



## Lukas Vischer: The Vision of a Responsible Society after Fifty Years

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### 2. Historical Context

In 1948, the World Council of Churches was founded in Amsterdam. The churches were determined to work together for the construction of a *responsible society*. What about this vision today?

### 3. Summary

The differences between the confessions were not swept away by the foundation of the WCC. Yet the assembly was one in their pledge: "We intend to stay together". That pledge was sustained by the hope that the churches in common could give a more effective witness, that they could be ferment in a society shattered by crises, a spiritual power to strengthen all forces dedicated to building up a solid international order. In the midst of new conflicts after the war, there was hope that they would prove to be an independent force, a source of freedom, participation, justice and solidarity. - What has become of that vision after fifty years? The WCC has sought to the best of its ability to identify the tasks to which society is called, and to appeal for responsible actions. No other church institution succeeded so often in making visible what the churches ought to be concerned with. - But in the meantime, changes have taken place which shake the foundations of human existence. 1) Scientific research and new technologies have created new prospects in countless domains. Avoiding their negative consequences requires of humanity a measure of insight and responsibility that is not to be presupposed. 2) An over-exploitation on planet earth has led into an ecological crisis and contributed to climate change. God's creation is suffering under human domination. 3) The ideology of economic growth has led to production and consumption of goods being the measure of all things; it failed to bring about a just international economic order. Economic growth meets with objective limits. - In the context of its own jubilee the WCC has challenged the churches to reflect on the Old Testament law of the jubilee year. The countless people who have been sacrificed to economic exploitation, however, cannot be brought back to life; extinct plant and animal species will not return. What does it help to take responsibility for one leak when water is running out of so many holes? - Obviously, the churches today must be content with more modest hopes than fifty years ago. Nevertheless it is still meaningful to commit them *in common* for a *responsible society*. In face of overpowering unreasonableness in politics and economics their task is now one of *resistance*: 1) concerning the recognition of limits of resources like water, 2) concerning the mandate of *justice and solidarity* in face of the self-interest of rich nations and of climate change. 3) The Declaration of Human Rights must, in face of the ecological crisis, take account of *rights which are denied to human beings*.

Fifty years of WCC are the occasion for a thankful look back. The conditions have changed, but not the urgency of a common witness. The churches' reluctance to grow from mere relationships into a genuine community is difficult to grasp. Perhaps it can be explained by the fact that they do not yet see clearly enough the witness which is in fact demanded of them. Placing this challenge before themselves ever more consistently must thus be at the top of the list of their priorities.

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AND PROSELYTISM



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# The Vision of a Responsible Society after Fifty Years

*Lukas Vischer*

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## I

Fifty years have gone by since the founding of the World Council of Churches. For me, that first assembly in August 1948 remains a vivid memory. At the time I was a student at the University of Basel. Every day we listened with excitement to reports on the radio of what was happening in Amsterdam. All of us saw the vote to constitute the WCC on 23 August 1948 as a sign of hope: delegates from the most diverse churches coming together to risk a new beginning after the murderous destruction of the second world war – coming together so that, after so much bloodshed, a more peaceful world might come into being. The mood of those days was characterized by a key term to which the assembly gave currency: the churches should work together for the construction of a “responsible society”.

Of course, the differences between the confessions were not swept away by the encounter in Amsterdam. On the contrary, their gathering reminded the individual churches of their own particularities and inevitably made them aware of the strangeness of the other traditions. Yet the assembly was one in the conviction that a new day had dawned. In a solemn message to the churches the delegates underscored their pledge never again to separate themselves from one another: “We intend to stay together.” In the first place that was because they had become aware of the irrationality of their separation. But it was more than that: the assembly was sustained by the hope that the churches in common could give a more effective witness, that they could be a ferment in a society shattered by crises, a spiritual power to strengthen all those forces dedicated to building up a solid international order.

It was already evident that new conflicts were threatening. The ideological camps which had only recently been together in the struggle against Nazism had split apart. The confrontation between the Western powers and the Soviet Union, which would

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leave a decisive imprint on all historical developments until the end of the 1980s, had emerged. Political tensions were increasing from year to year. The spectre of a third world war, this time fought with nuclear weapons, hung over all.

