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# CHAPTER 14

## THE EARTH CHARTER TO INSPIRE GOVERNANCE IN MODERNITY

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### 1. The Responsible Society

From the very beginning of the World Council of Churches (WCC) in 1948, the concept of a 'responsible society' has played an important role. It reflected the ethical attitude required in view of the needs and shortcomings in society and to act accordingly. My compatriot Cardinal Willebrands, who became so famous for his ecumenical efforts, very much contributed to the notion of a 'responsible society'. For him this principle also guided his important work with the World Council of Churches.

In the language of more recent times the plea for a "responsible society" is reflected in the call for ethics to underline the decisions that we take in all spheres of political activity, from the economy to peace and security. The emerging concept of corporate social responsibility, increasingly embedded in the practices and policies of the private sector, is a very tangible manifestation of the plea for societies to be more responsible.

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What has become clear is that governance by governments alone cannot create responsible societies. They need business and civil society to participate in the development and implementation of rules. It is the emergence of a new concept of “shared or participatory governance” which provides so many exciting opportunities for elevating the importance of ethics.

## 2. Modernity

For a very long time modernisation was considered to be achieved by the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment was about the triumph of the natural sciences, all the way from Copernicus and Galilei to Einstein. It was also about the modernisation of economy, the political economy as conceived by Adam Smith, the Wealth of Nations, all the way to econometrics, and eventually the triumph of market-economies above planned economies. Market-economies all over the world seemed to be the ultimate of Enlightenment.

Politically, it was about the American and French Revolutions. It was about the development of a new political order, the implementation of the Trias Politica, from the peace of Westphalia. Since then it was all about states and national sovereignty.

The next step involved the establishment of the United Nations, the end of colonialism and the vesting of sovereignty of all peoples according to democratic principles. It was above all about promoting the rights of the individual, the emancipation and empowerment of people. Together, all these interrelated dimensions represent the Enlightenment. And for a long time the goal to realise the ultimate of Enlightenment all over the world seemed to be the ambition to pursue. However, we now witness modernity as going beyond Enlightenment, which was very much about the eternal pursuit of developing secular society; or more precisely as an continuing, developing society because it was more and more secular. What is there beyond Enlightenment?

### 3. The Development of the Post-Secular Society

Recently, the famous philosopher Habermas gave a speech on the post-secular society. The title was intriguing. Firstly, because it suggests that at one point society was indeed secular, and secondly, because it implies that society today is no longer secular. The Nexus Institute in Tilburg was privileged to have invited Habermas, now at a ripe old age, but just as sharp as always, to deliver this lecture on the post-secular society. I was privileged to be in his audience. Habermas made it clear that in modernity one has to find a symbiosis between the secular and the religious.

He criticised secularism for opposing the religious dimension of life, while at the same time making it clear that the secular dimension continues to be important. Indeed, the religious and ethical dimension has to complement the secular. There are several reasons for this.

Continuing secularisation alone “empties” humankind of values and identity. This is the outcome of a process of exaggerated individualisation and the economisation of daily life. In modernity, this era of globalisation draws businessmen, politicians and journalists into a ‘Bermuda triangle’ of short-term interests and actions:

- business feels a pressure to quarterly or semi-annually publicise profits thereby compelled to make short-term strategical and business choices, which discount the planet and disregard basic human needs;
- politicians seem to think that only plans that can be realised within their term/electoral cycle are worthy of pursuing;
- since the media presently is business, the news has to be sold, and news sells when it is sensationalist; when it highlights one-liners, rather than presented by objective and balanced perspectives.

This is what I mean by the Bermuda triangle of the short-term. Besides this exaggerated short-term thinking, there is the temptation to claim a certain civilisation to be superior. Given the power structure after the Cold War this seemed to be the American way of life.

Against this backdrop, individuals are searching for a sense of their identity, for values to guide their daily lives, for a greater sense of harmony and a place for spirituality. As a result, religion and spirituality are enjoying a resurgence, and rightly so. However, it is useful on the occasion of this 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the World Council of Churches to look back and reflect on several important milestones.

#### 4. Two generations ago

Let me take you back to 1941. In that year, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt delivered his Four Freedoms speech to convince the American people that the time had come to participate in the Second World War to fight fascism. In one way, the phenomenon of the World War – and this was already the second one – indicated a globalising world. Roosevelt formulated four freedoms:

- The Freedom of Expression;
- The Freedom to worship God; each in its own way;
- The Freedom from Fear;
- The Freedom from Want.

