more. "The closer we draw to Jesus Christ, the closer we come to one another," as an early publication of the ecumenical movement puts it. Jesus Christ is also the content of the message the churches have to proclaim to the world.

For a long time the doctrine of creation was not considered urgent because it did not divide the churches. Church unity had broken up over other issues. And even in regard to common witness in the world there seemed to be no immediate need for further clarification of the understanding of creation -- the foreground at that time was occupied by the building of human community in church and in society.

## I. THE NEW DEPARTURE IN THE SIXTIES AND SEVENTIES

From the beginning of the sixties the picture changed somewhat. After the 1961 WCC Assembly in New Delhi, two lines of reflection began to emerge, one in the Commission on Faith and Order and the other in the Department on Church and Society.

### A. The Commission on Faith and Order

At the New Delhi Assembly Professor Joseph Sittler had been asked to give one of the main addresses on the theme "Jesus Christ -- the Light of the World." He tried, on the basis of Colossians 1: 15-20, to present a cosmic Christology, and I can still remember the surprise that greeted his exposition. Reactions ranged from delighted agreement to disapproving frowns. People were not sure whether they had heard a fruitful and forward-looking presentation, or an intellectual exercise. In retrospect, I would say that with that intervention the ecumenical movement crossed an important threshold.

Sittler stated: "In propositional form it is simply this: a doctrine of redemption is meaningful only when it swings within the larger orbit of a doctrine of creation. For God's creation of earth cannot be redeemed in any intelligible sense of the word apart from a doctrine of the cosmos which is his home, his definite place, the theatre of his selfhood under God, in corporation with his neighbour, and in caring relationship with nature, his sister." And he quoted Allan D. Galloway: "Unless one is prepared to accept a dualism which condemns the whole physical order as being not of God and interprets redemption simply as release from the physical order, then one is forced to raise the question of redemption, not in contrast with but as an implicate of personal redemption. Physical nature cannot be treated as an indifferent factor -- as the mere stage and setting of the drama of personal redemption. It must either be condemned as in itself evil, or else it must be brought within the scope of God's redemptive act."<sup>1</sup>

Later in his address Sittler added: "The way forward is from Christology expanded to its cosmic dimensions, made passionate by the pathos of this threatened earth, and made ethical by the love and wrath of God."<sup>2</sup>

The suggestion did not go unheeded. From then on the Commission on Faith and Order began working on the question of how far joint theological reflection on the relation between creation and redemption belonged within the subject of church unity. Before long the work developed into a study entitled "God in Nature and History." Hendrikus Berkhof was one of the moving lights behind this undertaking, and Joseph Sittler was actively involved. In my view, the report, published in 1967, is still one of the more noteworthy texts produced under the auspices of the World Council of Churches.<sup>3</sup> Presented to the Fourth Assembly in Uppsala (1968), it shared the fate of much ecumenical study work and fell victim to the WCC's short memory, in view of priorities at that time.

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<sup>1</sup>Called to Unity, *Ecumenical Review* XIV, 1962, p. 178 f.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid. p. 186.

<sup>3</sup>God in Nature and History in: *New Directions in Faith and Order*, Bristol 1967, Faith and Order Paper no. 50, Geneva 1968, p. 7 ff.

The study starts from the assumption that the God revealed in Christ is at one and the same time God of creation and God of history. In the Bible creation and history are related in a special way. "In worshipping a God of history, Israel inevitably developed an attitude to history different from that of religions of the nations around; but her attitude to nature was also different.... Nature is not so much the realm where God is revealed to man, as the realm in which man, created in God's image has to realize God's purpose for his creation."<sup>4</sup> Of the Christ event it says: "The deepest driving powers of history are revealed in the double event of cross and resurrection. The witnesses see history as the battlefield of God with the powers of guilt and destruction. They see how God seemingly yields to this rebellion, but in reality uses it and gears it to his redemptive purpose. They see how God overcomes the resistance and makes grace and life triumph over sin and death... To take seriously the final events in Christ, must also mean that he is confessed as the ultimate secret of creation. The key to the understanding of history must at the same time be the key to the understanding of creation, since both are essentially one."<sup>5</sup>

In other words, it defends the thesis that the great drama unfolding between God and humanity in history is also the drama of nature. Nature is included in this history, in a sense, "historicized." God speaks to human beings through history; nature has no voice of its own with which to speak of God. But does this not almost inevitably mean that nature is subordinate to humanity? The study rejects this conclusion. It does stress that although, by virtue of creation, human beings are part of nature, and indeed need it for their survival, they do at the same time have dominion over it. "Man guides and transforms nature. This is an unparalleled event in the age-long history of evolution: the product becomes the leader."<sup>6</sup> But at the same time it emphasizes that human beings may not for all that forget the significance of nature as "their sister." Above all, they must live in the constant awareness that "nature's meaning surpasses man's understanding." "God also has his own relation with nature. The pedestrian way in which the Enlightenment tried to prove that all phenomena in nature are there for man and for man only, has served to prove just the opposite. The very fact that so many phenomena are meaningless and incomprehensible to man, is extremely meaningful, in so far as it teaches him the limits of his knowledge and task."<sup>7</sup>

## B. Church and Society

The second line of reflection started from the WCC Department on Church and Society. While the Commission on Faith and Order approached the subject mainly from the angle of biblical and church tradition, the Department on Church and Society was largely compelled to tackle it as it came to grips with social phenomena. Whereas the immediate post-war decades were marked by an astonishing optimism, the mood swung the other way at the end of the sixties as awareness increased of the dangers hanging over humanity. The publication of the Club of Rome Report *The Limits to Growth* was a landmark. The vision of

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<sup>4</sup>Ibid. p. 9.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid. p. 12.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid. p. 18.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid. p. 18.

gradually increasing material prosperity for all the world's people disintegrated. The talk now was increasingly of the deterioration in the quality of life for broad sectors of humanity and particularly the poor, and of the possible disappearance of whole species, indeed the threat to the survival of humankind itself. As the question of humanity's treatment of the natural world began to raise questions about human life in community, and indeed human survival, "creation" increasingly became an issue for the Department of Church and Society.