This was the political constellation in which the Amsterdam assembly formulated its vision of a "responsible society". Rather than taking a one-sided position in favour of one system or the other, the churches should become a source of responsible action. The concept of the responsible society included a clear rejection of the inhuman, totalitarian and centralizing characteristics of the communist regimes. But there was also a clear critique of the Western camp. A responsible society, said the assembly, is a society "where freedom is the freedom of men who acknowledge responsibility to justice and public order, and where those who hold political authority or economic power are responsible for its exercise to God and the people whose welfare is affected by it". The hope was that the churches would prove to be an independent force in the conflicts which were emerging, a source of freedom, participation, justice and solidarity.

## II

What has become of the vision of Amsterdam? Where do we stand fifty years later?

There can be no doubt that the churches have come closer during this time. Few if any of the historic churches would now fail to list ecumenical relations among its priorities. The first barriers to fall were those between the Protestant churches. Here and there church unions took place. But the most significant event of the past fifty years was undoubtedly the Second Vatican Council, in which the Roman Catholic Church, which had decisively rejected contacts with other churches at the time of the Amsterdam assembly, opened itself to the ecumenical movement. Today the majority of churches take the contacts of Christians with each other across confessional boundaries for granted. And yet at the same time the separations of fifty years ago have not been overcome. They will doubtless accompany us deep into the third millennium. Again and again it is evident at critical moments that the churches are not prepared to make a common witness. Beneath the velvet gloves that typify the encounters of churches today the dangerous confessional claws of the past remain hidden. A notable competition is taking place. In Amsterdam, it is said, the representatives of the individual confessions came together one evening for special meetings. When they were asked later about the substance of their conversations, all of them reported the same thing: we have concluded that our confession constitutes the centre of the movement and can offer to build bridges of unity to the other churches. It is precisely this which remains the central problem of the ecumenical movement to this day. A peculiar notion of prestige stands in the way of further progress towards full communion. Each church regards itself as the centre and seeks to impose itself on others as the centre.

And what is the state of affairs as far as the vision of the "responsible society" is concerned? How far has this hope been fulfilled? The WCC has remained faithful to this vision. It has sought to the best of its ability to identify the tasks to which society is called and to appeal for responsible actions. Already in the 1950s it warned against the terrible consequences of economic neo-colonialism. At the same time it took up the struggle against the apartheid system in South Africa. At a point when hardly anyone in the West was talking about it, the WCC took stands in favour of admitting

China to the United Nations and the right of the Palestinians to self-determination. Already in the early 1970s it discerned the ecological crisis and sought to put this on the agenda of the churches.

Inevitably such stands led to confrontations and conflicts. The WCC became, particularly in the West, more and more unpopular. It was accused of being a fellow-traveller with communism. No doubt the WCC made mistakes and blunders in these confrontations. Still, the balance sheet is an impressive one. No other church institution succeeded so often in making visible what the churches today ought to be concerned with.

But what about the current situation? What meaning can be given to the vision of a "responsible society" today? The historical constellation in which this vision took shape belongs to the past. The confrontation of the two great systems came to an end with the implosion of the communist regimes. The Western system has emerged victorious from the confrontation. A global economic order, built on the principles of the free-market economy, is coming into being. What does it mean, in the midst of these new developments, to appeal for responsible actions?

### III

To begin answering this question, we must try to get clarity about the transformations that have taken place over the past decades. By comparison with the earlier period the churches do not just find themselves in a new situation. It is more than just the constellation of historical powers which has shifted. Imperceptibly, changes have taken place which shake the foundations of human existence.

The jubilee of the WCC can help us to become somewhat more clearly aware of these. A half century is basically a short time. Yet with the short attention span of people today it is half an eternity. Many, including the Christian churches, have not yet grasped the meaning and consequences of the transformations which have taken place in rapid succession – *too* rapid for the human capacity to take them on board. A comparison of the present with the past can thus be salutary. Let me single out three elements of this:

#### Scientific research

Scientific research has created new prospects for human existence in countless domains. The constant interaction of science and technology has brought about an explosion of knowledge and above all of human possibilities. The shadow of Hiroshima already lay over the Amsterdam assembly as a sinister foreboding. In the succeeding decades came one breakthrough after another: the rapid development of motorized mobility on the road and in the air; the introduction of television; the first flight to the moon and the breathtaking triumphs of space exploration; the computer, with all its promise of introducing a new age for humanity, and the new communications media, enabling the process of globalization, which is either lauded or loathed today; the discovery of DNA and the resulting developments of genetic engineering. And the potential of science is not yet exhausted. New surprises loom on the horizons.

