J. Ronald Engel, USA. A thematic essay on solidarity and kinship with all life

The Earth Charter Covenant

Ron Engel was a core member of the international drafting committee for The Earth Charter. Ron first became active in international work on behalf of global ethics in 1984 when he founded the Ethics Working Group (EWG) in IUCN (The World Conservation Union). Over the following decade the EWG grew into a network of several hundred persons from over sixty nations. As co-chair of the Ethics Specialist Group of the IUCN Commission on Environmental Law, Ron was able to exercise leadership in advancing the Earth Charter Resolution through the World Conservation Congress in Bangkok in 2004. Ron is currently Senior Research Consultant with the Center for Humans and Nature in New York and Chicago and Professor Emeritus at Meadville/Lombard Theological School of the University of Chicago.

On November 24, 2004, a large step was taken toward making the Earth Charter a covenant of the world community. The World Conservation Congress, representing over one hundred countries, meeting in Bangkok, Thailand, endorsed the Earth Charter and recognized it "as an ethical guide for IUCN policy." IUCN, an acronym for International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources, also known as the World Conservation Union, has over 1,000 member organizations from some 140 countries, including 77 states, 114 government agencies, and 800-plus national and international non governmental organizations.

I had special reason to vote for the Earth Charter resolution on November 24. My granddaughter, Helene, was born that morning. A few days later, on the Buddhist festival of Loy Krathong, I sent a candle-lit boat of flowers out on the canals of Bangkok; and I again thought of Helene, and the thousands of flickering lights on the water became symbols of all our world's children. It was an occasion to renew my personal covenant with life, a covenant that finds expression in the Earth Charter.

We humans possess a unique and terrible freedom. We are free to choose the unconditional rights and obligations that will govern the relationships to which we are bound – the covenants of our personal and collective existence. But our freedom is ambiguous. Anxiety tempts us to choose narrow forms of commitment, or to deny the reality and responsibilities of covenant altogether. Hence are born the ideologies of superiority, exclusivity, and exceptionalism that wreak such havoc in the world.

History takes the course that it does by virtue of the covenants that men and women, communities, and nations choose to honor. History is a clash and contest of covenants, and genuine cooperation among human beings, especially among those of diverse cultures, is an immense moral and spiritual challenge.

The Earth Charter stands in a long line of covenantal thinking that holds our most fundamental covenant to be a covenant with the creativity of life – variously called a primordial bond, a covenant of creation, or a cosmic covenant. Once we affirm our own life, we affirm all that life entails – our emergence from, our dependence on, and our impact upon, the whole evolving community of life. Therefore, it is our responsibility to honor and obey the conditions for life's continued flourishing, including the universal moral imperative to respect and care for one another that is written into the fabric of being itself. When, in endorsing the Earth Charter, "We pledge to join the global partnership for a just, sustainable, and peaceful world and to work for the realization of the values and principles of the Earth Charter,[1]" this is the covenant we are affirming.

Global ethics may be defined as citizens engaged in critical conversation about the covenants by which we live. The aim of these conversations is to make the covenants of our civilization more responsive to the life-sustaining relationships of our existence, more inclusive in their membership, more respectful and caring of the integrities of their members, and more holistic in their grasp of the multiple moral concerns that must be met for communities to thrive.

It was out of such conversations that the Earth Charter was written; and it was because of such conversations, held over many years, that the IUCN World Conservation Congress was led to endorse the Earth Charter at Bangkok. It is the only organization

with Observer status in the United Nations General Assembly providing expertise on the conservation of nature. Founded in 1948 to promote international cooperation on behalf of science-based conservation, it sponsored the consultations that resulted in such ground-breaking formulations of global ethics as The World Conservation Strategy (1980); The World Charter for Nature (adopted by United Nations General Assembly in 1982); Caring for the Earth (1991); and the Draft International Covenant on Environment and Development (Third Edition 2004).

To make the Earth Charter covenant a present and active reality in the lives of people, it is essential that the kinds of conversations held by the Earth Charter Commission and IUCN be held in as many of the world's communities as possible. The work of global ethics to advance the Earth Charter covenant has only begun, and the agenda of questions for discussion is long.

How can we reclaim the concept of "covenant" for the modern world? Two problems face us. On the one hand, covenant is often so closely associated with a particular religious tradition that it is inappropriate for public life. On the other hand, we are so accustomed to living by "contract," the notion that our obligations need extend only as far as our self-interest warrants, that the inevitable covenantal basis of social life is eclipsed. Yet, there is little hope that societies based on sectarian dogma, contract, or even an overlapping consensus on values, will ever have sufficient motivation to live in accord with Earth Charter principles.