For almost a decade the Department's forefront of attention was on the role of science and technology in the future of humanity and how to evaluate it. A series of conferences and studies were held in close cooperation with representatives of the different sciences. The main ones that should be mentioned in this connection are the conferences on "Science and Technology for Human Development, The Ambiguous Future -- The Christian Hope" (Bucharest 1974)<sup>8</sup>, and "Faith, Science and the Future" (MIT Boston 1979).<sup>9</sup> The debates were not governed first and foremost by a theoretical interest. The hope underlying the enterprise was really that it would prove possible to develop a constructive dialogue on the ethical issues facing the churches and the sciences today. What responsibilities do the sciences carry in relation to the destructive consequences resulting from scientific research and its applications? How, considering the uncertainties of the future, can an exchange, or perhaps even an alliance, be brought about between the church and science? What role can the churches perhaps play in the elaboration of ethical principles? These questions were discussed not only in general terms but also on the basis of concrete examples. In the course of the work studies were produced, for example, on ethical aspects of genetics, energy use and, above all, nuclear energy.<sup>10</sup>

The fundamental question of the relationship of faith and science could not, of course, be ignored. The deeper the exchange of views on ethical consequences became, the more evident was the need for agreement at the theological and philosophical level. What do the church and science have to say to one another? How can this unfruitful dichotomy of two mutually exclusive domains be overcome? What conditions have to be fulfilled on the part of the churches and of the sciences to allow dialogue to take place and to do so fruitfully? Two conferences in the seventies dealt exclusively with these questions : Science and Faith (Mexico City 1976) and The Ideological and Theological Debate about Science (Cambridge 1977).<sup>11</sup>

One of the merits of this study is that it introduced into the debate the now generally familiar concept of the "sustainable society." Used for the first time at the conference in Bucharest in 1974, it was defined as follows:

"The goal must be a robust, sustainable society, where each individual can feel secure that his quality of life will be maintained or improved.

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<sup>8</sup>Report published by the WCC in mimeographed form.

<sup>9</sup>*Faith and Science in an Unjust World*, Report of the World Council of Churches' Conference on Faith, Science and the Future, Vol. I, Plenary Presentations. Vol. II Reports and Recommendations, Geneva, 1980.

<sup>10</sup>Charles Birch and Paul Abrecht (ed.), *Genetics and the Quality of Life*, Rushcutters Bay 1975; Paul Abrecht and Ninan Koshy, *Before it's too late, The Challenge of Nuclear Disarmament*. Hearing in Amsterdam 1981, Geneva 1983.

<sup>11</sup>*Anticipation* no. 22 (May 1976) and *Anticipation* no. 25 (January 1979).

We can already delineate some necessary characteristics of this enduring society. First, social stability cannot be obtained without an equitable distribution of what is in scarce supply and common opportunity to participate in social decisions. Second, a robust global society will not be sustainable unless the need for food is at any time well below the global capacity to supply it, and unless the emissions of pollutants are well below the capacity of the ecosystem to absorb them. Third, the new social organization will be sustainable only as long as the rate of use of non-renewable resources does not outrun the increase in resources made available through technological innovation. Finally, a sustainable society requires a level of human activity which is not adversely influenced by the never ending, large and frequent natural variations in global climate."<sup>12</sup>

One year later, the concept of the sustainable society was adopted by the WCC Assembly in Nairobi and has been a firmly established part of ecumenical vocabulary ever since. However, it also met with opposition. When it was first talked about, some people expressed the fear that the emphasis on the limits to growth would relegate commitment to social justice to second place. The Nairobi Assembly therefore deliberately chose to speak of a "just" and "sustainable" society as the goal of the ecumenical movement. But even after Nairobi the arguments continued about how to reconcile the concern for justice and ecological responsibility.

One of the most impressive presentations on the theme was the address given by Charles Birch at the Nairobi Assembly, in which he compared the earth to the Titanic. The iceberg had five tips, he said, five physical threats to human survival; they are: the population explosion, food scarcity, scarcity of non-renewable renewal resources such as fossil fuels, environmental deterioration and war.<sup>13</sup> He went on to stress that these dangers are not equally distributed over the earth. "In short, too many people demanding too much while others have little, destroy their source of life in trying to get what they want. Rich and poor countries confront each other in a gigantic struggle over the body of earth... This involves a programme of de-development of the rich world. The rich must live more simply than the poor may simply live."<sup>14</sup> Birch then examined the role of technology and pointed out how important it was who exercised control over technical development. His presentation culminated in the demand for a sustainable society, calling for humanity to behave in such a way "that the life of man and other living creatures on which his life depends can be sustained indefinitely within the limits of the earth."<sup>15</sup> It is something in the nature of an all-embracing liberation movement, "women's liberation, men's liberation, the liberation of science and technology, animal liberation, plant liberation and the

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<sup>12</sup>*Study Encounter* 69, vol. X, 4, 1974, p. 2.

<sup>13</sup>Creation, Technology and Human Survival, *Ecumenical Review*, vol. XXVIII 1976, p. 67.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.* p. 69 f.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.* p. 73.

liberation of the air and the oceans, the forests, deserts, mountains and valleys..."<sup>16</sup>

But what came out of the study for the dialogue between theology and science in the stricter sense of the word? First, we may note that the study repeatedly refers to the new preconditions for this dialogue that have meanwhile developed on both sides. "Dogmatic claims that scientific knowledge represents final and exhaustive truth about the world are seldom heard today. A common view is that scientific theories are limited and instrumental models which permit prediction and control, not description of the world as it is in itself. There is an increasing awareness that the directions taken by scientific research are determined by industrial needs and cultural assumptions and not by the pursuit of truth alone"<sup>17</sup> Conversely, theologians were increasingly clear in their own minds that the division of nature and history into two quite separate spheres could not be maintained.