And every time he added with his sonorous voice: “All over the world”. It is significant that this address was about values; not about vital interests of the USA. The message was a profoundly ethical one. Roosevelt urged the American people not to retreat from the mission to defend the four freedoms. A few years later, the four freedoms were key in a comprehensive effort to formulate and agree upon the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The Declaration cannot be understood without the context of not only overcoming the Second World War, but to also overcome the colonial era.

All peoples, all countries, deserved their own nation, their own sovereignty. Colonialism had to come to an end and all the sovereign nations, the old – sometimes colonizers themselves – as well as the new ones – often colonized peoples – should work together in the United Nations. Yet, each government of these sovereign states should respect the human rights vis-à-vis their own citizens. Even when they were democratically elected, they should not disregard their human rights whilst exerting power in the interest of the sovereign nation democratically entrusted to them.

## 5. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)

The UDHR, now sixty years old, has fulfilled a large role in guiding the behavior of sovereign states all over the world. Civil society created the NGO Amnesty International to report on the human rights performance of governments. The reporting efforts of international media and specific initiatives such as the World Press Photo also contributed to the development of mounting pressure on governments to observe human rights obligations. In the Roman-Catholic Church it was *Justitita et Pax*.

At the same time there was also criticism of the UDHR, which was considered too Western in its approach; too focused on the rights of the individual. There is no doubt that the UDHR was an important offspring of the Enlightenment in which the recognition and empowerment of the individual as individual had come to be recognized as paramount. Another shortcoming of the UDHR proved to be the phenomenon that those who were in power in order to protect themselves claimed the right to prioritise the vital interest of the State. Political leadership – and that is always about individuals being in power – claimed that it was sometimes needed to prioritise the control of power above human rights.

Many violations of human rights occurred in the name of the State, because of interests which were considered vital by those who were in power, vital for the State. For a long time one thought that this phenomenon was the consequence of totalitarian regimes or failing democracies, but more recently it became clear that even a large and seasoned democracy as the USA might violate human rights, as if for example terrorism justifies the violation of human rights. This makes the UDHR even more important and therefore let us continue to acknowledge this important achievement of civilisation.

## 6. Not only sovereign states; not only the UDHR

Modernity, in this era of globalisation, is no longer a world comprised only of sovereign states. Fukiyama called the end of the Cold War the overcoming of communism/socialism and the triumph of market-economy all over the place, the “end of history”. Nowadays, we know it

was not; but it is true we have entered a truly new phase in history. Soon after this “end of history” the world became confronted with the anti-globalisation movement. They argued that the free flow of capital, of “direct foreign investment” all over the world, would result in a race to the bottom.

Their theory was understandable. Developing economies relied on foreign investment to fuel their economic growth. Confronted as they were with the reality of a global capital market, they would become overcautious, choosing not to enforce higher labour and environmental standards in order not to jeopardise the flow of capital to their countries. They had a point.

In a world where multinational companies would respect the laws of each country in which they operated, the profits might be expected to be higher there where regulations were the most “capital-friendly”. Thus leading to a “race to the bottom”.

### **7. From the “race to the bottom” to “best practices”**

However, this understandable anti-globalisation thesis did not take into account another consequence of globalisation, caused by the development of information and communication technology. When we think back, we remember Silicon Valley as the icon of technological development; from telephone to fax, from computers to emails, from the internet to mobiles; ICT really did become a revolution. It connected the world; it changed citizens, humankind and its institutions.

The anti-globalisation movement embodied the concerns and the anger about the overruling forces of corporate capital taking possession of the world where profits and greed would be fuelled by a race to the bottom. Indeed to a certain extent it happened and continues to happen, but at the very same time the ICT revolution resulted in a number of important consequences. NGOs became emailing societies. These non-governmental, non-profit institutions, aimed at social objectives, wanting to improve life, overcoming the down-sides of capitalism of market economies *per se*, started to globalise as well.

While in the past multinational companies used to observe the laws of each country in which they were active, in modernity this no longer sufficed. NGOs, civil society, started to point out that deficiencies, shortcomings, social as well as environmental, could not be accepted just because national laws, in particular in developing countries, permitted them. NGOs in developed economies and democracies started to report globally. Child labour and environmental degradation were reported to and by the media. This was no longer a cry out against governments; it directly addressed the behavior of transnational corporations (TNCs). Moreover, these TNCs started to be affected by this new situation and started to change. How did that happen?

