

Welcome to Turning Conscience Into Action, the Earth Charter podcast. Join Mirian Vilela, Earth Charter International Executive Director, in her fascinating conversations with great thinkers, scholars and activists from around the world who are working in the fields of sustainability, ethics, education and social transformation. Our purpose is to generate new insights on how to face current global challenges and inspire informed action.

For several years during the 90s, a group of scholars and activists interested in spirituality and sustainability met at the beautiful town of Assisi near Rome in Italy for an intensive week of exchange.

Many of these meetings were used as part of the consultation around the drafting of the Earth Charter, with the purpose to generate a dialogue to find common ground between people from different cultures and areas of knowledge. Elizabeth Ferrero was the main organiser of these meetings. Right after the Earth Charter was launched, Elizabeth, together with Joe Holland, published a book titled The Earth Charter and Study Book of Reflection for Action. Today, we have the pleasure of having a conversation with both of them.

Elizabeth is professor of ethics and environmental ethics at St. Thomas University. Joe Holland is emeritus professor of philosophy and religion, also from St. Thomas University. Thank you, both of you, for joining us. You're welcome. Thank you. We're happy to be here. So I would like to start our conversation, given the fact that we are celebrating 20 years since the launch of the Earth Charter, and both of you have been involved in the Earth Charter movement for over 20 years. So what do you think is the uniqueness or the strength of the Earth Charter as a document to the current times?

Maybe, Joe, do you want to start? As we know, around the world, with the rise of this new right movement, which I don't think is really populist, what they call it populist. Is it a hostility to anything global? And in fact, globalization has been a very negative thing because it's been guided by the neoliberal economic. I see the Earth Charter as an alternative globalization. I think that would be helpful to say that it's radically different from the neoliberal paradigm, and it seeks to protect the community of life, not simply globally, but also locally, too, at every level.

What about you, Elizabeth? Well, I was unbelievably moved, and I still am moved today. This was the very first time that I saw the possibility of a document that could have really bring people together. So this was really a document that now more than ever, its relevancy is really to bring people together and with the big, big shift of paradigm. There is a number of interesting ideas that are articulated in the Earth Charter that helps us to shift our world views, to shift our mindsets. When is Earth community?

The other one is the whole idea of respecting care for the community of life. Would you share with us or give us some comments on these key ideas? What does Earth community means to you and the importance of respecting care for the community of life? I am teaching right now a course on ethics, and in fact, it's interesting because this coming week, we're going to be looking at the first four principles of the Earth Charter.

And basically, one of the reasons that we're doing is we want to look at the first four principles, but then the principle that I'm going to be zero in with them is principle number six, which is prevent no harm with the precautionary approach, which is really ties in with the global ethics, or at least within the Christian community is what we call consequentialism, producing the least amount of harm.

And that's how you proceed. But it's interesting because one of the things that I did for the students, since these are all online courses, and Joe teaches in the law school, so he can tell you quite a bit about that. But in the undergraduate and the regular ethics course, we do regular audio lectures. And one of the things that we're going to be discussing at Gradle is the big shift of paradigm, going from a reductionist and a mechanistic paradigm into an organic one based on relationships and patterns and networks, all the kind of stuff that future Capra has been teaching for a very long time.

But also now the science is really coming forward. And I think of two big ones that my students and ethics are going to be learning, connecting to the Earth Charter. And that is David Bohm and Lipton. So therefore, this incredible synergy that the earth community, this shift of paradigm, which is so, so relevant right now for our times. What about you, Joe, in your law classes? My teacher course, Mirian, with Professor Mark Wolfe, we teach, team teach it. It's called United Nations Global Ethics and, excuse me, United Nations Global Governance and Global Ethics.

And the Global Ethics is based on Catholic social teaching. The course was designed, we have a program at the United Nations from the law school, where students are the interns, either with UN missions or with UN agencies for a full semester and they get a full semester's credit for their third year of law school, which is their final year. And in the United States, this is a postgraduate program, not an undergraduate law. And this is to prepare them for that. But other students in the law school also have an interest in it and they take it as well.

