

Confessing our sins and Confession of our hope;
WCC advocating for social justice, freedom
and human integrity

An Analysis of the WCC projects “Just, Participatory and
Sustainable Society” and “Program to Combat Racism”**

by Rev. Augustinos Bairachtaris**

Introduction

Secularisation and liberalisation as consequences of globalisation have challenged Churches to tackle problems which they had never thought to deal with before the European enlightenment. Liberalisation led society to a religious fragmentation making religion a personal choice. The clear distinction between the State and the Church led also to a clear separation between religion and society. Religion is no longer a basic element of the citizenship at least in the European context because of the multicultural and multinational ethnic nature of European society¹. Human rights and constitutional freedom are the main axioms which guide society. Many believed that the world without religions would be peaceful and more harmonious; apparently this interpretation of

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1. Chr. Krieger, “Religion engaging with Liberalism” in: Irina Yazykova (ed.), *Theology of Freedom – Religious and Anthropological Foundations of Freedom in a Global Context*, ББИ, Moscow 2021, pp. 305-310.

history and politics proved wrong. This left some free space in the public dialogue for religions to participate equally with other social factors trying to bear witness to their beliefs and to secure the freedom of religious conscience and worship. Thus, against the uncertainty and the law of skeptical doubt and relativity promoted by the representatives of post-modernity, religions came forward developing their certainty about God, life, death, social justice, freedom etc.

Within this framework the global struggle for a more just human community took place. Churches could not avoid such challenge and they committed to fight for the cause of justice, freedom, and human dignity. It is a commitment with practical character and action in different circumstances, such as the search for a world with better economic order, concern for human rights, combating racism, struggling against the mistreatment of women, supporting refugees, and overcoming the widespread hunger².

Many ecumenical leaders and theologians started a series of discussions on the responsibility between Church and society. They ended with the acceptance of the following definition: *“Responsible society is one where freedom is the freedom of men who acknowledge responsibility to justice and public order, and where those who hold political authority or economic power are responsible for its exercise to God and the people whose welfare is affected by it. For a society to be responsible under modern conditions, it is required that people have freedom to control, to criticize and to change their governments, that power be made responsible by law and tradition and be distributed as widely as possible through the whole community”*³.

Consequently, Churches are called to be responsible for society through the perspective of freedom combined with economic and social justice. Christians are incapable of preaching the gospel without facing questions of grace and judgment, life and death, justice, and peace. This quest for economic and social justice leads to new forms of political and spiritual freedom. The issue of social justice is not only a political but also a

2. W. H. Lazareth, *The Lord of Life – Theological Explorations of the theme Jesus Christ – The Life of the World*, WCC, Geneva 1983, p. 13.

3. W. A. Hooft, *Report of Section III: The First Assembly of the WCC Held at Amsterdam August 22 to September 4*, WCC, New York 1949, p. 78.

theological question which theologians must analyse not only framed in the new context and in accordance with the Bible and doctrines, but also in relationship to the new discoveries and achievements of other sciences.

Within this shaped situation the WCC proposed the following programs: *Just, Participatory and Sustainable Society*, *Program to Combat Racism*, and *Justice, Peace, and Integrity of Creation* in order to address the issues of justice, racism, economic development, the protection of the creation and the relationship between the developed and developing countries. In other words, these programs were a new way of credibly proclaiming Jesus in a new pluralistic environment.

1. Churches Struggling for Economic, Social and Political Justice, Freedom, and Human Dignity

In the eve of the 20th century a major shift took place at a global level thanks to the inspiration and visionary force of the so-called *founding fathers* of the Ecumenical Movement. When we discuss the ecumenical movement, it is impossible to avoid speaking about the World Council of Churches (WCC). The Council is an *ecumenical fellowship of Christian Churches confessing the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour according to the Scriptures and therefore seek to fulfil together their common calling to the glory of the One God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit*⁴. Additionally, it aims at Christian unity assisting in the healing process of society. Visser 't Hooft, Oldham, Temple, Best, Soderblom, Metropolitan Germanos of Thyatira, Florovsky, Potter, Castro, Nissiotis, Raiser and many other important church leaders of the ecumenical movement attempted to solve the riddle of the relationship between society and Church using modern terms. All these protagonists had the boldness and the adequate vision to bring Christians of different ecclesial traditions to the same round table in order to exchange and share their theological treasures, trying to

