



Lukas Vischer:

Committed to the Transformation of the World?

Where are we 40 years after the World Conference on Church and Society in Geneva (1966)?

1. Place and Date of Publication

World Council of Churches (ed.): *The Ecumenical Review*, Vol. 59 No. 1, January 2007, Geneva, 27-47.

2. Historical Context

The World Council of Churches' Conference on Church and Society in Geneva, 1966, was borne by the hope for a new and more just social order and an almost undivided confidence in the progress of science and technology. Lukas Vischer's critical analysis specifies some areas in which the conference underestimated the magnitude of the challenges humanity was facing.

3. Summary

1966 – 2006: Seven contrasts

1. The potential for destruction inherent in the scientific and technological revolutions has proved to be in reality a threat for the whole life on planet earth.
2. The conception of social justice has proved to imply struggle and has to be achieved within the limits of growth: "The rich must live more simply so that the poor may simply live."
3. Since 1966, the number of challenges has multiplied and has become less and less manageable for ordinary people.
4. The "secular city" offers freedom and the opportunity for individuals to develop their own self. But it does not provide the moral ground for a society of solidarity and responsibility.
5. The struggle of colonies for independence and economic self-reliance has not managed to break up the structures of injustice. The gap between rich and poor nations persists.
6. At the Geneva conference, open violence was considered to be the inevitable answer to the hidden structural violence of oppression. Today, violence is omnipresent: not only in interpersonal relations but also in our relationship to creation as a whole.
7. Ecumenical collaboration with the Roman Catholic Church at the universal level began to reach limits soon after 1966. On the other hand, awareness of inter-religious dialogue, of gender issues, and of the role of non-governmental organizations has developed.

New theological frontiers: Two examples

The theme of the Geneva conference was human self-development. Creation was understood as the stage or the arena of human history. In order to respond credibly to the ecological crisis, a revision of Christian anthropology is called for. The scientific and technological revolutions have shaken the inherited structures of society. Lack of wisdom in dealing with the gifts of God's creation has led to destruction. This development represents a humiliation of humankind.

What then is the task of the churches today?

God will ultimately not abandon his creation. The Spirit is still at work in our midst. Whether "successful" or not: The churches have their task in acts of love and solidarity as signs of God's future. "The fulfilment of God's love is the purpose of the world, its symbol the cross."

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GENEVA 1996 - THE ONGOING TASK OF
ECUMENICAL SOCIAL THOUGHT AND ACTION

WORLD COUNCIL OF CHURCHES

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Lukas Vischer

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Geneva 1966, Achievements and Limitations

“As Christians we are committed to working for the transformation of the world”.¹ This programmatic sentence appears in a prominent place in the message of the Conference. The gathering was called because it had become clear that a far-reaching transformation of society was taking place. Historical developments had already led to new conditions of life and it was clear that further changes were bound to occur. History was rapidly moving ahead. The sub-title of the Conference is characteristic: *Christians in the technological and social revolutions of our time.*

The Conference was to formulate a Christian response to the new situation. It had to identify and register the developments which had taken place. But its task was also to show what role the churches had to play in this ongoing process of transformation. A clear analysis was expected, but more was hoped for. The Conference was supposed to issue an appeal to the churches and, if at all possible, to launch a movement of involvement in the present historical processes. The message of the Conference called then for more effective and vigorous action.² The churches were to recognize the role they have to play in the changes of our time – with its chances and open possibilities, and ensure that the further course of history would lead to a just and equitable society.

¹ *World Conference on Church and Society, Geneva, July 12-26, 1966, Official Report*, ed. M.M. Thomas and Paul Abrecht, Geneva 1967, *Message* §6, p.48.

² *Official Report, Message* §9, p.50.

The political situation at the time was dominated by the East-West conflict. Two ideologies or more precisely two political and military superpowers were competing with one another. The worst period of confrontation was over. The concept of peaceful co-existence had been launched. But the fear of a third world war, conducted with nuclear arms, was still alive. The issue of nuclear armaments was therefore inevitably on the agenda of the Conference. One of the resolutions speaks of "a passing moment of grace which needed to be seized".³ The World Council of Churches was, however, determined not to allow the prevailing political constellation to dominate the debate. The discussion of other urgent issues and challenges was not to be prevented. For some years the WCC had been engaged in a study process on "rapid social change". The issue of social justice had come to the fore. How can the technological progress achieved in recent decades be so shaped and directed that the younger, now independent nations do not fall into new forms of dependence? Their hopes and claims had found vivid expression in the study process. This extended preparatory work enabled the World Council of Churches to break out of stereotype debates on the political confrontation between the superpowers and to engage in more comprehensive reflections on the transformation of society.

The Conference was preceded by the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965). Here also an attempt had been made to deal with the changes in society. The conviction was that the witness of the Church could only reach contemporary people, if an *aggiornamento* of the Church could be operated. Outdated structures of worship and ecclesiastical organization needed to be replaced. The Church was not to understand itself in the first place as an institution but had to meet the world as a living communion. The Church had to bear its witness in the world and, as the Pastoral Constitution on the Church and the World expresses it, share its joy and hope as well as its problems and anxieties. Pope John XXIII had created the atmosphere which was required for the undertaking. The short Encyclical letter *Pacem in terris* had freed minds to face the challenges of the time. The agenda of the Church was not to be determined by the conflict of the ideologies and super-powers. The Church was to work independently for a comprehensive peace. The Pastoral Constitution developed this programme in a measured and carefully formulated way.