So it's a seminar that's in jurisprudence. Well, we spend a lot of time studying the United Nations and issues of global governance. But we use Catholic social teaching and we actually use two documents in Catholic social teaching, Pacham and Terrace, which was published in 1963 by Pope John XXIII and Laudato Si 2015 by Pope Francis. And the students love those. And I use the Earth Charter as it was proposed originally to become soft law in the United Nations as akin to the International Declaration on Human Rights. And the student, every year I notice the students are much, and now I would say critically aware of the ecological situation, particularly because they live in Miami. So I connect back to the, in the Earth Charter, the idea that we are a critical moment in the Earth's traffic.

The students are very aware of that. So this idea of cherishing the community of land, Laudato Si tends to approach it as ethics, even though it calls for spirituality of ecology, ecological spirituality. But in fact, Laudato Si doesn't really develop that. I put a lot of emphasis on that, on the ecological spirituality that spirituality comes to all humans through the Earth, from the Earth, and that we participate in the spirituality.

It's very interesting in the Book of Genesis, the narrative of Adam, the creation of Adam from the slime of the Earth, it says. Actually, the Hebrew word is Khadamach, which means earth, but it's feminine. And Adam is not a proper name, but it's really, what it means literally in Hebrew is the earth creature. So the Khadam comes forth from the Khadama, almost like the earth creature from the earth mother. And thus we are creatures of earth and our spirituality is from the earth and comes from that.

That was a very important thing that Thomas Berry, I think, all the earth creatures, not just the human, but all the earth creatures are part of our family. As indigenous traditions and Francis of Assisi said that the plants and the animals are our sisters. And the divine mystery is revealed in and through the earth and in and through all the creatures. That's the source of the earth's spirituality and its presence has fell through that and nourishes us. With that energy, then we can begin to pursue ecological ethics as a result of that.

You have also been studying some Francis.

You have been studying some Francis and Thomas Berry for many years. And you have been relating their teaching also to the earth. Am I right? Absolutely. And I think to sort of a code out to what Joe is saying, is this, you see it right now, it's not just a very incredible time for the Earth Charter, but it's the right time. Because this oneness with the natural world, which same Francis talked about it, lived it, Thomas Berry and the students in the classes with Joe are finding it so important.

But the science world is now showing us that that's exactly what we're made of. Not just, and again, it's not just Brian Swim who has, I don't know if anybody has looked at his podcast of late, but they're unbelievable. But again, this oneness with the natural world is now shown that by scientists that it's really what we're all about. And that we need to look at the wiring of our own, not just the intellectuals of mind, but also our cellular system, which we all share with all forms of an earth.

And that I think is so important. And I know that Fidget Capra teaches it, but I think there are others who go even further to talk about the importance of the cellular level. So I think this could not be a better time for people to really understand the full meaning of the Earth Charter. Yeah, these are concepts that we still need to work on in terms of bringing it to the consciousness of people, the whole notion of earth community, that we are part of an earth community. Yeah. The whole notion of community of life certainly gives another angle, not other meaning in terms of how we relate to other living beings and species.

Now I would like to talk a little bit about ecological civilization. And because in early 2003, I believe you wrote a book together that you called the Earth Charter, a study book of reflection for action, which I understand was first published in Italian, then in Portuguese, and finally in English in 2005. In that book, you offered a detailed commentary on the entire Charter document. And you talk about the need for a new planetary civilization. You made then a call for a new ecological planetary civilization.

So I would like to ask you to share with us, without audience, what do you mean by an ecological civilization? I think we have to make that central because it's clear now that it's impossible to do things that will heal the earth in any dramatic way within the

framework of the current civilization. Every day the current civilization is more destructive. That would be my first point. But it won't do any good to do frontal challenges to the current civilization because the forces of repression are so vicious and so dangerous, and they will kill many people and torture them and imprison them as happened earlier and several long waves across Latin America and elsewhere.

We'll talk about that again. The second point is that this civilization must, in addition to be eco-centric, it has to be humanistic because there has been an ecology movement and there still are today. A certain strain of eugenics which wants to eliminate poor people and save rich people. We had that very strongly in the United States. Most of the business class was in favor of the eugenics movements in the beginning of the early half of the... The movement to eugenics, it means good birth. A movement that only certain races or certain kinds of people are worthy of living and we should reduce the population of the others.