#### **8. From a public relations approach (pr) to “neutralise” civil society to “corporate social responsibility”**

In the beginning companies thought good public relations would suffice to overcome the pressures of civil society, but shortly after it became clear that in these globalising companies, the talented young executives, who proved to be the main intellectual capital of rapidly growing companies, no longer appreciated the fact that the companies for whom they worked were so severely criticised in the press. The simple remark of friends and family “Oh, are you working for that company?” became very effective in catalysing important changes within the companies.

Another factor which promoted change for the good was the very experience that adherence to higher standards than those enshrined in their legal obligations started to make companies more efficient and more profitable. Policies such as “zero-accident” and “zero-emissions” proved to result in overall gains in productivity and in lower risks. All this resulted in “ethical” mission statements and subsequently in social and environmental reporting.

So what has prompted fear for a “race to the bottom” now catalysed a world of “best practices” whereby companies would publicise their efforts in adhering to best standards and best technologies all over

the world. Of course economic realities – a non-level playing field in a world practicing market-economy all over the globe – still result in a considerable force hampering social environmental progress. Yet at the same time, modernity with its fundamentally different reporting and role of the media and civil society, together with the experiences of companies going for better practices, is creating a new situation.

Not long ago, going for “best practices”, going for corporate social responsibility, was considered a luxury; today corporate social responsibility and the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) is considered more and more to be “core business”, as a key condition to being a successful (global) company.

Above I wrote, in simplified terms, about the “race to the bottom” as vocalised by the anti-globalisation movements. However, what we see is a world of “best practices” becoming visible by mission statements aimed at ethical standards all over the world and global reporting of the implementation of these worldwide standards. Of course the battle has not yet been won. Time and again the tendency of business to exploit nature and to make profit from the suffering of powerless people is a sad reality, but at the same time there are more and more examples of truly corporate social responsibility – of best practices.

### **9. Complementary governance in modernity**

What has happened is that “governance” today has another connotation than in the past. The word governance was traditionally related to governments, to states and intergovernmental treaties. Today “the partnership of government, civil society and business is essential for effective governance”. I note this as a “parenthesis”, because the wording is a citation from The Earth Charter. The Earth Charter by its very name seems to be associated to nature and the environment. And so it is, but it is also about much more. I have already pointed out the enormous impact of ICT on the development of complementary governance, on the partnership of government, civil society and business in order to make governance effective.



## 10. Environmental awareness

Now it is time to point out the role of environmental awareness as it has developed. In the beginning of the 1970s, the groundbreaking report "Limits to Growth" was published by The Club of Rome. Using new computer technology, it highlighted the consequences if the economies of the poor, i.e. developing countries, would mature to the same level of the developed countries. These consequences were described both in terms of the environment and in terms of the depletion of raw resources. The consequences were so worrying that the title of the report became "Limits to growth".

On the one hand this report had an enormous impact, on the other hand it was quickly shelved as irrelevant. In relation to "depletion" it obviously underestimated technological progress. In relation to the assumption that poor, developing countries as China and India would catch up, it was considered unrealistic. Above all, the battle between capitalism and socialism still dominated the scene.

The "Limits to Growth" publication was by no means the first environmental manifesto. In the sixties Rachel Carson's "Silent Spring" had generated much attention in the United States as to environmental risk of a rapidly growing economy. "Silent Spring" gave birth to the green movement. Another important milestone was the 1972 United Nations Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm. And so it went on.

## 11. Our Common Future – Sustainable Development

In 1987, the Brundtland Commission published "Our Common Future". This title is a clear indication of a growing awareness. It articulated the concept of "sustainable development", defined as development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. With the development of the concept of sustainable development, increasing focus was directed to the worsening consequences of growing economies, both within and between countries. From polluted rivers and acid rains to the hole in the

ozone layer, which formed the catalyst for the Montreal Protocol, from the nuclear disaster of Chernobyl to the increasing loss of biodiversity, wetlands and nature. While Our Common Future saw technology as an instrument to attain sustainability, at the very same time the precautionary principle was developed; i.e. do not go for new projects and new technologies as long as there is (reasonable) doubt about the consequences for environment and nature.

