

“Earth Charter Ethics and Finding Meaning in an Evolving Universe”

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At the outset I would like to extend my personal congratulations to Mary Evelyn Tucker, John Grim and Brian Swimme on “The Journey of the Universe” film and book, which will become a deeply inspiring educational resource in support of the transition to a sustainable future. All of us associated with the Earth Charter Initiative are profoundly grateful to Mary Evelyn for her extraordinary leadership in support of the drafting and promotion of the Earth Charter. As a member of the drafting committee, Mary Evelyn played an especially important role in helping to craft language for the Preamble that sets the Earth Charter’s ethical vision in the context of an evolving universe. Further, she has always seen the need for a new global ethic as one important implication of the Universe Story as it relates to humanity’s role as a member of the community of life on Earth.

Eric Chaisson, who with Mary Evelyn was part of the first Earth Charter drafting committee meeting in January 1997, also shares this outlook and his views had an important influence on the language that is used in the Preamble. I also would like to recognize that in addition to Mary Evelyn and Eric a number of you attending this conference contributed to the drafting process and have supported and used the Earth Charter in many different ways, and I would like to take this opportunity to thank you.

It is the belief that there is a link between the Universe Story and the need for a new global ethic that has led the conference organizers to include a discussion of the Earth Charter. In what follows, my objective is to share some reflections on the nature, significance, and impact of the Earth Charter’s ethical and spiritual vision. I also would like to respond to some of the comments by other participants regarding the tension between scientific theories of evolution and the world view of Christianity and other

traditions that affirm the ultimate meaning and value of life in the face of evil, suffering and death.

1. Reflections on the Earth Charter Initiative

First, all of us involved in the Earth Charter Initiative firmly believe that in our increasingly interdependent world a new sense of planetary citizenship involving shared responsibility for the well being of the whole human family, the greater community of life, and future generations is essential if humanity is to survive, make the transition to sustainability, and flourish in the next millennium. The primary objective of the Earth Charter consultation and drafting process was to give expression to a new global ethic that clarifies our common responsibilities as global citizens in the 21st century.

Second, the members of the Earth Charter Commission, Secretariat and Drafting Committee all believed that the Earth Charter process was as important as the final product. The process involved an extended worldwide, cross cultural dialogue on common goals and shared values. Nothing like this had ever been tried before. What made the process possible is the emergence of a global civil society during the final decades of the 20th century. The leaders of the Earth Charter Initiative believed that cross cultural dialogue involving grass roots community leaders as well as experts was the only way to avoid the charge of intellectual imperialism, ensure a wide sense of ownership of the Charter once it was drafted, and provide the document with legitimacy as a guiding ethical framework for building a just, sustainable and peaceful world.

Earth Charter dialogues involved a search for common ground. They were also conducted in accordance with guidelines designed to promote trust in the process, deep listening, and openness to diverse points of view. For example, in an effort to ensure that all individuals and groups attending a meeting felt fully empowered to participate and

that no one person's or group's agenda controlled the discussion, the position of chair person for a session was rotated among women and men and among representatives of different groups.

In support of the global civil society dialogue process, which went on for five years, the drafting committee conducted extensive research in the fields of international law, science, philosophy, ethics and religion and consulted with many international NGOs. The objective was to identify the principles on which there appeared to be an emerging international consensus and to use this information to help focus and advance the dialogue.

Third, the Earth Charter was launched a decade ago, but to date no United Nations or civil society declaration has superseded or replaced it. Some significant declarations have appeared, but none of them are the product of an extended, inclusive, participatory process such as generated the Earth Charter. Declarations like the UN Millennium Declaration, which was drafted several months after the Earth Charter appeared and includes the Millennium Development Goals, can be viewed as involving significant steps on the part of the UN toward implementation of Earth Charter principles. The Johannesburg Declarations issued by the World Summit on Sustainable Development in 2002 affirms the inclusive ethical vision in the Earth Charter when, using language from the Earth Charter, it states that "we declare... our responsibility to one another, to the greater community of life and to our children." This is as close as the United Nations General Assembly has come to endorsing the Earth Charter.