4. *Towards a Common Understanding and Vision of the World Council of Churches – A Policy Statement*, World Council of Churches, WCC, Geneva 1997, p. 13.

achieve the best for the world's benefit⁵. It is wise to consider the Council not as a mere international organisation as others, but as a fellowship of pilgrims that share the same journey and vision and move towards the same direction. Thus, the member Churches of the WCC managed to proceed to the stage of a common and mutual acceptance beyond the preconceived boundaries and ideologies they had for each other, if not to a full-scale recognition of their relative historical Churches⁶.

However, this 76 years old ecumenical journey has been empowered by God's grace besides the difficulties, challenges, and disagreements they had to face. Some of these problems have been the dividing issues of racism and injustice. All member Churches refused to step aside or to turn away from every form of racism and injustice, because both come in direct contradiction to God's word and will. The Council therefore called all Churches to the goal of visible Eucharistic unity in Christ, while at the same time it supports the mission of servicing human need, breaking down all existing barriers between humans caused by gender, colour, language, or ethnicity and advocating justice and peace. Thus, the Council has developed a threefold goal: a) Eucharistic unity in Christ based on the same Gospel and faith, b) common witness regarding the mission and evangelisation and c) commitment to promote justice and peace around the world. Therefore, the vision of the WCC member Churches embraces the whole world, and not only Christianity, promoting life for all⁷.

Since its inauguration the World Council of Churches spoke about *Man's Disorder and God's Design* realising the difficulties they had to face as churchly organisations to formulate a new theological mindset. From 1948 onwards the WCC and generally the ecumenical movement had been engaged with the promotion of ideas such as human freedom, religious liberty, and social justice, as well as human rights and land

5. *Vers une Conception et une Vision Communes du Conseil Œcuménique des Eglises*, COE, Genève 1997, p. 19.

6. *The Nature and Purpose of the Church – A Stage on the Way to a Common Statement, Faith and Order Paper No. 181*, WCC, Geneva 1998, p. 59.

7. Eph. 1, 10: "God's plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in Christ, things in heaven and things on earth".

rights. The first general assembly of the WCC in Amsterdam adopted the “*Declaration of Religious Liberty*”. For instance, it was realised that the focus of the Churches should be oriented towards the relationship between the economic development and social justice. Again, injustice was rightly understood as the primary cause of poverty and marginalisation of peoples; even some theologians dared to identify the economic exploitation and social injustice as forms of modern *heresy*, because both can provoke the destruction of social cohesion and the dissolution of community’s bonds of unity. Injustice, oppression of indigenous populations, mistreatment of women and children and unlimited exploitation of natural resources are all signs of human imperfection and failure, forcing people into a physical and moral elimination.

Within this framework and quite early on the WCC recognised the importance in dealing with issues of social agenda and not only with doctrinal theological questions. Because of that evaluation Christianity became more social, more human, and more compatible with the current social situation. Churches, instead of arguing solely upon doctrinal issues originating in the past, preferred to deal with life’s current problems. Nevertheless, the relation between those who advocated the primacy of social ecumenism, and those who advocated the primacy of ecclesial ecumenism was quite intense and challenging⁸. Some member Churches like the Orthodox got the impression that the Council was concerned only about the social agenda. As a result, a vivid and powerful dialogue commenced between the Christians and faithful of other religions along with Marxists. The decision of the WCC to financially support the liberation movements in Africa to regain their political freedom and liberation from oppressors even by means of violence gave birth to the Frankfurt Declaration (1971)⁹. In addition, the social activity of the Council was supported by theological arguments at the Bangkok

8. *Ibid.*, *Towards A Common Understanding and Vision of the World Council of Churches – A Policy Statement*, p. 11. Some theologians spoke about the need for a *wider ecumenism* or for a *macro-ecumenism*, which would open the ecumenical movement to other religions and cultures beyond Christianity.

