



Lukas Vischer: How Sustainable Is the Present Project of World Trade?

1. Place and Date of Publication

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2. Historical Context

Two discourses about the future of society are predominant today: a) about sustainability; b) about the vision of a single global market. While the demands of sustainability meet with almost insurmountable obstacles, worldwide commerce has become a project enthusiastically pursued.

3. Summary

While several countries have registered impressive economic growth, globalization aggravates unemployment, weakens nation-states and their social legislation, and leads to an uneven distribution of wealth. Competition touches the question of who will exercise economic and therefore political hegemony in the world. - Proposals seeking to meet the criterion of sustainability point in two directions: 1) the recognition that natural resources are limited and human economic activities must stay within these limits, 2) the need for organizing the economy and society in smaller and appropriate units. - Whereas the Reformers, even Calvin, thought of human economic life primarily in terms of subsistence and solidarity, the categories of increased wealth and competition became dominant in the Western world during the 17th century: The economically developed nations felt to have the task of leading the “underdeveloped nations” to new wealth and thus to assure peace among the nations. But the transition from the antagonisms of history to a peaceful world is beyond human capacity. The churches’ witness just reflects the conflicts that divide the world.

Nevertheless it seems that new orientations are needed in at least three areas: 1) God’s wisdom in creation. Human beings are part of creation and must therefore respect the limits imposed on them. 2) Does the Bible really speak of history as an ascending line? Many biblical passages (e.g. Daniel) point to the contrary. The ultimate hope of the church is God’s kingdom - not as the fruit slowly maturing in the course of human history but as God’s future beyond history. In communion with Christ its presence can be anticipated. 3) The growing interdependence of humankind is thus not simply to be considered as a gain. On the one hand, the biblical witness points in the direction of the *oikoumene*: Any exclusion of others in the name of preserving one’s own identity and defending the narrow interests of one’s own community must be resisted. On the other hand, the biblical texts denounce the temptation of the power resulting from trade. The primary concern of the churches will therefore always be the quality of communion in each place. The notion of subsistence refers to real and justifiable human needs within the whole of creation; subsidiarity suggests that, without abandoning universal solidarity, responsibility is to be exercised at the lowest possible level.

Can the course of history still be changed? There is no clear-cut answer to this question. A new future could arise, but it may also be that it will then be too late to return to healthier forms of society.

Sustainability and **Globalization**



Edited by
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How Sustainable Is the Present Project of World Trade?

LUKAS VISCHER

Two unreconciled perspectives

Two discourses about the future of society are predominant today. On the one side, there is continual talk about sustainability or sustainable development. Society and economy must be organized in such a way that the quality of life of future generations will not be impaired. On the other side, there is the vision of a world society in which production, commerce and consumption are increasingly carried out on a global scale without regard for national boundaries.

Neither discourse is limited to academic considerations. Both call for immediate political action. Since the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, the goal of sustainability is being pursued through a complicated network of intergovernmental negotiations to ensure that certain limits are respected – at least in selected areas of concern such as climate change and biodiversity. The vision of worldwide commerce is the declared theme and purpose of the World Trade Organization (WTO).

But these two perspectives have unequal power. While the demands of sustainability meet with almost insurmountable obstacles, the vision of worldwide commerce has become a project enthusiastically pursued. Sustainability may be widely discussed, but these discussions seem to have limited impact on the actual course of things.

For all who are concerned with the increasing threats to the quality of life on the planet the pressing question arises: How can true sustainability be achieved? Can it be achieved at all within the framework of the present project of society? Or will the demands made in the name of sustainability remain unfulfilled as long as the present direction remains unchanged?

Doubts increase. Today, the “process of globalization” is no longer discussed exclusively by experts but is receiving more and more attention from the general public.¹ Usually this public attention focuses on the

social costs of the process. But doubts also arise from an increasing recognition that the present project of society cannot meet the demands of sustainability. Rather than reducing threats to the environment it contributes to the acceleration of its deterioration.

The social price of globalization

The term “globalization” is used today in so many senses that misunderstandings can easily arise. Often the word simply refers in a general way to the factors, events and processes which lead to an ever more encompassing connectedness of humanity. This kind of globalization has been taking place for centuries. Stage by stage borderlines and distances have been overcome and people have been connected. In recent years this process has been accelerated by new and unexpected technological achievements. A world has come into existence where in principle an exchange between all parts of humanity can take place.

In its narrower and more precise meaning, “globalization” refers to the vision of a worldwide market uninhibited by national boundaries and other barriers. In contrast to *inter-* and *multinationalization*, *globalization* is a new phenomenon. As long as the exchange of goods is carried out between individual states and the sovereign national states remain the actors of commerce we speak of *internationalization*. In the course of the last few centuries, commerce has increasingly been internationalized. A new phenomenon is *multinationalization*, the interpenetration of national economic systems through transnational initiatives for the exploitation of resources, production and commerce. More and more the principal actors are the multinational corporations. *Globalization* goes a step further. Through binding intergovernmental agreements, space should be created for the free competition of economic forces within a single global market. National economic systems should be placed within a larger common framework which will make it possible to maximize production and consumption in a new way.²

Globalization in the more general sense of the term is the precondition of this project. Without the ever-closer connection among people the idea of a worldwide market could not have been conceived. Without the technological achievements of the last decades, especially in the areas of mobility and telecommunication, the project would be unable to function. Globalization in the narrower sense of the term is the response to the new context which has arisen. Through its emphasis on production and consumption it contributes in turn to further accelerate the process.

The protagonists of globalization affirm that this new development has already brought considerable gains to humanity. In the space of a few years the liberalization of commerce has raised the volume of international commerce and strengthened at least certain national economic systems; and several countries have registered impressive economic growth. Many countries which previously had to rely on agricultural production have now begun to participate in the industrial development and thus to share in the wealth which it generates. The old dictum that the rising tide will lift all boats, both large and small, seems to be borne out. While the reconstruction of society made necessary by the process of globalization has also caused considerable disadvantages and losses, these are, on this view, only temporary. The promising signs on the horizon justify the expectation that globalization will on the whole turn out to be blessing for all.

