



World Religions, the Earth Charter, and Sustainability

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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. Neo-classical economic thinking has equated economic growth with progress, despite any harm to the environment. 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.

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). 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).

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. Most religions 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.

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.

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.

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. A planetary future that is "flourishing," not simply "sustainable," will be enhanced by the six components identified by the Earth Charter along with the six values of the world religions. Such a framework that integrates values for flourishing of the world's religions with the cen-

tral component of global ethics may be an important context for expanding sustainability principles and practices.

This integration of these principles 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, programmes, 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.