The study repeatedly recognizes that theology is neither equipped nor prepared for the dialogue with science. "Theology seems to be in extraordinary disarray. Not only are there the traditional differences associated with the classic confessions of various denominations, many of which are experiencing a resurgence of self-consciousness, but today there is also a wide variety of streams of theological thought which cut across confessional lines."<sup>18</sup>

This starting position was too complicated to be overcome at once. The merit of the study carried out in the seventies lies not so much in offering fully-fledged findings as in formulating the questions posed for both sides. The study ends as it began, by calling for more attention to be paid to the subject. "The explication of the cosmological meaning of faith and theology is necessary not only for apologetic reasons, but also to ensure the coherence of theology and Christian witness. This entails serious attention to the formulation of a strong theology of nature and a reassessment of the doctrine of creation... Ways must be found to articulate a theology of nature in terms of a new ecological sensibility."<sup>19</sup>

Nonetheless, the study produced a series of starting points and perspectives that were to prove fruitful in the coming years. In particular, the Conference reports from Boston (1979) moved on a level not since attained in the ecumenical movement. Some of the important points that should be mentioned were:

1. The will to establish a new relationship between theology and science is apparent throughout the study. The big question was how this was to be understood and described. "Modern science and Christian faith are currently being related in a variety of ways. This variety is rooted in the plurality of ways in which the churches regard the faith and conceive of God's relation to the world. As a result of both this plurality and the wide range of

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<sup>16</sup>Ibid. p. 76.

<sup>17</sup>*Anticipation* no. 22, p. 14.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid. p. 14 f.

<sup>19</sup>*Faith and Science in an Unjust World*, Report of the WCC Conference on Faith, Science and the Future, vol. II, Geneva 1980, p. 22.

scientific activity multiple interactions between modern science and Christian faith are to be expected."<sup>20</sup> In how far do theology and science speak of the same reality? How far are theological utterances *sui generis* and therefore independent of the insights of science? How far are they aspects of one and the same perception of truth? No common answers could be given to these questions even at the end of the study. The report of the Boston conference simply gives a review of the different possible answers.<sup>21</sup>

2. The ideological aspects of science and technology played an important part in the study. There are frequent references to the fact that scientific research -- often unwittingly -- rests on ideological presuppositions. The claim that scientific research is "value-free" and "objective" cannot be sustained. "Modern Western science itself developed in association with a number of ideological presuppositions. Part of the ideology of science was the belief in the inherent unity of truth and goodness, knowledge and happiness: it is good to know and knowledge contributes to the happiness of mankind... Today however, this ideology is severely questioned. The relationship between science and war, science and the control of behaviour, technology and the ecological crisis, are facts which every scientist should take into consideration... In the midst of our present crisis it is urgent that the social sciences devote part of their interest to the analysis of problems which are related to the human-social consequences of science such as:

- a) What is the economic basis of science?
- b) What is the political basis of science?

These two questions help to answer the next one, of vital importance:

- c) If knowledge entails power, to whom is scientific knowledge, and therefore economic and political power being given?
- d) What have been the real results (as against the ideology) of science in society?"<sup>22</sup>

The debate about the essential nature of science was particularly impassioned at the Boston conference. R. Hanbury Brown's statement that science had to try to pursue the truth independently of direct interests was described by Rubem S. Alves, a delegate from the Third World, as self-deception. In fact, he said, scientific research was based on ideological presuppositions and intimately bound up with the control of power. To discover its true nature one had to start with the experience of those who suffer its effects, namely, the "under-developed" nations of the Third World. The nature of the wolf only becomes fully apparent when the lamb and not just the wolf itself is given the chance to define it. Science has to accept responsibility for the consequences unleashed by its discoveries.

Another question raised in this connection concerned how far there are given limits to scientific research, on ethical grounds. The dilemma comes up

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<sup>20</sup>Ibid. p. 14

<sup>21</sup>Ibid. p. 15 f.

<sup>22</sup>*Anticipation* no. 25, p. 7.

again and again. On the one hand it is recognized that: "We cannot turn back. We cannot choose the dream of un-knowing. We shall open the last door in the castle, even if it leads, perhaps because it leads, on to realities which are beyond the reach of human comprehension and control."<sup>23</sup> Yet on the other hand it is said: "If the church is to understand science in the light of the Incarnation then it must infer the role of science as a servant. The opening of doors is to be commended not as an act of Hubris but as an act which offers liberation."<sup>24</sup> But how do we go about realizing this role for science? It will come as no surprise that this question remained unanswered -- the study got no further than describing the dilemma.

3. The recurring insight throughout the study is that in view of present developments the emphasis has to be on God's presence in creation rather than on God's sovereignty over all created things. The World Conference in Boston says, for example: "The cultural context has radically changed since biblical times. In the Biblical period humanity was confronted with an overpowering nature. The command to rule the animals and to subdue the earth delivered people from fear and from the temptation to divinize or demonize nature... The power relations have since been reversed by science and technology. What needs to be emphasized today, therefore, is the relatedness between God and his creation rather than their separatedness. The dignity of nature as creation needs to be stressed and humanity's dominion must be bound up with our responsibility for the preservation of life." <sup>25</sup>

Aspects of Process Theology became increasingly important. "In this view God participates in the world as it evolves and as the possibilities for the world become concretely realized from the organisation of the electrons and the like into atoms and that of atoms and cells into living organisms. The process of that which is possible becoming concrete is called 'concretion.' It is the creativity of God in the world as it responds to the divine activity. In his primordial nature, God is not before but with all creation. God is both the sustainer of existence and the lure of existence."<sup>26</sup>

4. The concept of the "sacramental" played an important role here. To do justice to God's presence in creation it was said that nature was sacramental in character. Pointers in this direction first surfaced at the Bucharest conference (1974). "We are also helped in our approach to creation by a sacramental understanding of the world. We use the word sacramental with a precise meaning. The world is not sacred, not divine in itself. In the beginning of creation the world received its good worldliness. But the free action of God takes elements and things of this world and makes them signs, sacraments of God's presence and of his coming. Through the sacramental view we apprehend, in the peril and vulnerability common to man and earth,

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<sup>23</sup>George Steiner, T. S. Eliot Memorial Lecture, quoted in *Anticipation* no. 22, p. 36.

