

The Earth Charter and the Catholic Church in Australia

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IN THESE FIRST years of the 21st century, have prospects been dashed for a new world order free from the violence, war, poverty, oppression and environmental degradation that characterized so much of previous centuries? The prognosis is certainly grim, but not without hope—which continues to surface in surprising ways. Throughout the world, in all regions, and amongst all cultures, we find civil society self-organizing and taking a lead role in showing the way forward. One shining example is the campaign against land mines. Another is the Earth Charter Initiative.

The Earth Charter is a declaration of values and principles for a more just, sustainable and peaceful world. In this paper I consider the relevance and use of such a secular document to the Catholic Church, and in particular the Church in Australia. Four issues are considered under the headings of global governance, the integrity of creation, religion, and education. The paper then briefly examines some potential issues concerning interpretation of the Earth Charter from a Catholic perspective.

Background

It is not possible here to give a detailed history of the Earth Charter or to discuss in depth the document's contents. Details of its history, together with the full text, are given in the Earth Charter handbook (ECIS 2001). However, some background material is unavoidable for the discussion that follows.

In 1987, the United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development issued a call for creation of a new charter that would set forth fundamental principles for sustainable development. The drafting of an Earth Charter was part of the unfinished business of the 1992 Rio Earth Summit. In 1994, Maurice Strong, the secretary general of the Earth Summit and chairman of the Earth Council, and Mikhail Gorbachev, president of Green Cross International, launched a new Earth Charter Initiative with support from the Dutch government.

During the years from 1994 to 2000, extensive research was conducted in the fields of international law, science, religion, ethics, environmental conservation, and sustainable development in preparation for the drafting of the Earth Charter. For example, a study of over 50 international law instruments was prepared and circulated as a resource for those contributing to the consultation process (Rockefeller 1996). Through this period, consultations were conducted throughout the world to examine the evolving draft document. Input was received from all regions of the world from expert panels, non-government organizations and communities. One such consultation was held in Australia (Mackey and Dooley 1999). The consultation process was drawn to a close and the Charter released in a ceremony at The Hague Peace Palace in 2001.

It is worth noting two key results of the global consultation process. First, it was decided that in addition to serving as a potential new international soft law document¹, the Charter's scope should be expanded to embrace all actors and sectors, as the interrelated nature of the global challenges demands the cooperation of governments at all levels, civil society, together with business and industry. Second, the purpose of the document evolved from being a Charter for sustainable development to a Charter for a more just, sustainable and peaceful world. The influential argument here was that sustainable development is a means to an end and not an end in itself.

The document's structure also reflects recommendations from the consultation process. The Earth Charter begins with a Preamble that articulates the interrelated global challenges and the need to promote a sense of universal responsibility. The Preamble is followed by 77 principles written in the form of ethical imperatives, and ends with a concluding statement called The Way Forward. The ethical principles are clustered into four key themes: Protect and Care for the Community of Life; Ecological Integrity; Social and Economic Justice; Democracy, Nonviolence and Peace. Each theme contains four primary principles, which in turn contain a varying number of supporting principles.

Global Governance

By the time this article is published we may or may not be at war against Iraq. In either case, there is little doubt that recent months have seen the stirrings of a world order that threatens global governance processes. While war remains a scourge on the human endeavour, and human rights abuse, poverty and environmental degradation persist in all their horror, there has been, post-World War II, a growing sense of universal responsibility for the well-being of all humanity. The emergence of the United Nations has cultivated international dialogue, agreement on broad principles, and an impressive array of international law on critical global issues, together with ongoing efforts to implement changes on the ground.

The significance of these changes is often unappreciated. Previously, it was generally held that there was little if any role for ethics in the relations between nations. Hobbes (1651) argued that the primary responsibility of governments was to look after the welfare of their citizens. As reviewed by Dower (1998), one argument in support of this position is that ethical behavior can only exist in the context of shared culture, traditions and institutions and these have been lacking at the global scale. It was generally accepted that national governments may well have to behave in ways that would be unacceptable at an interpersonal level. It was also considered foolish for nations to expose themselves to rogue nations who would not play by the golden rule, especially in the absence of mechanisms for enforcing agreements.