9. P. Beyerhaus, Director of the Institute of the Discipline of Missions and Ecumenical Theology, was the leading figure behind the Frankfurt Declaration.

conference in mission and evangelism in 1973. The general theme of the conference “*Salvation today*” left no doubts about the urgency that Christian Churches should engage in the struggle against racism and to fight for freedom, justice, and liberation. Even more, one year later at the Lausanne world conference on Evangelism it was stated that: “*We affirm that evangelism and socio-political involvement are both part of our Christian duty. For both are necessary expressions of our doctrines of God and man, our love for our neighbour and our obedience to Jesus Christ... The salvation we claim should be transforming us in the totality of our personal and social responsibilities*”¹⁰.

Having said that an intense internal split happened among the member Churches of the Council during the '70s because of the status of confession that Churches should have in relation to these political and social issues. Notwithstanding, there is another subject which must not pass unnoticed; again, in the '70s emerged the idea of the influence of the non-western Churches and their traditions upon the formation of global ecumenism. A Church, in terms of being an ecumenical Church must not have a European character! Instead, every single local Church, especially the Churches of the so-called Third World, is called to provide its own culture, theology, liturgy, and ethos to the growth of the ecumenical fellowship. Thus, the preoccupation of the Council with the issues of racism, freedom, and justice for the population of the Third World offered a special opportunity to the Orthodox Churches to stand up and present their own spiritual treasures. Also, it is important to note that the majority of the Orthodox Churches in Europe were under Soviet political control and oppression. Thus, theologians from the African, Asian, Latin American, and Orthodox context presented some new hermeneutical insights upon the Gospel giving at the same time fresh air and new perspectives in the life and programs of the World Council of Churches.

The position that “the idea of social justice is present within any religion and the principle on which society should be built was actually forgotten or remained only verbal in religion’s official rhetoric” is true beyond any doubt. Unfortunately, the Christian Churches have offered

10. “Lausanne World Conference on Evangelism”, *Ecumenical Press Service* 23 (1974), p. 4.

privileges to dominant classes, races or political parties thus blocking all necessary changes in the social network. In particular, the institutional historical Churches at a global level have been accused of being willing to co-operate with non-democratic political powers, without defending the oppressed and weak people, when these were under persecution by the military regimes and political authorities.

This realisation sent shockwaves through the European institutionalised Churches which only then (in '60s and '70s) began to understand the great scale and level of that challenge. Thus, the twentieth century Christians found the notions of justice and freedom in Scripture and Tradition, especially in the old covenant between the people of Israel and God. The Israelites' painful experience of Egyptian oppression made them to search for the true meaning of justice, which was identified with goodness. The Christian tradition emphasised the personal dimension of the just relationship between human being and God. The ecumenical movement stretched the importance of the communal perspective, understanding the practice of justice through the restoration of the right social relationships¹¹.

Nevertheless, it is necessary to see justice through the biblical interpretation as part of God's design for the salvation of the world. Jubilee, Sabbath, the Messianic hope and the coming of the Kingdom of God all tend to clarify the meaning of justice. However, the ultimate model for the application of justice is Jesus' self-giving prototype, where for instance Jesus in the episode with Zacchaeus established justice through love. Jesus moves beyond any theoretical definition of justice, beyond any work of charity and beyond any law; Christ understands justice as an expansion of the actual love: "*I must stay at your house today*"¹². These messianic words show the urgency and the personal level of justice, love, and salvation. In other words, to stay together (Jesus and Zacchaeus) in the same shelter means to share commonly goods and feelings, because of love which surpasses any human system of justice. Furthermore, Jesus' words have an instant result on Zacchaeus' heart and mindset, which

11. *Church and World – The Unity of the Church and the Renewal of Human Community, Faith and Order Paper No. 151*, WCC, Geneva 1990, p. 40.

12. *Luk.* 19, 5.

immediately transforms him into a just person rebuilding his relationship with his fellow people and giving back to them everything that he had stolen before: “*Seek first God’s Kingdom and God’s righteousness and all these things shall be yours as well*”¹³. When Christians sacramentally share Jesus’ body and blood in the Eucharist, at the same time they challenge injustice, racism, separation, and lack of freedom¹⁴. Churches are called to assume their missionary task and to proclaim salvation in relation to the present context and needs of societies. It is clear then that the search and struggle for justice and freedom are both equally a divine calling and a human endeavour leading to a reconfiguration of the traditional understanding of mission and ecclesiology¹⁵. A Christian must serve and secure their neighbour’s rights as well as establishing just distribution of all goods and privileges with respect for the freedom, dignity, and integrity of all, maintaining a responsible stewardship towards creation¹⁶. Christians are supposed to make a difference in social level in terms of life conditions. That is why Jesus named his disciples the “*salt of the earth, the light of the world and a city built on a hill*”¹⁷.

