

Ecumenical Christianity and the Earth Charter

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Humanity belongs to one oikoumene (household)—community of ecumenical earth—that now needs to observe common ethical standards for the sake of justice, peace, and integrity of creation. In an ever more interdependent world, human responsibility must be guided by global ethics that are congruent with basic values the world's cultures and religions hold in common. As one ecumenical leader put it:

The church, together with other living faiths, should seek a global ethics based on shared ethical values that transcend religious beliefs and narrow definitions of national interests...In a world where technological culture and globalization foster dehumanization, where new ideologies of secularization deny the presence of ultimate reality and promote materialistic and consumerist values, the church, in collaboration with other faiths, is called to reshape, renew and reorient society by strengthening its sacred foundation. In the pluralist societies of today we have a shared responsibility with our neighbors for a common future... Any process or development that jeopardizes the sustainability of creation must be questioned. Humanity must restore right relations with the creation.¹

The Earth Charter is a particularly promising response to this need, addressing both religious and secular people in all sectors of society. (Later I show why it is preferable to other recent global ethics initiatives.)

The objectives of the international movement that has fostered this global ethics initiative are:

- * to promote a worldwide dialogue on shared values and global ethics;
- * to draft an Earth Charter that sets forth a succinct and inspiring vision of fundamental ethical principles for sustainable development (or sustainable earth community);
- * to circulate the Earth Charter throughout the world as a people's treaty, promoting awareness, commitment, and implementation of the values it articulates—in personal / community lifestyles, in education and religious teachings, in professional and organizational ethics, and in public policy / government practices.
- * to mobilize constituencies (sectoral, national, and international) to encourage the United Nations to endorse the Earth Charter by the year 2002 at its Rio + 10 General Assembly.

The Earth Charter is a holistic, layered document that articulates the inspirational vision, basic values and essential principles needed in a global ethic for earth community entering century 21. In its final form, the Charter consists of a preamble, followed by four general principles, twelve main principles and sixty-one supporting principles that integrate ecological integrity with a just and sustainable economic order, democracy and peace. It ends with a brief conclusion entitled, "The Way Forward." The purpose of the main body of the Earth Charter is to state, in imperative form, concise principles (or norms) of enduring significance that are widely shared by people of all races, cultures, religions, and ideological tradition. Its principles were composed with an intent to be inspiring, clear, and uniquely valid and meaningful in all languages. Moreover, the principles deliberately incorporate relevant points of consensus achieved in international agreements and at United Nations conferences.

The Earth Charter Secretariat is housed at the Earth Council, formed after the Rio Earth Summit under the leadership of Maurice Strong, and headquartered in Costa Rica. The first international workshop on the Earth Charter was held at the Peace Palace in The Hague in May 1995, involving representatives from thirty countries and over seventy organizations. In 1997, the Earth Council joined with Green Cross International, led by Mikhail Gorbachev, to form the Earth Charter Commission. The Earth Charter Commission established an international Drafting Committee representing different regions of the world, chaired by Steven C. Rockefeller, Emeritus Professor of Religion at Middlebury College, Vermont. The Drafting Committee prepared Benchmark Draft I of the Earth Charter, issued by the Commission in March, 1997, at the conclusion of the Rio+5 Forum. Through 1998, numerous conferences and meetings on the text of Benchmark Draft I were held on every continent, and National Earth Charter Committees were organized in over forty countries. The Drafting Committee, after sifting numerous recommendations on ways to improve the text, completed Benchmark Draft II, issued April 1999 by the Earth Charter Commission and circulated by the Earth Council. While the current text already effectively implements the first three objectives of the international Earth Charter movement, the on-going consultation process will result in further fine-tuning revisions of Benchmark Draft II, being released Spring, 2000 on the way to the Millennial Forum and Assembly of the United Nations.

How Will the Ecumenical Movement Respond?

Through deliberations and programs spanning the last third of the 20th century, the ecumenical movement worldwide and in the US has begun to articulate a global ethic of eco-justice, fostering constructive human responses that serve environmental health and social equity together, in order to build just and sustainable community. Eco-justice expresses a spiritually grounded, biblically informed, moral posture of respect and fairness toward all creation, human and nonhuman. In this view, all beings on earth make up one household (oikos), which benefits from an economy (oikonomia) and pattern of community life that

takes ecological and social stewardship (oikonomos) seriously.