## 12. Market economy all over the world

With the end of the Cold War, China, under the chairmanship of Xiaoping Deng had started to develop quickly. In 1992, two decades after Stockholm, the United Nations Conference of Environment and Development (UNCED) was held in Rio de Janeiro. It became a remarkable conference. In the aftermath of the demise of communism the message was about the importance of the market-economy and global economic development, as if the first, second and third worlds did not exist anymore. Yet, at the same time the presence of NGOs and indigenous peoples in Rio was impressive. They came to express their concern about the paramount importance of economic growth. This was about the environment and about nature. The UN and governments had prepared a blueprint for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, but the NGOs and indigenous people pointed out that a more fundamental choice was required: Awe and Respect for Nature and Ecology above Economy.

They made a plea for an Earth Charter; an idea that was already mentioned in Our Common Future and Maurice Strong, UNCEDs Secretary-General, promised to press for an Earth Charter. So it happened and shortly after, these efforts were merged with those of the Green Cross chaired by Michael Gorbachev. The Earth Charter Initiative became a movement. Along these lines the Earth Charter was created as an initiative of global civil society. It took more than seven years to produce the Earth Charter in 2000, in what has been called the most open and participatory worldwide process.

### 13. The Earth Charter

While the Universal Declaration of Human Rights addresses how government should behave vis-à-vis their citizens in respecting their human rights, in the Earth Charter the peoples of the Earth declare their responsibility to one another, to the greater community of life and to future generations. The sixteen principles are clustered into groups of four:

- Respect and care for the community of life
- Ecological integrity
- Social and economic justice, and
- Democracy, non-violence and peace.

These principles are preceded by a Preamble and followed by “The way forward”. This comprehensive approach makes it clear that the Earth Charter, though originating from concerns about the global environmental crisis, strives to inspire awe and respect for the Earth community. In the words of the Earth Charter’s preamble:

“To move forward we must recognize that in the midst of a magnificent diversity of cultures and life forms we are one human family and one Earth Community with a common destiny.

We must join together to bring forth a sustainable global society, founded on respect for nature, universal human rights, economic justice and a culture of peace.”

### 14. The Way Forward

“The way forward” asserts the importance of “the partnership of government, civil society and business as essential for effective governance”. It also, however, calls for a fundamental change of mind and heart. It requires a new sense of global interdependence and universal responsibility; “... we have much to learn from the ongoing collaborative search for truth and wisdom”.

The Earth Charter recognises important realities: “Life often involves tensions between important values. This can mean difficult choices. However, we must find ways to harmonize diversity with unity, the

exercise of freedom is the common good: short-term objectives with long-term goals.” “The way forward” concludes:

“Let ours be a time to be remembered for the awakening of a new reverence for life, the firm results to achieve sustainability, the quickening of the struggle for justice and peace and a joyful celebration of life.”

### **15. Complement the UDHR with the Earth Charter**

This year we celebrate the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This Declaration continues to be an important standard against which the behavior of governments towards their citizens is measured. However, the time has come to complement this UDHR with the Earth Charter. Just as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights provided an important set of parameters for the development of nations, the Earth Charter now leads the way; the protection of the earth’s vitality, diversity and beauty is a sacred trust in which we are all interconnected to each other and with the greater community of life, as well as with future generations. The need to complement in modernity is to strengthen and give guidance to the partnership of government, civil society and business. This partnership is essential for effective governance.

### **16. Spirituality has to be part of The Way Forward**

At the beginning of this article, I referred to an important speech given by Habermas. It is indeed remarkable to consider the extent to which spiritual thinking is embodied in the Earth Charter.

It is as if modernity is beyond Enlightenment, beyond individualisation and beyond entrusting the public cause to secular democratic institutions alone. Habermas makes a plea for a symbiosis; and rightly so. Yet, I would like to add to his thesis that a broader context beyond religion is needed.

Spirituality and spiritual movements have to be understood as equally relevant for the common good. Spirituality is blossoming in a world where people, planet and profit balance the importance of the market economy with corporate social responsibility and the Earth Charter complements the UDHR. We might even start to speak about the four P’s: People, Planet, Profit and “Pneuma”.

At a time when western civilization was based on the three monotheistic religions: Judaism, Christianity and the Islam, the Enlightenment highlighted the importance of maintaining a clear separation between “church and state” in order to protect the public interest. Let us be honest, that was in a wonderful way done by the creation of the Trias Politica, and later by the creation of the United Nations.