The Geneva conference was no doubt much more turbulent than the Second Vatican Council. The reports reflect the sharpness of the debate. Some critics described the Conference as chaotic. Paul Ramsey was of the opinion that the

³ Official Report, p.125.

WCC would be well advised to follow in future the model of the Second Vatican Council.⁴ To a certain degree the criticism was no doubt legitimate. The reports contain rash judgments and above all an abundance of resolutions and recommendations. But the criticism misses the essential point. The explosive character of the Conference was, in fact, one of its qualities. Through this it became a mirror of the contemporary world, a signal and an appeal to face, and cope with, the big problems which appeared on the horizon.

The Conference was borne by the hope that a new and more just social order could be achieved. Historical developments pressed forward. New horizons opened. The majority of the participants had an almost undivided confidence in the progress of science and technology. A new stage of human history seemed to be within reach. A few quotations may illustrate this:

The conference discussions stressed the many and increasingly rapid advances in technology and economic organisation which will continue to produce fundamental economic change in all countries whatever their ideological or political forms. These advances lead to a growth of economic productivity and are to be welcomed as a gift from God who gives new powers to men and requires their use for the common good.⁵

The churches should welcome the development of science and technology as an expression of God's creative work. They also should welcome the economic growth and social development which it makes possible, because this helps to free men everywhere from unnecessary work and material insecurity; it also makes it possible for the relatively few richer nations of the world to assist the poorer countries in their enormous task of moving along on the road of self-sustained development.⁶

"Our age is the first which can aspire to freedom from the tyranny of physical nature," claimed one of the main speakers, Emmanuel G. Mesthene, executive director of the Programme on Technology and Society at Harvard University.⁷ The question is now what use humanity makes of these new possibilities. The Conference was not naïve in this regard. It was conscious of the fact that new discoveries are not as a matter of course wisely used. It reckoned with conflicts and resistance. But it was on the whole convinced that the obstacles could be overcome. Though evidently going through turbulent waters, the goal could be reached. A responsible society? So far the goal of the ecumenical movement had been described by this formula. Was it still valid? Many had doubts. The formula sounded too simple to do justice to the tasks ahead. A new order had

⁴ Paul Ramsey, *Who speaks for the Church?*, Abingdon Press, Nashville and New York, 1967, p.14.

⁵ Official Report, p.52.

⁶ Official Report, p.90.

⁷ Official Report, p.14.

to be brought about. Some conference participants went to demonstrate in front of the building of the United Nations in Geneva. On one of the posters, one could read the slogan: *Nuevas estructuras para un nuevo mundo!* Action was needed now. The Conference was seen as a moment of decision.

We have become increasingly aware of the plight of the developing nations which comprise more than two thirds of the world's population and yet have access to only one fourth of the world's resources. We also realize that if the present trend towards widening the gap between the rich and poor nations is not arrested and reverted, the very peace and stability of the world will be threatened.⁸

"If not – the consequence will be": such formulations provided the backdrop for passionate appeals. The mood was militant and full of hope. What had to be achieved went beyond the teaching held so far by the churches.

In the past we have usually witnessed through quiet efforts at social renewal, working in and through the established institutions according to their rules. Today, a significant number of those who are dedicated to the service of Christ and their neighbour assume a more radical or revolutionary position. They do not deny the value of tradition nor of social order, but they are searching for a new strategy by which to bring about basic changes in society without too much delay ... at the present moment it is important for us to recognize that this radical position has a solid foundation in Christian tradition.⁹

But, in retrospect, it must also be said that the Conference failed to do justice to the contemporary situation. It took only a few years to realize that its analysis of the transformation of society was, to say the least, incomplete. The power of the forces which had been released by scientific and technological progress was far more complex than the Conference assumed. It clearly underestimated the magnitude of the challenges and tasks humanity was facing. The role it attributed to the Church exceeded by far its real spiritual and material capacities. After a short while the analysis already needed to be revised. Today many of the answers given by the 1966 Conference appear rather naïve and unrealistic.

It is significant, I think, that the key sentence of the Geneva Conference was modified by the Porto Alegre assembly (2006) into a prayer addressed to God. God, in *your* grace transform the world. The formulation is the expression of a new perception of Christian witness. But has the language used by the World Council of Churches changed accordingly? In many reports and statements

⁸ Official Report, p.209.

⁹ Official Report, p.49.

issued in recent years the 1966 language continues to be used. The changes, though again and again identified, have not really been integrated into the general discourse of the ecumenical movement.

The Second Vatican Council had also engaged in an effort to “read the signs of the time”. But when we read the Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et spes* today, we come to the conclusion that the Roman Catholic analysis also remains incomplete and in some respects even erroneous. The style of the Second Vatican Council, so highly praised by Paul Ramsey, proved, in fact, to be unfortunate. Because of the authority attributed to a Council by the Roman Catholic Church the errors of perception persisted much longer than in the World Council of Churches. While in the ecumenical movement the debate soon moved ahead, the Roman Catholic Church remained fixed on the texts which had been solemnly promulgated.

