

World Religions, the Earth Charter, and Sustainability

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Abstract

This article argues the global environmental crisis shows the need for a broad, inclusive definition of sustainability. It shows how religious traditions can help contribute to broader definitions, and describes how work from the field of Religion and Ecology has developed resources. It argues that the next step for the study of Religion and Ecology is to address sustainability, and then proposes that the Earth Charter provides an orienting framework for that engagement of religion and sustainability.

key words: Religion and Ecology, Earth Charter, sustainability

The complex nature of our global environment crisis is increasingly evident as weather patterns are becoming more severe, as species are becoming endangered and going extinct, as non-renewable resources such as oil are being wantonly used up, as forests and fisheries are being depleted, and as water is becoming polluted or scarce. The large-scale problem of climate change is now more visible to a larger public, while the massive extent of species extinction still remains invisible to most people. Yet these two global challenges suggest that our burgeoning population and industrializing presence is altering not only the face of the planet and its climate, but also the process of

natural selection itself. Which species will live and which will die are now in our hands. This is because in the twentieth century we exploded from two billion to six billion people and increased the pace of economic development beyond the boundaries of what is sustainable.

As the developing world attempts to raise its standard of living with unrestrained industrialization and rapid modernization, there is an inevitable impact on the environment and natural resources. The result is that severe pollution of water, air, and soil is becoming more widespread in places such as India and China. Similarly, the high level of consumption of energy and resources by the developed world is causing serious problems of equity and justice. The tension between environmental protection and economic development is thus a source of increasing conflict between the developed and developing world. Since the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in Rio in 1992 there have been a series of major UN conferences and negotiations to redirect the course of development to be more equitable and sustainable. Regretably, the worldwide increase in military spending, especially by the United States, means that less money is available for the pressing issues in the Millennium Development Goals regarding poverty and the environment (www.un.org/millenniumgoals).

Thus, the human community is still struggling to reinvent the idea of “sustainable development”. It is becoming clear that a broader definition is needed for more effective practice – one that integrates efforts at poverty alleviation with environmental protection. Many religious communities have been involved in efforts to mitigate

poverty, hunger, and disease, but now they are recognizing this cannot be done adequately without attention to the environment, which is deteriorating rapidly. Sufficiency of food, shelter, and health for humans will depend on a thriving biosphere to support life for the Earth community.

The litany of environmental and development problems is well known, but what is becoming ever more self-evident is that they cannot be solved by science, technology, law, politics, or economics alone. That is because we are more aware that environmental and development issues are, in large measure, social issues. Thus “fixing” the environment through technology or regulating development through legislation will not be sufficient. These are necessary approaches, but more is needed. We are being pressed to see the linkage between environment and people, between healthy ecosystems and healthy social systems, between environmental protection and poverty alleviation. The challenge, then, is to create whole communities, where humans are not dominating nature, but rather recognize their profound dependence on the larger community of life. In this spirit, economic growth needs to be redefined and a broader ethical perspective needs to be articulated so as to integrate ecology and economy. In short, new indicators of “progress” need to be developed. The world’s religions and the Earth Charter can play a role in this redefinition with an ethical articulation of a path toward a flourishing Earth community.

Neo-classical economic thinking has equated economic growth with progress, despite any harm to the environment. While this thinking drives our industrial

processes, economists are shifting, however gradually, to a realization that the environment can no longer be seen as an externality to be ignored. While profits have been the principle traditional indicators of economic growth, ecological economists are developing a new field of study and practice, pioneered by Herman Daly, Robert Costanza, Richard Norgaard, Hazel Henderson and others. They have formed an International Society for Ecological Economics (www.ecoeco.org). They are challenging models of economic growth and development along with conventional methods of cost accounting that disregard the environment. Thus, they are pressing economics to include, not only financial profit, but also environmental health and social well being. New measurements are being developed for this triple bottom line. This includes calculating “ecosystems services”, namely estimating the value of natural processes for assisting the human economy. Ecological economists have estimated that it would cost some \$33 trillion dollars to replicate nature’s services (Robert Costanza, Gretchen Dailey et al, “The Value of the World’s Ecosystem Services and Natural Capital”, *Nature*, 15 May 1997.)