<sup>24</sup>G. Ronald Williams, An Epistle to Judith, in *Anticipation* no. 22, p. 38.

<sup>25</sup>Report of the World Conference in Boston 1979, vol. II, p. 33.

<sup>26</sup>Charles Birch, What does God do in the World?, in *Anticipation*, no. 22, p. 43.

a new sense of awe towards the universe."<sup>27</sup>

Or, as Charles Birch put it in his speech at the Nairobi Assembly: "The world is not as tame as our sluggish convention-ridden minds tend to suppose. There is another view, which for want of a better term I shall call a sacramental view, which emphasizes the tender elements of the world... Science has laid bare the amazing interdependence and physical unity of the world. But the churches have, for the most part, left hidden the spiritual unity that alone gives the physical its meaning. I cannot think on this personalistic and unitary image of the creation without a humbling sense that all creatures are fellow creatures and that human responsibility extends infinitely to the whole of creation."<sup>28</sup>

5. This sacramental view of nature led inevitably to questions concerning the place of humanity within the natural world. There is no doubt that human beings are part of nature. And no doubt, either, that this aspect has not been given enough emphasis in the history of modern times. But how are we to understand the biblical description of humanity as the "image" of God? In how far are human beings different from all other creatures? The report of the Consultation in Mexico has this to say: "Both humankind and non-human nature are together God's creation. We must preserve the precision of the biblical vocabulary in expressing these two different relations -- between God and the human and between God and non-human nature. Metaphorically it is said that humankind is 'called' to salvation... Non-human nature is promised instead to be 'delivered' after praise and groanings and after 'waiting' on God. In both cases there is life... But in the Biblical view it is also clear that men and women are the speaking, answering, refusing and accepting partners of God. We do not find in the Bible any kind of monistic confusion between anthropology and cosmology... The Biblical background without any pretentious claim to fixing the place of science, may help scientists in proposing to them a view of the similarities and distinctions between human and non-human creation and of the distinctive responsibility of human beings in and for the cosmos."<sup>29</sup>
6. There was an increasing emphasis in the course of the study on the "intrinsic value" of all created things -- animals, plants and all that exists on earth. The value of created things cannot be measured purely in terms of their usefulness to humanity. Every creature has its own intrinsic value before God. "We catch glimpses of it in the Book of Job, for example, in the questions in the 38<sup>th</sup> chapter: Why have flowers in the desert after rain where no man is? Have they no value when there is no-one to use or admire them? or in the Psalm 104, where God made things for their own sake. Man is only one of a number of pebbles on the cosmic beach."<sup>30</sup>

This emphasis led immediately to a further question. How can the intrinsic value of each creature be recognized and respected? It would be pointless

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<sup>27</sup>Bucharest 1974, mimeographed edition, p. 78.

<sup>28</sup>Creation, Technology and Human Survival, *Ecumenical Review*, vol. XXVIII 1976, pp. 77 and 79.

<sup>29</sup>*Anticipation* no. 22, p. 21.

<sup>30</sup>Charles Birch. Creation, Technology and Survival, *Ecumenical Review*, vol. XXVIII 1976, p. 77.

to talk about the intrinsic value of all created entities unless at the same time it is recognized that those entities thus have a right to exist. "In an ecological universe every created entity has intrinsic value because all are subjects as well as objects. And whatever has intrinsic value has some right to exist and to prosper."<sup>31</sup> This raises the question of the rights of nature. How can human rights and the rights of nature be reconciled? "There must be a hierarchy of intrinsic value from lesser creatures through mammals to the human. 'Are you not worth more than many sparrows?' asked Jesus. A complete life-ethic would take into account the hierarchy of intrinsic value and instrumental value. No one has yet attempted to do that systematically. But the immediate point of importance for us is that in the ecological view of nature, when the interests of people and elephants and kangaroos come into conflict, the non-humans count for more than zero in the equation."<sup>32</sup>

7. The study gave rise to some fresh thinking on biblical witness. What does Scripture actually say about creation? The constant reproach is that Jewish-Christian tradition is responsible for contemporary humanity's "grace-less attitude" to creation. How far does this accusation actually stand up? How far is the idea of human dominion over nature really anchored in biblical witness? Is there not a distinction to be made between biblical witness and the understanding of biblical witness which prevailed for so long in the church?

In the report of the World Conference in Boston we read: "Western theology has introduced the opposition (of subject and object) even into the interpretation of the Bible: creation and salvation have been separated; either the theology of salvation swallowed up the theology of creation, or creation was treated in isolation from it. Today by contrast, we need to point out the numerous ways in which the Bible connects creation and salvation in Christ, eschatological hope and obedience, and justice and sustainability."<sup>33</sup> The report then gives an overview of biblical statements pointing in this direction.

An important aspect in this connection is the image of the "covenant," which gained in importance as the study progressed because in the Old Testament the concept of the "covenant" is used both for God's relationship with people and for relationship to creation. "The covenant is the master image for the relation of God to humankind. But the Bible does not speak of humankind alone. In both the Genesis creation stories, in the psalms of praise and distress, in both the Pauline and Johannine Christologies, in the recapitulation prophecy of Revelation -- everywhere the cosmos is also present, associated to the God-human covenant story."<sup>34</sup> The covenant is the metaphor to express the fact that humanity and the whole creation belong together.

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<sup>31</sup>Charles Birch. *Faith, Science and an Unjust World*. Report of the WCC Conference on Faith, Science and the Future, vol. I, Geneva 1980, p. 71.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid. p. 72.

<sup>33</sup>Boston, vol. II, p. 31.

<sup>34</sup>*Anticipation* no. 22, p. 21; see also Boston vol. II, p. 31.

### C. The Commission on Faith and Order in the Seventies and Eighties

For a while after the study on "God in Nature and History" the subject of creation receded into the background in the work of the Commission on Faith and Order. The Commission was involved in the study undertaken by the Department on Church and Society. It organized the theological consultation in Mexico City (1976) jointly with Church and Society, for example. But it did not carry out any studies of its own on the subject.