1966 – Today : Seven Contrasts

What are the changes which have taken place? It is impossible to offer a complete analysis, but let me offer seven illustrations:

1. *Human beings and nature:* Already after a few years it was clear that the impact of the scientific and technological revolutions was greater by far than the 1966 Conference had realized. The potential for destruction inherent in them exceeded the risks and dangers which were then seen. Already in the sixties they constituted in reality a threat for the whole of life on planet earth. Nature was in the eyes of the Conference hardly more than the arena of human action. Both the resources and the capacity of the earth was taken to be inexhaustible. Science increasingly began to realize that there were limits to the exploitation of the planet. In 1973 the analysis of the Club of Rome, “Limits to Growth”, was published, a first, in fact still rather harmless, alarm signal. In the following years the threats to the climate, loss of biodiversity, scarcity of water and many other forms of deterioration of the environment entered public consciousness. Increasingly, human activities proved to be problematic. The WCC engaged in new considerations. At a conference on Church and Society in Budapest in 1974 the concept of sustainability was discussed for the first time, and a year later the WCC assembly in Nairobi, following a passionate speech by Charles Birch, declared that the struggle for social justice needed to be coupled with a resolute commitment to sustainability. A comprehensive correction of the prevailing orientation of the WCC was proposed by a further conference in 1979 in the MIT in Boston. The theme now read: *Faith and Science in an unjust world*. The magnitude of the crisis was now more realistically per-

ceived. The human conquest of the planet has to reckon with limits. Despite all the progress achieved, human beings remain bound by the given framework of God's creation. The consequence is clear. If they are to survive on this planet, they have to reduce their claims on nature and its resources.

The Boston conference did not get much attention – even within the WCC its conclusions were only reluctantly received and not really given further thought. The commitment to sustainability remained in the background. But year by year the signs of environmental destruction multiplied. The changes caused by science and technology led to an ever deeper self-contradiction. The crisis sharpened but it proved difficult, if not impossible, to change the basic orientation of society.

2. Social Justice: new requirements. The Geneva conference had a relatively simple conception of social justice. Equality between rich and poor nations can be achieved by associating the poorer nations to the general economic growth of humanity. Economic growth and social justice were seen as twins. The realization of justice requires, however, far-reaching structural adjustments. A new order will not come about by itself. It requires struggle. One year later (1967) the papal encyclical *Populorum progressio* introduced the slogan: development is the new word for peace. The Conference could not have made this slogan its own. Social justice implies struggle. The underprivileged nations have to fight for their claims and rights, and the churches have to take sides in this fight.

In a lecture delivered one year after the 1966 conference, Samuel Parmar (1921-1979), one of the masterminds of the World Council of Churches in the sixties and seventies, described the inevitability of this struggle in the following terms:

If we accept the *technological* revolution which we obviously do without any reserve, it is not logical to reject the *social* revolution which can create structures subjecting technology to the benefit of humanity ... Since the technological revolution is the product of the social conditions of the West, it is for the Non-Western world hard to understand why the fathers of this revolution are so reticent to accept the need for the social revolution in other parts of the world.¹⁰

As the ecological crisis entered people's consciousness, this concept of justice had to be modified. The expectation that the gap between rich and poor nations could be closed or bridged by economic growth proved to be less and

¹⁰ Samuel L. Parmar, *Entwicklung mit menschlichem Gesicht*, Gesammelte Vorträge und Aufsätze, Texte des kirchlichen Entwicklungsdienstes 17, Frankfurt am Main 1979, p.23.

less likely. Social justice had to be achieved within the limits of growth, and this meant that the rich nations had to drastically reduce their demands. In his speech to the Nairobi Assembly (1975) Charles Birch expressed this insight by the succinct phrase: "The rich must live more simply so that the poor may simply live." The industrial nations were no longer seen as pioneer nations paving the way for the poorer parts of humanity, but as consumer and polluter nations which through their extravagant life-style created ever new social injustice. True, it might be possible through new scientific and technological discoveries to shift the limits to a certain extent. Technological efficiency may diminish the overexploitation and pollution of the planet. But all these improvements would not suffice to maintain the present life standards of the Western nations, and even less to extend it to the entirety of nations. A just social order worldwide is only possible if the industrial nations are prepared to adopt a radically new orientation.

Samuel Parmar concludes a lecture on the "Limits to Growth" (1974) with a reflection on the need for the countries of the Third World to opt for an independent approach to development:

Most of our countries have opted for the values and ways of industrial nations. Our experience over the past two decades shows that these have not solved our problems but may even have aggravated them. We must recognize that in a relative sense, that is, in comparison to developed nations, and in terms of the prevailing economic yardsticks we will continue to be poor. Should we not develop a different yardstick of measuring progress? The quest for self-reliance is much more than an economic concern. It is an attempt to find dignity and meaning within the material limitations which will remain.¹¹

Today, social justice is in peril more than ever. Economic growth continues to be the absolute priority of all nations. The costs caused by exploitation and pollution are systematically ignored. Measures to protect the environment invariably meet with resistance. Changes to climatic conditions, induced by human activity, are not taken seriously by the industrial nations. The way rich nations deal with poverty in the world has hardened. Self-interest dominates. The call for a comprehensive order of social justice is no longer on the agenda.