But the balance-sheet is in fact far from being clear-cut. Many aspects obviously contradict these claims and give rise to questions and concerns about the negative impact of globalization.

In the first place, globalization aggravates the problem of unemployment. Driven by the laws of competitiveness, firms are obliged to rationalize their production and to achieve the highest possible output with a minimum of workers. Almost daily we hear of mergers of firms – and soon thereafter the inevitable reduction of jobs. While globalization is not the only reason for this development, it is certainly a major contributing factor.

Another consequence is the weakening of nation-states. The initiative increasingly lies with economic forces which are transnationally organized. Their decisions and actions confront governments with *faits accomplis*. Governments are thus forced to form alliances with the real actors of the economic development. To make sure of having a share in the expected rise of economic growth, they seem to have no other choice than to adapt to the demands of economy and to create the best possible conditions for the competitiveness of the firms relevant for their country. Social legislation inevitably suffers in this process. Political control of globalized economy is not yet in sight. The world which results from the process of globalization is highly vulnerable. The Asian crisis shows how easily even seemingly successful economies can experience serious damage.

In the third place, the distribution of the wealth created by increased production is uneven. While the economic situation has considerably improved in certain countries, the prospects for other countries are far

from bright. Especially the least developed countries are unable to participate successfully in a world governed by the laws of competitiveness; and there is little reason to expect the mere mechanisms of the market to improve their situation in the near future.

In this perspective the very term globalization is misleading. Though all nations are affected by its consequences, the process cannot really be called “global”, since it is dominated by the three economic powers of the United States, Europe and Japan. There are good reasons for speaking of “triadization” rather than globalization. Within the process a struggle for hegemony is taking place. Competition touches not only the spheres of production and commerce but also the question of who will exercise economic and therefore political hegemony in the world.

The scientific and technological developments of the last several decades have resulted in far-reaching changes, calling into question the inherited shape of society and shaking the foundations on which human community has been built. Cultural values with deep roots in history begin to lose their plausibility. New “global” values are being transported into all corners of the planet, resulting in a superficially unified culture. In response, close-knit cultural groups are being formed – based on a variety of ethnic, national and religious traditions. Globalization accentuates and accelerates this double development. True, society has never been a static reality; changes are inevitable and need to be coped with. Today, however, the question arises whether the spiritual resources are available to deal with the rapid change of life conditions.

The ecological price

What about the impact of the globalization process on sustainability and its demands?

The general assumption is that the requirements for sustainability and the process towards uninhibited worldwide trade are compatible or at least not mutually exclusive. Through appropriate measures the construction of the single market can be made sustainable. By coining and promoting the now fashionable term “sustainable development” the Brundtland report and later the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) turned the compatibility of the two discourses into a kind of axiom. What is required to achieve sustainability are only corrections of the growth-oriented economic system. Sustainability can be reached through technological efficiency, international agreements and increased international solidarity.

But many factors give rise to doubts about this thesis. The general trend towards exploitation and destruction has scarcely diminished. True, there has been improvement in some areas. Especially the richer countries have made noticeable progress in such areas as protection against water and air pollution, recycling certain forms of waste and biological agriculture. But despite these partial achievements the general picture is far from reassuring. The progress achieved does not make up for the increase of threats in other areas. There is no need to enumerate these at length: catchwords like "water supply", "rain forests", "bio-diversity", "the ozone layer", "climate change", "population growth" are sufficient to remind us of the magnitude of the continuing challenge.

Let me nevertheless elaborate briefly four illustrations of the profound tension between the demands of sustainability and the project of globalization:

1. *Motorized mobility.* After modest beginnings in the first decades of the century motorized mobility on the roads and in the air has expanded by leaps and bounds since the second world war. In recent years a further expansion has set in as it has conquered the countries of the South. In a few years the number of cars in Korea, for instance, has multiplied by ten. According to present estimates the number of vehicles in the world will increase from 500 million today to 2.3 billion in 2030. At the same time air traffic is systematically being built up. Thus the contribution of motorized mobility to carbon dioxide emission is likely to increase steadily in the coming few decades, at least as long as no "clean" or "cleaner" substitutes for gasoline or kerosene are found.

Mobility has always been a driving force in the expansion of trade. The extent of mobility also determines the extent of commerce. The precondition for the expansion of international trade has been the increase and the enormous acceleration of international transport and worldwide telecommunication.³

But is such an amount of motorized mobility sustainable? In my view the protagonists of expanded world trade have no answer to this question. They would argue that only a small part of global carbon dioxide emissions are due to the exchange of goods, and that measures of reduction would thus not yield substantial gains. But the issue is not only how many tons of oil are burned by boats, lorries and airlines in the service of international trade. The question is rather the amount of emissions caused by the whole project of accelerated trade. There is little doubt that the combination of intensified mobility and intensified trade gives birth to a dynamism which constitutes a threat to sustainability.

2. *Energy prices and ecological incentives.* In many countries environmentalists promote the idea that market mechanisms could achieve a substantial reduction of today's wasteful use of energy. The price of energy should be increased and taxes levied on the use of fossil fuels. These higher prices will serve as an incentive to reduce energy consumption by introducing more efficient technologies or other economy measures.

The main obstacle to this widely accepted idea is of a political nature. How can a majority be found in favour of higher prices? Such measures will appear both to individual consumers and to industry as economic loss. Individual nations will hesitate voluntarily to deprive themselves of an economic advantage and reduce their competitiveness in international trade. An increase in energy prices could be achieved only through a simultaneous international initiative.

