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What World Religions Teach Us

Forum contribution: [Toward a Great Ethics Transition](#)

Mary Evelyn Tucker

I am indebted to [Brendan Mackey](#) for raising valuable issues about the contribution of the Earth Charter to a global ethics for our time. I am also grateful for the thoughtful comments his article has provoked. My response focuses on how world religions can complement this process, recognizing the limitations of religions as well as their capacity to support transformative moral change, as in abolition in England, the civil rights movement in the United States, and anti-apartheid in South Africa.

The litany of environmental, climate, and development problems is well known. Now more than ever, we are being pressed to see the linkages between environment and people, between healthy ecosystems and healthy social systems, between climate protection and poverty alleviation. We need truly interdisciplinary approaches and systemic thinking that includes more stakeholders, as many GTI commentators have noted. Our challenge is to create not simply low-carbon societies but whole communities, where humans are not recklessly exploiting nature for material gain, but rather recognizing their profound dependence on the larger community of life. In this spirit, unrestrained economic growth needs to be halted and effective governance needs to be enacted. And new ethical indicators of “progress” need to be developed.

These indicators are the central concerns of the Earth Charter for the integration of ecological integrity, justice, and peace. They correspond to six key “values for human-Earth flourishing” shared by world religions. These include reverence, respect, restraint, redistribution, responsibility, and renewal. These values were first identified in a conference series we organized at Harvard on World Religions and Ecology from 1996 to 1998, at which Steven Rockefeller (among others)

presented. The Earth Charter in its drafting stage was included in each of the conferences. John Grim and I expanded on these values in *Ecology and Religion* (Island Press, 2014).

The conferences highlighted viable human-Earth relations in scripture, in ritual, and in ethics. Over 800 scholars participated and ten volumes were published by Harvard. The Forum on Religion and Ecology was formed at the culminating conference at the United Nations in 1998. It is now based at Yale, where a major [website](#) was created to assist research, education, and outreach in this area. In the last twenty-five years, a new field of study has emerged in colleges and seminaries, and a new force for change has arisen within religions communities.

Statements on the environment, on climate change, and on eco-justice have been released by leaders from different world religions and indigenous traditions. Many religious groups cite the Earth Charter. The Pope's encyclical *Laudato Si* is a major document in bringing together eco-justice concerns. The Earth Charter is referenced in the encyclical. While religions have their problematic dimensions, including intolerance, dogmatism, and fundamentalism, they also have served as wellsprings of wisdom, as sources of moral inspiration, and as containers of transforming ritual practices.

The key components of the Earth Charter are (1) cosmological context, (2) ecological integrity, (3) social equity, (4) economic justice, and (5) democracy, non-violence, and peace. These six components of a sustainable future have their counterparts in the values for human-Earth flourishing that are shared among the world's religions.

Cosmological Context

All cultures have been grounded in the stories they tell regarding the nature of the universe, the evolution of the Earth and of life, and the destiny of humans in this context. These cosmological stories provide accounts of the creation and evolution of life and the purpose of humans. As humans are currently trying to navigate their way between scientific accounts of evolution and the multiple religious stories of creation, the Charter articulates a broad, simple, and inclusive sensibility that Earth is our home, our dwelling place within the larger cosmos.

This enlarged perspective of home may be a critical foundation for articulating a future that is both sustaining and flourishing. The Charter recognizes that we are part of a large family of life, including not only other humans but also other species. The interdependent quality of the Earth community is celebrated along with the fact that the conditions for life have been evolving for billions of years: “Humanity is part of a vast evolving universe. Earth, our home, is alive with a unique community of life. The forces of nature make existence a demanding and uncertain adventure, but Earth has provided the conditions essential to life’s evolution.”

Thus to speak of the broadest context for the flourishing of bio-social systems, we need to be reminded of the cosmological, evolutionary story of life’s emergence. The religious response to this is one of reverence, a quality shared by many scientists who are deeply inspired by their study of nature from cells to galaxies, enhanced now by powerful microscopes and telescopes. The intricacy and complexity of life is valued from both a spiritual and a scientific perspective. Awe and wonder become expressed through the shared experience of reverence. The [Journey of the Universe](#) film and book reflect this process.