3. Technological Progress. On the whole, the Geneva conference had an optimistic view of technological progress. True, the negative consequences of the technological revolutions were not overlooked. But technological progress was not considered to be inevitable but capable of opening new horizons for

¹¹ Samuel Parmar, *Social Guidelines and Limits to Growth*, Anticipation 18, 1974, p.22. In German: *Sozialethik und ‚Grenzen des Wachstums‘*, in: *Entwicklung mit menschlichem Gesicht*, p.67.

humanity. "It frees man from magic, from material servitude, from endemic diseases and hunger, and ... frees us for new possibilities in leisure, for satisfaction and fulfillment of self, for new forms of creativity." The question was how humanity was to deal with the new capacities and possibilities offered by science. "Whether the effects of technology are good or bad, depends on the goals presupposed." The particular task of the Church consisted in guiding progress in a sound direction. "Where the Church sees technological change as a gift of God for the liberation of mankind, its vocation is to welcome, not resist, this new challenge in human history":¹²

Economic growth has expanded enormously the horizons of the human family. The increase in educational and cultural opportunities, the networks of mass communication and transportation, and the extension of voluntary and government social services have enriched the lives of men beyond the wildest dreams of earlier generations. *To this personal and social fulfilment Christians must say a loud amen, for human creativity is a gift from the Creator.*¹³

This *amen* has in the meantime become much more reserved. While the Geneva conference was convinced that technological progress would secure a better future, the ambivalence of technology became clearer in subsequent decades. Technology cannot be applied without circumspection. It has its own independent power. Though the fruit of human activity, it follows its own laws and constantly creates *faits accomplis*. The power it offers will be misused and is the cause of irreparable destruction. Good and bad use of technology are in conflict. The dangers enumerated already by the Geneva conference as possible "side effects", have become bitter reality:

new vocational diseases, air and water pollution, mental disturbances, psychic tensions, and disruptions in the life of the community, dislocation and at least temporary unemployment caused by automation, large scale migration and increasing slum-dwelling which intensifies continuing social evils such as alcoholism, drug addiction and prostitution.

The analysis of the Boston conference (1979) was much more differentiated. Instead of speaking in a general way of the blessings of technology, the conference scutinized dangers inherent in technology. What are the risks accompanying technological progress? How can society avoid losing control of technology and its potential effects. The Boston conference was characterized by a certain degree of helplessness. It made an impassioned call for restraint. Technological innovation should not be introduced over the heads of the

¹² Official Report, p. 154-55.

¹³ Official Report, p. 64.

people. Before applying new means the readiness of the population and the level of acceptance needed to be tested.

Science and technology have further progressed in the last four decades and caused new revolutions. New discoveries have changed the patterns of society even before earlier changes have been fully absorbed. New developments have taken place in the fields of electronics, computer science, genetic engineering, the cloning of living beings and many other areas. The number of challenges has multiplied since the Geneva conference and has at the same time become less and less manageable for ordinary people. There are not many today who would speak of technological progress so plainly as a gift of God. The expectations have drastically diminished.

In the eighties the World Health Organization, for instance, still confidently promoted the slogan *Health for all by the year 2000*. The expectation was that the combined forces of medical research, technology and good will would achieve new degrees of health. Already in those years, but today to an even greater extent, humanity is not only confronted with new diseases such as AIDS, but also with the return of illnesses which seemed to have been overcome.

4. **Community.** The Geneva conference was aware of the potential impact of technological progress on the traditional forms of community. Bonds of community are called into question, new forms needed to be found. "The new technology is demanding new patterns of community and is rapidly secularizing the social order." Technological innovation inevitably calls for a re-construction of society. The Geneva conference urged the churches to participate actively in this transition. Its responsibility primarily consists in assisting those who are affected by the effects of change. "The Church must recognize the price paid for change in human suffering, disorientation and the disruption of cherished forms and traditions, and stand with those who are the victims of change."¹⁴ But this is only one side of the task. The Church is to contribute to the building up of a new society. It has to recall the fundamental presuppositions for true communion and seek to realize new forms of community in its own midst.

A better type of community should emerge, *aided by planning*, in which man may have a sense of identity, loyalty and belonging so necessary for him as roots for living. This new community should be informed not only by charity but also by justice.¹⁵

¹⁴ Official Report p.154.

¹⁵ Official Report, p.158.

The society of the future will be secular in character. The Geneva conference was of the opinion that this development was to be welcomed. It creates the basis for mutual recognition. The "secular city" does not mean the end of the public role of the Church, it opens on the contrary new perspectives. As one of the many components of society the Church can more freely bear witness to the essence of its message and recall its validity for the whole of society.

Secularization provides the possibility of choices among alternatives, a world in which there is more than one answer to any given problem, because the diffusion of vocation and responsibility creates openness and the possibility of change ... The secular society is not founded on a religious base which cannot be challenged but rather religious institutions and ideas are one among many components of the social structure. This means freedom. Uncertainty and risk are necessary results of freedom.¹⁶

How far are these expectations still relevant? In the course of the last four decades the churches have indefatigably worked for the maintenance and renewal of the human community. The building up of living communities is one of the central tasks of the Church. New Christian movements have come into existence offering a new home to many people. Christians play a significant role in non-governmental organizations which pursue goals neglected by society. The churches play no doubt a significant role in creating a sense of community.

The process of disintegration caused by the technological revolutions has, however, not been halted. The developments have on the contrary led in almost all parts of the world to uprooting and increased instability.

At the same time the limits of the concept of the secular city have become manifest. It is true that the secular society offers to all its members freedom and the opportunity to develop their own self, but it does not provide the moral ground for developing a society of solidarity. Almost everywhere today the forces that are required to build up a responsible society are missing. Moreover, the secular city is far from neutral but represents secretly a form of creed. And the values underlying this creed can have disastrous consequences.