But the World Trade Organization is far from even considering such a step; indeed, the general trend is in the opposite direction. As states abandon their monopolies on energy production and distribution, it is not only objects and services produced by energy but energy itself which becomes a tradable commodity. The laws of competition lead almost inevitably to a lowering of the prices. The privatization of the energy market is being promoted today on the basis of the argument that energy will become cheaper for the individual consumer.

3. *The dangers of accelerated change.* Ever more rapid change is a characteristic of the present period of history. In the past few decades science and technological research have led to an explosion of knowledge. Limits which once seemed unsurpassable have been transcended by epoch-making discoveries. These have not only affected inherited modes of life and modified the structures of society but have also fundamentally changed the relationship of humans to nature. The new knowledge and the capacities resulting from it lead to claims that nature cannot in the long run satisfy. Over-exploitation of natural resources and destruction of the environment are the inevitable consequence. These developments have blinded human beings to the life of nature. Like an impermeable wall, the technological means which humans have created prevents them from perceiving creation in its own dignity. They are not even aware of the damages they cause around them.

The prerequisite for a softer relationship with creation is a new sense of time. Changes in society require time. A new equilibrium cannot be achieved overnight, but needs to be put to the test. The ecological crisis has demonstrated the significance of the precautionary principle. The

expectation that nature will absorb any human intervention has turned out to be a naive illusion. The environment is by far more vulnerable than we have assumed so far. Ecological responsibility obliges us therefore to exercise more precaution. To avoid excessive strain a slowing down of the processes of change is required.

The period we live in, however, is one of accelerated developments. Science is forced by the laws of competition to make new discoveries. New technological inventions are thrown on the market, and before humanity has adapted to one new situation it is already confronted with newer challenges. The economic dimension is decisive in this process. Science and technology are more and more in the service of economic gains. Economic success requires making new insights and products available before others are able to take advantage of them. The economic competition has a dimension of time. Every lead pays off. Globalization accelerates this process. As competition acquires global dimensions the struggle for advantages in time further increases. Coping with consequences becomes a secondary consideration.

4. *Intergovernmental conventions.* The hope of the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro (1992) was that the community of nations, by adopting a series of binding intergovernmental conventions, would agree to respect certain limits in exploiting nature. Two conventions – on climate change and on biodiversity – were signed in Rio; further desiderata were formulated in the long list of the Agenda 21.

The necessity for binding international agreements to overcome the ecological crisis is widely recognized. But Agenda 21 has been promoted only half-heartedly in recent years. Work on further conventions has had only limited success, and the negotiations on the implementation of the conventions signed at Rio and ratified by a large number of nations have run into impasses. The Conference of Parties to the Convention on Climate Change in Kyoto (December 1997), for instance, was unable to reach a satisfactory agreement on the reduction of carbon dioxide emissions. More daring decisions would not have been credible anyway because the majority of industrialized nations had not honoured even their promise at Rio to reduce the emissions to 1990 levels by the year 2000. If no unexpected change occurs, carbon dioxide emissions are likely to *increase* in the coming years.

Can change be expected in the framework of the present project of worldwide trade? The World Trade Organization has established a Committee on Trade and Environment, but it is no surprise that this body is seen as an element alien to the WTO, with little impact on its work.

The reason for this is that the WTO pursues priorities other than Agenda 21. Agreements which set or seem to set limits to production, trade and consumption contradict the spirit of free competition which underlies the project of globalization. They will be combatted at all levels in the name of competitiveness. Again and again the thesis is defended that the conservation of resources and protection of the environment in general can safely be left to the mechanisms of the world market.⁴

Intergovernmental agreements in the areas of social justice and ecological responsibility can only be realized if a new general consciousness is born which will give rise to new political will.⁵

Can the present development be mastered? Can sustainability be achieved through corrective measures?⁶ Or is a more fundamental re-orientation of society needed? Is it possible to introduce the necessary measures so long as they continue to be consistently considered as an afterthought? Is it not unlikely that sustainability will be realized so long as "sustainable" is no more than the adjective qualifying the noun "development"? Does sustainability not need to become the noun determining the model of society to be adopted?

Possible reorientations

Proposals seeking to meet the criterion of sustainability seem to point in two directions:

1. *The recognition of scales.* The first starts from the recognition that natural resources are limited and that human economic activities must therefore stay within these limits. Herman Daly has again and again reminded us of the basic insight that the economic system is only a subsystem of the biosystem. He promotes the idea of scale or scales which must not be trespassed.⁷ These scales are to be defined in harmony with the rules of balance and capacity of regeneration in the household of nature. In any case, human claims must never go as far as to cause irreversible damage.

The idea of scale rules out the assumption of continuous economic growth. True, estimates made in the 1970s about the availability of resources have proved to be too pessimistic. Natural resources continue to be available to a larger extent than was assumed at that time; and it is likely that for certain resources substitutes can be found. Nevertheless, pressure has increased in several areas, and it remains essential to establish realistic scales to guide economic exploitation. For example, scientists have calculated that per capita emissions of carbon dioxide should

not exceed 1.7 tons; and the establishment of maximum limits is of utmost importance in today's disputes among nations over fishing rights.

Closely related to the concept of scale is the suggestion of the need for a limit to human needs and desires. An economic system must not grow beyond a certain point. Both individuals and society as a whole need to be able to declare a certain level of wealth sufficient. Some authors have compared the economic system to the growth of a tree. Growth beyond the height that is characteristic for a particular tree is considered abnormal, perhaps even a sign of cancerous illness. Just as trees are not meant to "grow into heaven", so society should not measure achievement exclusively in terms of economic growth. Instead of maximizing production and consumption, it must be guided by values such as sufficiency, simplicity, care and solidarity.