13. *Matt.* 6, 33.

14. *Baptism, Eucharist, Ministry, Faith and Order Paper No. 111*, WCC, Geneva 1982, p. 14.

15. The Orthodox Churches in 1975 through the document *Confessing Christ through the Liturgical Life of the Church* proposed a new dimension of the practice of mission. According to that meaning mission should be seen as an extension of the liturgical life of the faithful member of the local community into their social life. That missiological concept was named “liturgy after the liturgy” emphasizing the witnessing role of the Christians in their daily life. The dynamics of the sacrament of liturgy do not stop at the boundaries of the Eucharistic assembly, but they serve the whole society; it is a calling to Christians to serve their brothers wherever they meet them in the public market, or even to cry with the poor, or to assist the needy and to listen to the marginalised people. See I. Bria, *The Liturgy after the Liturgy – Mission and Witness from an Orthodox Perspective*, WCC, Geneva 1996, pp. 19-34. According to the Canberra Statement (1991) the typology of “liturgy after the liturgy” is a link between worship and mission, since “the worship space needs to be designed so that all people can participate fully. A lively ministry of hospitality, welcoming all in the name of the Lord is most important”. See M. Kinnamon, *Signs of the Spirit – Official Report of the WCC Seventh Assembly*, WCC, Geneva 1991, p. 119.

16. *Ibid.*, *Church and World – The Unity of the Church and the Renewal of Human Community*, pp. 43, 47.

17. *Matt.* 5, 13-16.

Accordingly, Churches must become an instrument in God's plan for the renewal of society. The principles of justice and freedom offer to Christianity a locus to deploy its ecclesiology. Churches live the paradoxical experience of unity, which is given and real deriving from God the Triune, but at the same time the relationship between the Churches as we see them in human existence suffers from disunity and brokenness. This ecclesial separation reflects upon social brokenness too since the members of the Church are also members of society. It is evident that these two manifestations of brokenness cannot be healed without renewal in Church and in society. Such renewal leads to unity, because the unity of society assists the Church in being renewed into unity and vice versa; the unity of the Church is a decisive factor in humans' community. Thus, these two types of unity in Church and social level without being identical they influence to each other¹⁸.

On the contrary any kind of injustice breaks the fundamental communion between people and God. For this reason, the Church is called by God and sent to proclaim the Good News in word and deed through the struggle against oppression, racism, and injustice so the world may believe¹⁹. The Son of God manifested on the Cross his death and his resurrection calling his disciples to take up their own cross and follow him bringing justice and hope to the oppressed and marginalised people of all times. At this point the eschatological significance of the death and resurrection of Jesus becomes evident; He who took upon himself people's sin offering back to them His righteousness²⁰. The Church must suffer equally, even to the point of *martyrdom*, with those who suffer and with the poor who live in the margins but keep hoping for Christ' justice and remain humble before God. Thus, poverty and injustice become conditions of true sanctity²¹. This martyrdom of the Church means witness (*martyria*), but it also means analysis, criticism

18. Th. F. Best, *Faith and Renewal – Reports and Documents of the Commission on Faith and Order, Stavanger 1985, Norway, Faith and Order Paper No. 131*, WCC, Geneva 1986, pp. 170-171.

19. *Luk.* 1, 78.

20. *2 Cor.* 5, 21.

21. J. de Santa Ana, *Good News to the Poor – The Challenge of the poor in the history of the Church*, WCC, Geneva 1977, pp. 95-97.

and exposition of unjust social structures and advocacy for poor, to work towards the reconciliation and transformation of humanity²². It is pivotal for Churches to attack the problems of poverty and injustice not only at the level of their consequences, but mainly at the level of their causes. Institutional and structural injustice generates poverty around the world making both issues global problems.

