



Faith Traditions and Sustainable Development

Rick Clugston

Rick Clugston (United States) is Project Coordinator for the Earth Charter Scholarship Project at the Center for Environmental and Sustainability Education at Florida Gulf Coast University. Dr. Clugston serves on the Earth Charter International Council.

Most people identify themselves as religious and/or spiritual, and for many, their faiths call them to live in ways that respect and care for all life, present and future, and to focus on being more, not having more, after basic needs are met. In the context of the ongoing global dialogues on sustainable development and education for sustainable development, religious and spiritual communities can play a critical role in advancing a strong framework for sustainable development that includes the spiritual dimension of life, and that contributes examples of educating for sustainable living.

UNESCO recognizes that faith communities have much to contribute to our understanding of sustainable development, and have been educating for sustainable living for many years, often centuries, before the concepts of sustainable development (SD) and education for sustainable development (ESD) were invented in our modern, globalized era.

Representatives of a diversity of faith traditions were invited to contribute to this publication. They were asked to respond to the following questions:

- *What are the linkages you see between your faith tradition and the concept and purpose of sustainable development? What are the most important values in your faith that connect to sustainability?*
- *How does your faith teach and communicate the vision of sustainable development? How can*

Education for Sustainable Development and the Earth Charter be part of those processes?

- *How do you see your faith tradition contributing to the transition to a sustainable world?*
- *What tools can your faith contribute to ESD? What tools from ESD can contribute to your faith?*

UNESCO is responsible for coordinating the United Nation's efforts to shape education for sustainable development, and serves as the Secretariat of the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (DESD). Their background material on ESD observes that "Education for sustainable development (ESD) is a vision of education that seeks to balance human and economic well-being with cultural traditions and respect for the earth's natural resources. ESD applies transdisciplinary educational methods and approaches to develop an ethic for lifelong learning; fosters respect for human needs that are compatible with sustainable use of natural resources and the needs of the planet; and nurtures a sense of global solidarity. ESD integrates concepts and analytical tools from a variety of disciplines to help people better understand the world in which they live." (UNESCO, 2010, "ESD in Brief.")

In her preface Mary Evelyn Tucker, points to the challenges and opportunities for religious traditions to bring their core values into our debates over sustainable development, emphasizing the common religious values of "reverence, respect, restraint, redistribution, responsibility, and renewal".

This introductory article is organized in the following sections:

1. faith perspectives on sustainable development;
2. examples of ESD from faith communities, including the uses of the Earth Charter; and
3. engaging effectively in bringing the spiritual dimension of sustainability into sustainable development policy and practice and into ESD

Faith perspectives on sustainable development

You will find here 17 articles from Indigenous Traditions, Abrahamic and Asian Religious Traditions. The authors of these articles describe the major tenets of their faiths which support sustainable development. They express similar understandings of the purpose of development and its core principles, such as the golden rule. They call us to recognize the integrity of creation/the interconnectedness of all and to respect and care for the community of life and future generations.

The following quotes illustrate these common values:

From his African Christian perspective, Yakubu notes that "Sustainable development is holistic, it encompasses four dimensions: social, economic, ecological and political. The nexus and inter-linkages between these four elements can be rendered intelligible in the context of the biblical idea of interdependence and the relationship between the body and its parts, which Apostle Paul described in 1 Corinthians 12:12-27. Verse 26 (NIV) says, 'If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honoured, every part rejoices with it.' "

Toh describes basic premises of Buddhism, including "dependent origination' which sees all things and phenomena as interdependent and arising from multiple causes and conditions is clearly consistent with the 'sustainable development' view of the 'environment' (including humanity) as comprising

interdependent dimensions and elements that interact mutually and are embedded in complex relationships of causes and effects. Recognizing this Buddhists feel and enact a deep sense of compassion and loving-kindness towards all other beings and parts of the universe. This empathy... motivates engaged Buddhists to act in ways that help alleviate or overcome the suffering, especially via actions designed to address the root causes of the ecological crisis."

Zabariah Haji Matali points out "There are numerous citations from the Holy Quran and the hadiths (sayings of the Prophet pbuh) on sustainability and the wise utilisation of natural resources. They all lead to the conviction that all elements, species, habitats and ecosystems are part of the perfect universe created by the Al-Mighty. Hence respecting the law of nature and all its components is an obligation of every Muslim, who by definition has 'surrendered' or 'submitted' himself/herself, body and soul, to the Creator."