Bob Goudzwaard and Harry de Lange speak of "a minimal provision for our own basic needs (as well for the basic needs of all), in conjunction with establishing a maximum level of consumption". They advocate in this connection an "economics of enough", which distinguishes "material luxury desires from the legitimate economic needs of people today and of future generations" and gives priority to "meeting economic needs: the needs of the poorest, of those lacking work, of the environment and its sustainability, and of human community. But this reforming of our economic order comes at a price, a price that material desires must pay. In an economics of enough, a society must be willing to accept that general income increases... will gradually come to an end."⁸

2. *The significance of regions.* The second proposal emphasizes the need for organizing the economy and society in general in smaller units. Instead of thinking primarily in terms of worldwide relations, we should give greater value to the role of the local community.

The arguments for this orientation vary. For many, the quality of human relations is the primary concern. Though recognizing how repressive small communities can be, they hold that human community must manifest itself primarily in small units, where the sense of civic responsibility and cultural particularities can flourish. But the primary argument is that of sustainability. Resources will be more wisely used when exploitation, production and consumption take place within limited geographical areas. In addition, the need for motorized mobility of persons and goods will be reduced.

This is not of course a call for autarky. Many problems today transcend the competence of a region and require international agreement. Given the inequalities of regions, international commerce is indispensable. The issue

is what place local and regional communities will be given within the framework of the international community. The protagonists of “decentralization” promote the view that the local community should be both the starting point and the goal of any order of society. They often speak of the worldwide society as a “community of communities”.

Herman E. Daly and John B. Cobb argue that

it is folly to sacrifice existing institutions of community at the national level in the supposed service of non-existent institutions of community at the world level. Better to build and strengthen the weakening bonds of national community first, and then expand community by federation into larger trading blocs among national communities that have similar community standards regarding wages, welfare, population control, environmental protection, and conservation. True efficiency lies in the protection of these hard-won community standards from the degenerative competition of individualistic free trade, which comes to rest only at the lowest common denominator.⁹

Cobb portrays a sustainable society as “decentralized”. Human needs should be met locally “as far as possible, depending on trade only when necessary”. Only as local communities regain basic control over their own economies can there be health in human community and an effective community of people within the larger environment of living things. Further, it is only by this radical decentralization that dependence on an exhaustible supply of energy can be overcome.¹⁰

Similarly, Larry Rasmussen seeks to give the classical notion of subsidiarity a contemporary meaning: “Subsidiarity means that what can be accomplished on a smaller scale at close range by high participation with available resources should not be given over to, or allowed to be taken over by, larger and more distant organizations.”¹¹ The guideline is not what is the most “local” but what is the *appropriate* level of organization and response, for “in a world of maldistributed resources and power, the local cannot be the only locus of responsible action, just as it is not the only place we meet and live together... The necessary guideline is not ‘no trade’ or ‘no markets’ or even ‘minimal trade’ and minimal markets’. The guideline is to minimize the appropriation of carrying capacity from elsewhere, thus risking other people’s and otherkind’s lives in the present and for the future.”¹²

The unresolved conflict

As reasonable as such considerations and theses may sound, there can be no doubt that the dynamism of present developments points in exactly the opposite direction.

How can a society geared to continuous growth start being guided by scales? Scarcities may arise which require limitations in the use of resources in certain areas. But such situations will be interpreted primarily as a call to redress the situation by deploying new creativity. From where could the readiness come to be content with a certain level of consumption? The conviction that human desires are in principle unlimited is deeply rooted in Western culture, and because it serves the interests of the present system it is vigorously promoted at all levels of society. Having transcended the boundaries of space and time, how can human beings find their way back to an emphasis on the local community? The weakness of all the scenarios proposed for achieving a transition from here to there lies in their inability to show how the will for change can develop under present circumstances.¹³

The dynamic force of present processes is so strong that movements of opposition seem to have little chance. The consensus on which it relies seems so evident that it can be presented as the only realistic course. Proposals in other directions can be dismissed as nostalgia, romantic dreams or idealistic programmes, of academic interest perhaps, but not applicable in reality.

So what sense does it make to conduct the debate at this level? Instead of getting lost in speculations, is it not better to limit the discussion to possible corrections of the present course? If real solutions are out of reach, is it not better to make the present development if not sustainable, at least more nearly sustainable? Green parties and environmental NGOs are faced with this dilemma. In debates on economy and society they are often obliged to defend positions which do not correspond to their deepest convictions and concerns but fit into the framework of present debates.

But all this leaves many people with a deep malaise. In the depth of their hearts they are aware of the contradictions in which they live and operate. They realize that sustainability demands more drastic measures than simple corrections, but they know that their views will not be heeded. Though it is obvious that the present course cannot fulfil the demands of sustainability, no alternatives can be pursued.

Motorized mobility provides a good illustration of this split consciousness. Though its negative consequences are evident, even environmentalists hesitate to propose measures for its reduction. Instead, debate focuses on possible corrections: technological improvements of vehicles, internalization of external costs into the price of gasoline, shifting traffic from road to rail.

We are thus living in two worlds. There is on the one hand the desire to live in a world in which human beings live in harmonious communion with the created world. Poets, film-makers and intellectuals of all kinds make this their theme. They articulate a pain deep in our hearts. On the other hand decisions are taken which confirm and push further present trends.

The ideological dimension

Why does the vision of a world society knit together by bonds of trade exercise so much fascination? Why is it so difficult even to imagine a different course?

In the first place, the process can rely on the power of historical developments. While sustainability represents a new orientation, the project of globalization can build on history. The expansion of trade to world dimensions appears to be the logical next step in the economic history of recent decades and even centuries.

Moreover, this development seems so far to be crowned with success. It has brought wealth – at least to the industrialized world. Despite increasing social problems and the seemingly insurmountable inequality between rich and poor nations, only a very few would advocate a return to earlier levels of wealth and comfort. Science and technology have led to an increase of knowledge and capacities. Science, technology, production, commerce and consumption are now so closely intertwined that the course cannot be changed without the risk of a serious disintegration of society.