In addition, the UN Global Reporting Initiative has been formed for measuring the environmental and social impact of corporations (<http://globalreporting.org>). The Equator Principles have been created by a Dutch banker, Herman Mulder, for guiding banks and financial institutions in their investments (www.equator-principles.com). The “ecological footprint” provides a similar opportunity for individuals or institutions to calculate their environmental impact in a variety of areas, including use of carbon. This method was first developed

by William Rees and Mathias Wackernagel and is now part of a broad international network (www.footprintnetwork.org). Religious communities have entered this arena through socially and environmentally responsible investments. Jewish and Christian groups have collaborated in forming the Interfaith Center on Corporate Responsibility based in New York (www.iccr.org).

In addition to the triple bottom line of economic profit, environmental health, and social well being, some people are suggesting that spiritual well being is also an important component of human flourishing. They maintain that the full range of human happiness includes a sense not only of physical health, but also spiritual well being and happiness. In fact, in Bhutan the Gross National Happiness Indicator has replaced the Gross National Product Index. Developed with Buddhist principles and supported by the King, this notion has gained a wider audience than Bhutan. It is based on a conviction that there is more to social cohesion and individual fulfillment than economic competition and profit making. The Happiness Indicator takes into account other factors. For example, personal spiritual cultivation is encouraged along with community building; the quality of life is seen as more important than the quantity of material possessions; non-material values, such as cultural and ecological integrity, are highly prized.

(www.grossinternationalhappiness.org) Because of this, along with many other projects named above, “progress” is being redefined as more than economic growth.

Thus, in discussing the topic of sustainability we may need a broader basis for analysis than simply “sustainable development”. That is because sustainable development

may still be viewed too narrowly as measured by economic indicators of growth. As defined by the Brundtland Commission report, *Our Common Future* (Oxford University Press, 1988), it is development that meets present needs while not compromising the needs of future generations. This ethics of intergenerational equity is a necessary criterion, but may not be fully sufficient. That is because while it emphasizes balancing environmental and economic growth, it does not always take into account the full range and interaction of human-Earth flourishing. Such a broad context may be enhanced by the contribution of the world's religions, both in theory and in practice regarding poverty alleviation and environmental protection. We may be able to draw on shared values as well as diversified practices of the religions. This can be done in relation to the Earth Charter, a major international document drafted in response to the needs for an integrated ethical framework for sustainable development. (www.earthcharter.org)

In terms of general principles and values that the world religions offer to sustainability discussions, they can be described as broadening the category of sustainable development to include past, present, and future concerns. In short, large-scale and long-term perspectives will be needed to envision sustainable ecosystems that have developed over billions of years, sustainable living for humans at present, and a sustainable future for all life. These correspond to the central concerns of the Earth Charter and the growing commitments of the world's religions to ecology, justice, and peace. They correspond to six key "values for human-Earth flourishing" shared by the world religions as they are being challenged to envision a

viable future for the Earth community. These values include: reverence, respect, restraint, redistribution, responsibility, and renewal.

These values for human-Earth flourishing were first identified as the result of a three-year conference series at Harvard on World Religions and Ecology from 1996-1998 (*Daedalus* “Religion and Ecology: Can the Climate Change?” Fall 2001). The conferences were intended to explore elements of the world’s religions that highlight human-Earth relations in scripture, in ritual, and in ethics. A major goal of the series was to begin a process of retrieving, reevaluating, and reconstructing the ecological dimensions of the world’s religions so as to contribute to a sustaining and flourishing future for the Earth community. Over 800 international scholars and theologians of world religions participated in the conferences that included the western religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam), the Asian religions (Jainism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Daoism, and Shinto), and Indigenous religions. Ten edited volumes were published by the Harvard Center for the Study of World Religions as a result of these conferences. A Forum on Religion and Ecology was formed at the culminating conference at the United Nations and the American Museum of Natural History in 1998.

