



THE PHILOSOPHY OF REVERENCE FOR LIFE
and the
EARTH CHARTER



An Essay by
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INTRODUCTION

From his moment of inspiration in 1915, when the full significance of the idea behind the phrase “Reverence for Life” dawned on ALBERT SCHWEITZER whilst floating past a herd of hippopotamuses on the Ogowe River in the Gabon, he worked for the remaining 50 years of his life, both in his actions and his writings to communicate the far-reaching importance of this idea to the world. However, beyond writing about it in numerous books and thousands of personal letters, and speaking about it in lectures, sermons and conversations with friends, he remained confident that the idea will make its own way in the world at its own pace.

And this is indeed happening.

The most profound and comprehensive confirmation and expression of this ethical idea on the world stage can today be found in the EARTH CHARTER, which was formally launched in the year 2000 after the most extensive and widespread international consultation and collaboration ever undertaken for that time.

The charity “Reverence for Life UK” will inaugurate the first “Reverence for Life Awareness Week” from the 15th - 23rd September 2018.

Amongst the numerous projects planned for that week there will be a series of daily postings on Facebook inviting contemplation of what the phrase “Reverence for Life” can mean and suggesting simple ways in which it can find expression and motivate action in our lives.

One of the celebratory actions will be the re-endorsement of the Earth Charter as the most profound and up to date expression of this ethical idea in the realm of governance.

With this in mind, I have prepared this short essay to show the connection between Albert Schweitzer’s early preoccupation with issues of governance and with the Earth Charter. And also to substantiate my view that Schweitzer would have been delighted with the content of the Earth Charter and its 16 main principles, expressing *“interdependent principles for a sustainable way of life as a common standard by which the conduct of all individuals, organisations, businesses, governments and transnational institutions is to be guided and assessed.”*

BACKGROUND

In the year 2000, fired up by my initial enthusiasm at the first appearance of the Earth Charter on the public stage, I gave a presentation at the Annual General Meeting of the International Albert Schweitzer Association (AISL) encouraging this organisation to endorse the Charter and confronting the frequently heard comment: “...nice words, but it will never work!”

I drew attention to the necessity for us all to change our concept of “what works” if we, as a species, and life on this earth as we know it, is to have any kind of future. In addition, I shared my conviction that what is expressed in the Earth Charter is a potent and powerful guide for a new concept of “what could work”.

Since then, the Earth Charter has steadily grown in influence in many countries, particularly in the field of education, and the values it expresses are increasingly being recognised as signposts for an entirely new concept of governance of human activity.

As part of our celebration and inauguration of the “Reverence for Life Awareness Week”, I want to explore to what extent the Earth Charter can be seen as an effective and enabling instrument leading towards the realisation of Albert Schweitzer’s vision of the rehabilitation of the concept of a “Civilised Nation State”.

ALBERT SCHWEITZER'S CONCEPT OF A 'CIVILISED NATION STATE'

Since his early 'teens' in the 1890s, when the word 'epigones' came up in school lessons and was explained as describing those who live off the achievements of their ancestors and claim them as their own, Albert Schweitzer could not rid himself of the idea that he lived in a time when this was the norm. As a boy, he fought hard against this feeling but could not shake it off. He was aware that it created a gulf between him and his peers. Notwithstanding his efforts, the feeling grew as he got older, and it came to a head when as a 25 year old he was in Berlin, taking part in the New Year's celebrations that ushered in the 20th century. At a gathering, he overheard an older professor say the words: "...its no use, we are all just epigones, pluming ourselves with other people's feathers..."

The phrase hit him like a thunderbolt because it fully expressed what he was feeling. Already a Doctor of Philosophy and of Theology, and lecturing at the University of Strasbourg, he had been struggling with the fact that he could not share the euphoria and what seemed to him exaggerated optimism about the future which awaited them in the new-born century.

He resolved to put pen to paper about it.

The resulting early notes and drafts of numerous chapters were found after his death and have been published in German in 2005 under the title of "Wir Epigonen" by C. H. Beck, selected, compiled and edited by Ulrich Körtner und Johann Zürcher.