The Earth Charter movement intersects positively with the ethical concerns of the ecumenical movement, as we shall see below. But the ecumenical movement has only begun to respond to the Earth Charter. Benchmark Draft I received little church attention, though it was the subject of positive comment and suggestions in an early 1998 letter to Steven Rockefeller from Joan Brown Campbell, General Secretary of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. Her letter did not ask that the Earth Charter use the words "God" or "Creator," since an articulation of global ethics must speak to people of all faiths including nontheists. But the NCC letter asked for better expression of the eco-justice vision (integrating ecological integrity with social and economic justice), which occurred in Benchmark Draft II.

The draft Earth Charter is now being circulated to the member communions of the World Council of Churches, as well as to national and regional councils of churches relating to the WCC, to stimulate theological-ethical reflection and response. WCC General Secretary Konrad Raiser made this decision in light of the integrated creation-justice-peace content of the ethical principles in Draft II, and at the request of leaders of an international seminar on "Earth Ethics and the Ecumenical Movement" held April 24-30, 1999 at the Ecumenical Institute, Chateau de Bossey, Celigny, Switzerland.

A letter to the Earth Council from Seminar participants expressed appreciation for development of an Earth Charter, and suggested a few revisions that might be incorporated in the final version anticipated in the year 2000. One suggestion was to insert the following sentence in the third paragraph of the Preamble: "Our current historical moment results not only from evolutionary processes, but also from human actions, social systems, and historical practices that have benefited or harmed the natural world and human societies." Another suggestion would add another subprinciple to Principle #2: "Recognizing our regional rootedness and defending local communities of life and their evolutionary processes." Seminar participants also suggested developing subprinciples for #7 to limit animal experimentation and farming methods that cause animal suffering, and to reduce the killing of animals for sport or to obtain component parts for commercial purposes. Moreover, the ecumenical seminar group saw the need for more emphasis in principles #9 & #10 on redistributing wealth to meet basic human needs.

The supportive response of the ecumenical seminar to the earth ethics of the Charter is a promising sign. But we do not yet know how officials of Protestant and Orthodox communions in the WCC view the Earth Charter or how it will be utilized in varied ecclesial and social settings. Hopefully, the churches are alert to the intention of the Earth Charter drafters "to give to the emerging global consciousness the spiritual depth—the soul—needed to build a just and peaceful world community and to protect the integrity of Earth's ecological systems."²

As an ecumenically engaged Christian ethicist of Presbyterian background, I suggest that utilization of the Earth Charter in the churches is quite consistent with the long-standing commitment of ecumenical Christian leaders and of the WCC to give shape, as well as practical expression, to a global ethic. O. Frederick Nolde, an American Lutheran who became a WCC staff person, was instrumental in drafting the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This was followed during the Cold War years by ecumenical reflection on "The Responsible Society" and, after the 1972 Stockholm Conference, the WCC articulated principles of "Just, Participatory and Sustainable Society." The most recent ecumenical theme—"Justice, Peace, and (Integrity of) Creation"—was designed to meet three interrelated threats to life: social-economic injustice, war/arms race, and environmental destruction.

Ecumenical consultations in the 1990s have paid special attention to the undercurrents of universal history and global power relations, and to highlighting alternative modes of life in dignity that undergird just and sustainable communities. This "Theology of Life" approach to the crisis of globalization features peoples' struggles from the underside of history to challenge cultural domination, patriarchal power, political oppression, economic injustice, and environmental destruction.³ The Earth Charter's supporting principles—a crucial feature of Benchmark Draft II—reflect this view from below. A number of subprinciples became part of the Charter at the insistence of groups experiencing marginalization and exclusion from decision-making processes. So the ecumenical movement should welcome an Earth Charter with extra words and supporting principles that clarify responsibility and keep powerful interests from hiding behind generality.

I find the Earth Charter to be a theologically resonant, ethically coherent, and socially practical expression of the transformative vision and values needed to guide ecumenical earth. Following are some interpretive comments on facets of Benchmark Draft II, offered to encourage and inform ecumenical Christian use of the Earth Charter.