Originally it meant white Europeans, particularly from northern Europe. The Darwin family was very heavily involved in it. Charles Darwin's son was the president of the International Eugenics Congress. The first one to do that, very powerful. The eugenics movement came from England and the United States. It's what Hitler was pursuing. Only the master race should survive. For him it was white Aryans. It was Anglo-Saxons who were two German tribes in England that the people in the United States were celebrating.

Certainly in the new right we see that coming back in the United States again, that the other races are inferior. I think therefore we have to make a very important point. It is to defend humans along with all the other humans or with all the other creatures. Not that we have to increase population. But we have to defend human rights that the Earth Charter does. Therefore I think from the viewpoint of resisting against eugenics in the context of pursuing ecological civilization, the Earth Charter becomes supremely important.

Because there are maybe certain countries in the world that would want to be pursuing ecological civilization but they don't believe in human rights. I won't mention any in particular but they are very powerful and very strong. They look upon human rights as only a western doctrine but not a universal. So your vision ecological civilization as eco-centric and also brings the human part of it, right? Human rights, yes, and democracy. Elizabeth, how do you envision or what do you mean from your perspective, Elizabeth, what is ecological civilization?

Especially how important that is. I think it's, I'd like to just say a few words a little bit about this, how this book came about and the concept of ecological civilization that it tried very hard to bring forward to the reader. But in 2002, in August 2002, during, you know, this very difficult period of time in Johannesburg in South Africa, when the Earth Charter, there were questions about principle 7 and principle 11. And the publisher that was going to be published in the book that Joe and I wrote decided that he was not going to publish it.

And there were other scenarios connected to that because these two principles according to the opposing views seem to be saying that the Earth Charter was proposing abortion, which obviously is totally untrue and found in every sense of the way. And consequently,

the book had no way of going with no publisher. And it was only because a group of friends of mine in Italy, all in academia, decided that this was not going to be, this book was too important. And the ecological civilization dialogue was supposed to be, this was the time, and they got together, and very quickly two of them were able to translate it into Italian.

And not only to translate it into Italian, but a huge gathering, which was attended by Tom Berry, as well as by Joe Holland, and his wife, Paquita, and others. All over Italy. We started in Milan. Then we went to Rome, and then we went to one of the most beautiful places, Castel del Monte in Puglia, where we had roundtable discussion about the Earth Charter book that we just wrote about the need for the psychological civil stake, and when it came into being. But the question that I want to emphasize besides the struggle, and all that we went through is the fact that this concept of ecological civilization, and the civilization that starts understanding that without being one nest with the natural world, we're not going, and that was long time ago.

So today in 2020, as we are heading a very dark period in American politics, we are seeing more than ever the need to bring the discourse of the ecological civilization, which is central to the Earth Charter back on the table.

Not just in universities and colleges, but for the people of walk the streets of every place on earth to become aware of its importance it's significant, and that without it, we're not going to be able to make it as a, as a human civilization. So you think their shutter can play a role as an instrument that frames a vision of a large civilization. As before, Johannesburg. But this is, this is, this is what it is. And I think it needs to, to be an instrument, yes, for universities and colleges, but it needs to be able to regain its importance.

And I think in those 16 principles, there is the key to the change of paradigm, the organic paradigm that we need desperately to change quickly in order to. Yeah. So, both of you, you have taught ethics for so many years, the experts on global ethics, environmental ethics. However, from my point of view, ethics is really being misunderstood, and probably many people don't really see the value or the importance of it. So, I would like to ask you to share with us, how do you teach global ethics, how do you teach environmental ethics and how have you used their.

Okay, I teach is that I teach it in a very simple way after teaching and for 33, well, not 33 years, but for a long time. And for many, many years, we in fact we use we Joe and I developed a course which was called the urge other at St. Thomas University. And we taught that regularly, and we usually were able we did not have 50 students, but we always had enough students to be able to make the course. Now, in the regular ethics course, I tried many different things I tried to use the document itself.