There is, furthermore, the history of recent decades, which was dominated by the antagonism of two systems – on the one hand the free interaction of economic forces, on the other hand central control in almost all realms of society. But East and West, though deeply divided in many respects, were ultimately committed to the same goal – to foster through economic growth the welfare of the nations. They sought to prove the superiority of their systems by achieving economic expansion. In the latter years of their confrontation, the economic dimension took on increased significance.

The collapse of the Marxist regimes was primarily an economic collapse. The field was now free. The victorious side now had the task of providing the pattern for a new world order. It was almost inevitable to rely on the patterns which had guided its economic thinking in the past. The occasion had now come to pursue the Western system on a world basis. How could the West have turned down this opportunity?

As important as all these considerations may be, they do not yet provide the full answer. Behind the vision of a worldwide market is an ideological presupposition which has been a guiding concept in the history of the West. It has to do with a particular understanding of the destiny and vocation of human beings and humanity as a whole. Humanity is called to reach, in the course of its history, ever new heights of being human. As knowledge and capacities increase, human beings become more and more the masters of nature. They free themselves from the bonds which once seemed to be imposed on them forever by nature. They achieve greater wealth. Horizons gradually expand. While history is not linear progress and there are failures and catastrophes, the basic vocation of humanity remains unchanged. Ultimately history moves on an ascending line.

This understanding of human history has diverse roots. Arising in the Renaissance, it became dominant in the Western world during the 17th century. Earlier, human beings had primarily been seen as subject to God and God's will. Now they came to consider themselves increasingly as masters of their own history. Whereas the Reformers, even Calvin, thought of human economic life primarily in terms of subsistence and solidarity, the categories of increased wealth and competitiveness began to come to the fore.

Closely related to the vision of human self-expansion is the expectation that humanity will gradually grow together into a tangible worldwide unity. Borderlines fall. Separate worlds enter into relation with one another. Cultures increasingly interact. The vision of a world living in peace acquires more and more importance. To be sure, there will also be new conflicts, and because of their worldwide character they will be more murderous than anything previous. But in these conflicts the readiness for new relationships among the nations matures.

The Western world attributed to itself the pioneering role in this process. The power it held through scientific and technological knowledge seemed to destine the West to the particular task of giving birth to the new world. Western nations regarded themselves as called to lead humankind to the goal it had eventually to reach. While the British empire emphasized the cultural vocation of the West, the focus later shifted to the economic development of the nations. President Truman's famous speech in 1946 presented the programme which was to guide political action in the following decades. The economically developed nations had the task of leading the "underdeveloped nations" to new wealth and thus assure peace among the nations. Later, the papal

encyclical *Populorum progressio* (1967) would proclaim that “development is the new name for peace”.

All these concepts face the same difficulty. How will the transition from present history to the promised land take place? How can it be shown that the fruit of a peaceful and happy world is really maturing in the events of history? How can power come to be shared and a state of responsible community emerge? Immanuel Kant thought he had discovered a “plan of nature” leading to such a state.¹⁴ Marxism believed that history would inexorably create a classless society.

All these expectations of a better future claimed to be based on an “objective” perception of history. No convincing proof of this was ever offered, and the experience of the last decades has made clear that it *could not* be given. The transition from the antagonisms of history to a peaceful world is beyond human capacity. Even the most altruistic messianic movement cannot break out of the game of power and counterpower. Indeed, messianic movements are so easily transformed into powers of exploitation and oppression precisely because they regard themselves as entitled to sacrifice the well-being of the present generation in the name of an allegedly even better future.

Nevertheless, such visionary thinking continues today. Building on the idea of a development encompassing all nations, a new project is being proposed which is meant to bring liberty and wealth to the world. Motifs from the past are being revived: boundaries must be transcended, intensified exchange will create new bonds and reduce violence among nations.

In November 1995, Michel Camdessus, director general of the International Monetary Fund, addressed a group of Roman Catholic intellectuals on the future “global city”. Recalling the founding of the United Nations and the Bretton Woods Institutions 50 years earlier he appealed for people “to renew their vision of a better world to be constructed”. Two events, he said, have changed the course of history: the fall of the Berlin wall and the rising dynamism of globalization. Both can have enormous consequences for the freedom and the brotherhood of people. They are harbingers of a new order – a unified world and an world economy which provides a home to all.

Are we then on the way to a better world? Camdessus remains prudent. He invokes neither a “plan of nature” nor the “objective course of history”. In his eyes the future is open. But he is deeply convinced that the road chosen holds enormous promises. Despite all uncertainties, it is thus worthwhile, even morally required, to engage all our capacities in

the project. The experience of present instability must not deter us. We are called to make a wager that these signs are signs of the time, representing a new chance for the world. We have nothing to lose in making this wager, but it does impose on us the obligation to appropriate the ambivalent dynamics and so to direct them that they bring about a more fraternal world.

It is interesting that Camdessus does not speak of certainties but of chances and risks. His *élan* has its roots in a sort of creed, legitimizing the project of globalization by the imperative of hope. Because human beings are called to higher destinies, doubt and misgivings must be overcome. Support for this project is thus put in moral terms. In those who resist he sees the same "great fear" which made people in the 10th century expect the end of the world in the year 1000.¹⁵

In the face of such ideological convictions, speaking of scales can only be interpreted as a step backward and emphasizing the significance of local communities as a betrayal of the true vocation of humankind. The only true road forward is globalization.

The witness of the churches

In this debate do the churches speak a word of warning, pointing to another understanding of the vocation of humankind? Does their thinking represent an alternative? Or do they in fact share the vision of an ever-increasing unity of humankind? Have they perhaps even been a driving force in developing this vision? The picture is ambivalent.