One important statement was made in 1978 at the Commission Meeting in Bangalore on the theme "Giving Account of Hope." One of the working groups dealt with the question of how the Christian hope could be asserted in the dialogue and encounter with science, the report being intended as a contribution to the World Conference in Boston.

The text says that faith and science each have their own way of asking questions and understanding. They are complementary rather than in competition with one another. "The scientist in his professional capacity does not ask questions which look for purpose. Some actions, for example in biology, may look purposeful, but they do not require explanations involving purpose. The presence of purpose in the development of the universe cannot be read off directly from science. It is, however, a permissible interpretation of the data, if anyone should choose so to interpret them... For the theologian, on the other hand, the idea of purpose is a central conviction which is not derived from the observation of the natural world, but from the history of the acts of God. It is an anthropocentric statement, focused on human destiny, not on the natural history of the cosmos."<sup>35</sup>

Some people found this view simplistic -- Charles Birch described it in Boston as the "disjunct view of faith and science." Why should the nature and intention of God be observable only from history?

The Commission on Faith and Order returned to the theme of creation from a new standpoint in the eighties. It had been decided at the Commission meeting in Bangalore to set up a study on the "Apostolic Faith," for which the chosen starting point was the Nicene Creed, as the fundamental statement of the faith recognized by all the churches. The intention was the bold one of attempting an explication of this text for our times. The theme of creation was dealt with extensively in this context.

The text is characterized by its strong affirmation of the trinitarian faith. The Commission on Faith and Order shows that the trinitarian understanding of God is the essential precondition for a proper understanding of God's relation to the world as his creation -- an emphasis of some importance in view of later developments in the World Council of Churches: "The one God both transcends and is present in his creation. Moreover each divine person, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, of the one God participates in both this transcendence and this immanence. When Christians speak of God's works concerning creation in relation to the divine persons, they should always insist that the three persons fully participate in that work... The creation...is not only made for use by

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<sup>35</sup>Bangalore 1978. *Sharing in One Hope*, Faith and Order Paper 92, p. 158.

mankind: God the creator rejoices in his work; all humankind shares in this joy and in some way perceives the eternal power and deity of God in his work.... All this means that the entire creation, through the presence and activity of the Triune God in it, is full of his glory and in the end will be transformed by participation in God's glory. Therefore, in Christian Trinitarian perception, creation is not to be seen in any sense as standing apart from God, as the deistic view asserts, nor confused with God, as the pantheistic view claims. Rather, creation though other than God, and still in bondage to decay and groaning in travail can be properly understood only in relation to God as its creator, redeemer and sustainer."<sup>36</sup>

The text stresses that this view necessarily implies the ethical obligation to preserve the creation. "In Jesus Christ God has acted to save creation." The renewal of humanity therefore naturally also includes responsible stewardship of creation. The environmental crisis is mentioned, but it is obvious that the members of the Faith and Order Commission were much less exercised by it than the people responsible for the work of the Department on Church and Society. With relatively unshaken confidence they speak of the human calling to bring creation to its fulfilment. "Understood in its true context and meaning, the biblical command calls human beings to become co-operators with God's work and to preserve and consummate his creation.... Women and men are continuously set free to rediscover and renew their stewardship in relation to God's creation."<sup>37</sup>

## II. NEW DEVELOPMENTS IN THE EIGHTIES

The Church and Society study came to an abrupt end with the World Conference in Boston (1979). Its findings played little part in the preparations for the Vancouver Assembly (1983) and were mentioned only briefly at the Assembly itself.<sup>38</sup> Nor were the threads of the earlier study picked up at a later date. Initiatives of the eighties were on a different level.

### A. The Conciliar Process of Mutual Commitment to Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation

The Vancouver Assembly (1983) called emphatically on the churches to make a common commitment to justice, peace and the integrity of creation. In view of the extreme levels of nuclear armaments during those years it laid particular stress on peace-keeping in its statements. In one text, which was subsequently to become important, it also called for a commitment to the "integrity of creation."<sup>39</sup> It is not clear from the Assembly report just how the formula "justice, peace and the integrity of creation" came into being. It was not the result of any real debate, nor was it ever knowingly adopted by the delegates. (It

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<sup>36</sup>*Confessing the One Faith*, Faith and Order Paper 153, p.38 f.

<sup>37</sup>*Ibid.* p. 41.

<sup>38</sup>*Gathered for Life*. Official Report, Sixth Assembly of the World Council of Churches, Vancouver. Geneva 1983, pp. 77-78.

<sup>39</sup>*Ibid.* p. 225.

is not even mentioned in the index of the Vancouver Report!) It was not until after the Assembly that it began to attract attention. The idea of a "conciliar process" in which the churches would join together in a common commitment to justice, peace and the integrity of creation met with an unexpectedly enthusiastic response in many churches, especially in the northern hemisphere, and particularly in 1984, after the German Protestant Kirchentag in Düsseldorf had spoken of the need for a "Council for Peace." For a long time the WCC was uncertain what to do about its own proposal and decided only after long hesitation to take steps to put it into effect. After a difficult preparatory period the World Convocation for Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation finally took place in 1990.

Four aspects of the conciliar process are important in relation to our theme here:

1. All the statements made in the course of the process assume the urgency of the situation. Time is short. If the necessary measures are not taken soon the very survival of humanity is in danger. "We live in a moment of extreme jeopardy. Human activity is slowly closing down the life support systems of the planet."<sup>40</sup> Something must be done. All forces prepared to defend life must be mobilized. The churches have the task and duty to draw attention to the impending danger and call for conversion before it is too late.
2. Two concepts which have played an important role in Christian tradition were enlisted to underline the urgency of the task. On the one hand it was said that it was important for the churches to call to mind God's covenant with his people and find an appropriate common response to it and, on the other hand, echoing Dietrich Bonhoeffer's suggestion in the thirties, there was talk of convening a council for peace. However clear the intention, the use of these two -- theologically and ecclesologically loaded -- terms led to almost insurmountable complications. Instead of increasing the enthusiasm for common action they sparked off an interminable discussion on the legitimacy of using them.
3. The linking of the three concepts of justice, peace and creation was a way of expressing the fact that in our commitment for survival we must never lose sight of all three aspects. The crisis in which we find ourselves cannot be reduced to one aspect only. Commitment to justice and peace always has to go hand in hand with commitment to the preservation of creation, and vice-versa. Concern for the environment cannot be divorced from the commitment to justice and peace. In this respect the "conciliar process" anticipated something of the perspectives that were later to underlie the UN Conference on "Environment and Development" in Rio de Janeiro. All in all, however, it did not get beyond the general statement that Christian commitment had to be maintained in all three areas at once. The conciliar process did not manage to clarify how exactly the link can be established.
4. The sense of urgency concerning the issues meant that the conciliar process concentrated first and foremost on describing the dangers and urging the need for immediate action. Important as further research and theoretical reflection are, the practical measures that must be taken here and now cannot be postponed. As was rightly stressed, the change of direction must