Moreover, a major international website was created to assist research, education, and outreach in this area. The website provides introductions to the world religions and their ecological dimensions along with annotated bibliographies of the books and articles in English on this topic. It also identifies over a hundred engaged projects of

religious grassroots environmentalism. It contains a lengthy bibliography on religion and poverty issues. It includes educational materials such as syllabi, videos, CDs and DVDs (www.yale.edu/religionandecology).

One of the outcomes of the conference series at Harvard and the ongoing Forum work now based at Yale is the emerging alliance of religion and ecology both within academia and beyond. Over the dozen years since the conference series began a new field of study has emerged in colleges and secondary schools. Moreover, a new force has arisen within the religions from leaders and laity alike. Both the field and the force are contributing to a broadened perspective for a future that is not only sustainable, but also flourishing.

Within academia, religious studies departments are offering classes in this area; divinity schools and seminaries, focused on training Christian ministers, are including courses (www.webofcreation.org); and high school teachers have developed creative curriculum as well (www.rsiss.net.rsissfore.html). There are graduate programs being offered at Drew University and the University of Florida, as well as a joint Master's degree program in religion and ecology at Yale. Many environmental studies programs are encouraging the participation of religious studies and the humanities in what have been predominantly science and policy oriented programs. Moreover, a two-volume encyclopedia on religion and nature has been published and two academic journals have been launched. A Society for the Study of Religion, Nature, and Culture has been formed in the

United States and a Forum for the Study of Religion and the Environment has been created in Europe.

Within the religions, statements on the environment or on eco-justice have been released by the major world religions and indigenous traditions. Leaders such as the Ecumenical Patriarch, the Pope, and the Dalai Lama have spoken out regarding the urgency of these issues. The Patriarch, Bartholomew, has presided over six international symposia focused on water issues (www.rsesymposia.org). Rowan Williams, the head of the Anglican Church in England has written sermons on this topic (www.archbishopofcanterbury.org) and the US Presiding Bishop for the Episcopal Church, Katherine Jefferts Schori, has testified before Congress on the risks of climate change. Ministers and lay people are organizing projects such as fighting mountain top removal, educating children in ecology, conserving energy in the Interfaith Power and Light project (www.theregenerationproject.org). Many of these activities are depicted in the film, *Renewal* that features eight case studies of religious environmentalism across the United States (www.renewalproject.net). The Catholic nuns have been especially active in projects on sustainable agriculture and ecological literacy (www.sistersofearth.org, www.genesisfarm.org, *Green Sisters: A Spiritual Ecology*, by Sarah McFarland Taylor, Harvard University Press, 2007). In addition, the National Religious Partnership for the Environment has been working for fifteen years with Jewish and Christian groups in the United States (www.nrpe.org), while the Alliance for the Conservation of Nature in England has established

numerous ecological projects around the world (www.arcworld.org).

As this field and force has expanded there is a growing recognition from many quarters of the importance of the participation of the religions in environmental programs and concerns. For some years, for example, scientists have been asking for the religious communities to play a more active role in environmental issues. They recognize the large number of people around the world who are involved with religions. There are one billion Muslims, Christians, Hindus, and Confucians, respectively. They observe that moral authority has played an important role in many transformations of values and behavior, such as the abolition of slavery in 19th century England and in civil rights by Martin Luther King and other religious leaders in the United States and South Africa in the 20th century.