I tried to take pieces of it or start from the end of the beginning. I've laid what I discovered that works best, and this could be a hint for those people who are teaching on the undergraduate level, especially students who have no knowledge is to really start from where they are, which is no knowledge at all about the ecological civilization about an earth community, and so forth, and to really take them from one something that they need

to know, which is consequentialism, starting from our start to what you ought to do to achieve the good life.

In other words, whatever decision you make, you have to cost the least amount of harm. And I start with principle number six, right there after doing consequentialism. And it seems to be effective, because when they look at the precautionary approach that you can you have to prevent harm at all costs, in order to be able to keep humanity on the other face of this planet. It clicks and then I go into principle number seven, which is of course the patterns of production, and to save in order to safeguard the earth bounty and the earth regenerative capacities and all of that.

So in other words, I start from where they are, and I amplify and I take it from there. There are times that I can do four or five major principles. And there are times that I can do even more. But what it does allow is for them to really get into the Earth Charter and to be able to understand where to something that it makes sense to them, and how they can apply it into their life. They never forget principle number six. They never forget principle seven, even in my conversation after they graduate, when they talk to me, usually sometimes they refer without being aware at those two major.

How about you? How have been your experience in teaching? Well, maybe I might say something first about my own understanding of ethics as a professor of philosophy for many years. And I wrote about this in a recent book called the postmodern ecological spirituality. And I'm developing a little expand modern philosophy. So I'm not surprised that students are skeptical about ethics and not normally get turned on to it as a system or anything because in my view, modern, modern Western philosophy and ethics is part of that modern Western ethics is bankrupt, absolutely bankrupt.

It's based on the, the, the role in the advanced world of modern society that it's communities are collapsing up where our community with nature is collapsing our community with each other is collapsing families are collapsing, because individual, the individual, the automos is what it's based on. It's based on writings, but she's been very helpful. So the, all of modern physics was the, modern, modern, modern ethics with its Kantian deontological ethics or Anglo American utilitarian ethics are absolutely bankrupt, I think they've been shown not to work.

They're just the logic of capitalism atomized view of the world. So once you shift to the other ethics is really derivative of cosmology. So once you make the shift to the other cosmology, and you begin to put it develop a form of ethics that is relational. It's inescapable because we're part of nature or part of the earth, we're related to each other, we're part of each other really. Then you had then students in my mind, in my experience begin to open that way. I find it works with students and I always begin with a philosophy course with an essay I wrote back in the middle of the 80s for the human culture. I rename them in similar form the primal classical modern and postmodern and students really like that they see that there's a story there. They're part of an organic developing tradition.

And this new moment is very critical because we really do have to have to save the life system of planet Earth and including, including ourselves within it. And if we don't, the very close future approximate future looks quite catastrophic. So I've had a good experience

teaching ethics, systemically provided we develop an ethics grounded in new cosmology and I think that the Earth Charter does that it would speak about cosmology but very clearly it's grounded in the new cosmology and and what I would call holistic relational.

So needed nowadays. So I guess both of you know well the two popes and cyclical. Yeah, it's quite unique that he launched in 2015 Laudato Si in 2020. The new in city called Frateri Tuki. Would you make some comments about what you find in terms of the importance of these two in cyclical and how my actually my primary field of study is Catholic social teaching in cyclical the modern and cyclical tradition began in 1740. That's, I say humorously when the popes finally accepted the printing press. They were a little late but they, they said accepted it.

But they these are these people and cyclical are instruments of discernment. So what's going on. In this case Catholic Christians are more recently broadly as an invitation to everyone to try and find a creative response to what the great crisis we're experiencing. Laudato Si was a long time coming actually I think in my analysis of Catholic social teaching, the one who begins the ecological turn in Catholic social teaching is John the 23rd. I won't have time to go into how that is but he called he called for a, a new civilization before uphill to that point Catholic so he was elected in 1878.

He had been set and before that by the way, the popes were rejecting the modern world, the most famous Pionono that the bias the ninth issue of an infamous something called the syllabus and he condemned the entire modern world. Leo, the 13 who had been in the papal diplomatic corps and later the Archbishop of Perugia. He, he changed the strategy completely in a powerful way with Laudato Si.