Most of the authors are quite critical of the current development paradigm, and the values driving globalization. They emphasize that spiritually the materialistic and consumption oriented person both served and created by economic globalization-is a stunted and misdirected person, creating tragic social and environmental consequences by pursuing this false path to the good life. They stress the need for humility, awe and wonder, and responsiveness to a deeper dimension of existence that has created and sustains all that is, to quieting our desires and fears, to seeking to be more, not have more (wealth, power, control), and to living in a way that all can live.

Bishop Browning draws our attention to the "Christian belief that creation has set within it rhythms and cycles that cannot be abrogated by humanity without consequence. That we have endeavoured to replace such a cycle with our own is at the heart of our problem. Our cycle, colloquially

called '24/7', is essentially a cycle of productivity. Its driving force has become the fear of scarcity. Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is our measure of the rhythm's success. The irony is that we produce to increase our wellbeing, but increasingly the means (productivity) is making the goal (wellbeing) more elusive. The Christian values of harmony, wholeness, justice, wellbeing are all interconnected and relate back to the cycle we believe is set within creation and which we have abrogated to our peril.

Toh comments, that in Buddhism, the Four Noble Truths emphasize the necessity to overcome attachments or cravings, such as greed, ill-will and delusion, which if not transcended, fuel a continuing cycle of "suffering". This insight is most relevant to the problem of an unsustainable paradigm of "development" and "progress" reflected in the dominant over-consumerist and over-materialist economic, social and cultural order.

Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism have intermingled for centuries in China and each has influenced on the others. The three philosophies commonly emphasize respect for others, social harmony, and interconnectedness with nature and the earth, which are all in line with the concept and purpose of sustainable development. Another fundamental concept is that of the collective effort, rather than emphasis on the individual, which adds strength to the sustainable development call for global responsibility and global action. All three philosophies emphasize the importance of frugality and refraining from greed; i.e. 'being more instead of having more', which is also essential for sustainability. (Yunhua Liu and Alicia Constable)

The failure to place economics into the broader context of humanity's social and spiritual existence has led to a corrosive materialism in the world's more economically advantaged regions, and persistent conditions of deprivation among the masses of the world's peoples.... Society must develop new

economic models... furthering a dynamic, just and thriving social order. Such economic systems will be strongly altruistic and cooperative in nature; they will provide meaningful employment and will help to eradicate poverty in the world.... The ultimate function of economic systems should be to equip the peoples and institutions of the world with the means to achieve the real purpose of development: that is, the cultivation of the limitless potentialities latent in human consciousness. (Arthur Dahl-Bahai)

Examples of ESD from faith communities

Spiritual teachings from very different historical and cultural contexts emphasize that, in this world of death and suffering, ignorance, fear and desire- an individual can connect to the deeper, ultimate, radiant and caring source of all that is and live a full and enduring life. Most of these traditions offer a set of practices and ways of living that will awaken this connection and bring about justice, peace, and what we might now call sustainability in the world. The authors describe various activities related to education for sustainability, including social action campaigns, community development, and religious celebrations. Most of the examples below use the Earth Charter in their ESD efforts.

Sister Nagle describes basic principles of Catholic Social Teaching and their correlations with Earth Charter principles, describing a set of campaigns she is engaged in to practice these principles, such as stopping human trafficking and reducing the use of bottled water. Rabbi Amswych promotes a stable market economy based on a more direct relationship between producers and consumers.

Soka Gakkai International created the "Seeds of Hope: Visions of sustainability, steps toward change" exhibition which aims to provide a positive message without glossing over difficult realities. It stresses how all religions have messages relating to interconnectedness, environmental protection and sustainability, featuring quotes from different

traditions. It also stresses that sustainability is holistic, and not just about the environment. Examples of empowered individuals who have made a difference are shared, including those who have strengthened links in their communities.