The Earth Charter represents a potentially landmark advance in international governance. As an ethical framework for a more just, sustainable and peaceful world, the Charter can provide the foundation for a new generation of international law on environment and development. The Charter provides both an integration of shared values and ethical principles already agreed to by the international community and a synthesis of the global

consensus that has been reached on many key issues. If the Earth Charter were to be endorsed by the UN General Assembly it could then be used as a guide to international negotiation, decision-making and legislation.

However, national governments will only support endorsement of the Earth Charter by the UN if they are confident there is a broad domestic base of support. Effectively, this means that the Earth Charter must become a social reality within nations before it can become one internationally. Dower (1998) suggested that a world ethic could be deemed a social reality when its values and principles are accepted by key actors and integrated within influential institutions. Endorsement of the Earth Charter by the Catholic Church would send a powerful message through the Australian community that global governance must be founded on values and ethical principles and that a “Hobbesian” world view must be rejected.

Integrity of Creation

In his address of 17 January 2001, Pope John Paul II called for the ecological conversion of the Church and for Catholics to help protect and restore the integrity of God’s creation here on Earth:

It is immediately evident that humanity has disappointed divine expectations...humiliating the earth, our home. It is necessary, therefore, to stimulate and sustain ecological conversion.

This dramatic pronouncement brings to the foreground the importance to Christian life of caring for Earth’s natural environment and the non-human creatures with whom we share Earth as home. As noted by Hart (2002), this message draws from values that are deeply rooted in the Bible, in two millennia of Church teaching, and in the lives and perspectives of people such as: St Francis of Assisi—with his life of simplicity of possessions (today we refer to this as ‘more sustainable ways of living’) and of kinship with all creatures (the foundation of modern day nature conservation); St Benedict—and his ideas on community and on responsible development of Earth to meet human needs (in modern parlance, ‘environmental stewardship’ and ‘sustainable development’); and St Augustine’s call for respect for all creatures, even those not needed by humans:

Some people presume to find fault with many things in this world, through not seeing the reasons for their existence. Though not required for the furnishing of our house, these things are necessary for the perfection of the universe (Pegas 1945).

As noted above, the Earth Charter principles are written in the form of ethical imperatives. The four principles in the first theme define broad ethical commitments, while the remaining principles are ‘action orientated’ in that they relate to the ethics of individual and collective behaviour in respect of important, contemporary concerns. The ecological integrity theme contains 24 principles, drawn from the fields of environmental

science, engineering, law and ecological economics. The Earth Charter also contains principles (#15a,b,c) that promote a respectful, caring and compassionate attitude toward non-human species and organisms; echoing St Francis' kinship with all creatures. The Earth Charter is a valuable resource for Catholics to explore, in the context of contemporary issues, the meaning and implications of his Holiness' call for the ecological conversion of the Church.

The Relationship With Religion

The Earth Charter Handbook (ECIS 2001) details the sources that were drawn upon in drafting the Earth Charter, which included: international law instruments and NGO declarations; the new scientific worldview; the social movements associated with human rights, democracy, gender equality, civil society, disarmament, and peace; the seven UN summit conferences on children, the environment, human rights, population, women, social development, and the city held during the 1990s; the work done in the field of environmental and sustainable development ethics over the past fifty years; and the practical experience and insights of those groups that have successfully pursued sustainable ways of living and working.

In addition, the Earth Charter has drawn upon the wisdom of the world's religions and philosophical traditions. Thus, while the Earth Charter is a secular document it has been influenced by and reflects shared spiritual values and principles. For example, the Preamble argues that: 'The protection of Earth's vitality, diversity and beauty is a sacred trust'. The Earth Charter initiative recognizes that the world's major religions have a critical role to play in the transition to a more just, sustainable and peaceful world. In addressing the ecological imperative for example, there is a limit to the role that scientifically based knowledge can play in the formulation of people's value systems. Science can inform us as to what impact we are having on nature and how to mitigate those impacts, but it cannot tell us whether these actions are right or wrong per se. Science gives us a head but not necessarily a heart nor a conscience.