One especially interesting new document is the draft Universal Declaration on the Rights of Mother Earth that is being circulated by the Bolivian government. The principles of the Earth Charter provide the ethical foundation for the concept of the rights of nature. Whether using rights language as a legal mechanism for promoting

environmental protection will eventually be adopted by the international community is impossible to predict. Earth Charter International supports a full international debate regarding the ethical and legal issues involved.

Fourth, the Earth Charter is designed to encourage a sense of belonging to the universe and an awareness that human life is a product of a cosmic as well as a planetary evolutionary process. The objective in this regard is to deepen the sense of the interdependence of humanity and nature and to heighten consciousness of humanity's responsibilities as a member of the greater community of life on Earth. The Earth Charter Preamble also affirms several other universal spiritual values and attitudes related to a cosmological perspective, including "reverence for the mystery of being, gratitude for the gift of life, and humility regarding the human place in nature." As noted in the Preamble, these attitudes can strengthen the sense of human solidarity and kinship with all life.

Consistent with the practice of most scientists and with strong support from leaders of indigenous peoples, the Earth Charter uses the planet's name, Earth, and does not refer to "the earth" or "the Earth." The abandonment of "the earth" in favor of the name Earth is a significant language change. References to "the earth" encourage old habits of thought that regard our planetary home as just an object, a stage for human history and a collection of resources to be exploited for human purposes. Use of the name Earth can evoke the image of the planet in space as photographed by the astronauts, and it encourages respect for Earth and appreciation of the planet's unique beauty and interrelated biosphere. I mention all of this because most environmentalists, philosophers, and journalists, as well as international environmental lawyers, persist in using the definite article with the name Earth. This is an odd construction. It would not occur to any of us to refer to the Mars or the Saturn, for example. "The Earth" seems to

be a halfway house between “the earth” and the name Earth, and it will eventually be abandoned when people finally become fully comfortable with the name Earth just as they are now becoming comfortable with gender neutral language.

Fifth, the world view being promoted by the Earth Charter is shaped both by science and by what perhaps can best be described as a spiritual and ethical awakening that is taking place in millions of people, especially youth, in different cultures all around the world. The emergence of this new spiritual and ethical consciousness may be one of the most significant developments in recent human history – an evolutionary development that goes largely unnoticed in the news media and the academy.

Over the past four to five thousand years all of the great civilizations prior to the modern period have produced their own distinctive form of religious and ethical consciousness. Some universal values have emerged, but the religious and ethical consciousness of these former civilizations is shaped by separate cultural histories and distinct geographical locations on the planet, generating great diversity. Over the past 200 years, under the impact of science, the industrial revolution, the democratic revolution, and technology a new civilization has been taking form. Its emergence has produced great tension with the older religious traditions, and it is often identified with materialism and secularism. However, as industrialization and the new technology propel the human species into the era of global history and make possible for the first time the emergence of a planetary society, this new civilization may well be in the process of producing its own distinctive form of religious consciousness. The new religious consciousness involves an ethical and spiritual awareness that reflects a sense of belonging to the whole human family in all its diversity, Earth’s greater community of life, and the universe at large. The image of Earth in space is one of its primary symbols.

The new planetary consciousness is informed by science, including the new

physics, ecology, and cosmology. It appreciates the interdependence of all peoples and of people and nature. It inspires a quest for universal ethical and spiritual ideals. It is all one with the attitudes and values that are the foundation of a democratic culture, including respect for human rights, gender equality and cultural diversity. It recognizes the intrinsic value of all life forms and extends moral consideration to the whole community of life. It views caring for people and caring for Earth as two interrelated aspects of one great task. Its world view is shaped by wonder, a mystical sense of the sacred, reverence for life, compassion and love. It integrates the spiritual life with everyday life.