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<sup>40</sup>Pre-Assembly Consultation in Kuala Lumpur 1990, *Ecumenical Review* XLII, 1990, p. 313.

begin before it is too late. The conciliar process therefore deliberately addressed itself to the people at the "grass roots" and allowed itself to be guided by the idea of "resistance from below." There is no doubt that this way of doing things brought movement on more than one front. It is largely thanks to the conciliar process that consciousness of responsibility for the future could take root in the life of local congregations. The weakness of the process lay in the fact that because of the concern over the implications of the impending dangers, no consistent reflection took place on theology and society. Demands were made without any indication being given of the kind of society that would be needed in order for them to be realized. The conciliar process was unable to suggest any practical solutions and consequently did not really get beyond the stage of issuing exhortations.

## B. Feminist Theology

In the eighties an important emphasis on a deeper understanding of humanity and creation came from feminist theology, which pointed out with increasing insistence the close connection between discrimination against women and aggression against nature. In both cases the same idea of male dominance is at work. Rosemary Radford Ruether speaks for many people when she says: "We cannot criticize the hierarchy of male over female without ultimately criticizing and overcoming the hierarchy of humans over nature."<sup>41</sup> A new relation between men and women will also lead to a new relation of "partnership" with the environment. The emphasis should be on God's motherly care for the life God has created rather than on the sovereignty of God, the creator. Feminist sensitivity and environmental awareness increasingly go hand in hand.

## C. The Canberra Assembly (1991)

In contrast to previous assemblies the subject of creation was at the centre of attention in Canberra. One of the four sections was devoted exclusively to it. The report develops the Christian view of creation specifically from the standpoint of the working of the Holy Spirit, partly because the main theme of the assembly was pneumatology. But quite apart from that, a change had taken place. There was a greater sense of the need for a deeper spirituality in dealing with creation. The emphasis on the action of the Holy Spirit seemed to open up new perspectives in this respect. "Recognizing the priority of the Spirit opens faith's vision to the vast panorama of God's activity in creation."<sup>42</sup> God's Spirit is present in all created things; it binds all creatures together in one whole and human beings have to assume their allotted place in this communion of the Spirit.

A conference held in Kuala Lumpur in 1990 in Assembly preparation put it as follows:

"The Spirit of God's uncreated energy alive throughout creation. All creation lives and moves and has its being in this divine life. This Spirit is in, with, and under 'all things' (ta panta). The Spirit strives to bring them to their full perfection (redemption). Because of the presence and pervasiveness of the

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<sup>41</sup>Rosemary Radford Ruether. *Sexism and God-talk, Towards a Feminist Theology*, London, 1989, p. 73.

<sup>42</sup>Kuala Lumpur, p. 315.

Spirit throughout creation, we not only reject a view in which the cosmos does not share in the sacred and in which humans are not part of nature; we also repudiate hard lines draw between animate and inanimate, and human and non-human. All alike, and all together in the bundle of life, 'groan in travail' (Rom. 8) awaiting the full redemption of all things through Jesus Christ 'in the power of the Spirit.'"

If created life shares in the uncreated life of God through the all-pervasive presence of the Spirit, then we humans, bonded to one another and the rest of nature, must respect the mystery of life and acknowledge the dignity of all creatures. In our co-existence with the rest of nature, we may understand ourselves in various ways -- as the present trustees of the tiny speck of creation called Earth, as servants of the Spirit and the earth, as the priests of creation, as its tillers and keepers, as co-creators, or as that portion of nature come to consciousness of itself in creation's own ongoing life."<sup>43</sup>

This view did not go uncontested. Many people saw it as one-sided, some even as heretical, and at the Assembly itself it became apparent that the ecumenical movement is still a long way from a general agreement, let alone a common understanding on the subject of creation. The relation between Christology and pneumatology in particular gave rise to disagreements at the Assembly. What does it mean that the Spirit which permeates creation is the Spirit of the crucified and risen Christ? Whereas the Commission on Faith and Order, in its study on the Apostolic Faith, had developed a strictly trinitarian understanding of creation, the Assembly emphasized the person of the Spirit in preference to the first and, above all, the second person of the Trinity. The differences could not be resolved at the Assembly itself and indeed the working out of a common view was declared to be one of the urgent tasks awaiting the WCC.

Despite the deep lack of consensus at the theological level, the Assembly did manage to agree on some aspects of the environmental crisis. The urgent need for rapid action was stressed in Canberra as never before at an Assembly. Of the aspects discussed, the section on "Rethinking Economies" is particularly relevant in considering "sustainable growth -- a contradiction in terms?" I therefore quote it in full:

"32. With modern communications, prices can be known immediately all around the world. However, knowing the price of something does not mean we know its value. To think that price equals value is a conventional economic fallacy. Price is only one specific way of looking at value: the value in exchange. In a market economy price is based demand and supply, which are both calculated on a very narrow, short-term basis. Immaterial needs get no price; hence these needs are often increased instead of being satisfied through consumption. Waste, in which all material production ends, is usually disregarded. And since the poor have little money, their needs get excluded. In measuring supply, the market responds only to those costs which can be expressed in money. Moreover, it is an advantage to producers to leave out those costs which they do not pay for themselves, such as environmental degradation and human disease that may result. As a consequence, a good deal of environmental damage is being caused without entering

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<sup>43</sup>Kuala Lumpur, p. 316.