Education

The Catholic Church is a major provider of education in Australia at all levels (primary, secondary, tertiary; formal and informal). Heeding the call for the ecological conversion of the Church will demand a reorientation of these education systems, particularly in terms of exploring the relevance of traditional Catholic values, providing the background information and knowledge of the key issues and opportunities, and identifying courses of action for giving effect in our daily lives to this new mission. The Earth Charter can be used as an educational tool in developing curriculum to meet these challenges. A diversity of Catholic educators around the world have already begun to utilize the Earth Charter in their educational programmes and activities (ECIS 2003).

The Earth Charter provides a number of important educational themes that can be drawn upon in reconsidering the content and structure of educational programs (Mackey 2003). For example:

Critical challenges and choices: The Preamble lays out the critical environmental, social and economic challenges that confront humanity, and highlights the choices we must make in order to bring about a more just, sustainable and peaceful world;

Universal responsibility: The fundamental challenge of the Earth Charter is to live with a greater sense of universal responsibility. The first four main principles provide a strong foundation for an ethic of responsibility. If we assume responsibility is based on these values, then we should give attention to cultivating these attitudes and dispositions through education;

Peace and nonviolence: The Earth Charter provides an integrated definition of peace based on right relationships with oneself, community and the biosphere. The Earth Charter constitutes a thematic map of the interrelated issues involved in promoting a culture of peace.

Interpretation Problems

While the Earth Charter has been embraced by many individuals and organizations within the Catholic Community (see endorsee list, ECIS 2003a), there are elements of the document that may raise concern due to possible different interpretations of specific text. There are two classes of interpretation problems we can anticipate. First, it could be that whilst in agreement with most of the values and principles as expressed in the Charter, some do not see the need to endorse in toto such a document. Second, in a document as complex as the Earth Charter it is inevitable that a given individual or organization may have difficulty with the interpretation of a particular passage.

With respect to the first potential problem, an argument could be raised that the Catholic Church provides all the necessary moral authority and guidance needed to promote a more just, sustainable and peaceful world. In which case, endorsing a document such as the Earth Charter could be seen as undermining, in some way, the authority of the Church. But, the Earth Charter is a secular document that seeks to articulate values and principles shared amongst all the peoples of Earth and that are consistent with the world's major religions. For Catholics, the source of these values is and will remain their faith.

Rather than seeing the Earth Charter as a challenge to Church moral authority, the Earth Charter should be viewed as an opportunity to promote interfaith dialogue. It is a useful tool that provides a common, secular ethical framework directed at promoting social and economic justice, ecological integrity, and peace; goals shared by the major world religions. An example is the use made of the Earth Charter at the second World Peace Summit held in Sydney 2003, which had speakers from, amongst others, all the world's major religions, including Bishop William Morris of Toowoomba.

Concerns over the meaning of particular passages in the Charter really must be dealt with on a case-by-case basis. A decision has been taken by the Earth Charter steering committee not to publish an official interpretation of each Earth Charter principle. Rather,

a commentary is being written by Prof Steven Rockefeller (who chaired the drafting process; ECIS 2001), which will tell the story of the making of the Earth Charter. There are a number of reasons for this decision.

As discussed in Mackey et al. (2003), in addition to its function as a global ethic for a more just, sustainable and peaceful world, the Earth Charter has an important educational role to play in the ongoing dialogue about global ethics—in the sense of an intellectual enquiry that looks at and reflects on different positions. An additional philosophical argument is that ethical principles are not prescriptive. Rather, they simply provide guidance as to the kinds of things that warrant our moral consideration. Consequently, the Earth Charter principles do not necessarily have a simple meaning apparent in all situations. Their universal and general nature demands that their meaning be considered in a particular context and may even evolve. By analogy, high courts can apply over time differing legal interpretations to articles in national constitutions. It should be expected that the application of Earth Charter principles in real world situations prompts both deep reflection and debate.