Moreover, scientists such as E.O. Wilson have called for an alliance between religion and science in a shared concern for the future of the environment. This was articulated in *A Warning to Humanity* in 1992 and more recently in Wilson's book, *The Creation: An Appeal to Save Life on Earth* (Norton, 2006). Similarly, the biologists Paul Ehrlich and Donald Kennedy have proposed a Millennium Assessment of Human Behavior (*Science* 2005). In addition, policy think tanks, such as Worldwatch Institute in Washington DC, have encouraged the role of religions. One of their principal researchers, Gary Gardner, has published a chapter on this topic in the State of the World report of 2003 and a book called *Inspiring Progress: Religious Contributions to Sustainable Development* (Worldwatch Institute, 2006). Moreover, the policy expert

and the Dean of the School of Forestry and Environmental Studies at Yale, James Gustav Speth has also called for the participation of the world's religions in his book, *Bridge at the Edge of the World* (Yale University Press, 2008).

It is now becoming clearer that a further step for the alliance of religion and ecology is in the area of sustainability. There are many significant movements within the sustainability field, namely:

- 1) sustainable development efforts internationally (United Nations Development Programme and United Nations Environment Programme)
- 2) overseas development efforts within governments such as USAID and aid programs of many of the European nations.
- 3) non-governmental organizations (NGOs), many of these are led by religious groups who are assisting the poor.

Traditionally most of the international and national efforts have operated within standard models of top down aid, often without sensitivity to local concerns or culture. This has frequently resulted in aid getting caught in government agencies or in corrupt bureaucracies and not effectively assisting people or projects in need. Traditional models of development favored mega projects such as dams for hydroelectricity and irrigation that uprooted millions of people. These include the Narmada dam project in India and the Yangtze dam project in China. Many of these projects lost funding from the World Bank because of concerns regarding environmental and social impact. Moreover, in the last two decades economic globalization has become so dominant that local cultures and traditional knowledge were often lost or put at risk. Cultural Survival was founded at Harvard by David and Pia Maybury-Lewis

to assist indigenous peoples around the world to protect their cultural heritage (www.cs.org). Helena Norberg-Hodge wrote a compelling description of local knowledge in Ladakh called *Ancient Futures* (Sierra Club Books, 1991). She and others have observed that the hope for trickle-down economic benefits to the poor from globalization have yet to be realized in many parts of the world.

Thus alternative models for development and sustainability have begun to emerge in the last few decades. All of these share an interest in local, small scale, community based, participatory processes and have a strong aversion to global, large scale, corporate based, top down processes that are economically driven toward profit alone. Some of the earliest studies in this regard were from the Chilean economist, Manfred Max-Neef, titled *From the Outside Looking In: Experiences in Barefoot Economics* and from the Berkeley ecological economist, Richard Norgaard, in his book, *Development Betrayed*. In 2004 *Alternatives to Economic Globalization* was published by the International Forum on Globalization (www.ifg.org) These alternative models of development and sustainability are being complemented by a vast array of eco-design, alternative technologies, renewable energies, and organic agriculture.

In this mix of programs and policies for sustainability that have emerged around the world, there is a growing recognition that cultural and religious values have a significant role to play in helping to shape a sustainable future. While religions have their problematic dimensions, including intolerance, dogmatism, and fundamentalism,

they also have served as wellsprings of wisdom, as sources of moral inspiration, and as containers of transforming ritual practices. Thus they tend to be both conservators of continuity and agents of change. Religions have always played this role of conserving and transforming, balancing the dynamic tension of continuity and change for cultures over long spans of time. Indeed, human cultures are profoundly shaped by this dialectic and civilizations endure by navigating the delicate balance between tradition and modernity. Moving too deeply into traditional ways leads to fossilization and fundamentalism, while going too far into modernity can lead to superficial and inadequate responses to change.

A central challenge of our present moment is to bring to bear the depths of the world's religious traditions into meaningful dialogue with modernity. Such an effort needs especially to be focused on the environmental crisis in its multiple aspects. This is a key task of religions to contribute to a sustainable future. It reflects the growing calls for spiritual insight and moral energy to be brought to bear in the discussions on sustainability. It is important to note that many significant groups focusing on sustainability are seeking just such intersection with values and ethics. These include Mikhail Gorbachev's Green Cross, which has sponsored a series of conferences on *Earth Dialogues: Is Ethics the Missing Link?* Also the Club of Rome (www.clubofrome.org) and the Tallberg Forum (www.tallbergfoundation.org) are interested in defining the moral boundaries and conditions for a sustainable future. Moreover, there was a significant effort made by the World Bank under James Wolfensohn to create a discussion with

religions around development issues called World Faith Development Dialogue (www.wfdd.org.uk).