So that's so important. And now I think the Vatican is completely behind the need to create a new civilization. What happens in, in, in, in Fratelli tutti and there is a negative side to Fratelli tutti because it begins with an Italian phrase of course that speaks to men not to women although immediately thereafter it says men and women. But clearly the Catholic Church has a huge handicap in its leadership that is almost blind in this area of the, of the legacy of a, of the misogyny in the Western Christian tradition and, and, and, and fear, actually, I think spiritual fear of the feminine as well. So that's a handy earlier in a meeting that Elizabeth and I were in that I see it as what they call it in French a critical a cry of the heart.

And this is crying out, especially for migrants what's happening. So many people have already become, have already become environmental ecological refugees, you know, by the ecological devastation through war or drought or famine that has been afflicted upon them. We have millions and millions of ecological refugees, including from Central America as you, as you probably are very well aware of Mirian men. And they're not able to survive this farmer's day longer there. And so this is a cry that the entire social system is the ecological system is really breaking down from the familiar level all the way up to the, into the United Nations, it's not working, it's not working.

He doesn't really propose much of a solution, but he's putting this on the table before us that it really is fundamentally breaking down. Now I think in response to that, without, you know, being our officially saying of an organic ecological civilization, and it does

reflect the ethical vision of an organic understanding of the human community and the human family. So it becomes ever more powerful as the crisis, kind of personal flavor to it. Elizabeth, what are your thoughts on this to cyclical and how it links.

I'm not going to say very much on that. But I want to talk about two things that are happening as a result that I think are extremely important. And we talk, you talked about synergy. And I see such an important connection with the HRJ. First of all, it's one of the things that the Pope keeps saying at especially after he wrote the second in cyclical, Laudato Si. He said, children are the prophets of the future. And if you look, and I look quite a bit of his what he writes once a week or when every two weeks or whenever something comes out from him. That seems to be coming out every single time. The children are the prophets of the future.

In other words, the importance of connecting with the youth, because it's the youth. And I think not just formally in high schools or in regular colleges and universities, but the importance of the or charter, how do your charter and Laudato Si, especially Laudato Si, can interconnect through the youth. And the Vatican is doing an awful lot of stuff along these lines. Some of it unfortunately was, was could not come to pass because of the Coronavirus. And therefore there were only remnants of it.

But lately, I heard that he's definitely next year, when we're going to be out of the chaos and nightmare that he's going to start again. But then he picked it up again, after Laudato Si, connecting the youth at the nut. And interestingly enough, I followed every, I immediately connected myself with their weekly and bi-weekly meetings.

And it's all youth oriented, and it's in the hands of youth. I am sure there are others who are actually taking the reins and helping the youth to come through. But it would be wonderful to see the Earth Charter connecting especially with Universidad del Sentido.

Because I have a feeling after the coronavirus, the Pope is going to give even more importance to this as a way of having the youth. He already had a huge conference in October, which was minimized, of course, because again of the coronavirus. And only people up to 35 years old could attend it.

And it was, except for some of the experts who came in. And this is one of the ways that the Earth Charter could interface with Laudato Si. And of course, with Fratelli Tutti, which as you know, Joe already mentioned in Italy, every woman in academia has been up in arms whenever this title came out.

We are excluded. What is the Pope thinking we are? Blah, blah, blah, kind of stuff.

But yes, and I felt that, you know, Joe already expressed my feelings as well about it. But Laudato Si, it's a very, very important document, which definitely, I think, the Earth Charter needs to connect in many ways. And my feeling and recommendation is that it ought to connect along those lines.

I just want to thank you very, very much, Mirian, for listening to our thinking today. Thank you so much.

I am the one who wants really to thank you for joining us today and for sharing your knowledge and your experience. My intention here is to share with a bigger audience this knowledge and hopefully reach many people. Thank you.

If you like this episode, please share it and support our movement by making a donation. This podcast is developed by Earth Charter International as part of our work, as UNESCO Chair on Education for Sustainable

Development with the Earth Charter.

Thank you.

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