Each of these breakthroughs was basically a revolution. Prevailing thought-forms have been called into question. The fabric of society has been severely strained again and again; and new syntheses have not been immediately evident. For the consequences of these new potentials were in no way evident at the time they were intro-

duced. They came over as a *fait accompli*, with which we had to live. Again and again we are assured that science and technology constitute the twofold key to the future, that their experiments are in themselves neither good nor evil, but only a means at the disposal of humanity. This is precisely the problem we confront today. How can the new potentials become blessings? Or, more modestly, how can they be prevented from producing negative results? For one thing is clear: despite all these impressive accomplishments the new world in which we live remains extremely vulnerable. Relatively small mistakes can have catastrophic consequences; and avoiding negative consequences requires of humanity a measure of insight and responsibility that is not to be presupposed.

### **The ecological crisis**

The second element is the ecological crisis which has fallen upon humankind. For about three decades it has become clearer and clearer each year that humanity is living far beyond its means. A genuine over-exploitation is taking place on planet earth. To push through its new achievements, modern society makes demands on the resources of God's creation which the creation cannot sustain, at least over the long term. With all too few scruples, we are living at the cost of future generations. And at the same time we burden the earth, the air and the water with the rubbish of our expansion. In an unprecedented way God's creation is suffering under the domination of humanity. Where the modern human being begins to dominate, natural life must give way. Thousands of plant and animal species have already died out.

Perhaps the most glaring example of this double phenomenon of resource depletion and strain on the environment is the way we treat oil. A resource which took millions of years to develop is used as if it were inexhaustible. The irrationality of all this consists not only in the over-exploitation, but above all in the risk that we run. For we have learned in the meantime that the excessive burning of fossil fuels contributes to accelerated climate change on the planet, particularly in the countries around the Equator.

### **The ideology of economic growth**

This ideology has beguiled humanity in recent decades. A remarkable shift has taken place. In contrast to earlier centuries, the production and consumption of goods have become the measure of all things. The welfare of nations is almost exclusively measured in economic terms. The four-decade-long confrontation of the great powers was finally decided by the economic advantage which scientific and technological developments brought to the West. And even now, after the end of this struggle, salvation continues to be expected from economic growth.

The huge economic expansion has undoubtedly brought many improvements. But because it has not succeeded in bringing about an international economic order which is to some extent just, its blessings remain unequally distributed. The social contrasts appear within individual countries as well as between North and South. The industrialized nations watch over their superiority. The few Southern countries which tried to become industrialized are today suffering bitter reverses.

And at the same time the ecological crisis shows that objective limits are placed on economic growth. Justice cannot be established through further growth, but only through a new spirit of sharing. Basically the task today is this: to return to healthy

limits and within these limits to build a worldwide community of nations. But as clear as this task is, so limited is the readiness to take it on. A notable blindness lies over our generation. An ideology whose destructive power has long been obvious continues to be regarded as the source of salvation. In its name social injustice as well as ecological destruction are accepted. How has this blindness come about? A good part of it is explained by the fact that social bonds have loosened and above all that the artificial new world into which science and technology have led us obscures our view of nature – on which however we ultimately, as ever, depend. The modern world is not only vulnerable; it is also self-deluding.

## IV

What sense does it make to speak of a “responsible society” in such a world? When the WCC was founded in Amsterdam, the churches were one in the hope that boundaries *could* be set to the destructive powers through responsible action. It is evident that in the succeeding decades unimagined breakthroughs have been achieved, but at the same time the course which has been steered leads towards destruction. There is good reason to believe that none of this will change in the foreseeable future.