Points of Theological Resonance

The Earth Charter is being read in all sorts of civil society groups, and through the eyes of other world religions.⁴ Here I read it as a Christian who finds theological resonance in the Earth Charter's Preamble, Principles, and Conclusion. Without making any explicit statements about God or the Creator, the Earth Charter contains spiritual affirmations about the community of life and the human role therein that are congruent with biblical-theological themes. Ecumenical Christians take biblical themes seriously—along with tradition, experience and reason—as the basis for theological reflection, without taking the bible literally as God's errorless word, or pitting the bible against evolutionary science. The ecumenical theological posture explores "why" along with "how"—

understanding the evolving universe to be shaped by God's creative, loving purpose, and this suffering planet to elicit God's healing, reconciling power.

The Preamble begins by declaring universal interdependence and responsibility within earth community. "We, the people of the Earth, declare our responsibility to one another, to the greater community of life, and to future generations? We are one human family and one Earth community with a common destiny." Subsequent paragraphs of the Preamble offer a rationale for the opening declaration, as they describe humanity's cosmological and ecological situation, the fundamental environmental and social problems facing the world, the choice before us, and the need for a new sense of universal responsibility or global citizenship. The Preamble's concluding paragraph is a call for development of a shared ethical vision that will give direction to the sense of universal responsibility and serve as a foundation for the emerging global civilization. The interrelated principles of the Charter offer such a vision.⁵

The first two sentences of the Preamble's second paragraph announce, "Humanity is part of a vast evolving universe. Earth, our home, is alive with a unique community of life." Similarly, monotheistic faith today affirms that the whole cosmos—and this planet—bodies forth the power, wisdom and love of God (now understood in more holistic, organic terms). In other words, the natural world is a tangible sign of the enlivening and restoring presence of God's Spirit. All of earth community is valuable to God, who relates directly to and cares for the well-being of everykind. So the creatures are not at human disposal; humans have responsibility for earthkeeping and care for biodiverse life in each place! As the last sentence of the Preamble's second paragraph puts it, "The protection of Earth's vitality, diversity, and beauty is a sacred trust."

Those sentences of the Earth Charter are consistent with basic biblical-theological affirmations that God creates and reconciles all being, loves the magnificent diversity of life, and gives humans responsibility to maintain the integrity and grandeur of Earth. We are to love each other and care for the rest of creation in the way Jesus does. Humans have social and bio-responsibility for places and species (are stewards of life's well-being). As citizens of earth community who have acquired destructive habits that crowd out other life and threaten the planet's well-being, we are now obliged to limit our production, consumption, and reproduction, so that otherkind may also thrive. Later, the Preamble enjoins us to "live with a sense of universal responsibility" and express "the spirit of human solidarity and kinship with all life" animated by "reverence for the source of our being, gratitude for the gift of life, and humility regarding the human place in the larger scheme of things." (These spiritual sensibilities or virtues are reinforced again in the Conclusion's last paragraph.) The Preamble ends with a commitment to implement the vision and values of sustainability expressed in the Earth Charter's principles.

As we have seen, distinct threads of religious conviction, consistent with

Christian faith, are woven into the tapestry of the Earth Charter's preamble and conclusion. But religious resonance is not limited to the beginning and end of the Charter. The interrelated ethical principles that make up the body of the Earth Charter also offer some significant leads for theological reflection.

The first of four general principles set forth in Benchmark Draft II is "Respect Earth and all life," i.e., life in all its diversity. This posture recognizes and affirms the interdependence and intrinsic worth of all beings, i.e., everykind. Such a post-anthropocentric posture moves beyond the Agenda 21 consensus reached at the 1992 Earth Summit. Now the churches need to adopt a similarly inclusive earth community posture, in order to be faithful to basic biblical themes such as: a) the vision of Creation's Sabbath in the Torah, b) the ecological covenant God makes with Noah and "all flesh that is on the earth" in Genesis 8-9, c) Jubilee laws and lifestyles to restore the poor, protect the animals, and to let the land lie fallow found in Leviticus and Deuteronomy, d) hope for earth community's fulfillment in Jesus' announcement of the kingdom of God—the society of all within God's gracious reign, and e) the power of the Logos—the ground and reason of being—to love the cosmos and to restore Earth's wholeness through incarnation that suffers with nature and humanity, caring for both (John 1:1-5; Colossians 1:15-20).

