

“Teilhard’s Vision and the Earth Charter”

An essay prepared by Steven C. Rockefeller for a panel on
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It was in the early 1960s as a divinity student in the classroom of the Christian theologian Daniel Day Williams at Union Theological Seminary in New York that I first encountered the work of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. Williams’ theology drew heavily on the work of a number of evolutionary thinkers and process philosophers, especially Alfred North Whitehead. Like Whitehead Teilhard did his most creative work in evolutionary philosophy and theology during the 1920s and 1930s. This was a period that produced a number of highly creative evolutionary philosophers including Henri Bergson in France, Samuel Alexander in England, and John Dewey in the United States. They were all deeply influenced by science and the experimental method of knowledge, and they all sought in diverse ways—especially Teilhard—to harmonize science, philosophy, and religion in an effort to heal a major split in the modern psyche.

This essay has been prepared as a contribution to “The Spirit of the Earth: Global Ethics and a Sustainable Future,” one of a number of panels and events organized as part of a special commemoration of the life and thought of Teilhard. It focuses on the Earth Charter as an articulation of the emerging new global ethics and as a contribution to what Teilhard called “the formation of a veritable spirit of the earth.”¹

Teilhard views the evolution of life on Earth as continuous with the great evolutionary process that is the universe. Convinced that all evolution is an ascent toward consciousness, he regards the emergence of mind in humanity as a great step forward in the evolutionary process. Teilhard asserts that “the awakening of thought” and its development “affects life itself in its organic totality and consequently it marks a transformation affecting the state of the entire

planet.” In and through the process he labeled planetization, or what we today call globalization, the cultures and civilizations created by mind form above the biosphere a new layer that encircles the planet. Employing the Greek word for “mind”—*nous*, Teilhard calls this new “thinking envelope” the noosphere. With the development of the mind and noosphere, Teilhard argues that Earth becomes “the thinking earth,” evolution becomes conscious of itself, and “the spirit of the earth” begins to take form.²

To understand fully Teilhard's meaning it is important to recognize that he views mind as more than simply the power of discursive reason and scientific knowledge. Mind, he argues, includes something akin to Plato's *eros*, a passionate longing for the reunion of the separated and for the good, the true, and the beautiful. One can also say that for Teilhard the mind includes what in the Bible is called the heart. As a Christian mystic as well as an experimental scientist, Teilhard argues that God is at work in the world and the entire cosmic evolutionary process is driven by some elemental force seeking to bring the power of mind and love to self-awareness. Furthermore, Teilhard believes that as the noosphere takes form, the evolutionary process will achieve its deeper purpose only insofar as humanity is guided by both love and knowledge and succeeds in unifying the world and building in the midst of cultural diversity a just and peaceful planetary civilization.³

Teilhard defines love as “the internal propensity to unite” and states that: “Love alone is capable of uniting living beings in such a way as to complete and fulfill them; for it alone takes them and joins them by what is deepest in themselves.” He envisions humanity's “power of loving developing until it embraces the total of man and of the earth.” It is noteworthy that even though Teilhard's work was completed before the environmental movement emerged, in this statement love extends to the whole Earth community—to both people and ecosystems.

This is what Teilhard has in mind when he writes of “the spiritual renovation of the earth.” Since all elements in the universe are interconnected and interdependent, he rejects as “false and against nature” the idea that human beings apart from nature or some one fortified society of privileged people can find fulfillment in isolation. “The gates of the future” he argues, “will open only to an advance of all together”⁴

As Teilhard's comments on love suggest, ethical values have a critical role to play in the evolutionary advance of civilization. In addition, from the perspective of his vision of the unification of the world, the formation of global ethics, that is, the emergence of values and principles that are widely shared in all cultures, is a necessary development. The creation of the Earth Charter, which is designed as “an ethical foundation for the emerging world community,” can be viewed as a significant contribution to this process.⁵

Before commenting further on the Earth Charter itself, I would like to emphasize the critical role of ethical choice and global ethics in the current world situation. First of all, scientific knowledge by itself cannot answer the questions: How shall we live? What is the good life? In the final analysis, our answers require making ethical choices about what kind of persons we want to be and what quality of community life we want to sustain that go beyond the scope of science. Science can help communities understand the consequences of different choices and courses of action, but it cannot determine what is right and wrong. This is the domain of the human heart and the will as Teilhard was keenly aware.