The message of the Christian churches points to the horizon of the whole of humanity. God, the Creator of *all* things, has become human in Jesus Christ. The kingdom, announced by Jesus, brings human history to its end and fulfilment. With the coming of Christ the moment of decision has come for *all* nations. God's grace has been offered to them. "Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people, and again, praise the Lord, *all* Gentiles, and let *all* the people praise him" (Rom. 15:10-11). The preaching of the apostles is addressed to the whole *oikoumene*, from Jerusalem, to Judaea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. The goal is to gather the people before God. All are called to present their lives to God as living sacrifice of praise. There is in this movement an enormous dynamism. Boundaries are transcended. Walls are torn down to make room for the new communion. All who accept the message become living stones in the great temple of God resulting from the proclamation of the good news.

What is the relationship of this Christian vision to the fact that the history of nations more and more merged into one single history of

humanity? How is this historical development to be interpreted? What does it mean for Christians that horizons expand; and what is the role of the churches in a world which seems to become steadily smaller?

Christian perspectives have no doubt been a driving force in this development. At the same time, however, the emerging “unity of humankind” presented a formidable challenge to the churches. The church was now called to manifest its true nature. The creed speaks of “one, holy, catholic and apostolic church”. Were these new developments not the occasion to give renewed expression to the catholicity of the church? The missionary and later the ecumenical movements have many roots. But there is no doubt that they are in part a response to the historical process of the growing interdependence of humanity. Faced with new horizons, faced with the conflicts arising from the interaction of nations, and above all faced with the mounting impact of empires, the churches had to come together. They had to leave behind their imprisonment within national boundaries and make an exodus into a wider community.

How is the relationship between the church and humankind to be understood? Different answers can be and have been given.¹⁶

The church may consider itself as the centre of humankind. The proclamation of the gospel brings into existence a community which is called to be a model for the nations, a *societas perfecta* which can serve as source of inspiration. The church anticipates in its own midst the community which the nations are destined to achieve. Its witness thus focuses on pointing – through its existence and through its word – to the sources of true communion. It will denounce deviations and contribute to the sound development of human community.

This self-understanding is particularly alive in the Roman Catholic Church, but it has also played a significant role in the ecumenical movement. Cardinal Ottaviani gave it succinct expression when Pope Paul VI returned from a visit to the United Nations, declaring that the pope had succeeded in showing that the church was to be considered as the “soul of the community of all peoples”.

Closer scrutiny shows that such claims cannot be maintained. Far from being a *societas perfecta*, the church is divided. Its being and its witness reflect the conflicts that divide the world. Throughout its history it has identified with the forces which have dominated and determined the process of globalization. It bears the marks of this history; and it would be an illusion to think that it can free itself from it by simply referring to its “spiritual” vocation. The Western world from which the pre-

sent project of society emanates is, in fact, shaped by the Christian tradition, and the messianic dimension which characterizes it has undeniably Christian roots.

A new manifestation of the catholicity of the church can therefore only be achieved on the basis of radical self-criticism. A conversion and a new departure are required. The church must seek to become free from the identification with its Western origins.

There is, for instance, the question of how to evaluate the efforts of other movements towards worldwide unity. The church is not alone in the process towards closer bonds among the nations. It must recognize that it is part of a larger process, side by side with other forces, both religious and secular, which seek to respond to today's challenges from their perspective. Presumably, the celebration of the year 2000 will show both the pretensions of Christianity and the necessity to transcend them. Unity cannot be constructed by the church alone.

Of even greater importance is the conviction that the place of the church may never be at the side of the powerful. It must identify with the victims of power. Present trends exact an enormous price. Commitment to the gospel requires taking sides with those who have to pay this price. Over the last several decades the churches have gradually been led to new forms of solidarity with people suffering exploitation and oppression. Increasingly, they have not confined their efforts to calling for dialogue and peace and mediating in conflicts, but have sought to strengthen the voice and resistance of the victims of power. Thus, for the sake of *catholicity*, the churches have sought identification with particular interests.

In all this, however, the legitimacy and even the desirability of growing unity among the nations were never called into question. The debate concentrated exclusively on how the conditions for justice and equity could be assured. The churches sought to give a more humane face to the worldwide community. Against violence, injustice and oppression they promoted values such as solidarity, peace and justice.

But today's challenges raise new questions. The process towards unification which has so far been considered the inevitable destiny of humankind needs to be questioned. In fact, already in 1968, one of the first papers written for the WCC study on the Unity of the Church and the Unity of Humankind emphasized the ambivalence of the process towards increasing interdependence, recognizing that this did not necessarily represent a stage on the way to new heights but might be "a stage on the way to self-destruction..., not progress but rather progressing in

the uncertainty whether perhaps somewhere ahead bridges have already collapsed”.

The ecological crisis reinforces this doubt. Less and less can the possibility of self-destruction be ruled out. Marquis N.C. Condorcet (1743-94), an Enlightenment philosopher who firmly believed in progress, pointed to the contradiction in which we live: “Progress has its only limits in the temporal existence of the planet we have been made dependent on by nature.” What he wanted to say was that there were practically no limits. In fact, the limits he identified appear more and more clearly today. Though the very existence of the planet may not be threatened, its capacity to provide humankind with a safe habitat is far from assured. The primary question therefore is not just how to correct the course of developments but how to establish a relationship to God’s creation which respects its limits. What has been and continues to be regarded as progress turns out to be a threat to the future.

The churches are far from being of one mind in this respect. Their witness has so far moved within the framework of the dominant ideology. Although they were critical in many respects, they shared its presuppositions even in their criticism. In many circles new perspectives are beginning to be developed. But the real debate within the churches is still ahead.

Theological perspectives

It seems to me that new orientations are needed in at least three areas:

1. *God’s wisdom in creation.* In the first place the simple fact needs to emphasize that human beings are part of creation and must therefore respect the limits imposed on them. While they have received the capacity to extend these limits, this basic dependence remains, whatever their achievements. Humanity can come to its fulfilment only in communion with other human beings and with creation as a whole. The fulfilment of human life is not the domination of nature, but wisdom and care in relating to it.