'into the books'.

"33. What we need, therefore, is first of all a new concept of value, based not on money and exchange but rather on *sustainability* and *use*. Humankind has failed to distinguish between growth and development. While advocating 'sustainable development' many people and groups in fact often have found themselves promoting 'growth'. Growth for the growth's sake -- the continued addition to what already is present -- is the strategy of the cancer cell. Growth for growth's sake is increase in size without control, without limit, in disregard for the system that sustains it. It ultimately results in degradation and death. Development on the other hand -- like the strategy of the embryo -- is getting the right things in the right places in the right amounts at the right times with the right relationships. Development, while supported both by growth and *reduction* of its parts, results in a self-sustaining whole. Development of the earth by human body, maintains a balance among all parts of the whole. What is 'just' and 'right', then, must be found in social, biological and physical relationships involving humanity and earth. True development, as opposed to simple growth, focuses on the eco-system level.

"34. It is necessary, then, to correct prices in such a way that they take into account the need to maintain the ecological functions which nature is offering humankind. For example, those living in wealthy nations would have to pay far more for the use of exhaustible energy resources. It should be noted that particularly energy prices, prices of raw materials and agricultural prices are already subject to effective manipulation. The means of public manipulation of prices should be used to reflect both ecological requirements and the need for distributive justice. The churches in the European Community, for example, should press for a radical change in the Community's agricultural policy, detrimental as this policy presently is to both the environment and African, Asian and Latin American farmers. The practice of the USA to dump their agricultural surplus in developing countries should also be vigorously opposed." <sup>44</sup>

### III. THREE OPEN QUESTIONS

Clarification of the relation between humanity and creation will continue to be one of the tasks for the ecumenical movement in future. Indeed, the Canberra Assembly actually expressed the wish that work on the theology of creation should become one of the main thematic concerns of the WCC. Any study on this subject will have to be wide-ranging and take into consideration a variety of approaches and viewpoints.

In my view, three issues cannot be ignored.

- A. I think first of the fact that the end of human existence seems to be in sight in a tangible way. Günter Anders put forward the thesis as long ago as 1959. "Even if it were to endure for ever, the age in which we live is the last age of humankind.... We are living in the time of the end -- the age whose end

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<sup>44</sup>*Signs of the Spirit*. Official Report, Seventh Assembly of the World Council of Churches, Geneva 1991. pp. 63-64.

we can actually bring about any day now."<sup>45</sup> Jürgen Moltmann recently described the same state of affairs as follows: "It is a permanent battle for survival, a battle in which there is no victory -- at best a battle with no end. We can prolong our "end of time," but we and all the generations which come after us will have to "husband" life in this end of time. It will be life constantly concerned with postponing the end. Humanity's lifetime is no longer guaranteed by nature but has to be kept open by human beings themselves. Until now nature has been able to regenerate the human race after each human act of mass destruction. Until now nature has protected humankind from annihilation by human beings. Henceforth this is no longer the case. With Hiroshima humanity lost its atomic innocence."<sup>46</sup>

Anders and Moltmann base this interpretation of our times on the nuclear threat. But is it not equally present in other threats to the created earth? At least two of the threats regularly enumerated in ecumenical texts are basically of a similar nature in that they can within the foreseeable future end in the annihilation of the human race. Pollution of the air and the contamination of soil and water are endangering human survival. The nuclear threat catches the attention to such an extent because it evokes the idea of sudden suicide by the human race. But are the factors which are causing gradual destruction any less dangerous? The process which appears to have started will continue relentlessly unless there is a completely unexpected turn of events.

The earlier ecumenical discussion could still view the future with more confidence. Joseph Sittler, for instance, in his speech in New Delhi said: "It is the thesis of this address that our moment in history is heavy with the imperative that faith proposes for the madly malleable and grandly possible potencies of nature, that holiest, vastest confession: that by him, and through him all things subsist in God, and therefore are to be used in joy and sanity for his human family."<sup>47</sup> Or the study on God in Nature and History: "Consummation is a far higher work than creation...far more than only the restoration of an original situation.... Christ is the new man who leads the process of history to its ultimate goal. Genesis 2 does not picture a perfect state but a point of departure. Revelation 20 and 21 do not present a repetition of the Garden of Eden, but a city, symbol of culture."<sup>48</sup> And a little later: "The process of God's creative work has not yet come to an end. New developments are still to be expected. Living in a great historical process means looking constantly forward, believing in an open future."<sup>49</sup>

All these texts certainly do show an awareness that human history is caught

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<sup>45</sup>Günter Anders. *Atomarer Tod - kein Selbstmord* (1959), in *Die atomare Drohung*. Radical Überlegungen. By the same author. Fourth edition with introduction of "Endzeit und Zeitende", Munich 1983, p 55 ff.

<sup>46</sup>Jürgen Moltmann. *Die atomare Katastrophe: wo bleibt Gott?* in *Evangelische Theologie* 47, 1987, pp. 50, 60

<sup>47</sup>*Ecumenical Review* XIV, 1962, p. 185 f.

<sup>48</sup>Cf. note 3, p. 13.

<sup>49</sup>*Ibid.* p. 15.

up in far-reaching upheavals, even that by its overweening arrogance the human race could bring itself to the edge of doom. And yet a note of confidence prevails. Joseph Sittler ends his address with these words: "This radio-active earth, so fecund and so fragile, is his creation, our sister, and the material place where we meet the brother in Christ's light. Ever since Hiroshima the very term light has ghastly meanings. But ever since creation it has many meanings glorious; and ever since Bethlehem meanings concrete and beckoning."<sup>50</sup>

Can we still have this confidence? Or do all the signs indicate that a qualitatively new age has begun? If the latter is the case, many theological questions will have to be asked in a new perspective. What does it mean to confess God, the Creator, in this day and age? Until now God has largely been understood as the guarantor of a natural order that sustained the human race despite all its sinfulness and foolishness. Who is God if this certainty begins to crumble? Are we then obliged to say that God's covenant with creation can be undermined and cancelled from the human side? What does that then have to say for our understanding of God, humanity and creation as a whole?