With respect established as the foundational first principle, the other three general principles specify ethical responsibility: (#2) between humans and otherkind, (#3) in and among human societies, and (#4) between present and future generations. Humans are to care for and to con-serve the community of life in all three spheres and to share benefits and burdens, recognizing that quality of life and relationships—among people and with nature—are the crucial criteria. As Jesus put it in John 10, the goal is to have and share life abundantly.

What the general principles present as basic human responsibilities are further developed in principles #5-16. Before unpacking some ethical emphases of those principles, I want to call attention to the special theological resonance of the last principle, #16: "Create a culture of peace and cooperation." Its subprinciples concisely affirm peacemaking in the Gandhian tradition of active nonviolence, the Franciscan tradition of peaceful living with neighbors and nature, and anti-war traditions that demand demilitarized societies for the sake of all life. The concluding subprinciple #16, 5 is quite congruent with biblical definitions of shalom (peace with justice) in referring to "the wholeness created by balanced and harmonious relationships with oneself, other persons, other cultures, other life, Earth, and the larger whole of which all are a part." Christians (& other monotheists) can interpret the last phrase to affirm God as the Sacred Whole, Source of all being.

Ethical Congruence

The organizing principles in Parts II, III, and IV of the Earth Charter specify

crucial values to observe and necessary methods to follow in an ethic of truly sustainable development (or sustainable community). These ethical principles, which apply everywhere and at all levels of moral agency—personal, institutional, and governmental—are congruent with ecumenical Christianity's emphasis on eco-justice. Twelve organizing principles amplifying four general principles provide a broader view of the imperatives of 21st century environmental ethics, comprehensively understood to encompass the quest for ecological integrity in linkage with a just and sustainable economic order, pursued in the context of democracy and peace. Since a detailed commentary is being written by the drafting committee, I will only highlight some ethical features of Earth Charter principles #5-15.

In Part II, principle #5 outlines the global/local agenda for preserving biological diversity by protecting and restoring ecological systems. It assumes the need for careful development planning and management of renewable resources within a larger strategy of conservation and habitat preservation.

Principle #6 highlights prevention—the "golden rule" of environmental ethics—and recommends the precautionary principle as a practical guideline whenever knowledge is incomplete or inconclusive. Regulation of potentially harmful activities, publicly accountable decision-making and assignment of costs, environmental impact assessments, governmental oversight, and international cooperation are indispensable for implementation of meaningful precautionary measures to prevent harm to the environment, for example from toxic pollution, global warming, ozone depletion, deforestation, overfishing. (Also see Principle #12.)

Principle #7, in calling for considerate treatment or compassion for all living beings, asserts human concern for individual animals and not only an ecosystems approach to the well-being of otherkind. Because this simple assertion moves beyond the current international consensus, no subprinciples were developed for Benchmark Draft II, though some are being developed for the next draft of the Earth Charter. The ecumenical movement has said little on this subject except in *Liberating Life: a Report to the World Council of Churches* produced by a consultation held at Annecy, France in 1988. That report took seriously the well-being of animals individually and within healthy ecosystems, and proposed that integrity of creation informed by biblical sensibility refers to "the value of all creatures in and for themselves, for one another, and for God, and their interconnectedness in a diverse whole."⁶

Part III of the Earth Charter links ecological sustainability with economic justice, highlighting an important set of eco-justice concerns. Principle #8 emphasizes that population stabilization, reduced consumption, renewable energy, and full-cost accounting are related facets of an integrated approach to maintaining Earth's carrying capacity and the well-being of human communities. Principles #9 & #10 present guidelines for overcoming poverty and achieving economic equity.