Secondly, global ethics have become an urgent need. In our increasingly interdependent and complex world, no nation, not even the most powerful, can effectively address the environmental, economic, and social problems it faces and ensure the security and well-being of its people by acting alone. Partnership and cooperation among nations and peoples are essential

to environmental protection, human development, and security everywhere. Humanity has arrived at a point in its socio-economic and political development where the building of a just, sustainable, and peaceful world community in the midst of cultural diversity is not only an ideal evolutionary possibility; it has become an ecological and social necessity.⁶ Advancing cooperation and building a global community requires mutual understanding and agreement on common goals and shared values. In short, this means global ethics, involving a further evolution in humanity's ethical and spiritual consciousness. It involves working out through dialogue agreement on a core of fundamental ecological and social values that will give international law a solid foundation and the process of globalization positive direction, reversing current dangerous trends. Every great civilization in world history has generated its own distinctive ethical and spiritual consciousness. The quest for a planetary ethics is part of the search for our spiritual center as planetary citizens of a globalizing technological civilization.

This brings me to the Earth Charter. It is a product of the global ethics movement that began with the drafting of the Charter of the United Nations and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights over fifty years ago. On recommendation of the World Commission on Environment and Development, the 1992 Rio Earth Summit endeavored to draft an intergovernmental Earth Charter that would set forth fundamental values and principles for the transition to sustainable development. As a result of disagreements between the North and the South, governments were not able to draft the Earth Charter. Consequently, in 1994 a new Earth Charter initiative was launched as a civil society undertaking with initial funding from the Dutch government. Six years later in 2000 the Earth Charter Commission, which is co-chaired by Maurice Strong and Mikhail Gorbachev and made up of members from twenty-one countries

representing Africa, the Middle East, Asia and the Pacific, Europe and the Americas launched the Earth Charter at the Peace Palace in The Hague.

The Earth Charter, which is a declaration of fundamental principles for building a just, sustainable, and peaceful global community, is significant for three reasons: the process that produced it, the content of the document, and the movement it has inspired.⁷ First, the drafting of the document involved the most open and participatory process that has ever been conducted in connection with the creation of an international declaration. It is the product of a decade-long, world wide, cross-cultural, interfaith dialogue on common goals and shared values. Hundreds of organizations and thousands of individuals were engaged in the process. An Earth Charter secretariat was established in Costa Rica at the Earth Council. National Earth Charter committees were set up in 50 different nations. Both grass-roots community leaders, including indigenous peoples, and experts in many fields were involved. Meetings were held throughout the world and on the internet. For example, one five-day conference in the Pantanal in Brazil brought together Earth Charter groups from 24 countries in South, Central, and North America and the Caribbean and concluded with an outdoor ceremony in celebration of the Earth Charter vision involving local political leaders, a military band, and over 3,000 school children all wearing Carta da Terra t-shirts.

Second, the content of the Earth Charter reflects the consensus on shared values taking form in the emerging global civil society. The text builds on and extends international law in the fields of environmental conservation and sustainable development. It reflects the findings of the seven UN summit meetings held during the 1990s, especially the summits on environment, population, and women. It reflects a careful study of the ethical visions in over 200 people's treaties and NGO declarations issued over the past three decades and the influence of

contemporary thought in science, religion, philosophy, and ethics. The drafting of the Earth Charter was completed before the UN Millennium Summit meeting, but its principles fully support the UN Millennium Development Goals.