- B. A second aspect which must be included in any further reflection on the relation of humankind and nature concerns the understanding of human freedom. We first have to ask what constitutes genuine freedom. In Christian tradition it has been clear from time immemorial that genuine freedom includes service of our neighbour and of the community. Christians are Lord over all things only to the extent that no-one and nothing can separate them from the love of God. Their freedom lies precisely in their being ready to serve their neighbour. They are called not to dominion but to service. Statements of this kind were concerned with relations between human beings. Genuine freedom then seemed entirely compatible with dominion over nature. Indeed it could even be extolled as one of the advantages of the Christian message that it liberated human beings from the constraints of nature and thus equipped them for a life of greater freedom. But can this view of freedom be maintained? Does the fulfilment of genuine Christian freedom not lie equally in communion with all creatures? Must Christian freedom not respect the right of fellow creatures just as it respects the rights of human beings?

This line of thinking must be taken a step further. How are we to understand the fact that God grants human beings room for freedom? What does it mean that human beings can decide against God and bring about their own destruction? As a rule the church has interpreted this fact as a call for human responsibility. In the freedom granted to them human beings can find fulfilment in God but they can also forfeit their freedom. They can turn against God and bring about their own ruin. The freedom given to them is God's gift. The resources they wrest from nature are not evil as such; they can be used to God's glory. Technology is not evil as such -- it only becomes an instrument of destruction when it is misused by human beings.

In the study on "God in Nature and History" for example, we read: "History is the work of the sovereign God. God is never a helpless spectator of man's

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<sup>50</sup>*Ecumenical Review* XIV, 1962, p. 185 f.

autonomy. Nor does he use men as passive instruments. The divine character of omnipotent grace is seen in the fact that it admits and presupposes the highest measure of human liberty. God's freedom does not jeopardize nor even limit man's.... These insights are particularly relevant since, through the knowledge of nuclear fission, the power fell to humankind to destroy itself and its world. From now on, we have to live with this terrifying possibility. This situation makes an appeal to our responsibility as never before. For Christians who know about the depth of sin in man, this implies a constant struggle to bring and to keep the powers of destruction under a strict control. We are challenged to pray and to work afresh for the renewal of the world through the powers of the Spirit. At the same time we will do so in a deep confidence, knowing that our concern is far more God's own concern, and that his sovereign love for his sinful creatures will prove itself stronger than all our resistance." And of the technology created by human beings in their freedom it says: "Christendom should not have hesitated, therefore, to welcome the immense progress in controlling and using nature which gave relief to innumerable riches for a deeper humanization of mankind.... Technics are not sinful in themselves; on the contrary, they are a means towards fulfilling God's commandment. The means are in the hands of sinful man, and are therefore never free from the possibility of misuse for selfish ends. Here the Christian Church has to exercise a critical function."<sup>51</sup>

But can human freedom be described in such a general way? Can we say that *the* human person enjoys this freedom equally and endlessly renewed at all times? Does there not come a point when this freedom is already forfeited? The passages just quoted were based on the assumption that the destruction brought about by the misuse of human freedom could always be put right again and the original situation restored. But what if the destruction already in progress were irreversible? We then have a situation where individuals, perhaps even groups know that this course of events could in principle have been avoided but that in fact it cannot now be halted.

What does it mean then to speak of God, the Creator, in this situation? What does it mean to wait for the coming of God's Kingdom? What does it mean to be a free human being? Of course, we must never tire of opposing the destruction of nature by human beings in their freedom, which continues unabated. But is it not in itself proof of freedom that, even when human freedom has so obviously failed, trusting in God's grace, we continue to wait for the coming of The Kingdom and to praise God in our hearts?

- C. The third aspect I should like to mention is our relation to death -- the death of each individual human being, but also the death of creation as such. The realization that we have entered a qualitatively new age also brings a change in our attitude to death. It creates a deeper awareness that not only our lives but also all created things are in thrall to death. The Christian message has never left any doubt about this. "Heaven and earth shall pass away." What God has created is not eternal: it will pass away and will only be called to new life by a new act of creation by God. This new creation will no longer be subject to change because it rests wholly in God: in the midst of the new Jerusalem humanity will rejoice eternally in communion with God.

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<sup>51</sup>Cf. note 3, pp. 27 and 23.

Just as a person's death reminds us that every one of us must die, the dying in creation reminds us of the transience of created things. The fact that in the space of a few decades many animal and plant species have been wiped out for ever is a Memento mori which we cannot overlook. For what does it mean that animals which, to use a biblical image, survived the flood in the ark, have now disappeared from the face of the earth as a result of humankind's aggressive expansionism?

Every living thing in creation and the creation as a whole has its allotted span. Is not humanity's deepest desire however to extend that span? Human beings experience death as their enemy. They try to protect themselves from it and to fend it off. The achievements of science and technology can be interpreted as an attempt by humankind to stand up to this enemy and place itself beyond the reach of its power. It is certainly no coincidence that the achievements of science and technology which are most acclaimed as progress are those in particular which seem to contribute to the further development of life. At the same time, the subject of death is largely excluded from our thinking and, above all, from our action. The fact of dying is felt as an embarrassment because it reminds us of our own mortality and so fixes the limits of our calling to live. The situation today seems to confront us with a novel and paradoxical state of affairs: it is our very striving after life which is the cause of death. As human beings try to break through their allotted limits they are causing death -- first of their environment, but ultimately also of themselves.

The resurrection of Christ is often interpreted as God's denial of death. Easter is celebrated as the festival of life. But is the resurrection also God's denial of mortality and the limits that are set to human life? Certainly not. The resurrection is the anticipation of God's new creation. It makes death no longer an enemy. It gives human beings the freedom to look death in the face. It is not an invitation to resist death but the fundamental reason which enables us to live life to the full even in face of death.

Death as such does mean the defeat of humanity. The fact of dying does not in itself deprive life of its meaning. The real question is how far we have lived the life given to us, in love of God and our neighbour and the whole created world. That is where it finds its fulfilment.