The new ethical and spiritual consciousness regards the world's religions as the common heritage of all people, and it seeks spiritual wisdom wherever it can be found. However, it liberates people from religious exclusivism and fundamentalism, and it focuses attention on direct personal experience, insight, and awakening rather than submission to external clerical authority and devotion to fixed creeds. Some new religious communities and organizations have formed, but the new consciousness is not about the emergence of a new world religion. It is about the transformation of the existing religions and how they relate to each other and the challenge of building a global community in the midst of cultural diversity. There is continuity between core teachings associated with the world's religions and the new planetary consciousness, and the latter can be given distinctive Buddhist, Christian, Confucian, Jewish, Hindu and Islamic forms of expression and this is happening. It also finds modes of expression separate from all traditional institutional religion. For example, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international declarations and covenants, as well as the Earth Charter, reflect the striving of men and women from diverse cultures to articulate the universal

values that are part of this new awareness. These universal ethical values are the first pillar of sustainable development.

2. The Impact of the Earth Charter

What has been the impact of the Earth Charter? How has it been used? Some examples are cited below:

- The first goal of the Earth Charter Initiative has been to raise awareness around the world of the Earth Charter's ethical vision and to seek endorsement of the document. The Earth Charter has been translated into over 40 languages and close to 40 national web sites in the local language have been set up in addition to the Earth Charter International web site. To date over 5,000 organizations have endorsed the document, including UNESCO, the World Conservation Union, the U.S. Conference of Mayors, and hundreds of universities. Over 800 organizations in the United States have endorsed the Earth Charter.
- A second goal of the Initiative has been to promote the educational use of the Earth Charter, and the Charter has been widely used in schools, colleges and universities around the world as a teaching tool. The new Encyclopedia of Environmental Ethics and Philosophy edited by Baird Callicot and Robert Frodeman recognizes the Earth Charter as one of the ten "primary sources" for this entire field of study and includes the full text of the document. Earth Charter International has formed a partnership with UNESCO in support of the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development. Among the governments that have integrated Earth Charter related materials into their

national school system are Mexico, Costa Rica and India. This may happen in China.

- The Earth Charter is now widely recognized by international lawyers as a significant reference document and some law professors teach it as soft law. Some elements of the Earth Charter are, of course, already part of hard law.
- ECI has formed a partnership with the Global Reporting Initiative, which works with hundreds of corporations on the development of sustainability indicators for reporting on their corporate social and ecological responsibility. GRI now offers these corporations the option of using the Earth Charter as a guiding ethical framework for their corporate social responsibility and sustainability indicators. Earth Charter US has formed a partnership with the Business School at Tampa University, and together they annually present Earth Charter Sustainable Business Awards to Florida based corporations.
- Among the many city governments that have used the Earth Charter in their sustainable development planning are Montpelier, Vermont, Toronto, Canada and Sao Paulo, Brazil.
- ECI has helped to create an action oriented international network of Earth Charter Youth Groups, involving young people in over 100 countries who are working in their local communities to implement Earth Charter values. In partnership with a virtual multi-media platform, Heart in Action, ECI offers these Youth Groups training in sustainability leadership skills.
- A group of international law experts and environmental philosophers have just published a new book with the title: The Earth Charter: A Framework for Global Governance (KIT Publishers, 2010). The volume is edited by Klaus Bosselmann and J. Ronald Engel and includes a Preface by Nick Robinson. It contains a fairly

comprehensive bibliography of the many books and essays that deal with the Earth Charter.

- Hundreds of religious organizations and groups have endorsed the Earth Charter, and ECI has formed a partnership with the Forum on Religion and Ecology at Yale headed by Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim.

3. Reflections on Evolution, Human History, and the Problem of Evil and Suffering

In the course of the Conference, it was pointed out by several participants that many Christians find it difficult to reconcile their idea of God as the omnipotent Creator of a good universe with the Darwinian theory of biological evolution, which depicts evolution as a violent and cruel mechanism without a predetermined goal. Further, this concern about the nature of biological evolution becomes an obstacle to acceptance of the idea of cosmological evolution. In response to these observations, I would like to suggest one way to address these concerns and to reconcile faith and science.

