The Earth Charter, Globalization and Sustainable Community

Larry Rasmussen
Union Theological Seminary, New York City
SCE Panel: "The Earth Charter and Christian Social Ethics"
January 2001

The dream of a common earth ethic and the unity of humankind is a hoary one, at least as old as the Hebrew prophets, Confucius, the Buddha, Plato and Jesus. That should surprise no one since religions themselves, and ancient philosophies, and the primordial visions of first peoples have consistently staked out an audacious claim for "community," one sufficiently generous to include not only the neighbors (at least those I like) but Earth as a whole, indeed the cosmos in toto. Creation as a community has been not only the dream, but the claim.

Humans dream these dreams because community that surpasses answers to restive stirrings deep within our little creaturely souls. Indeed, religion and ethics may well arise from yearning to align our lives with an order that outstrips them, an order attuned to the same powers that flung the stars and planets into their orbits, and an order in which we are truly home to the universe itself.

In our time the old dream has found concrete realization in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, posited as it is on the notion of universal human dignity and endorsed as a common moral standard and instrument for all peoples everywhere.

The Earth Charter Movement and the Charter itself belong to the deep tradition of this dream of earth as a comprehensive community guided by a shared ethic. There are a couple new twists, however. The most remarkable one, at least for the wee children of modernity, is to consider the whole community of life the bearer of moral claims and to render the ethics of homo sapiens derivative of Earth's requirements. "Respect Earth and life in all its diversity" is the fundamental principle of the Earth Charter. It is in fact the parallel of human dignity, or respect for every human life, at the base of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

But the parallel hides a moral revolution. The fabled "turn to the human subject" of modern Western ethics–a turn underlying modern psychology, philosophy, economics, politics, and the science and technology of the industrial paradigm itself, and the turn as well that issued in the notion of human rights itself–this is the turn rejected by the Earth Charter and its moral world. The language is mild and careful and never very confrontational, but the Earth Charter is an assault on the institutionalized anthropocentrism of reigning practices and their morality. Even to say "humanity is part of a vast evolving universe" and to view Earth as a remarkable niche in that universe, and alive, because it is the bearer and sustainer of a unique community of life, is already to invert the orientation of prevailing ethics. In fact, the very moral universe that gave us universal human rights does not accord well with the Earth Charter ethic. The Earth Charter wants to de-center the sovereign human self (historically, an androcentric and white Western self) who is the moral legislator and whose very notion of freedom rests in

giving ourselves the laws we live by. But the universal rights tradition combines the rightful assertion of human dignity as the norming norm with a practical and deeply institutionalized morality of the sovereign human subject as legislator over all else. The Charter does not accept this.

Let me cite another instance of how far the Earth ethic of the Charter is from the present, dominating moral universe. Cosmologies now emerging in science, namely ones in which the web of life spreads out to embrace distant galaxies and all 13-15 billion years of the epic of evolution, have little place in our moral sensibilities and habits. Most of us still regard ourselves morally as an ecologically segregated species. So we moved more rocks and soil and water in the 20th century than did volcanoes and glaciers and techtonic plates, and we altered the thin envelope of the atmosphere more in that time than all humans together in previous and far longer stretches of time. Yet none of it registered as a profoundly moral matter, much less a moral crisis.

In sum, the Earth Charter is trying to line out what Earth as Earth community means for ethics. In moral theory it means de-centering the sovereign human self and in practice it means re-doing the world created by that self–in the words of an earlier draft that are now omitted, "reinvent[ing] industrial-technological civilization." This primacy of Earth community for ethics–or a communitarian understanding of nature and society together, with the economy of Earth basic to all–is the new twist, at least for the modern era.

The other remarkable fact quality of the Earth Charter is its genesis and generation, the drafting process itself. The Charter initially failed. It was to be the international product of nation-state negotiations climaxed at the Earth Summit in Rio, 1992. That did not happen. The Earth Charter Commission, gifted with remarkable leadership, then decided to re-launch the effort as a civil society initiative. That grass-roots participation by communities and associations of all kinds resulted in "a people's treaty." It is not a true "treaty," but there is a call for its endorsement by the UN General Assembly in 2002 as a "soft law" document. And its own drafting has been done in coordination with a "hard law treaty" underway as "The International Covenant on Environment and Development." In any event, at this point the Charter is much more an inspirational document for a developing global consciousness and an educational tool and guide for action in many quarters–government, business, civil society.

My point about genesis and process, however, is the Charter's rarity among time-worn efforts at a global ethic. Few have been generated from the bottom up, or more precisely, from high levels of participation cutting across virtually all sectors of society, with a determined effort to include historically under-represented voices. Past efforts at an earth ethic were far less representative than this one, and to my knowledge none were carried out by way of a democratic consultative process this open and with this much revision over time. It is a remarkable instance, made possible in part by electronic globalization, of what in fact may be an emerging global society tuned to local communities and bio-regions as well as to myriad forms of expertise. These two qualities, then, should get the attention of Christian ethics today–the Earth Charter Movement's high levels of representation and agency in the effort to realize the ancient dream of an Earth ethic, and

the Charter's assumed and proposed moral universe, with respect for the full community of life as foundational.

What brought this on? Is this trip truly necessary? Changes in moral practice and habits of mind are usually compelled by altered material conditions, whatever our deep and lasting yearnings. And conflict is always present, and part of moral contestation. So what is compelling here and where will be rubs be, if in fact the Earth Charter is significant in the ways just mentioned?

What brought on such as the Earth Charter Movement has been laid out by different people in different ways. Theodore Roszak says that ecological problems cannot "be fully solved, if at all, by the nation-state, the free-trade zone, the military alliance, or the multinational corporation." These "awkwardly improvised human structures" are powerful, but they aren't up to the task of addressing their own macroconsequences spread across a humanly dominated biosphere. Some kind of reinvention of inner and outer worlds together is necessary.

Lester Brown's take is that we are looking at the need for an environmental revolution of an order of magnitude that matches the agricultural and industrial revolutions, and necessarily transforms them at the same time. Like the agricultural revolution, the environmental revolution will also dramatically alter population trends. But whereas the agricultural "set the stage for enormous increases in human numbers," the environmental "will succeed only if it stabilizes population size" in ways that establish "a balance between people and nature." And in contrast to the industrial revolution, "which was based on a shift to fossil fuels," the environmental will have to shift away from them, on some other base. (I add that human beings, in order to arrange their own habitat by way of these revolutions and others, have always transformed eco-systems by simplifying them. That simplification is at the heart of both agriculture and urbanization and will, I suspect, continue, since the rest of nature is immensely more complex and dynamic than we can reckon. The most complex human system, to remember a comment by Peter Raven, is to the rainforest as the squeak of a mouse is to the history of music. But now our simplifications must of needs be done with a view to preserving, indeed enhancing, bio-diversity itself.