This danger was recognized by the Geneva conference:

In that secular society man's choices are no longer obligatory and prescribed. Each man is free to seek his own faith and make his own assumptions about the purpose of being. This brings the risk that modern man, having freed himself from magical, religious or ideological views of the world, may consciously or unconsciously begin to absolutize other aspects of secular life such as nationalism, the profit motive, rationalism, social

¹⁶ Official Report, p.158.

planning or other new “Molochs”. This becomes secularism in which an absolutized assumption of the secularized world begins to play a determining role comparable to that of religion in the sacred society.¹⁷

Religious convictions, seen by the conference as a relic of a magical understanding of the world, actually remained highly relevant for the building up of society. Society does not simply consist of individuals, but only survives as a community of communities. Communities are needed as the ground from which the sense of solidarity and public responsibility can grow.

5. Towards a responsible international community. The risks connected with nuclear armaments were omnipresent at the conference. How can mutual destruction be prevented? How can an international order be established through which the conflict between the superpowers will be neutralized? The Geneva conference had no illusions in this regard. A “responsible society” at the international level was not in sight:

The churches should be under no illusions with regard to the state of the world. There is no world government nor can we foresee one. The nuclear nations exercise their power uncontrolled by any international agency, and at the same time the international ethos of the nuclear age is still highly ambiguous.¹⁸

The Conference gave its support to the United Nations and expressed its conviction that the institution needed to be strengthened. Despite the weaknesses and failures it needed to be defended, and not paralyzed by the conflict of the superpowers. It was therefore essential that all nations are represented in its midst and participate in its activities. Logically, the Conference asked for the admission of the People’s Republic of China into UN membership.¹⁹

The United Nations are not only indispensable as an instrument to ensure peace but also as a framework for the promotion of mutual understanding and social justice. The Conference hoped for a wide acceptance of binding agreements among the nations, in particular the Covenants on Human Rights.²⁰ Only by submitting to the increasing authority of the community of nations and participating in the promotion of real peace, could humanity hope to survive.

The Conference therefore underlined the political role of the developing nations. It accused the former colonial powers of playing a double game.

¹⁷ Official Report, pp.158-159.

¹⁸ Official Report, p.128.

¹⁹ Official Report, p.132.

²⁰ Official Report, p.132.

Though releasing their colonies into political independence, they failed in laying the ground for economic self-reliance. The young nations are used as instruments in the cold war. Without regard for the interests of the developed nations the developing countries have to act on their own. The Conference was of the opinion that the conditions for independent action were given. A revolutionary spirit was at work, and it was the responsibility of the churches in all countries to identify themselves with this struggle.

A revolutionary mood pervades the thought of many of the more active and influential groups in public life of the Third World and is an important factor in their politics. These groups seek national independence, not simply in the formal political sense but in the wider sense which includes economic, social and cultural factors as well. They are concerned to reduce substantially dependence on and exploitation by the developed countries. They seek economic development – by which is meant industrialisation, technological advance, and diversification of production – but at the same time they are concerned to promote equally fundamental changes in the organisation of political and economic power, in order to enable the common man – workers, peasants, the emerging middle classes, students and intellectuals etc. – to share more equally in national life.²¹

The struggle may involve revolutionary methods and even violence.

Wherever small elites rule at the expense of the welfare of the majority, political change towards achieving a more just order as quickly as possible, should be actively promoted and supported by Christians ... In case where such changes are needed the use by Christians of revolutionary methods ... cannot be excluded a priori.²²

What has become of all this? What was then said about the United Nations is – *mutatis mutandis* – still valid today. In decisive moments its voice cannot prevail against the big powers, but the institution remains indispensable. Again and again it succeeds in solving or at least alleviating political conflicts.

The hope that the two covenants on civil and social human rights could become common ground for the international community was not fulfilled. The Covenant on civil rights was ratified by many states and serves today as an instrument for protests against the violation of individual human rights. It became an indispensable weapon of non-governmental organizations such as Amnesty International. The Covenant on Social Rights, however, was not ratified by the United States. A common basis for the realization of social rights was not achieved. And soon the struggle for social justice was further compli-

²¹ Official Report p.141.

²² Official Report, p.142.

cated by the requirements of the ecological crisis. The vision of an international responsible society was further and further removed. With the end of the Cold War a new power constellation arose. The mutual correction of the superpowers no longer existed. The international community needed to be re-conceived and built up on a new – more complex – basis.

The revolutionary spirit which pervaded the countries of the Third World has no doubt borne fruits in certain places. Some liberation movements both in Africa and to a lesser extent in Latin America succeeded in taking power. But the overall picture remained unchanged. The gap between rich and poor nations persists. The structures of injustice could not be broken up.

The appeal of the Geneva conference to the churches to identify themselves with the “spirit of revolution” was widely welcomed and taken seriously by many. At the same time it was also sharply criticized by many, especially in the industrialized countries. The programme to combat racism of the WCC gave an opportunity to the churches to measure the implications of the appeal for the vocation and witness of Christians. The churches remained divided.

In 1983 the Vancouver assembly invited the WCC to engage member churches in a conciliar process of mutual commitment to justice, peace and the integrity of creation. It was an attempt to mobilize the churches for a struggle against injustice and ecological folly. The initiative took time to take off, and after a few years it became clear that the churches were not really willing to support the movement. The “revolutionary spirit” met with less and less response in the churches. In the 1990s even the WCC itself abandoned the project.

The appeals of the Geneva conference sound today like voices from far away. The confidence that characterized the gathering has vanished. The question today is rather to what extent the churches, in face of the political, economic and ecological complexity, are still capable of any common witness.