In and through the intense and often complex debates that occurred during the consultation and drafting process, the organizational structures and wording of the Earth Charter gradually took form. The Preamble affirms that “Humanity is part of a vast evolving universe” and sets the Charter’s ethical principles in the context of a spiritual vision that emphasizes being more, not just having more. At the heart of the Earth Charter lies an ethic of respect and care for the community of life as a whole in all its biological and cultural diversity. Its principles are introduced as “principles for a sustainable way of life,” and they provide an inclusive and integrated understanding of the meaning of sustainable development. Sustainability has emerged as a new guiding ecological, economic, and social ideal reflecting a deepening realization that the goals of environmental protection, poverty eradication, human rights, gender equality, economic development, democracy, and peace are all interrelated and interdependent.⁸

The Earth Charter challenges us to recognize that we are all citizens of a shared planet as well as citizens of local communities. Consistent with this view, the Earth Charter expands the ethical vision dominant in modern industrial technological society in a three-fold fashion. First, it seeks to deepen commitment to the human rights and human development of all the world’s peoples, especially the poor, the vulnerable, and oppressed. In this regard, it promotes the eradication of poverty, gender equality, economic equity, and participatory, transparent, and accountable democratic governance at all levels. Second, its goal is to awaken a new commitment to the human rights and well-being of future generations. Intergenerational responsibility, holistic thinking, and long-term planning are core values of the ethics of

sustainable living. Third, its goal is to promote recognition that all life forms are interdependent members of the one community of life on Earth and all are worthy of respect and moral consideration.

There are two reasons to respect the larger living world. The first is the anthropocentric reason cited in the UN Millennium Declaration.⁹ We are dependent on the goods and services provided by Earth's ecosystems. It is, therefore, in our self-interest to protect and restore ecosystems and their biodiversity. Second, as affirmed by the World Charter for Nature (1982) and the Convention on Biological Diversity (1992), all life forms have value regardless of their utilitarian value to people. In other words, they possess what some philosophers call intrinsic value. It is for this reason that the greater community of life and each life form is worthy of moral consideration. As the 1987 report of the World Commission on Environment and Development, *Our Common Future*, puts it: "the case for the conservation of nature should not rest only with development goals. It is part of our moral obligation to other living beings and future generations."¹⁰ It is quite probable that unless societies come to respect nature for itself as well as for its utilitarian value to people, it will not be possible to generate the change in human behavior necessary to achieve sustainability.

The Earth Charter is often described as a declaration of global interdependence and universal responsibility. The Earth Charter adopted the concept of universal responsibility in part because it complements the idea of universal human rights. We all have rights and with those rights go responsibilities. Our ecological and social responsibilities, of course, are common but differentiated depending on our situations and capacities. In addition, since we live in a world where everything is interconnected, each one of us is to one degree or another responsible to all other beings for how we live and act. In this sense, too, our responsibility is universal. This idea

is expressed clearly in the Preamble of the Earth Charter, which states that if we are to build a sustainable world community, “it is imperative that we, the peoples of Earth, declare our responsibility to one another, to the greater community of life, and to future generations.”

Reflecting the influence of the Earth Charter, the Johannesburg Declaration issued by the World Summit on Sustainable Development in 2002 contains an identical affirmation of universal responsibility.¹¹

The Earth Charter principles provide government, business, and civil society with a clear vision of the revolutionary changes needed if humanity is to achieve a sustainable way of living. As the Preamble indicates, the document is intended to serve as “a common standard by which the conduct of all individuals, organizations, businesses, governments, and transnational institutions is to be guided and assessed.” However, the Earth Charter limits itself to broad ethical principles and general guidelines and does not attempt to identify the specific mechanisms and regulations that societies must adopt to implement its principles. Different cultures and societies will, of course, find many diverse ways of achieving the goal of sustainability.

The Earth Charter principles culminate with a vision of a culture of tolerance, nonviolence, and peace. The peace principle comes last—in Principle 16—because building a culture of peace requires implementation of all the other principles. Peace is described as “the wholeness created by right relationship with oneself, other persons, other cultures, other life, Earth, and the larger whole of which all are a part.” (16f) So defined, peace is conceived as an inclusive ethical and spiritual value.

There is a third reason why the Earth Charter is proving to be a significant document. An Earth Charter movement has emerged as part of the larger international sustainable development

movement. Since the Earth Charter was formally launched in June 2000, it has been translated into 30 languages and disseminated around the world by the Earth Charter secretariat, which is affiliated with the UN University for Peace in Costa Rica. The document has been endorsed by thousands of NGOs and by several hundred individual cities as well as the International Council of Local Environmental Initiatives (ICLEI) and the US Conference of Mayors. Last November IUCN (The World Conservation Union), which is the largest and most influential international conservation organization including among its members 77 state governments and over 800 NGOs, endorsed the Earth Charter at its World Conservation Congress in Bangkok and recognized the Earth Charter as an ethical guide for IUCN policy.

