The ethical guidelines proposed by the Ecumenical Movement during most of this
century, manifest a clear awareness of the prevailing character of the modern
culture. J.H. Oldhams, who was General Secretary of the International Missionary
Council, and who became an active participant of the Life and Work Movement,
can be considered an emblematic personality, with strong Christian conviction and
at the same time conscious of the challenges that modern culture put to Christian
faith. His influence was dominant in the work of Church and Society of the World
Council of Churches (WCC) and through it also upon other ecumenical
programmes like the one to Combat Racism (PCR) and Participation in
Development (CCPD). A particular feature of the modern culture is the belief and
intention to build a more just and human society in history. In the Ecumenical
Movement this thrust was understood as the imperative to witness the justice of
God through actions aimed at a responsible society, which also became later
“participatory”, “sustainable” and “solidarious” with the victims of injustice.
These goals were understood in historical terms, as it is characteristic of
modernity.

By the end of the present century there is a strong feeling about the crisis of
modernity. Injustice has not declined, individualism prevails, solidarity loses
ground, sustainability is a fashionable concept but there are not too many who
want to translate it into political programmes, and there is also a growing
sentiment that “the reign of freedom” cannot be achieved in history. Events in the
last decade point up that we are living a period of transition. However, the
changes which are being introduced in history are not always those which were
expected. They are changes which confirm the feeling that crisis is there and that
humankind has not the will to overcome it. Thus, we are installed in the crisis.
We live with an awareness of crisis.

I want to mention some elements of this crisis that we are living.

First, accelerated changes are being implemented in human life styles through
the introduction and impact of new technologies of information. The rhythm of
life is speed-up. The operational logic becomes more and more binary, according
to the computers’ programmes. That is: it is a logic of “take it or leave it”;
adjustment or exclusion. Those who make the necessary changes for adjustment
have a place and a chance in the system. Others who cannot, or don’t want to pay
the price, are “out”. “The market” has become the place where this systemic
logic is most clearly seen. The ideology of the "free market" has made an idol of this artefact which characterizes modern economy. Today, it seems as if the most important laws for human beings are the laws of the market. Almost all values of human life are dominated by market requirements.

Second, it is necessary to say that domination does not mean that all people become subordinated and accept market's imperatives. There are many who resist this logic of domination and exclusion through which is manifested the nature of the prevailing system. To say it in other words: there are many (although they are not a majority) who resist exclusion practices and proclaim the need of a more inclusive organisation of society. If the system tends to become closed upon itself (in a movement which some denounce as "a totalitarianism of the market")¹, those who resist against the system introduce in reality disfunctionalities which intend to point up to the need of a new social order: more open, just, inclusive and human. That is, an order where freedom is not reduced merely to the realm of the market.

This is the case of what Immanuel Wallerstein calls "the anti-systemic movements".² By the way, here we can perceive one of the significant transformations that we live in this transition period, because the "classical" anti-systemic movements of the XIXth century and the first half of the present one (the social movement and the nationalist movements) have become little by little more integrated in the system. New anti-systemic movements have emerged, denouncing the injustices and inherent contradictions of the system: the movements that promote and defend human rights (civic and social), the feminist movements, the anti-racism movements, the environmentalist movements, and even some religious movements who — in spite of their natural ambiguity — also claim for systemic changes. These agents of resistance against the system introduce disorder within the systemic order. Doing so, they contribute to keep the system open. They are bearers of hope in our time.

Third, the nature of the changes that we are talking about is such that patterns of thought and tools of analysis which we used up to fifteen years ago in order to give account of the reality in which we participated, seem to become old. Reality is experienced now as more complex, and new ways to approach it are highly needed. Therefore, a new paradigm is necessary to understand the world where we live³, because if we continue to work with the traditional paradigm, we run two great dangers: one, that we shall not be able to understand the new realities of this world in transformation. The other, that we shall propose actions to be undertaken in order to face the problems that we live, which are grounded in analysis and interpretations which don't belong to present realities, and