The Bible speaks of wisdom as participating in God’s act of creating the world. Wisdom was created before all things and therefore rules in all things. “When God marked out the foundations of the earth, then I was beside God like a master workman, and I was daily God’s delight rejoicing before God always, rejoicing in God’s inhabited world” (Prov. 8:29-31). The task, therefore, is to discover the ways of wisdom in creation and to follow them. The values presently determining public life – increased output, economic growth, more and more consumption – are

certainly not in harmony with the rules of wisdom. Even raising the levels of wealth cannot unquestionably be considered as positive. In the light of wisdom the first consideration needs to be the equilibrium between exploitation and regeneration.

2. *What can humanity reasonably hope for?* Does the Bible really speak of history as an ascending line? Many biblical passages point to the contrary. God's people have been called in a world which is eventually moving to its end. Israel realizes more and more that it is a people among peoples. The horizon widens, especially in the apocalyptic literature. God rules over the whole of humankind. The visions attributed to the prophet Daniel present the history of humankind rather as a descending line. Empires follow one on the other, each one more oppressive and violent than the preceding. The true hope of the people lies beyond human history. Empires will be destroyed – or rather, will destroy themselves – and will make room for God's kingdom. The same picture is seen in the New Testament. Christ's resurrection does not mean that history now moves to new heights. Violence and death do not disappear. The ultimate hope of the church is God's kingdom beyond history. Its contours have become visible in Christ. In communion with him its presence can be anticipated.

It is important to underline this aspect, because Christian hope has often been portrayed as hope within the framework of an ascending human history. Faced with ideologies of all sorts, especially with Marxist speculations about the future, and with the innate human desire for confidence and dynamism, the temptation was almost inevitable to identify historical developments with the beginnings of God's kingdom. History was interpreted as a process leading into God's kingdom, or conversely, God's kingdom was seen as the fruit slowly maturing in the course of human history. But the future of humankind is, to say the least, radically open. As we wait for God's kingdom, we shall do our best to assure conditions which allow living together in justice and peace. Christian hope frees our hearts from the obsession constantly to develop "new visions" of the future. Christian hope enables us to practise a critical pragmatism.

3. *Communion – worldwide and local.* The growing interdependence of humankind is thus not simply to be considered as a gain. Like all historical developments, it is deeply ambivalent. The churches, which have been inclined to view it positively, must develop a more critical assessment. The ecumenical movement has perhaps not always sufficiently seen that the biblical witness points in two directions. On the one hand,

it emphasizes the need for transcending boundaries, for communities to overcome their national, ethnic, cultural, linguistic or religious exclusiveness. Any exclusion of others in the name of preserving one's own identity and defending the narrow interests of one's own community must be resisted.

On the other hand, there is also a recurring criticism of the empires of this world. The fact that God chose Israel, an insignificant people by human standards, shows that God's ways do not correspond to human history, which is dominated by the interaction of great powers. The existence of the particular people Israel is a living critique of imperial claims. The image of the giant statue (Dan. 2) with its feet partly of iron and partly of clay has a firm place in the biblical message. In particular, the biblical texts denounce the temptation of the power resulting from trade. "In the abundance of your trade you were filled with violence and you sinned," Ezekiel says of the king of Tyre (28:16).

From the beginning, the history of the church was characterized by the same critique. By insisting on God's claims the church inevitably came into conflict with the Roman empire. The New Testament leaves no doubt. As history advances human self-assertion becomes more stubborn and aggressive.

This double front implies a twofold witness. The gospel requires on the one hand a critique of all forces of exclusiveness. Too often the churches succumb to the temptation of identifying themselves with particular interests. Sometimes they have even become the driving force and spiritual guarantor of national and other identities. The message of the church points in the direction of the whole *oikoumene*. But this does not mean that all movements towards increased interdependence are to be affirmed. Churches must resist all concentrations of power. Their primary concern will always be the quality of communion in each place. The uniqueness of the notion of catholicity is that it includes both dimensions – the local and the universal. The churches must contribute to a sound interaction between communities at local and universal levels. Thus they also have the task of defending the interests of the local community against the claims of superior universal structures. The test for the quality of a universal order lies in the quality of community in each place.

The obvious threats to which humanity today is exposed would seem to make the direction for the churches clear. On the one hand they must recall the limits which economic expansion has to respect. On the other hand they must struggle for the preservation of responsible societies in

each place. These postulates may appear as a new orientation but they in fact have deep roots in the tradition of Christian social teaching. They correspond to the familiar notions of "subsistence" and "subsidiarity". Subsistence raises the issue of real and justifiable human needs within the whole of creation; subsidiarity suggests that, without abandoning universal solidarity, responsibility is to be exercised at the lowest possible level. In my view it is urgent for the churches to revive these notions and to develop them in the context of today's challenges.

* * *

Can the course of history still be changed? There is no clear-cut answer to this question. Much can be said to support the view that present developments cannot be changed. In all probability we have to count with further destruction and loss of quality of life. While the beginnings of a new orientation may be evident, there is still a long way to go before a consensus can be reached on alternative models of society. A new future could arise, but it may also be that it will then be too late to return to healthier forms of society.

NOTES

¹ Cf. the best-seller by Hans-Peter Martin and Harald Schumann, *Die Globalisierungsfalle*, Hamburg, Rowohlt, 1996.

² The following two descriptions of this process may serve as illustrations: "Globalization is a process whereby producers and investors increasingly behave as if the world economy consisted of one single market and production area with regional and national sub-sectors, rather than a set of national economies linked by trade and investment flows" (UNCTAD 1996). "The widening of the spectrum of goods and services entering international trade as a consequence of trade liberalization, increased freedom of establishment and technical innovations allowing long-distance delivery of services" (Jones and Kierzkowski).