Ecological Integrity

The broad context for a sustaining and flourishing future from the Earth Charter is preserving ecological health and integrity. Without such a basis for healthy ecosystems, there can be no long-term basis for the continuity of human life. It is expressed succinctly in the Preamble as follows: “The resilience of the community of life and the well-being of humanity depend upon preserving a healthy biosphere with all its ecological systems, a rich variety of plants and animals, fertile soils, pure waters, and clear air.”

The response of religious communities to this call for biological protection is the principle of respect for the rich diversity of life and the ecosystems that support life. Without such respect, environmental exploitation will continue, and we may irreversibly damage the ability of ecosystems to renew themselves. This is further spelled out in the Charter as protecting and restoring Earth’s ecosystems; preventing harm through the precautionary principle; adopting effective patterns of production, consumption, and reproduction; and advancing the study of ecological sustainability.

Social and Economic Justice

The next section of the Charter highlights social and economic justice, another key concern of the world's religions. The religious virtues of restraint in use of resources, as well as redistribution of wealth through charitable means, complement the Charter's principles. All of the world's religions encourage moderation in personal behavior as well as in the accumulation or use of material goods. In addition, the world's religions express a strong concern for the suffering of the poor and for inequality between the wealthy and those in need. Charitable giving is valued as a fundamental religious act.

The Charter calls for poverty eradication, equitable development, gender fairness, and non-discrimination regarding minorities and indigenous people. Thus justice is seen as balance of ecological, economic, and social factors. The term that many of the religions are using to describe this is "eco-justice," where biological and human health are seen as indispensable to one another. Indeed, preserving ecological integrity and protecting social and economic justice will require an integrated understanding of human-Earth relations.

In addition to restraint and redistribution, a broadened sense of ecological virtue is required. Women who do so much unpaid work to sustain their families, especially in developing countries, need to be valued and respected. The same applies for other minorities and for indigenous peoples who have preserved valuable environmental knowledge in many parts of the world. While the religions still have a way to go in recognizing the dignity and value of women and the communities of indigenous peoples, some progress is being made in this regard.

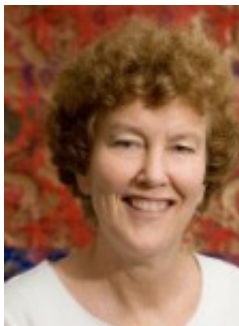
Democracy, Non-violence, and Peace

Finally, the Earth Charter recognizes that democracy, non-violence, and peace are necessary ingredients for a sustaining and flourishing future. From the perspective of the religious communities, democracy requires a fundamental sense of responsibility to future generations of the community of life — human and more than human. Non-violence and peace encourage the renewal of inner and outer peace, something that religious communities have tried to foster for millennia. Spiritual practices such as prayer and contemplation, yoga and tai ch'i, ritual and rites of passage have been developed to foster peace and non-violence for individuals and communities.

Of course, it should be noted that non-violence has not always been practiced, but it is one of the reasons why Gandhi, Tolstoy, and Martin Luther King are so widely admired. The principles in the section of the Earth Charter are strengthening democratic institutions, promoting sustainability education, respecting animals, and promoting a culture of non-violence and peace.

In conclusion, this integration of the principles of the Earth Charter with the virtues for human-Earth flourishing of the world's religions provides a unique synergy for rethinking a sustainable future. The capacity of the world's religions to provide moral direction and inspiration for a flourishing community of life is significant. The potential of the Earth Charter to create an ethical framework for sustainable programs and practices is considerable. Together, they may provide a comprehensive ethical grounding for creating a common and shared future.

About the Author



Mary Evelyn Tucker is a Senior Lecturer and Research Scholar at Yale University, where she has appointments in the School of Forestry and Environmental Studies as well as the Divinity School and the Department of Religious Studies. She teaches in the joint MA program in religion and ecology and directs the Forum on Religion and Ecology at Yale with her husband, John Grim. From 1997 to 2000, she served on the International Earth Charter Drafting Committee. She has authored and edited numerous books on Asian religions, the intersection between religion and ecology, and the work of Thomas Berry, and is the co-creator of a multi-media project called Journey of the Universe, which includes an Emmy award-winning film. She received her PhD from Columbia University in Japanese Confucianism.

About the Publication

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