

Speech at the Parliament of World Religions

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The 20th century which is ending in a few weeks has achieved a great deal in science and technology and in global development, but humanity, especially the Third World countries have paid a very heavy price. We have consistently ignored the dark side of development and we continue to do so. The Earth which is our home, and home to all living creatures, has been used ruthlessly and mercilessly and unsustainably. The very existence of life on Earth is at stake. We must reverse this trend if life on Earth is to continue.

The Earth Charter is an attempt to reverse this trend. The Earth Charter, we hope, will be a turning point in our history.

We live in a world which has obsessive preoccupation with growth and unlimited confidence in new technologies. Modern technology has been responsible for our disappearing forests, disappearing rivers and wet lands, disappearing bio-diversity, disappearing fossil and mineral wealth, and increase in deserts, arid lands and wastelands. We have pursued the philosophy of the cancer cell which grows and expands on its host eventually killing it. We too are behaving like the cancer cell killing the Earth with our expanded economic growth.

The Earth Charter has become necessary if we are to survive. It recognizes the crisis not only in our economic growth and in our consumerism, but also requires crisis in our social, moral and spiritual life. The confidence that the scientific method is the only valid approach to truth and knowledge is changing.

The Earth Charter provides the vision, the spiritual and the ethical basis, the direction and limits of the scientific and technological change; it helps in having a holistic, an ecological and an ethical view of knowledge—a view which in many ways is similar to those of mystics and of spiritual religious people.

The Earth Charter holds the Earth as sacred as did the belief systems of indigenous people, and of Hindus, Jains, and Buddhists. They treated the Earth as sacred and did not exploit nature without concern for its well-being, for its sustainability.

As Gandhi said the Earth has enough for our needs but not enough for our greed. If we are concerned about sustainable development, about poverty and equality, about violence and crime and wars, we must turn to Mahatma Gandhi, a man of deep spiritual, moral and ethical values, as also a man of action, who could transform millions and lead a non-violent Revolution. If we are to save the Earth and move towards a sustainable future we have a great deal to learn from the Mahatma.

Gandhi's method was 'satyagraha' – the literal meaning being 'holding on to truth'. Essentially 'satyagraha' is a moral principle, converted into a method to fight for social and political justice.

In everything that Gandhi did he introduced the spirit of religion in politics. When he was asked whether he was a saint or a politician he replied “I could not be leading a religious life unless I identified with the whole of mankind, and that I could not do unless I took part in politics.

If the General Principles of the Earth Charter are to be achieved and transferred into action the action must be religious, spiritual and political—as Gandhi's was. We will have to apply Gandhi's principles of Truth and Non-Violence if the Earth Charter is to be won for humanity.

In the Earth Charter, we propose a new paradigm of development, a people-led development, a development which is pro poor, pro nature and pro-women.

Like Gandhi we must practice what we preach. If Gandhi was concerned about the poorest of the poor, he adopted a life style reflecting his constituency. “If I come in my loin cloth”, he said, “it is because I represent the half starved, half naked dumb millions of India.”

To change the world we must start with oneself. We need an inner conversion. Gandhi had said, “My Life is my Message”. In the Earth Charter too, if we want it to become a reality, we must say 'My Life is my Message'. Can we do it?

Ultimately, the Earth's sustainability is based on deep spiritual and religious experience. It is appropriate that the Earth Charter becomes a living part of the proceedings of the Parliament of World Religions.

The Earth is sacred and spiritual and needs to be treated as such.

In India we have Vedic hymns dedicated to the Earth, which have been recited and sung over the centuries, for at least three thousand years or more. The Earth Charter too needs our dedication and our commitment as the Vedic Hymns do, and I promise it will change the world.

We must treat the Earth as sacred, with respect and compassion, and use it only as sustainability allows us.

Like the Gita, Bible, or the Quran or whatever holy book you follow, the Earth Charter too requires serious consideration, re-reading, re-interpreting, and meditation for it will help us to reconnect with what our cultures consider sacred and spiritual. We need to weave the Earth Charter around our own living traditions, our values and our concepts of sacredness and spirituality.

If the Earth Charter is to progress and if humanity is to progress then Gandhi and his thinking, and his emphasis on Peace & Non-Violence is inescapable.