6. Revolution and Violence. Inevitably the reflections on revolution raised the question of the use of violence. It was one of the central preoccupations of the conference. Again and again the reports return to it. Is it possible to use violence in a targeted and limited way? Can it be applied to obtain positive results? Is it possible that violence contributes to the success of a revolution against injustice? Can it be regarded as a kind of “Caesarean operation” serving new life? The Geneva conference tended towards an affirmative answer.

Violence is very much a reality in our world, both the overt use of force to oppress and the invisible violence (*violencia blanca*) perpetrated on people who by millions have been and still are the victims of oppression and unjust social systems. Therefore the question often emerges today whether the violence which sheds blood in planned rev-

olutions may not be a lesser evil than the violence which, though bloodless, condemns whole populations to perennial despair ... it cannot be said that the only possible position for the Christian is one of absolute non-violence. There are situations where Christians may become involved in violence. Wherever it is used, however, it must be seen as an ultimate resource which is justified only in extreme situations.²³

For these reasons, the Churches have urged their members to participate responsibly in the life of the state and society ... Human experience as well as Holy Scripture shows us that the power of law is required to compel man to respect the rights of others ... While this remains true in our day, many circumstances in the modern world force men to revolution against an unjust established order.²⁴

The violent overthrow of an existing political order (cannot be excluded). For in such cases, it may very well be that the use of violent methods is the only recourse of those who wish to avoid the prolongation of the vast covert violence which the existing order involves.²⁵

Such considerations played a significant role in the WCC in the following years. Especially the distinction between open and hidden violence proved to be helpful. It made it possible for the WCC to remind the rich nations and oppressive and dictatorial regimes of their responsibility and to support the rebellion of the poor nations. Open violence, went the argument, is the inevitable answer to the hidden structural violence of oppression. It must not be condemned *a priori*. The programme to combat racism was based on this distinction. The WCC exposed itself to sharp criticism. It was accused of having made its own the Marxist understanding of revolution. This was, of course, not the case. The limited approval of the use of violence was not more than a sign of solidarity with liberation fronts and other anti-racist movements, and there cannot be any doubt that this sign was registered and appreciated.

Where does this debate stand today? The opinion that violence can be applied in a limited, quasi surgical, way has increasingly been questioned in subsequent decades. Violence has its own dynamic. Once the door has been opened to let it enter, it can no longer be controlled. Experience shows that its impact cannot be foreseen. Instead of leading to dialogue and political compromise, it can harden positions for ever.

In one of its reports the Geneva conference offered the following reflections:

Christians should think of the day after the revolution when justice must be established by clear minds and in good conscience. *There is no virtue in violence itself, but only in*

²³ Official Report, pp.115-116.

²⁴ Official Report, p.122.

²⁵ Official Report, p.143.

what will come after it. In some instances significant changes have been made by non-violent means, and Christians must develop greater skill and wisdom in using these.²⁶

Already in the sixties, certain representatives of the Third World proposed other models of action. Samuel Parmar was one of them. In an article "Revolution without violence" (1969) he recalled Mahatma Gandhi and defended the thesis that for the Christian conscience non-violent revolution was ultimately the only valid approach. He affirmed the need for active resistance and was of the opinion that the authorities in power whose only concern was the maintenance of the status quo had no right to criticize the use of violence. But non-violent resistance was to be preferred to military action. Only non-violent witness was capable of bringing about lasting results of justice.²⁷

Today's situation differs from the constellation of the sixties. We are confronted with a frightening spiral of violence. Oppression calls for resistance and terror, resistance and terror are repressed by further violence. As the fabric of society gets looser and more difficult to control, blind use of violence increases. Violence is today omnipresent. What seemed to be reasonable in the sixties in a particular constellation of political forces, has today lost its legitimacy. Today the main task consists in minimizing the use of violence in order to create the condition for constructive dialogue.

One expression of this changed situation was that the WCC assembly in Harare (1998) proposed to the churches a "decade to overcome violence". The title given to this project shows, however, some naïvety. Overcome violence? The question is rather to recognize the presence of violence and to contain the energies which manifest themselves in it. Violence cannot be eliminated. In this world, dominated by violence, Christian witness for peace is characterized by the effort to demonstrate an alternative way through an active but non-violent witness.

Developments over the past decades have, in addition, made clear that the use of violence is even more general than assumed in the sixties. It is not only in interpersonal relations that violence is "lurking at the door" (Genesis 4:7) but also in our relationship to creation as a whole. Through the ecological crisis we have become aware of the degree of violence in our approach to God's creation. For a long time the victims of this kind of violence have remained silent. Their groaning is becoming louder and louder. A solution of the ecological crisis is only possible if we begin to recognize and diminish also this form of violence.

²⁶ Official Report, p.143.

²⁷ Samuel L. Parmar, *Revolution ohne Gewalt* (1969), in : *Entwicklung mit menschlichem Gesicht*, p.51 ff.

7. A new and common departure? The Geneva conference raised great hopes for the ecumenical collaboration of the churches. The Second Vatican Council had ended less than a year before and was still fresh in the minds of the public. Everybody was therefore wondering what the impact would be on the conference of the opening of the Roman Catholic Church to the ecumenical movement. A strong delegation of Roman Catholic observers was present at the gathering.