The World Resources Institute has designed a new guidebook and computer software program entitled the Earth Charter Community Action Tool or EarthCAT to assist local governments with developing goals, strategies, and measurable indicators for the implementation of Earth Charter principles.¹² These materials will be translated and tested this year in cities in Canada, Jordan, Peru, Senegal, South Africa, the Ukraine, the US and possibly China. For example, the City of Calgary in Alberta, Canada is using the Earth Charter guidebook and EarthCAT to create a 100 year plan for the city.

The Earth Charter is also being widely used in schools, universities, and faith communities as a vehicle for exploring the critical choices before humanity and the meaning of global ethics and sustainable development. The UNESCO General Conference of member states endorsed the Earth Charter in 2003 as “an important ethical framework for sustainable development” and as “an educational tool.” UNESCO is incorporating the Earth Charter into the materials it is preparing for the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (DESD) that was launched here at the United Nations headquarters on March 1st of this year.¹³ In the

spirit of the Decade, the national Ministry of Education in Costa Rica is already distributing a teachers' guide on "Education for Sustainable Development with the Earth Charter" and related materials for students.

In conclusion, the Earth Charter provides a much-needed integrated vision of the way forward in the form of broad ethical guidelines. Its emphasis on a transformation of our ethical values reflects a recognition that even though UN summit meetings and international conferences have developed a promising vision of a better world for all, the political will is too often lacking because the ethical commitment is at best half-hearted. The Earth Charter is one expression of what Teilhard calls the spirit of the Earth that is struggling to come to full consciousness in all of us. The Earth Charter is a vision of the ideal, but the ideals in the Earth Charter are real possibilities. We have the knowledge and technological expertise to progressively implement the Charter's principles while maintaining a vibrant economy. Even though the challenges before us are daunting and there are powerful forces of resistance, progress is being made on many fronts and much more can be done. The spirit of change is in the air. Teilhard de Chardin's writings express great hope regarding the future. His hope springs from a religious faith that includes a profound sense of belonging to the unfolding universe, faith in the human potential, and a mystical intuition that love and unity are the deeper meaning of the evolutionary and historical processes. Teilhard assures us that if we have the wisdom and courage to embrace a vision for the future informed by both the head and the heart, science and faith, we will find our way.

¹Teilhard de Chardin, *The Phenomenon of Man* (New York: HarperCollins, 1959), Rpt. Perennial HarperCollins, 2002, 239.

² *Ibid.*, 181-83, 212, 215, 239, 258, 221.

³ *Ibid.*, 222, 234, 242-43, and 284-85.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 244-46, 253, and 264-66.

⁵ See Earth Charter Preamble.

⁶ Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1970), pp. 238-39.

⁷ For the text of the Earth Charter and more information on the Earth Charter Initiative, see the international Earth Charter secretariat website www.earthcharter.org.

⁸ Even though the concept of sustainable development was constructed several decades after Teilhard's career ended, he would surely have actively supported it as an ecological and social ideal had he lived to see its emergence. Sustainability is implicit in his concept of a love that "embraces the total of man and of the earth."

⁹ UN Millennium Declaration, I. Values and Principles. #6. Respect for Nature.

¹⁰ World Commission on Environment and Development, *Our Common Future* (New York: Oxford, 1987), p. 57.

¹¹ The Johannesburg Declaration on Sustainable Development states: "From this continent, the cradle of humanity, we declare, through the Plan of Implementation of the World Summit on Sustainable Development and the present Declaration, our responsibility to one another, to the greater community of life and to our children." (Paragraph 6). For the complete text, see <http://www.un.org/esa/sustdev/documents/Johannesburg%20Declaration.doc>.

¹² Information on this project can be found at <http://www.earthcat.org>.

¹³ For more information on the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development, see the UNESCO website: http://portal.unesco.org/education/en/ev.php-URL_ID=23279&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html. See the discussion of the Earth Charter in the "Draft International Implementation Scheme, 2005, Section I.2.1" for the DESD.