Principle #11, as most recently revised, emphasizes that eradicating poverty is an environmental as well as a social ethical imperative. Supporting principles enunciate human rights in these terms: "secure the human right to potable water, clean air, uncontaminated soil, food security, shelter, and safe sanitation in urban, rural and remote environments;" and "provide fair and just access to education, health care, land, natural resources, affordable clean energy, and affordable credit, providing every person with the opportunity to attain a secure and sustainable livelihood." to establish equality; and to "enable all persons to enforce their environmental rights." In Part IV, Principle #14 reads, "Honor and defend the right of all persons, without discrimination, to a natural and social environment supportive of their dignity, bodily health, and spiritual well-being." A sub-principle goes on to "affirm the right of indigenous peoples to their spirituality, knowledge, lands and resources and to their related practice of sustainable livelihoods." Principles #11 and #14 together offer an outstanding presentation of human economic and environmental rights, bringing together emphases of the economic justice and environmental equity movements that mainline churches strongly support, and reasserting the substance of Principles of Environmental Justice adopted in 1991 by the National People of Color Environmental Summit, Washington, DC.

Principle #12 affirms "gender equality as a prerequisite to sustainable development," a goal that cannot be achieved without the full and equal participation of women. (Some conservative religious forces, however, keep the Earth Charter at arms length precisely because of its commitment to full participation by women as equal subjects seeking full development in mutuality with men.)

As we have seen, the Preamble and Part I of the Earth Charter feature the eco-justice norm of solidarity with other people and creatures, Part II features the norm of ecological sustainability, and Part III features sufficiency, equity and environmental rights as standards of socio-economic justice.⁷ Part IV emphasizes the importance of democratic participation in decisions about obtaining sustenance and managing the commons for the good of all. Principle #13 calls for transparency, effective public input on, and accountable government involvement in, environmental, economic and social policy. Principle #15 points to a parallel agenda for education, the arts and the media.

Relation to Other Proposals

The Earth Charter is part of a larger worldwide effort to clarify and follow the path to sustainability. How does it compare with other recent global ethics proposals? One big difference is in mode of development. Earth Charter drafting and redrafting has involved years of consultative development guided by an international drafting committee formed by the Earth Council. Individuals wrote other prominent global ethics proposals, with little international NGO consultation

before being published for wide circulation.

Two other proposals for a global ethic, each initiated by a scholar of religion, have been circulating during the period of Earth Charter development. Theologian Hans Kung drafted "A Global Ethic," to state a consensus and a challenge, in preparation for the 1993 Chicago Parliament of the World's Religions. His draft, subsequently endorsed by the Parliament, features four "irrevocable directives" or "broad guidelines for human behavior"—stated as commitments to a culture of: non-violence and respect for life, solidarity and a just economic order, tolerance and a life of truthfulness, equal rights and partnership between men and women. These four commitments have close affinity to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, are certainly worthy of the religious community's attention, and can be seen as complementary to the Earth Charter.

Meanwhile, Temple University Professor Leonard Swidler formed a Center for Global Ethics and drafted "A Universal Declaration of a Global Ethic," keyed to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Though his declaration of a global ethic emerged with even less consultation than did Kung's draft for the Parliament of World Religions, it too has stimulated reflective interreligious responses.⁸

The Earth Charter actually makes commitments similar to those in the Parliament-endorsed global ethic, and in Swidler's Declaration, while it offers much more, especially in the Earth Charter's fifty-five subprinciples. These principles include key phrases from consensus international language designed to resolve particular issues that animated recent UN conferences on Environment, Population, Women, and Urban Development. The Earth Charter is uniquely focused on a shared vision of basic values to be implemented by all social sectors for the sake of sustainable development/community.

The Earth Charter helps us to see that revelation continues in new contexts, rather than having been completed in the scriptures of the inherited religions. The global community striving toward sustainability in a full world must draw—with critical consciousness—on new insights of science, as well as the wisdom of the world's religions and learnings from cultures that effectively promote sustainable living.

The Earth Charter offers ethical principles that are both more comprehensive and more specific than are expressed in other recent proposals for global ethics. And it has been drafted in an on-going dialogue with civil society groups all over the world, which will result in further revision. With those credentials, the Earth Charter stands out as a peoples' guide to earth community ethics.