Our present geopolitical situation removes all illusions that the Earth Charter is being carried forward by the tides of evolutionary advance to inevitable triumph. If "another world is possible,"[2] it will come because persons are grasped by the vision of the Earth Charter in the innermost core of their being and believe its principles are right and true in spite of the ravages of warfare, irrationality, oppression, betrayal, and death. This is the kind of covenant it will take to confront overweening power and engage in non-violent dissent. Is there a significant advance in human rights, environmental protection, economic justice, or peace that has not involved sacrifice by persons of principled commitment?

What are the sources of such covenantal faith? The Earth Charter answers: gratitude for the "gift" and "beauty" of life; "reverence for the mystery of being"; confidence that peace is right relationship to "the larger whole of which all are a part." We need conversations on global ethics that probe such spiritual depths if we are to find the understanding necessary for embracing a commitment as large as the Earth Charter covenant.

We have other questions to answer, practical ethical questions such as those that the World Conservation Union must now address as a result of its historic vote at Bangkok. What does it mean for the Earth Charter to be an "ethical guide for IUCN policy"? What does it mean for policy on climate change or for the new IUCN engagement with corporations and markets? What does it mean for biodiversity conservation and biotechnology, education, the elimination of poverty, population stabilization, and how we relate the "rights of the child" to ecological integrity?

I wish all my fellow American citizens could have been with me that evening in Bangkok. It might have broken down their fears of the rest of the world and opened them to a vision of global partnership. Many delegates representing American non governmental organizations at Bangkok took strong leadership roles at the Congress and supported the Earth Charter. Unfortunately, the seven United States Government delegates who were present voted against the Earth Charter resolution, as well as most other resolutions that involved international cooperation; and they declined to give any substantive reasons for their votes.

The Earth Charter includes a call to "the nations of the world" to "renew their commitment to the United Nations" and to "fulfill their obligations under existing international agreements." The present United States government has rejected this call and chosen instead the path of militarism. Yet, this is the country that hosted the United Nations and whose founding covenant, the Declaration of Independence, with its ringing affirmation of equal human rights and natural moral law, must be counted as one of the antecedents of the Earth Charter. American citizens have, not only a national responsibility, but a global moral responsibility to engage in prophetic global ethics and call our country back to its universalist covenantal traditions. Martin Luther King, Jr., faced with a similar dilemma at the time of the Vietnam War, called on Americans to reaffirm their commitment to non-violent global cooperation and the rule of law.

Global ethics is concerned not only for the comprehensive covenants of international and national life, but how these interlock with the covenants of our local communities. What is the meaning of the Earth Charter for the world's communities, especially the sprawling urban areas that are the primary drivers of economic globalization and inequality? What, for example, are its implications for a metropolitan region like Chicago where I live? This, in turn, requires asking what form of power and authority will best embody the principles of the Earth Charter locally, regionally, and globally.

The form of global governance envisioned by the Earth Charter is suggested by the Latin word for covenant, *foedus*, from which we derive the English word "federal." The form of power and authority that the Earth Charter covenant proposes for the world is a federal structure composed of equal confederates who freely bind themselves to one another in a common whole that retains their respective integrities. The communities of the world weave a complex global tapestry that combines autonomy and shared authority.

I had an opportunity in October 2005 to propose to the Chicago Earth Charter Community Summit that we hold consultations to write a "Chicago Charter" comparable to the consultations we held to write the Earth Charter. The challenge is to draft the covenant that this metropolitan region needs to make with itself if it is to create a just and sustainable life for its citizens, and, at the same time, fulfill its responsibilities to the rest of the world. The inspiration for the new covenant must come from the region itself, its unique geography, history and civic culture, and from the unique relationships it has to other specific places throughout the globe. One regional obligation we know we have is to stop polluting our aquifers. One global obligation we know we have is to treat the Great Lakes, the largest system of fresh water on the planet, as a sacred trust.

Lake Michigan is not the Mekong Delta, but all the waters of the planet flow together. The destinies of American and Thai children are not the same, but they are utterly interdependent. When I read the Earth Charter, I think of my covenant with Helene, and this land, and my family, and city and country, and with Thailand, and its land and people, and all the Earth. It makes a big difference in how I see the world and what I do with my life. ●

Notes

1 Earth Charter Endorsement Statement, http://www.earthcharter.org/endorse/
2 The slogan of the World Social Forum