Human history, which is to a significant extent is a tale of violence, oppression, injustice, and the terrible suffering of untold numbers of innocent children, women and men, presents an even greater problem for belief in a God of love and justice and the ultimate meaning of life than evolution. From the perspective of human reason, if God is all powerful and all knowing, as most Christians and Jews believe, God is inescapably responsible for allowing this injustice and suffering to occur.

Confronted with the problem of evil, suffering and death, theologians have struggled over the centuries to develop rational arguments that justify God (theodicy) and explain why God would create our universe and give freedom to human beings in spite of all their weaknesses and faults. However, none of the many speculative arguments that have been put forth provide in the final analysis a convincing explanation. Disturbing

doubts and questions remain that have led some philosophers to atheism and to the conviction that life has no ultimate meaning.

The wisest spiritual teachers understand the futility of the endeavor to explain why, in a good universe, the innocent suffer and there is so much violence and destruction in nature at large. The author of the Book of Job is an example. Neither Buddha nor Jesus pursued this question. However, the world's great religions and wisdom traditions do offer a profoundly meaningful response to the mystery of evil, suffering and death. Those who seek the truth in the face of this mystery will find the answer of these traditions to be a path or way and a promise. Even though this path is often obscured by various aspects of institutional religion, it is the real heart of authentic religious life. Each of the great religions and wisdom traditions has its own unique approaches to the way, and no general description is entirely adequate. However, one way of thinking about the way is briefly described in what follows.

The way involves a spiritual quest and includes a spiritual practice, but it is more than a set of spiritual disciplines. It is a way of living and relating to the world guided by spiritual and ethical values. It requires the engagement of a person's whole being, strong faith, and courage. It involves deepening self-knowledge, awakening to an inner light, and a transformation of consciousness. It leads to the growing realization that the meaning and purpose of life are found in being more, not having more, and in preventing harm and promoting the good, caring for others and the community of life with intelligence, compassion, and love. What this means for different individuals will vary greatly according to their special abilities and life situation and the challenges presented by their time. The promise made regarding the way is the assurance that those who embrace it wholeheartedly will come to know the goodness of the power of being, will be sustained by a sense of the ultimate meaning of life, and will find true freedom and peace.

As Socrates put it in the conclusion of Plato's "Apology": "No evil can come to a good person."

Keeping these reflections in mind, scientific theories regarding cosmic and biological evolution should not be seen as necessarily incompatible with a religious faith in God or other world views that affirm the ultimate meaning and value of life. It is the part of wisdom to humbly accept the natural world and our place in it as revealed by ongoing scientific inquiry while also recognizing that our scientific knowledge of the universe is surrounded by mystery and we should not look to discursive reason and science to disclose the deeper meaning of life. This is not to suggest that scientific knowledge and the search for it are without moral and spiritual significance. For example, a knowledge of the interrelation of things is vitally important for sustainable development, and a knowledge of the human place in the larger scheme of things helps to clarify the nature and scope of our ethical responsibilities. Science cannot tell us what is right and wrong, but a knowledge of the consequences of different courses of action is critical information for ethically responsible decision making. Further, even though there are aspects of nature that are troubling to human moral reason, the encounter with the beauty and grandeur of the universe as revealed in nature on Earth and in the exploration of the evolving cosmos can contribute to the spiritual and ethical awakening that lies at the heart of the religious life.

In conclusion, I would like to leave you with the following question. It is one that I have been pondering with Gus Speth over the past year. A major obstacle to the success of the environmental, climate mitigation, and New Economy movements in the US is that the general public does not view the issues involved as fundamental moral challenges. In general, social movements in the US have achieved their objectives when the American

people come to recognize that these objectives are right, just and fair. What must be done to raise such moral concern regarding the goals of the sustainable development movement in the US? A relatively small group of philosophers and theologians have laid the intellectual foundations for a major change, but their thinking has not yet entered the educational and cultural mainstream. The Earth Charter Initiative has tried to address this issue in the US with only very limited success. Certainly Big History and “Journey of the Universe” have an important contribution to make in this regard. What other new initiatives and strategies could expand and deepen America’s ethical consciousness, leading to far-reaching progressive social change?