Practical Utilization

The most obvious use of the Earth Charter within civil society groups including congregations is to introduce its shared vision of sustainable community values, and to explore its ethical principles educationally, with an eye for practical implementation. On every continent, civil society groups are making creative contextual use of the Earth Charter to focus attention on the vision and praxis of sustainability within their ecological and social settings.

Besides exposing the sustainability path for people of all ages in every sector of society, the Earth Charter offers a coherent value framework for evaluating environmental issue responses, public policy choices, business and professional codes of conduct, and community lifestyles. It is an integrated standard to bring into dialogues about appropriate forest policies, equitable hazardous waste disposal, how to stop global warming, assessing development plans, agricultural practices, uses of biotechnology, etc.

A vision, politics and praxis of ecological sustainability in the context of justice and peace already concerns segments of the ecumenical movement, and now should engage the church everywhere. Any ecclesial body, congregation or group of church members can participate in the basic education-action process to build earth community. In-depth educational programs should also be organized around selected Earth Charter principles with their sets of carefully crafted subprinciples. Ecumenical Christians active in civil society organizations or business and professional sectors are also invited to make the connections.

To enable local leaders in the U.S. to become earth Charter Facilitators who connect with the international movement and link up regionally, an Earth Charter USA Network has been organized by the Center for Respect of Life and Environment. (Contact Thomas J. Rogers; E-mail: info@earthcharterusa.org; PH: 202-778-6133). The web site www.earthcharterusa.org gives information on the origin and objectives of the Earth Charter Network, and it offers resources to help introduce the Charter's content in local communities, as well as to link with partner organizations in civil society. Sectoral Working Groups of the Earth Charter USA Network will focus on: business and labor, religious communities, government and politics, media and communications, youth, as well education.

The Earth Council posts website information on the Charter at www.earthcharter.org.

The international coordinator of the Earth Charter in San Jose, Costa Rica is Mirian Vilela (E-mail: echarter@terra.ecouncil.ac.cr).

The Earth Charter is a coherent, available way to grapple with the fundamental changes needed in our attitudes, values, and ways of living. It issues a call to decision reminiscent of the stark injunction in Deuteronomy 30:19, "I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live." In a similar vein, the fourth paragraph of the revised

Earth Charter Preamble declares, "The Choice is ours: form a global partnership to care for Earth and one another or participate in the destruction of ourselves and diversity of life."

Notes

1. From the Report of the Moderator—Aram I, Orthodox Catholicos of Cilicia, Antelias, Lebanon—to the Eighth Assembly of the World Council of Churches, Harare, Zimbabwe, December, 1998.
2. Steven C. Rockefeller, "Christian Faith, Global Interdependence, and the Earth Charter," paper presented to a conference 10/22/98 on Ecumenical Earth: New Dimension of Church and Community in Creation (Book in press co-edited by D. Hessel and Larry Rasmussen).
3. See Bas de Gaay Fortman and Berma Klein Goldewijk, *God and the Goods: Global Economy in a Civilizational Perspective* (Geneva: WCC, 1998); Julio de Santa Ana, ed., *Sustainability and Globalization* (Geneva: WCC, 1998); and Richard Dickinson, *Economic Globalization: Deepening the Challenge for Christians* (WCC-Unit III, 1998).
4. See, for example, *Buddhist Perspectives on the Earth Charter* (Boston Research Center for the 21st Century, 1998).
5. Rockefeller paper, "Christian Faith, Global Interdependence, and the Earth Charter."
6. The text of the Annecy Report is in an appendix to *Liberating Life: Contemporary Approaches to Ecological Theology*, eds. Charles Birch, William Eakin, & Jay McDaniel (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1991).
7. D. Hessel, "Ecumenical Ethics for Earth Community," *Theology & Public Policy* 8, 1&2 (1996), discusses four basic norms: solidarity, sustainability, sufficiency, and participation.
8. See Hans Kung and Karl-Josef Kuschel, eds., *A Global Ethic: The Declaration of the Parliament of the World's Religions* (New York: Continuum, 1993); H. Kung, ed., *Yes to a Global Ethic* (Continuum, 1996); and Leonard Swidler, ed., *For All Life: Toward a Universal Declaration of a Global Ethic* (Ashland, OR: White Cloud Press, 1999).