The calendar of the Orthodox Church starts with a day of prayer for nature and earth, as it marks the beginning of the harvest season on the first of September every year. In the services of the church, there are prayers which ask God to grant us, our children, and our grandchildren for the continued provision of food, the protection of our climate, and a peaceful earth without war and crisis – all of which are connected to the goals of the Earth Charter. The Orthodox Church also regularly practices fasting, usually at the beginning of winter and the beginning of spring, seasons that are important in the life cycle of all creatures. This fasting is entirely vegan, eliminating all animal products, including dairy. The purpose of the tradition is to ask adherents of the faith to quit unnecessary lifestyles, and instead participate in sustainable lifestyles which both eliminate the gap between rich and poor, and strengthen the friendship between humans and nature.

Communities in Shangri-la, Diqing Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, have used the Earth Charter as a framework, linking it to their own knowledge and local Buddhist beliefs to create a community development plan, which involves the creation of a Community Nature Reserve. Students and teachers participating in the Water School for a Living Yangtze in Mianyang, Sichuan have been using the traditional Daoist deep respect for water as a way to explain the importance of sustainable water resource management to local communities. (Yunhua Liu and Alicia Constable)

At present, many Christians and churches have embraced the Earth Charter principles because they see in it, in a secular way, the biblical perspective of responsibility toward Earth and social justice

that is linked to ecological justice. In many base communities the decision has been made to deepen into sustainability education which implies a frugal and supportive use of all nature's goods and services, avoiding as much as possible the use of pesticides, encouraging family organic agriculture and promoting the utilization of all residues as ways of generating energy.

Engaging effectively in bringing the spiritual dimension of sustainability into sustainable development policy and practice and into ESD

UNESCO realizes that "Many, perhaps most, formal educational institutions, as well as many nonformal and media based educational/advertising enterprises, are not promoting ESD. Rather they are conditioning individuals to work for other ends, whether that is overconsumption or the promotion of fundamentalist and intolerant social projects."

Only a few of the authors touch on the many teachings and historical and current actions of religious and spiritual organizations that support unsustainability in all its forms. Mary Evelyn Tucker comments, "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."

Rabbi Soetendorp calls on us to collaborate to promote education for sustainable development "by incorporating concepts from different cultures and traditions such as Ubuntu, the 7th generation principle, the Earth Charter and the Charter for Compassion" in our various educational efforts. He is also taking the lead in a project focused on the "Spiritual Dimensions of Sustainable Development" which invites various faith communities to

contribute to advancing and deepening a global commitment to sustainable development through two major sets of activities:

Within our various traditions, we must:

1. recognize where our traditions and organizations have promoted violence, injustice and unsustainability;
2. commit to deepening our sense of empathy and interconnection with all our brothers and sisters and the whole community of life on Earth;
3. demonstrate sustainable living in our religious and spiritual communities;
4. educate ourselves to work effectively in development policy arenas, understanding the critical changes that need to happen in our economic and governance structures to create a flourishing future for all and
5. work together, serving as forces for good, by weighing in on the major international processes including Rio + 20, the UN Decade on Education for Sustainable Development and the realisation of the MDGs

We must also demand that our governments and international institutions:

1. affirm a framework of strong sustainability, such as the Earth Charter, as a guide to development policy and practice;
2. create a green economy that cares for future generations and genuinely internalizes social and environmental costs into the economic bottom line;
3. create structures for global governance with a global trusteeship mandate for Earth's common goods;

4. make good on commitments to MDG's, Agenda 21 and other commitments; and
5. acknowledge the importance of the spiritual dimension of sustainability-that after basic needs are met, life is about being more, not having more.

Conclusion

Tu Weiming challenges us: "The time is ripe for us to rethink the human in the 21st century. We are in need of a comprehensive spiritual humanism that is capable of integrating the four inseparable dimensions of human flourishing: self, community, Earth, and Heaven... Those who are musical to the sound of the Earth will guide us on to a new path of survival." And Marcos Terena reminds us "Modernity cannot survive as it is formed. It will not survive without the participation of traditional indigenous knowledge. How can we contribute? Back in indigenous lands we can still hear the song from the heart of the Earth, a song that comes from indigenous people's heart. A song taught to educate about our way of life and the spiritual respect for the Great Creator."

As the Earth Charter concludes in The Way Forward, "Let ours be a time remembered for the awakening of a new reverence for life, the firm resolve to achieve sustainability, the quickening of the struggle for justice and peace, and the joyful celebration of life. "