Nonetheless, based on the global consultation process we can anticipate that some segments of the Earth Charter may cause interpretative difficulties. For example, the first principle ‘Respect Earth and all its diversity’ could be interpreted as promoting a pantheistic attitude. However, this principle is more reasonably interpreted as referring to a duty to respect the integrity of Earth as the home of God’s creation. Another example is Principle 7e, which states, ‘Ensure universal access to health care that fosters reproductive health and responsible reproduction’. Some commentators may be concerned that this principle promotes abortion. But, this is not the case nor was it the intention of the drafters. Note that the Earth Charter steering committee has reserved the right to issue official comment in response to interpretations that are clearly against the spirit and intent of a given principle.

Conclusion

In addition to the plagues of war and poverty that persist on Earth, the rate of environmental change is now breathtaking and beyond most people’s experience and comprehension. In 100 years from now, at current rates of deforestation, the primary Congo rainforests will be largely cleared, and only 50% of the primary Amazon forests may remain (WRI 2003; WCMC 1998; Wilson 1992). Unbelievably, Australia has a similar rate of deforestation, losing about 400,000 ha of woodland ecosystems every year as the result of land clearing. All the credible scientific evidence points to the next 50 years as critical (Walker and Stefan 1997). Why? In 50 years time, most of the world’s primary forests and woodlands will be gone; much of the ocean fisheries depleted; substantial areas of marginal agricultural land desertified; and we are very likely to have on our hands a ‘run-away’ Greenhouse problem. In addition, there will still be around 600 million starving humans, and the current 20 million refugees could increase to between 50-200 million refugees, half of whom may be environmental refugees (FAO 1996, 2000; UNHRC 2003; Townsend 2002).

However, it is vital to avoid a sense of hopelessness. To quote the Earth Charter Preamble ‘The trends are perilous—but not inevitable’. There is still time for humanity to save what is left of biodiversity, stop deforestation and land clearing, promote ecological restoration, solve the Greenhouse problem, and create sustainable ways of living, including economic systems that reward rather than punish environmentally responsible behaviour. Indeed, to do this will require technological innovation and a whole new generation of production systems. Thus, we will need development to help solve our environmental crisis – but not simply more of the same kinds of development. Rather, what we need are more equitable, cleaner and smarter forms of economic growth (Pugh 1995).

There must be a point at which we as a community with moral responsibilities decide, ‘Enough is enough’. We can no longer ignore the larger global and moral contexts in which our actions are embedded. The time to act is clearly now. But, people will only act, or support the necessary changes to our social and economic systems, when they are sufficiently motivated—when what they value is threatened. Ultimately, it is spiritual growth that will guide people to embrace a sense of universal responsibility, work to promote the common good and the integrity of the greater community of life, and to consider the kinds of social and environmental legacies we wish to leave future generations. As one of the major religious organisations in Australia and the world, the Catholic Church has a special role to play in providing the moral leadership required to help people comprehend and address our interrelated social and environmental challenges. The Earth Charter can be a valuable tool in advancing this endeavour.

NOTE

1 A soft law document contains no legally binding commitments per se. However, it can act as a catalyst and provide the framework for the development of related hard law. An example of a soft law document that has functioned in this way is the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

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It is immediately evident that humanity has disappointed divine expectations...humiliating...the earth, our home. It is necessary, therefore, to stimulate and sustain ecological conversion. (Pope John Paul II, 17 January 2001).

The Church hears the cries of the poor and the groans of the earth. It seeks to stand in solidarity with the poor and the marginalized, and to exercise good stewardship of the fragile ecosystems that support life on earth. Every day more Christians are becoming aware of their responsibilities as people of faith towards God's Creation.

This growing awareness is also reflected in the teachings of the Church. Since the late 1980s the Pope has been raising social and environmental issues with increasing frequency and intensity in an important contribution to the development of Catholic Social Teaching in our times...

Catholic social teaching reminds us that human beings are called to act as stewards safeguarding the integrity of creation. We need to change our ways of seeing the world, of thinking and behaving, as we accept our responsibility to protect earth's finite natural resources.

According to the principle of the universal destination of goods everyone has a right to access the goods of creation to meet their needs—our lifestyles should not make such large demands on resources that others are left in need. We should practise simplicity, moderation and discipline. In the face of the consumer culture that surrounds us, this is a big challenge for each one of us.

—Social Justice Statement 2002: A New Earth
<http://compassreview.org/autumn03/4.html>