Its spokesman was Mgr Charles Moeller, professor at the University of Louvain and under-secretary of the Vatican's Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. He was given an opportunity to present to the conference the findings of the Second Vatican Council, in particular the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the World. Moeller was an open-minded theologian and was determined to give new impulses to ecumenical collaboration. His address went far beyond a simple summary. The Constitution, he said, showed that the Church faced the same problems as all Christians in the world. The Council's appeal to other churches to collaborate "was not merely conventional good manners or a stylistic addition ... but was included in the text to indicate that all of the problems dealt with were also of concern to non-Catholic denominations."²⁸ To corroborate this statement he urged the conference to clarify through joint common studies the following five theological issues: a) The Christian understanding of man; b) the reality of God facing atheism; c) Christology considered in harmony with an expanding universe; d) pneumatology (doctrine of the Holy Spirit); and e) eschatology or the end of time of which the gospel speaks.

This intervention was characteristic of the ecumenical mood of the sixties. Collaboration with the Roman Catholic Church seemed to be a matter of course. The common future in the ecumenical movement was envisaged, and planned for, with confidence. A year later the encyclical *Populorum progressio* was issued. A joint conference on development issues took place in Beirut. SODEPAX, a joint secretariat for questions of peace and development was established. Even the possibility of Roman Catholic membership in the WCC was seriously considered and discussed.

These hopes and expectations would, however, not be fulfilled. The collaboration soon began to reach its limits. The options and style of the partners was too different to allow for a resistant common basis. The conversations on Roman Catholic membership had to be given up. After protracted negotiation SODEPAX was finally dissolved. The proposal to launch the conciliar process

²⁸ Official Report, p.43.

of mutual commitment on Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation together with the Roman Catholic Church was not accepted. And even the suggestion in the 1990s to develop a common witness on climate change was *de facto* rejected. The Roman Catholic Church withdrew more and more into its own orbit. Though much collaboration was initiated at the regional and local level, the integrity of the Church at the universal level was carefully maintained. More and more it became apparent that any common witness at the universal level called into question, in the eyes of the highest authorities, the claim to represent the one holy, catholic and apostolic Church of Jesus Christ.

The Geneva conference was driven by the hope that the progressive forces of Christianity would unite in a new departure. True, it foresaw resistance and conflicts. But hope outweighed doubts. In the following decades this hope has been gradually disappointed. Christianity has again fallen apart into different camps. The relations between the various confessional traditions are limited to dialogues. The multilateral ecumenical communion has lost much of its élan and attraction. The debate on the nature of the Church and its unity is thrown back to its beginnings as the list of reflections and questions which was issued by the Assembly of Porto Alegre shows.

Or does perhaps this anniversary provide the opportunity for a new initiative? Both the Second Vatican Council and the Geneva conference made an attempt to read the signs of the time. It is clear that this reading of the sixties is in many ways now obsolete. Has perhaps the time arrived for a new common effort?

Other contrasts could be mentioned. The 1966 Conference had, for instance, no awareness of gender issues. Its reports are all written in male language. Attention is concentrated exclusively on the witness of the churches in society. The horizon of inter-religious dialogue on social issues was absent. In the sixties, the role of non-governmental organizations was not yet as significant as today. But the seven examples outlined above suffice to show the enormous changes which have taken place in the short period of four decades.

New Theological Frontiers: Two Examples

1. *The role of human beings in creation.* The Geneva conference held a “high view” of human beings and their role in God’s creation. Human beings have been given a dominating role in creation. Everything is oriented towards human beings – the centre of the universe. The true vocation of human beings provides the criterion for the appropriate response to the challenges of our time:

“Subdue the earth and have dominion”, God says to man (Genesis 1:28). What does this mean? Does God give man the vocation of controlling or dominating the world which he puts at man’s disposal? Yes. Moreover God puts no limit upon man’s dominion or control over nature except that it has to be fulfilled under God’s lordship: it is man’s mastery and God’s lordship. Man is responsible to use his stewardship of nature to make possible a fuller human life for all mankind: in this way he regains his original God-given destiny for which Christ died and has risen. Redemption concerns nature in that the Redeemer brings creation into its still hidden destiny, the new creation. According to Romans 8:20 man has a priestly function towards the whole of nature. The proclamation of redemption affects science not in the sense that faith competes with scientific information but in that faith gives it direction. Man is invited to use his capacity to make the life of mankind more human and to reveal God’s glory.²⁹

Christian theology must expound and defend the understanding of the ‘human’ as a criterion for judging economic and social change ... It can be applied as fruitfully to international political, economic and social structures as to national ones.³⁰

The theme of the Geneva conference was human self-development. After having acquired so much new power, how are they to build society? What is the relationship between God’s creative act and their own creative capacities? Ultimately, the Conference reflected and acted on the assumption that a new stage of being human had been reached. The relationship of humans to the whole of creation was not the object of any detailed considerations. The fact that human beings are part of God’s creation was practically ignored. The Geneva conference was anthropocentric in the extreme. Creation was understood as the stage or the arena of human history.

This unilateral emphasis on the role of human beings was in the sixties generally accepted. It was also shared by the Second Vatican Council. The Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et spes* solemnly declared: “Believers and non-believers are in general agreement that everything on earth is ordered toward man, the summit and central point of creation (§12).”

Individual authors went even further. In a theological bestseller which was published only one year before the Conference we read the following interpretation of Genesis 2:18-20:

The act of naming is an original and creative one. Man does not “form” the animals but he does give them names. Yet naming and forming must not be too widely separated. As God begins his activity in Genesis 1, the earth is described ‘without form’ and

²⁹ Official Report, p.198.