Christian Theology has become more existential, dynamic, and interactive between contemplation and action (praxis). Churches engage in dialogue with people of other faiths, ideologies and of no faith to bring about mutual justice, psychological comfort, reconciliation, ecological care, and unity bringing God's salvation and righteousness to the whole world. As the Church always must be seen in relation to Christ, so the world be seen either in the perspective of creation, redemption, or judgment²³. According to Richard Dickinson that newly formed Church's involvement in the struggle for justice, freedom, and liberation for something and from something has led theologians to a *rediscovery of eschatology*²⁴.

2. Changing the Racist Injustice Structures of Society as a Challenge of Modern Christianity (Programme to Combat Racism)

In 1960 a secretariat on racial and ethnic relations was formed within the WCC Department on Church and Society. There are two periods of studying social justice in relation to racism in the field of ecumenical theology: before and after Uppsala's Conference in 1968. Before 1968 Christians used to speak about the "race prejudice and the racial discrimination", while after the Uppsala assembly theologians

22. *The Nature and Mission of the Church – A stage on the Way to a Common Statement*, Faith and Order Paper No. 198, WCC, Geneva 2005, pp. 26-28.

23. Ol. Tomkins, *One Lord – One Baptism*, Faith and Order Paper No. 29, SCM Press Ltd, London 1960, p. 36.

24. R. D. N. Dickinson, *To Set at Liberty the Oppressed – Towards an Understanding of Christian Responsibilities for Development/Liberation*, WCC, Geneva 1975, p. 54.

used a more passionate and concrete vocabulary, namely “change of racist structures of society and combat against racism”. Out of this situation a new methodology surfaced based on the principle of *common and contextual action*. A new social ethics theology was developed, while different programs were raised to tackle social issues such as race discrimination and social and economic injustice. Racism for example is not linked simply with social injustice, but deserves deep theological analysis, because it is incompatible with the Christian doctrine of human nature and the Eucharistic dimension of the Church as the Body of Christ. Despite that, many Christian religious institutions and organisations of the northern world have benefitted from economic systems based upon racially discriminatory policy and tactics, since the time of colonisation for over 400 years. Racism became a thorny and dividing issue especially among European missionary Churches of the West.

As a result, in 1969 the WCC along with the support of national governments and other international organisations decided to tackle that dangerous and sinful situation caused by racism through the *Programme to Combat Racism* (PCR)²⁵, which was actually an *action-reflection project* aiming at the inhuman and non-Christian policy of *apartheid* followed by South Africa’s government. The accumulation of wealth and power in the hands of white people and Christian Churches due to economic exploitation of natural resources (*violation of land rights*) and manipulation of indigenous people (*violation of human rights*) proved that white racism was not a problem situated only in South Africa, but it was a worldwide issue. The African indigenous people brought as slaves to the American land of opportunity were subjected to the “Christianity” of their white masters. Furthermore, the slaves did not have the right to participate in the sacrament of Eucharist, which was treated by whites as a means of oppression and exclusion.

The ambition of the PCR was to make racism a global issue. Indigenous people must equally have, as all people maintain, the right of self-

25. The Program to Combat Racism was first commended at the Uppsala Assembly in 1968 and afterwards approved by the Canterbury meeting of the Central Committee in 1969 having great influence upon the mindset of Christian thinking relatively to development theory and practice.

determination and the right to control their own land. Thus, Christians around the world had to answer to God's call for peace and justice and to take a stand fighting against racism through their participation in that programme²⁶. It is surprising though that the Dutch Reformed Churches, under the pressure from their government, decided to withdraw from the Council instead of participating in this anti-racist initiative of the WCC, because it went against their own economic interests.

Moreover, the WCC through its statements and actions urged its member Churches to immediately eliminate any kind of racist practices in their own ranks and at the same time denounced violation of human rights because of race, colour or culture. Particularly, the PCR program urged individual Christians to respect all cultures' spirituality and to move beyond words being more active and sensitive on issues of social justice by supporting the victims of racism. Besides, world cultures shape the human words and voices that answer the divine calling. Through that program Churches tried to identify the signs of Kingdom in every culture and nation who lived the experience of oppression, invasion, massacre, and exploitation and to read history through the eyes of those people who in the past had been mistreated by western missionaries. How is it possible for the Churches to announce the Good News when in the past they appeared to be the bearers of bad news? How is it possible for these Churches to proclaim the message of freedom when in the past the same Churches were part of the system of colonisation and slavery in the name of Christian faith²⁷? Thus, it is important for Christians to apologise and to repent for their historical and collective sin as a first step to approach these nations.