Contributions of Religious Values and the Earth Charter

It is thus at a moment of immense significance for the future of life on the planet that the world's religions may be of assistance as they move into their ecological phase. The common set of values for human-Earth flourishing identified from the Harvard conference series on World Religions and Ecology can be seen as compatible with the ethical principles of the Earth Charter. Recognizing the complementary nature of these two may be a helpful framework for linking religion, ethics, and sustainability. This provides an integrating ethical context for the Millennium Development Goals.

The Earth Charter is both a document and a movement. It draws on scientific knowledge, legal principles, sustainability practices, ecological economics, the precautionary principle, and equity issues. In its decade long drafting process, it involved thousands of individuals and groups from around the planet and is the most inclusive civil society document ever negotiated. As a people's treaty it is a soft law document that is complemented by hard law of international covenants and laws. It has been endorsed by such international agencies as United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), the largest body of conservationists in the world. It is also endorsed by thousands of individuals and groups as well as by a number

of countries and cities. The implications for the application of the Charter is seen in the *Earth Charter in Action*, a book of inspiring stories from around the world – ranging from youth to civil servants and government officials (www.earthcharterinaction.org).

The Charter was drafted by an international committee chaired by Steven Rockefeller from 1996-2000. A distinguished group of international figures served as Earth Charter Commissioners for the drafting process and now an Earth Charter International Council guides the activities of the Charter. There is a Secretariat and a website based in Costa Rica at the University for Peace.

The Charter offers a comprehensive framework for revisioning sustainability as balancing the needs for economic development with environmental protection. It presents an integrated set of principles to guide our emerging planetary civilization that is multinational, multicultural, and multi-religious. It provides a platform for universal commitment to the flourishing of bio-social planetary life systems along with differentiated responsibilities.

The key components of the Earth Charter are: 1) cosmological context, 2) ecological integrity, 3) social equity, 4) economic justice, 5) democracy, 6) non-violence and peace. These six components of a sustainable future have their counterparts in the values for human-Earth flourishing that are shared among the world's religions as identified in the Harvard conference series. These values include: reverence, respect, restraint, redistribution, responsibility, and renewal. A planetary future that is “flourishing,” not simply “sustainable,” will be enhanced

by the six components identified by the Earth Charter along with these six values of the world religions. Such a framework that integrates values for flourishing of the world's religions with the central component of global ethics in the Earth Charter may be an important context for expanding sustainability principles and practices.

Cosmological Context

All cultures have been grounded in the stories they tell regarding the nature of the universe, the evolution of the Earth and of life, and the destiny of humans in this context. These cosmological stories provide accounts of the creation and evolution of life and the purpose of humans. As humans are currently trying to navigate their way between scientific accounts of evolution and the multiple religious stories of creation, the Charter articulates a broad, simple and inclusive sensibility that Earth is our home, our dwelling place.

This enlarged perspective of home may be a critical foundation for articulating a future that is both sustaining and flourishing. The Charter recognizes that we are part of a large family of life, including not only other humans but also other species. The interdependent quality of the Earth community is celebrated along with the fact that the conditions for life have been evolving for billions of years. "Humanity is part of a vast evolving universe. Earth, our home, is alive with a unique community of life. The forces of nature make existence a demanding and uncertain adventure, but Earth has provided the conditions essential to life's evolution."