The chapter headings of this publication show how deeply the young Schweitzer was concerned about issues and structures of governance:

The work was then to be called "Kultur und Kulturstaat" [Civilisation and the Civilised Nation State].¹

The main Chapters headings:

- II. Reasons for the Decay of Civilisation;
- III. Signs of the Decay of Civilisation;
- IV. Regeneration;
- V. Mankind and Man
- VI. The Idea of Statehood
 - i) The Nation-State and the Civilised Nation-State;
 - ii) Types of Nation-State and the Life of the State;
- VII. The Church and the State;
- VIII. The Social Nation-State;
 - i) Economic and Social Questions;
 - ii) The Depopulation of Civilised Nation-States;
- IX. Civilisation and Non-Civilised Nation-States;

Schweitzer first arrived in Africa in April 1913 and these texts were mostly written during the years between 1914 - 18, i.e. during World War I and his first stay in Equatorial Africa, where he was temporarily placed under house arrest as a German citizen in a French colony, and later interned in prisoner of war camps in France.

Back at home after the war, in the village of Günsbach in the Alsace (now annexed to France), he began to further develop the concept for this work, which had continually grown in his mind during the war-years. It was now to be called the "Philosophy of Civilisation" and was to consist of four parts:

- I. The Decay and the Restoration of Civilisation;
- II. Civilisation and Ethics;
- III. The World-View of Reverence for Life;
- IV. The civilised Nation-State;

¹ I to translate the word 'Kultur' as 'Civilisation' in this context, though the words are broadly interchangeable in many contexts in both languages. All translations from the German are my own in this essay.

Parts I. and II. were published in German as well as in English in 1923.

Part III. However, had a chequered history. In spite of four separate attempts during a period of 14 years, between 1931 - 45, this work did not come to a conclusion.²

For Part IV - 'The Civilised Nation-State' only a few pages of notes were found, thought to be destined for this final book.

We therefore only have the early drafts, whose chapter headings I have listed above, as evidence of Schweitzer's thoughts concerning the concept of the Nation-State and the criteria, which would qualify a Nation-State to be called "Civilised".

A whole century has passed since Schweitzer grappled with these questions of governance, and we have entered a new millennium. He himself lived through two world wars and still saw the early signs of the emergence of the post war 'throw-away society'. We have since experienced the massive explosion of that 'throw-away' mentality and the emergence and exponential growth of a digital, globalised society, adding the prospect of drastic climatic changes to the already existing nuclear threats to life on earth.

During the first months of the First World War Schweitzer realised that the storm clouds he saw sitting threateningly on the horizon³ during those New-Year's celebrations in Berlin, had burst over Europe and that the time for warning of their coming had passed. He felt the desperate need for some new thought, some new image, which could perhaps halt or slow down the disintegration of civilisation, (or at least sow a seed for the germination of a new one). In that state of mind the phrase "Ehrfurcht vor dem Leben" (literally - 'to stand in awe of Life' and then translated into English as 'Reverence for Life'), came to his mind and he immediately recognised its far-reaching significance for the current state of evolution of humankind.

It then became his number one priority to explain and demonstrate this significance in practically everything he did. He saw it as his duty to attempt to build a firm philosophical foundation for this idea in a way that would sustain and withstand the onslaughts of modernity racing in the opposite direction.

Alas, finding firm ground on which to build this foundation proved harder than he had bargained for. Other, more immediately pressing things - like the banning of atmospheric nuclear testing - demanded his attention and time ran out for him. Though he lived to be ninety years old, keeping his faculties intact until the end, he was to be denied the opportunity of building on this foundation and erecting the superstructure of 'ethical governance', which he had planned in his youth.

But the ethical idea contained in the words "Reverence for Life" did gradually make its way in the world - as he had hoped - and eventually found expression in the emergence of the "Earth Charter", which first appeared, coincidentally and quite independently, in the same year in which Schweitzer's unfinished Volume III of his Philosophy of Civilisation was published.

THE ETHICS OF REVERENCE FOR LIFE AS EXPRESSED IN THE EARTH CHARTER

The Earth Charter is the result of the most open and participatory consultation process ever conducted in connection with the drafting of an international document. A consultation which grew out of an initiative established at the 1992 RIO Earth Summit. This was taken forward in 1994 by the

² Once again, thousands of manuscript pages for this book were found after Schweitzer's death in 1965 and these were collated and edited by Claus Günzler and Johann Zürcher and published in German in 1999 by C. H. Beck. I have translated a selection of the essential content of this German publication into English. This is awaiting publication under the Title of "Towards Humanity's Next Evolutionary Step" which also contains an in-depth discussion of the reasons why this work could not come to a conclusion.

³ Using the metaphor with which he described the situation in his autobiography.

Secretary General of the Earth Summit and Chairman of the Earth Council, Maurice Strong, together with Mikhail Gorbachev, then President of Green Cross International. With support from Prime Minister Ruud Lubbers and the Dutch government, and Ambassador Mohamed Sahnoun of Algeria as the first Executive Director, an Earth Charter Commission with representation from all regions of the world was formed in 1997 and an Earth Charter Secretariat was established in Costa Rica.