Additionally, the WCC encouraged its member Churches to influence political parties and governments to expand their supportive strategy

26. Pauline Webb while he was a Vice Chairperson of the WCC Central Committee in 1969 stated: "*The voice of God happened to us. We became aware of the voice of God's judgment on the evil of white racism allied with political and economic and military power*". See WCC: *Minutes and Reports of the 23rd Meeting of the Central Committee*, WCC, Geneva 1969, p. 36.

27. *Your Kingdom Come – Mission Perspectives, Report on the World Conference on Mission and Evangelism*, Melbourne, Australia, May 12-25, 1980, WCC, Geneva 1981, pp. 26-36.

addressed to the poorest nations and communities, not only using economic means, but also mainly through fundamental changes in institutions and structures. There was no need of charity for the suffering and violated people, but of justice.

There was a common feeling among Christian Churches in the '70s that their words and statements needed to be in full agreement with their actions. There was no need of verbal condemnation of racism, but of concrete action and fight against it. The only way to eliminate racism and injustice is through universal education, greater involvement in the changing of oppressive political structures and an open mindedness questioning the information flow. Even some young participants manifested that: "Church structure is dead; long live movement! Let us take part in the Lord's Supper in Uppsala"²⁸.

Therefore, the importance of solidarity of developed countries and Churches with developing countries and the autonomous Churches outside of the western hemisphere emerged as a social demand and as an answer to God's calling for justice. The ecumenical dialogue between theologians on the issue of development proved that the idea of development must not be limited to issues of economic prosperity, military power, and technological advance, but must also include the meaning of solidarity, of brotherhood, of mutual accountability, of sharing the bread and the wine, of improving the educational and health system around the world etc. The ecumenical-ecclesial engagement to social and economic development was considered to be an issue of *status confessionis* of Churches' faith to Christ. How much can a Church be faithful to Christ when it accepts injustice and racism within society? Those who did not have the will and the vision to participate in the struggle for social justice were not faithful enough to God and not quite committed to Gospel's message for equality, peace, and justice.

At the Uppsala conference in 1968 a major decision was taken, that Christian movements and Churches must focus and participate in the general development of society. In other words, development is no longer a political problem; instead, it is a human problem which

28. A. J. Van Der Bent, *From Generation to Generation – The Story of Youth in the World Council of Churches*, WCC, Geneva 1986, p. 81.

means that Churches beyond their responsibility for the *missio Dei* and for caring for the well-being of the poor, the weak and the oppressed are equally responsible for struggling for justice, human rights, cultural identity, religious plurality, and re-distribution of power (economic and political). So, the question is: Can the Churches be the breeding ground for political solutions? Can the Churches find or propose better solutions for political problems?

Thus, both programs PCR and JPSS worked as answering to these questions. Economic development is a political and social issue, which nevertheless is connected tightly with humans' dignity and religion; people must not become tools or objects of development²⁹.

3. Analysis of the WCC Programme *Just, Participatory and Sustainable Society*

In 1970 the WCC held a world consultation in Montreux where it made clear that the global economic development should be based upon three inter-related objectives: justice, self-reliance, and economic growth. As a follow-up to this consultation in 1976 the Commission on Churches' Participation in Development (CCPD) launched the program *Just, Participatory and Sustainable Society* (JPSS) to propose to the member Churches strategy and policy in the field of economic development. Namely these priorities were: a) to assist Churches to struggle in solidarity with the poor and oppressed communities, b) to assist Churches to provide support to organisations in the name of social justice and c) to assist Churches to contribute towards the search for a social model.

After almost three decades of efforts since the foundation of the WCC it was realised that technological and economic growth instead of offering solutions created more questions and found few answers. The social gap between rich and poor enlarged and famine and diseases still

29. In Amsterdam's Assembly WCC's delegates declared that "man is not made for production, but production for man". See *ibid.*, *Report of Section III: The First Assembly of the WCC Held at Amsterdam August 22 to September 4, 1948*, p. 77.

threatened the world's population. Is there any hope after all? The JPSS programme was the main theme of the WCC's agenda for reflection and action between the 5th (Nairobi 1975) and the 6th Assembly (Vancouver 1983). The outcome of the elaboration of that programme was that JPSS could serve as a new vision and model for human society. However, that plan was proved by history to be quite ambitious.