Thus to speak of the broadest context for the flourishing of bio-social systems we need to be reminded of the cosmological, evolutionary story of life's emergence. The religious response to this is one of *reverence*, a quality shared by many scientists who are deeply inspired by their study of nature from cells to galaxies, enhanced now by powerful microscopes and telescopes. The intricacy and complexity of life is valued from both a spiritual and a scientific perspective. Awe and wonder become expressed through the shared experience of reverence.

Ecological Integrity

The broad context for a sustaining and flourishing future from the Earth Charter is preserving ecological health and integrity. Without such a basis for healthy ecosystems there can be no long-term basis for the continuity of human life. It is expressed succinctly in the Preamble: "The resilience of the community of life and the well-being of humanity depend upon preserving a healthy biosphere with all its ecological systems, a rich variety of plants and animals, fertile soils, pure waters, and clear air."

The response of the religious communities to this call for biological protection is the principle of *respect* for the rich diversity of life and the ecosystems that support life. Without such respect environmental exploitation will continue and we may irreversibly damage the ability of ecosystems to renew themselves. This is further spelled out in the Charter as protecting and restoring Earth's ecosystems, preventing harm through the precautionary principle, adopting effective patterns of production,

consumption and reproduction, and advancing the study of ecological sustainability.

Social and Economic Justice

The next section of the Charter highlights social and economic justice, which are also key concerns of the world's religions. The religious virtues of *restraint* in use of resources, as well as *redistribution* of wealth through charitable means, complements the Charter's principles. All of the world's religions encourage moderation in personal behavior as well as in the accumulation or use of material goods. In addition, the world's religions express a strong concern for the suffering of the poor and for inequality between the wealthy and those in need. Charitable giving is valued as a fundamental religious act.

The Charter calls for eradicating poverty, equitable development, gender fairness and non-discrimination regarding minorities and indigenous people. Thus justice is seen as balance of ecological, economic, and social factors. The term that many of the religions are using to describe this is "eco-justice" where biological and human health are seen as indispensable to one another. Indeed, preserving ecological integrity and protecting social and economic justice will require an integrated understanding of human-Earth relations.

In addition to restraint and redistribution, a broadened sense of ecological virtue is required. Women who do so much unpaid work to sustain their families, especially in developing countries, need to be valued and respected. The same applies for other minorities and for indigenous peoples who have preserved valuable environmental

knowledge in many parts of the world. While the religions still have a ways to go in recognizing the dignity and value of women and the communities of indigenous peoples, some progress is being made in this regard.

Democracy, Nonviolence and Peace

Finally, the Earth Charter recognizes that democracy, nonviolence and peace are necessary ingredients for a sustaining and flourishing future. From the perspective of the religious communities, democracy requires a fundamental sense of *responsibility* to future generations of the community of life - human and more than human. Nonviolence and peace encourage the *renewal* of inner and outer peace, something that the religious communities have tried to foster for millennia. Spiritual practices such as prayer and contemplation, yoga and tai ch'i, ritual and rites of passages have been developed to foster peace and non-violence for individuals and communities. Of course, it should be noted that nonviolence has not always been practiced, but it is one of the reasons why Mahatma Gandhi, Leo Tolstoy, and Martin Luther King are so widely admired. The principles in the section of the Earth Charter are: strengthening democratic institutions, promoting sustainability education, respecting animals, and promoting a culture of non-violence and peace.

Conclusion

This integration of the principles of the Earth Charter with the virtues for human-Earth flourishing of the world's religions provides a unique synergy for rethinking sustainability. Such a synergy can contribute to the

broadened understanding of sustainable development as including economic, ecological, social, and spiritual well being. This broadened understanding may be a basis for long-term policies, programs, and practices for a planetary future that is not only ethically sustainable, but also sustaining for human energies. For at present we face a crisis of hope that we can make a transition to a viable future for the Earth community. The capacity of the world's religions to provide moral direction and inspiration for a flourishing community of life is significant. The potential of the Earth Charter to create an ethical framework for sustainable development plans and practices is considerable. Together they may provide a comprehensive grounding for creating a common future.