It was decided to draft the Earth Charter as a "Peoples' Treaty" and thousands of individuals and hundreds of organisations (NGOs) from all regions of the world participated. 45 Earth Charter National Committees were formed. Dialogues were held all over the globe and on the internet. In 1999 an internet conference, lasting three weeks, attracted participants from 70 countries and 300 Universities.

The Commission then decided at a meeting at the UNESCO Headquarters in Paris in March 2000 to approve the release of a final version of the text.

The Earth Charter is a declaration of fundamental principles for building a just, sustainable and peaceful global society in the 21st century.

Amongst the considerable changes which have occurred during the seven decades since Albert Schweitzer wrote about Reverence for Life, two stand out for me as especially significant in the context of this essay:

- 1) The advent of the internet and the rapid advance of digital technology have made a globalisation of commerce and international relations possible beyond anything that could have been imagined in Schweitzer's lifetime. We now have corporations with larger financial 'clout' than many medium-sized nation-states, vying with national governments for power and control all over the globe. These non-democratic entities, beholden to shareholders, are threatening democratic national and international institutions and placing our democratic processes in jeopardy.
- 2) The careless, indiscriminate expulsion of the waste-products of our affluent life-styles, which have come to be regarded as the norm for an expanding global population, has soiled and polluted our environment to a point where clean-up operations and the creation of protected sanctuaries are becoming essential parts of a survival strategy.

Both these factors, amongst many others, make the question of governance a global issue. The problems and threats we now face cannot be contained, let alone solved, within national borders. The nation-state can no longer be regarded as the dominant entity within which to search for solutions to our problems. Along with our commercial activities, our problems have become global.

The Earth Charter fully recognises this.

By setting out principles for human behaviour permeated by the ethics of Reverence for Life, largely as Albert Schweitzer explained and demonstrated them, but appropriate to our current global predicament and applicable to all of humanity anywhere on the globe, the Charter establishes a roadmap which can guide humankind towards a more benign, less aggressive, more kindly existence on this earth.

Under the following four main headings, sixteen principles set out parameters, attitudes and directives for human behaviour which, if adopted, will guide us all out of our present 'mess' towards building a sustainable world based on respect for nature, universal human rights, economic justice and a culture of peace:

- 1) RESPECT AND CARE FOR THE COMMUNITY OF LIFE
- 2) ECOLOGICAL INTEGRITY
- 3) SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC JUSTICE
- 4) DEMOCRACY, NONVIOLENCE AND PEACE

The 'principles' set out in the sixteen sub-headings are further elucidated by sub-principles with specific recommendations for remedial and restorative action in each of the spheres of human activity referred to in these principles.

The resulting concise document covers, with astonishing brevity and clarity, the wide range of problems into which our current operating systems are driving us with such alarming speed.

To quote from the Charter's concluding paragraphs, pointing to 'The Way Forward':

"As never before in history, a common destiny beckons us to seek a new beginning. Such renewal is the promise of these Earth Charter principles. To fulfil this promise, we must commit ourselves to adopt and promote the values and objectives of the Charter.

This requires a change of mind and heart. It requires a new sense of global interdependence and universal responsibility. We must imaginatively develop and apply the vision of a sustainable way of life locally, nationally, regionally and globally....

Life often involves tensions between important values. This can mean difficult choices. However, we must find ways to harmonise diversity with unity; the exercise of freedom with the common good; short-term objectives with long-term goals. The partnership of government, civil society and business is essential for effective governance.

In order to build a sustainable global community, the nations of the world must renew their commitment to the United Nations....

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

CONCLUSION

Immediate implementation may seem unrealistic. However, the Charter expresses what we all know, deep down, to be true, and what we would aspire towards. Its format is ideally suited to serve as a guide for decision-makers in the many diverse bodies of governance at all levels of scale.

I firmly believe - along with my fellow trustees on the board of Reverence for Life UK - that there is no better nor more profound statement of the ethos of Albert Schweitzer's philosophy, expressed in terms relevant to the challenges of our time, than the text of the Earth Charter. It bridges all ethnicities and religious beliefs. It is full of hope in that it holds out the possibility that ethical governance is not so far out of reach as many might think. The willingness is all.

I recommend that anyone who has access should at least read it once at <http://earthcharter.org/discover/the-earth-charter/>



uniting the needs of
people and planet

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