Moreover, another event took place: the shift in the ecumenical field of Christian social thinking and experience. The whole global situation during these thirty years namely from 1950 to 1980 had changed dramatically, unveiling the complexity and the inter-relationship of political, economic, and social life. In these times the issue of *social and economic justice* had been central of the ecumenical dialogue. This event is also linked with the 4th Assembly of the WCC in Uppsala 1968 where the efforts to struggle against injustice became more urgent than ever before. Social justice was the main concern of the member Churches of the Council while this phenomenon was linked with the growth of peace movements around the world. Additionally, associations of young people and students along with the global academic society showed eagerness to fight for a just world without war (Korea, Vietnam), without human rights' violation and without racism. The message that the youth who participated at the Uppsala Conference addressed to the Churches' representatives was quite clear: "*Put up or shut up. Practise what you preach. Be ready for costly self-dedication*"³⁰. The Christian youth was deeply disappointed with social life dominated by the economic and exploitative political aspects of life.

It must be clear that Churches must respond to peoples' call for justice. Justice is not only a political issue; instead, it is a multidimensional ideal with many references in the Bible. Justice is a messianic category embracing God's righteousness. God's righteousness is a path for humans' sanctification. On the contrary, a human being who acts in an unjust way towards his fellow people cannot be united with God; in other words, injustice leads people away from God's Kingdom. Churches' participation in Christ's work of reconciliation is linked with

30. *Ibid.*, A. J. Van Der Bent, *From Generation to Generation – The Story of Youth in the World Council of Churches*, p. 82.

worship. In worship Christians are set to battle against the powers of demons of this world which are realised in oppression, in racism, in poverty, in cynicism, in everything which drives human beings away from their God-Creator³¹.

Another important perspective which I would like to highlight is the notion of peoples' participation as pivotal aspect of development. In Nairobi (1975) the member Churches of the Council defined that poor and oppressed people are the subjects and not the objects of the development process. The right of people to participate in the decision-making process led them to guide their lives in many concerns such as decolonisation, racial equality, human rights, and women's liberation. Additionally, from the messianic perspective the term *participation* is linked with the theological meaning of *koinonia*, which means all participate equally in Christ's Eucharistic body. All are accountable and responsible for each other in the local community, since salvation according to Church fathers is not individualistic, but always has to do with fellow people (neighbour).

Finally, the notion of *sustainability* which was the third pillar of the JPSS programme was something new, something which appeared in 1974 in Bucharest' consultation. But before that, for the first-time concerns arose about the future of earth's ecosystems, regarding pollution of the whole biosphere (atmosphere, hydrosphere, and lithosphere). The major challenge of the consultants was to present that this kind of rapid and accelerated industrial growth was the main threat to nature's survival. According to the final report of the Sub-unit on Church and Society, "the non-human creatures are not merely objects to be used for our pleasure or instruments for human purposes"³². Thus, the idea of *integrity of creation* was linked with the survival of the earth's ecosystems, since humanity cannot ignore the importance of the ecological crisis, nor be content to only treat the symptoms without dealing with the underlying roots of the problem. These roots are related essentially to human's arrogance towards creation and to human's dominion over nature. In

31. N. Goodall, *The Uppsala Report 1968*, WCC, Geneva 1968, p. 79.

32. *Church and Society, Report and Background Papers Meeting of the Working Group, Glion, Switzerland, September 1987*, WCC, Geneva 1987, p. 41.

1988 in Annecy, France, the working group of the sub-unit Church and Society gave the following definition: “*The value of all creatures in and for themselves, for one another, and for God, and their interconnectedness in a diverse whole that has unique value for God, together constitute the integrity of creation*”³³.