Even when today we know the weakness of states, the weakness of the architecture of international treaties and the weakness of the United Nations itself, we still desperately need to strengthen the rule of law where conflict and war have destroyed it. This is the more difficult because time and again all over the world corruption degrades democracies to the realities of greed. Again and again, we endeavor to strengthen transparency and accountability mechanisms in order to reduce corruption. It is thus for good reasons that Principle 13 of the Earth Charter reads: “Strengthen democratic institutions at all levels and provide transparency and accountability in governance, inclusive participation in decision making and access to justice.”

#### **17. Symbiosis of the political and the religious / spiritual dimension of life**

Still there is this need to forge a symbiosis between the political and religious dimensions of life and society. Yet, we have to be aware that this need is beyond the three monotheistic religions alone. It is a global need and there is the necessity to include spirituality. To paraphrase Habermas, we have to walk on two legs; Science and Religion, or rather Science and Spirituality.

Western dominance has claimed the word “Enlightenment” coming from the dark middle ages as a catch word for bringing humanity forward by science and providing the individual with more and more space. So people became more and more aware.

Eastern traditions recognise a divinity within nature and its capacity to restore harmony within ourselves by sublimating our ego. Reflecting on modernity may offer the observation that the “East” is now offering the enlightened “West” spiritual dimensions and practices. In this Eastern tradition, the spirit is set free not by decoupling the body, but on the contrary, spiritual exercises are very much about aligning the two.

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It is about listening to nature and enjoying prana. Spirituality is also about nurturing a reverence and awe for nature, for life and for all that lives. Spirituality is about narratives and the capacity to understand life and passion and joy in and by narratives. The narratives, in Zen Buddhism called koans remind us of the parables of the holy books of the monotheistic religions.

### **18. People, Planet, Profit and Pneuma**

The Earth Charter movement is a pro-globalisation movement. We, the People all over the globe, offer the Earth Charter to balance and complement democracies and market economies. Yet, modernity is certainly not only about information and communication technology and about the market-economy, it is also very much about the renaissance of spirituality all over the world by meeting each other and learning from each other, which has been made possible by communication.

Furthermore, it is also because humankind is becoming aware of the fact that we are all part of one human family, which in a tragic way is exhausting the very earth, the greater community of life to which we belong.

### **19. The collaborative search for truth and wisdom**

As the world becomes increasingly interdependent and fragile, we have much to learn from the ongoing collaborative search for truth and wisdom. The World Council of Churches has a great tradition in combining and harmonising diversity with unity. The World Council of Churches at this jubilee looks back on a proud history.

I chose to contribute to this jubilee by explaining why time has come to add the Earth Charter to the UDHR. The UDHR was in a way the ultimate outcome of the Enlightenment and the foundational ethical principle on which the United Nations was based. And now, in our post-secular society, the Earth Charter (EC) offers us a new dimension to complement this ever important UDHR document. The EC adds to this the notion of wholeness: that not only the pursuit of individual identity and individual rights versus the State are needed. Nation states, businesses and civil society also have an important role to play. The wholeness of nature, preservation of biodiversity, cultural diversity

of people and diversity of religions, existing with each other in peace and democracy have to be incorporated in our rethinking of our ethical values. All actors need to contribute and that is exactly what happened during the international consultations that produced the Earth Charter. I explained the need in modernity to pursue a form of complementary governance. The partnership of governments, civil society and business is essential to go for complementary governance.

Corporate social responsibility – and opportunities! – as well as local, regional and global civil society promoting the meaningful participation of all interested individuals and organisations in decision making will complement the political governance.

Yet beyond governance, as one human family and one Earth Community with a common destiny, we have to affirm faith in the inherent dignity of all human beings and in the intellectual, artistic, ethical and spiritual potential of humanity. It is gratifying that the Council of Churches in The Netherlands – after thorough consultations – endorsed the Earth Charter. The invitation to do so is also a global one, inviting the World Council of Churches to do the same. This is particularly crucial while the devil, *Diabolos*, the one who divides, is gaining force again.

## **20. Diversity instead of Superiority**

Those who believe in religion cannot blame the secular dimension of life even when the words security and terrorism are part and parcel of secular and democratic dimensions. Violence was, and is, all too often linked to religion and its tendency to claim superiority, even as far as legitimising violence; blessing the arms and sacralising the martyrs. Yet peace – as the Earth Charter describes it – “is the wholeness created by right relationships with oneself, other persons, other cultures” – and here I admit myself to add other religions – “other life, Earth, and the larger whole of which all are a part.”

Our cultural diversity and that of religions and churches is a precious heritage and each of them will find its own distinctive ways forward. The secular world will only be human if spirituality is practiced as well.