In the context of its own jubilee the WCC has challenged the churches to reflect on the Old Testament law of the jubilee year. Every seven years, after the great Day of Atonement, the *Yom Kippur*, the people of Israel were to proclaim a sabbath year. In this seventh year the land was to remain untilled. Over and above this, after seven times seven years, that is, in the 50th year, a jubilee year should be celebrated. In this year not only was the land to remain fallow, but debts were to be forgiven and slaves set free. Through the law of the jubilee year, justice was to be restored. Those who, trapped in debt, had sold themselves as slaves were to regain their original rights. Injustice always produces ever new injustices. Given free rein, it brings a more and more intolerable undergrowth of injustice. The establishment of the jubilee year was an attempt to set limits to this development. At least after fifty years the requirements of community should again be honoured.

At first glance the idea of a jubilee year at the end of the second millennium has much to commend it. But it would be an illusion to expect to go back to square one with a single throw of the dice. What has happened cannot simply be wished away after fifty years. The countless people who have been sacrificed to the economic exploitation of the past decades cannot be brought back to life. The consequences of the ecological crisis are at least in part irreversible. Extinct plant and animal species will not return. A jubilee year at the end of the second millennium inevitably has also the aspect of mourning over what has been irretrievably used up.

And above all we must reckon with the fact that modern society is hardly prepared to get involved in a jubilee year. The assembly in Amsterdam hoped that the developments of the future could be steered. They took it for granted that systems could be corrected and tamed, that excesses could be hindered and a peaceful equilibrium assured. They were clear that tremendous changes stood before them. The prerequisites seemed to be in place for building an international order. The League of Nations had been replaced by the United Nations. The hope seemed justified that in this context the churches could be active on behalf of a responsible society. A pact with reason seemed possible. In the realms of both politics and economics, the hope

was that powers could be mobilized which served higher goals than the immediate interests of ideological systems or nations.

This hope was not fulfilled. Developments increasingly eluded responsible steering. Political and economic realities have now become so complex that their consequences can no longer be foreseen. Long-term actions are thus made far more difficult if not impossible. The innovations introduced by science and technology bring along continually new tasks which were not necessary earlier. The difficulty is that those who will take up these new tasks are not found in sufficient numbers. Inevitably, discouragement sets in. What does it help to take responsibility for one leak when water is running out of so many holes? Why burn oneself out over problems that cannot be solved or whose solution basically makes no difference? More and more people are thus withdrawing from public life and leaving politics and economics to their own autonomy.

## V

The witness of the churches today, fifty years after Amsterdam, must be content with more modest hopes. And nevertheless it is meaningful to renew that vision of Amsterdam: to commit ourselves *in common* for a *responsible society*. A pact with reason is hardly in the realm of the possible any more today. In politics as well as economics unreason has become too overpowering. The testimony of the churches can today hardly be other than a counter-witness. Their task is now one of resistance: of giving a voice and a home to all those who see through the unreason of the present course, of enabling them, through their words and art and wisdom, to organize their lives so as to give shape at least to the outlines of the alternatives needed. It is more than just a corrective which is required. The very direction being followed must be called into question. The goal of a responsible society today can be reached only through a change of course.

What does this mean? After fifty years, what should be the common witness of the churches and of the WCC today? Let me clarify this a little through three concluding observations:

1. The first element of responsible action today is the *recognition of limits*. We have seen that the resources of the planet are not infinite. At every point we run up against boundaries. Two examples may be mentioned. The first is the state of fisheries in the oceans. They have been overused for years, and because they have been overfished they are beginning to decline. If a change does not happen immediately, a shortage of supply is programmed. The other example is water. Water has never been equally available to all parts of the world. For ancient Israel springs were nothing to be taken for granted. But the developments of recent decades have made water an inaccessible rarity for an ever greater part of humankind. Various factors are contributing to the uninhabitability of more and more regions of the earth: population growth, pollution, climate change, but above all the ever more demanding habits of the present generation. Access to water has long been a political problem. It has led to international conflicts and in all probability will lead to further conflicts.

What does "limits" imply? Limits mean consistently thinking in terms of boundaries. Humanity must stop at the boundaries drawn for it by its Creator. It must operate within the limits which are set for it by these boundaries. It punishes itself if over the long term it overfishes, exhausts non-renewable resources, pollutes and squanders water, and the like.