³ Daniel Finn writes: "Whether we consider the building of railroads in the US and Canada during the 19th century, the digging of canals in England during the 18th century, or the improvements in transportation brought about by air travel, electronics, and computers in the 20th century, the argument is the same. The mainstream economic view is that when improved transportation allows people to make economic exchanges with others at greater distances – whether across the nation or across the world – there will be more specialization in production, higher productivity, and higher levels of welfare. From the economist's perspective, then, the debate about international trade is about taking advantage of markets that have been extended by technological capacity but restricted by legal intervention"; *Just Trading: On the Ethics and Economics of International Trade*, Nashville, TN, Abingdon, 1996, p.30; cf. p.171.

⁴ "We should recognize that market solutions can also be found to ecological concerns (responsible forestry, aided by competitive prices, can help to husband resources, exploitative mining will wear them out). The problem economists have to face is to calculate the costs appropriately" (see below Peter Tulloch, p. 105). According to Finn, "international commerce requires a framework of rules. In most cases these must be rooted both in national legislation and in international agreement. Because of the importance of background assumptions concerning technological optimism in evaluating the depletion of non-renewable resources and of the value of species diversity in assessing prospects for biodiversity, participants to these debates have unusually

wide differences to negotiate in structuring such agreements. Significant progress has been made in the daunting task of establishing a scientifically rigorous definition for global biogeophysical sustainability, but far more work has yet to be done" (*op. cit.*, p.160). The most difficult problem, however, is to introduce the prices once they have been established; there is no answer to this question yet.

- ⁵ The thesis of a series of intergovernmental "contracts" has been coherently defended by the Group of Lisbon under the leadership of Riccardo Petrella. In analogy to developments in the 19th century when at national level in the new context of the industrial era social legislation was introduced there is now need not only for a social but also an environmental contract at the international level. The Group of Lisbon places its hope for the future on non-governmental forces of all kinds. The prerequisites of a promising future are thus the protection and strengthening of democratic rights. Cf. Group of Lisbon, *Limits to Competition*, Cambridge/London, MIT Press, 1995.
- ⁶ In recent years there has been much talk about the ethical dimension of the present challenge. Only on the basis of new "world ethos" will the nascent global society be able to survive. The primary task therefore is to bear witness to fundamental ethical commitments both in politics and in economics. Especially the churches have to contribute to the recognition of universal ethical values. As ethical principles and commitments find general recognition the present system can, even will be transformed into a "responsible society". "Without rules, without traditions, without a minimal ethical consensus our society will collapse as the socialist system has collapsed in recent years" (Marion Gräfin von Doenhoff, *Zivilisiert den Kapitalismus*, 1997, Stuttgart, Dt.-Verl.-Anst., cover page). In his broadly based study *Global Ethics for Global Politics and Economics*, London, SCM, 1997, Hans Küng defends similar ideas. The concern of the book is to formulate a "core of global ethics", i.e. a set of general principles which are to guide both political and economic activities (p.110). Küng does not hope for a perfect world. He seeks a middle way between unrealistic idealism and realism without any ethical convictions. "Both in the sphere of politics and in that of economics we need a new sense of responsibility" (p.277). Although these considerations can hardly be questioned, Küng's book remains unsatisfactory because it relies on a unilateral and superficial analysis. He speaks of globalization as "unavoidable", "ambivalent", "unpredictable" in its consequences but nevertheless "controllable" (pp.160-67). The ecological crisis is hardly mentioned (pp.205f.) and the tensions resulting from it are not dealt with at all. Well-intentioned as Küng's call for ethical principles may be, the book does not really do justice to the present situation.
- ⁷ Daly has also used the striking image of an ecological Plimsoll line of the planet. "The absolute optimal scale of load is recognized in the maritime institution of the Plimsoll line. When the watermark hits the Plimsoll line the boat is full, it has reached its carrying capacity... The major task of environmental macro-economics is to design an economic institution analogous to the Plimsoll mark"; cf. *Sustainable Growth: A Contradiction in Terms?*, Geneva, 1993, pp.41-42.
- ⁸ Bob Goudzwaard and Harry de Lange, *Beyond Poverty and Affluence: Towards an Economy of Care*, Geneva, WCC, 1994, pp.74,78,90; similar theses are put forward by Anna Sax, Peter Haber and Daniel Wiener, *Das Existenz-Maximum*, Zurich, Werdverl., 1997.
- ⁹ Herman E. Daly and John B. Cobb, *For the Common Good: Redirecting the Economy toward Community, the Environment and the Future*, Boston, Beacon, 1989, p.235.
- ¹⁰ John B. Cobb, *Sustainability*, Maryknoll, NY, Orbis, 1992, p.48.
- ¹¹ Larry Rasmussen, *Earth Community, Earth Ethics*, Geneva, WCC, 1996, pp.336f.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, p.339.
- ¹³ Detailed proposals as to how the economic system could be changed are put forward in the last part of Daly and Cobb, *op. cit.*, and by Goudzwaard and de Lange, who conclude their analysis with a "Twelve Step Programme" for economic recovery (*op. cit.*, pp.134-61).
- ¹⁴ Immanuel Kant, *Idee zu einer allgemeinen Geschichte in weltbürgerlicher Absicht*, These 8.
- ¹⁵ In fact there were no exceptional apprehensions in the 10th century about the approaching second millennium; the "great fear" is an invention of the 19th century which, of course, looked condescendingly on the "dark" ages; cf. Lukas Vischer, "Zwei Jahrtausendwenden", in *Theologie auf dem Weg in das dritte Jahrtausend*, Gütersloh, Gütersloher Verl.-Haus, 1996, pp.69ff.
- ¹⁶ The question of the relationship between the oneness of the church and ever-increasing interdependence of humanity has been a theme of the ecumenical movement from the outset. In the 1960s and 1970s it was the subject of a broadly based study by the World Council of Churches. Cf. Gert Ruppell, *Einheit ist unteilbar: Die Menschheit und ihre Einheit als Thema der ökumenischen Bewegung*, Rothenburg, Ernst Lange Institut, 1992.