³⁰ Official Report, p.52.

void. God's creative activity includes forming, separating and naming. Then, after he creates man, he enlists him in this creating activity. Thus the world does not come to man already finished and ordered. It comes in part confused and formless *and receives its significance from man*. Since man names the animals, *the meaning they have comes from the fact that they are incorporated in his life. Their significance arises from the fact that they are part of his projects and purposes ...* Here is a truly exalted view of man. God does not simply insert man into a world filled with creatures which are already named, in relationship and meaning patterns already established by decree. Man must fashion them himself. He does not simply discover meaning but originates it.³¹

One year after the Conference Lynn White published his famous article, "Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis".³² He developed the thesis that Christianity was partly responsible for today's ecological crisis. Because, he said, "I don't know of any religion which places human beings so exclusively at the centre of all attention." Though his thesis does certainly not do justice to the biblical witness, he could have used as an argument statements both from the Vatican Council and the Geneva conference.

In subsequent years it became increasingly clear that human beings cannot be isolated from the whole of creation. According to the second account of God's creation Adam was taken from the earth and must again return to the earth. Human beings ultimately depend on the gifts of the earth. True, a special role has been attributed to them. They are stewards of God's creation and called to cultivate responsibly God's garden. Their survival depends on the way in which they deal with the gifts of creation. In order to respond credibly to the ecological crisis, a revision of Christian anthropology is called for:

Obsolete theological statements continue, however, to exercise their influence. §12 of *Gaudium et spes* is still part of the theological discourse in many Roman Catholic circles and even in the WCC the issue of the relationship between human beings and the whole of creation does not receive adequate attention. The recent study paper of the Commission on Faith and Order on Christian anthropology does not take up the issue, but addresses all kinds of other less important themes.³³

2. Human planning and God's kingdom. The Geneva conference was evidently convinced that it lived in a privileged generation. New horizons had opened. "We know that God appears to have set no limits to what may be achieved by our generation, if we understand our own problems aright and

³¹ Harvey Cox, *The Secular City*, SCM Press 1965, pp.73-74.

³² *Science* 155, 1967, 1203-1207.

³³ *Christian Perspectives on Theological Anthropology*, A Faith and Order Study Document, Faith and Order Paper 199, WCC, Geneva 2005.

desire to obey in our circumstances.” This opportunity needed to be seized. How far the radical ethics of the kingdom of God can be realized, is beyond our knowledge. But it is clear that God is leading us to a new degree of being human.

How is the relationship between human planning and action, and the coming of God’s kingdom to be understood? Many formulations in 1966 seemed to indicate that the scientific and technological revolutions should be read as signs of God’s kingdom. What happens at this stage of history can be considered as an anticipation of the kingdom. The Second Vatican Council argued in similar ways. The signs of the time speak a positive language. They are signals of hope.

This view of history has been called into question by the developments of the last decades, which represent, in fact, a humiliation of humankind. True, humans have to fulfill a new responsibility. They need to take decisions affecting not only their own future, but also the whole of creation; and they are clearly not in a position to fulfill this new responsibility. Their planning is incomplete and often erroneous. Consequences can be fatal. The Geneva conference conceded that “the long-term future remains hidden”. But, in reality, every single step involves uncertainties and risks. Planning is inevitable. But historical events constantly override our provisions and forecasts. The future is in God’s hands. True, sometimes justice is established. Oppression is overturned: moments of grace. But coherent planning of historical developments is clearly out of question.

The signs of the time today, however, speak a different language than four decades ago. The scientific and technological revolutions have shaken the inherited structures of society. The lack of wisdom in dealing with the gifts of God’s creation has led to destruction, and it is more than likely that this work of destruction will continue. What is then the task of the churches today? The gospel provides them with the assurance that God will ultimately not abandon creation. Even where we see nothing but destruction and violence the Spirit is in fact at work. God’s creation will be renewed, and the folly humans have caused will be corrected. And the same Spirit is at work in our own midst. Signs of God’s future become visible. They are made up of acts of love and solidarity. Whether successful or not, according to human standards, they have their deep significance as signs of God’s new creation which has been promised.

A text on the relationship of human action and God’s kingdom, rich in meaning, was formulated at the Conference on “Faith, Science and the Future” in Boston in 1979:

The work of God enacted in Jesus Christ, is love – a love without limits, a love that seeks justice. The fulfillment of God's love is the purpose of the world, its symbol the cross. On the cross of Christ the real possibilities of human beings find their limitations and God's power finds its expression. God is creator; the world is his creation. We men and women have failed to live the life of love which God intends for us, but Christians testify that the love of God overcomes our human guilt and the supernatural structures of evil, the principalities and powers. Therefore, in as far as we are faithful, we await with confidence the coming of God's kingdom of love in which justice and peace and joy will be known by all and God will be all in all. No human acts can bring God's kingdom to its perfection, for it is God's work in his own time. We are dependent upon the Spirit. Yes, in the historical reality of God's work in Christ, we have grounds for hope. Hence we Christians can commit ourselves in the Spirit to our work now. Our work will be finite and limited, yet it is a commitment in which we have the real opportunity to live together in love. This is why we want to work together for a just, participatory and sustainable society. This is why Christians – though they themselves often defy God – can experience hope as a present reality, even in the direst suffering and loneliness.³⁴

³⁴ Paul Abrecht (ed.), *Faith and Science in an unjust world, Report of the WCC Conference on Faith, Science and the Future*, vol. 2 : Report and Recommendations, Geneva 1980, p.147.