Furthermore, creation was presented as an *open process* within which humans take responsibility for their actions. Personal responsibility therefore is very important and arises from human’s commitment to the environment, to the survival of future human generations and of other living creatures. Another kind of ethics was developed namely *environmental ethics*, recognising that everything which occurs in one place affects the whole planet. Along with these discussions for the survival of ecosystems another discussion took place regarding economic growth replaced by the term of *sustainability* and by the axiom of *limits to growth*. The limits to growth conversation brought the issue of social justice to the surface taking central place in the development policy. What right does 5% of the world’s population have to claim for itself the consumption of almost half of the world’s annual use of resources? Should the richer nations stop or reduce their development somehow? And if yes, they should reduce it to what level? What kind of impact will that reduction have on the poorest nations? The famous pattern of *production leading to consumption* and vice versa had to break and to be replaced by the model of selective development. So development is positive, but the question is development to what? According to the notion of limits to growth the objectives and the orientation of development must be redefined in terms of communitarian principles and in favour of people to participate in that whole process. The desire to possess and to control more and more things gradually leads to the loss of freedom, because every time someone buys something he/she is possessed by that object!

As a result, a new theological trend appeared namely *eco-theology* and a fresh interpretation of the theology of creation took place at an ecumenical level. The existing relationship between human beings and creation had to be analysed according to the new scientific information

33. Th. F. Best, *Vancouver to Canberra 1983-1990, Report of the Central Committee to the Seventh Assembly of the World Council of Churches*, WCC, Geneva 1990, p. 121.

and of course under the light of the Bible, where it is manifested that the earth is Lord's house and ours too, *oikos Kyriou*. Humans are not supposed to dominate on earth as conquerors, but to work as stewards offering their service to all and not to some.

Conclusions

The two programs of the WCC, namely the *Program to Combat Racism* and the *Just, Participatory and Sustainable Society*, were pointing at the same target: how to engage Christian Churches in the transformation process making the world a better place to live with more justice and peace. The real message of these programs was how to achieve reconciliation among communities and solidarity with every human being along with the faith in the dead and risen Christ as the way to unity. This notion of unity is not only limited to ecclesial terms, but also includes the peaceful coexistence of people of different cultural backgrounds living together in a spirit of acceptance and mutual respect. Both programs contributed largely to the ecumenical dialogue on the topic of the revolutionary social change based on the principle of social justice and freedom.

Additionally, dialogue implies Christians' attempt to describe God's will towards humankind by serving, suffering with, and calling people of all religions and ideologies, since Church does not exist for itself, but for the whole world. These programs searching for justice and peace were a testimony to the gospel of Jesus Christ belonging at the very heart of God's plan for the salvation of creation. However, it must be made clear that none of these programs was proposed by the WCC as an alternative political system, but as a means and as a criterion according to which all people are able to judge the social order and to examine the choices that must be taken.

In '60s and '70s Christians realised that they had lost their monopoly on public dialogue. Because of this historical event they had to regain their status and place in the public space, using modern tools of interpretation of the Gospel. This meant that they should move beyond their traditional theological methodology to reach out the social factors within a post-modern context.

In the meantime, religious minorities have become normality and Christianity is no longer the 'host' religion especially in the European context. Therefore, Christians must become advocates of the poor, of the widows, of the orphans, of the marginalised, of other faith communities and of people of no faith to live and to express themselves freely. For Churches to achieve this *rapprochement* with society they must abandon their attitude of self-righteousness and arrogance; they must listen to the other who might be diverse, instead of lecturing and stop demonising the different as heretical. Unless Christians decide to celebrate together the death and rise of Jesus Christ entering in a process of reconciliation and widening their solidarity to every human being, they shall remain fragmented into various sized groups mutually opposed or indifferent to each other, incapable of sharing the beauty of life given by God.

It is clear after all that racism and injustice come in total contradiction to Gospel's message; therefore, struggling against racism means fighting in favour of peace and social justice, since peace between the oppressor and the oppressed cannot exist as long as oppression continues.

Consequently, Churches must re-discover their common diakonia to the poor, the suffering and the weak of the world as a manner to unity proving while they maintain the same apostolic faith, they break the same bread, and they proclaim the same Gospel. John the evangelist placed the issue of unity right at the centre of Church's life; unity among Christians will verify Jesus' message sent by God the Father, while disunity will prove the Church to be untrue towards Jesus calling.³⁴ Without communion, there will be no common future for Christianity; instead, Churches will be replaced by ideologies or by indifference.

34. M. Kinnamon, *Towards Visible Unity – Commission on Faith and Order, Lima 1982, Faith and Order Paper No. 113*, WCC, Geneva 1982, p. 123.