A responsible society takes care of the gifts of the Creator. But the ideology of unlimited economic growth heads in the opposite direction. Its goal is the continuous increase of production and consumption. So powerful has this ideology become that it can hardly be contested. And yet we will sooner or later be unable to avoid setting the necessary limits and organizing production and consumption according to them. The first signs of this can already be seen in the declarations of the Earth Summit of Rio, especially Agenda 21 and the conventions on biodiversity and on climate change. This was a first attempt to determine upper boundaries and responsible limits.

2. But limits may not be imposed at the expense of the weak. That which is at our disposal must be justly shared. For the witness of the churches, therefore, the *mandate of justice and solidarity* has new urgency and meaning. The danger is greater today than ever that the self-interest of the rich nations will become the highest law. As social tensions have grown in the industrialized countries, their attention is increasingly focused on these internal problems. Anyone who advocates for a responsible international order thus faces greater obstacles today. What was earlier, under the category “third world”, the object of intensive study and actions is now pushed out of view.

And yet no one can remain blind to the fact that the situation is getting worse. The countries which have already been on the margins of economic expansion are also among the most vulnerable from an ecological point of view. The phenomenon of climate change makes this more than obvious. For the most part the emissions which are warming up the atmosphere originate in the industrialized nations; the first to feel their consequences are the countries of the South. And while the industrialized nations dispose of the means to protect themselves, the developing countries are largely delivered over defenceless to climate change.

Among the characteristics of a responsible society is care for its weaker members. The churches are thus committed overall to active resistance wherever the society withdraws itself from this care and responsibility.

3. Let me add a third, more difficult consideration. On 10 December 1948, only a few months after the founding of the WCC, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was solemnly adopted in Paris. From the very beginning the WCC identified itself with this Declaration. It saw in it the foundation of – or at least the starting point for – a “responsible society”. Over the following decades the Council engaged itself for the further development as well as, above all, the carrying out of this Declaration. It took an active role as a non-governmental organization in the human rights work of the United Nations.

How do things stand fifty years later? The engagement of the WCC in favour of the Declaration is unbroken. But can this Declaration still serve today as the basis for the struggle for a responsible society? In many respects the Declaration is certainly an invaluable instrument. It offers a lever for decisive critiques of political and administrative tyranny. It establishes in principle also the challenge to social justice. And nevertheless its limits are also more and more evident today.

The first difficulty consists in the fact that in the public debate the subtle equilibrium of personal and social rights is permanently disrupted if not destroyed by economic interests. The industrialized nations, above all the United States, enthusiastically wave the banner of human rights so long as what is at issue is extending throughout the world the personal freedom rights so cherished by them. Only sub-

ordinate attention has been given to social rights, particularly after the fall of the communist regimes. A binding declaration on the “right to development”, under discussion for years, is still in its early stages and the chances of its ever getting any further than that are less and less.

But the human-rights declaration falls short even more in the face of the ecological crisis. That the rights of human beings in God’s creation run up against boundaries is an insight which is not easy to incorporate into the spirit of the Declaration. But it is exactly this which must be attended to with emphasis by the churches today. It is not only the rights which belong to human beings, but also the rights which are denied to human beings – above all to those who belong to the poorer nations – which must be expressly established today. Human beings lose their worth not only when their basic rights are violated, but also when they violate the boundaries set to them in God’s creation and deprive their fellow human beings of the gifts which belong to them. The testimony of the churches today must go far beyond the instrument of the Declaration. The decisive key words for the present are limits and solidarity.

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The fifty years of the WCC are certainly the occasion for a thankful look back on all that the Holy Spirit has allowed to come to pass through this joining together of the churches. But this leads at once to the question of how the impulses of that time can be continued today.

In essence nothing has become obsolete. As before, the churches stand before the challenge of overcoming their separation and engaging themselves in common for a “responsible society”. The conditions have changed, but the urgency of a common witness has not gone away. The churches’ reluctance to grow from mere relationships into a genuine community is thus difficult to grasp; their fears about being unfaithful to tradition are hardly defensible.

Perhaps their hesitancy can be explained by the fact that they do not yet see clearly enough the witness which is in fact demanded of them. Placing this challenge before themselves ever more consistently must thus be at the top of the list of their priorities.