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The Earth Charter at 15: A Spiritual Lens on Sustainability

An Interview with Steven Rockefeller

This year marks the fifteenth anniversary of the release of the Earth Charter, which brought spirituality and ethics to the forefront of sustainable development discourse. Allen White, Senior Fellow at Tellus Institute, talks with Steven Rockefeller, who chaired the drafting of the Earth Charter, about its legacy as well as his own evolution as an educator, advocate, and thought leader in bringing spirituality and ethics into the public consciousness.

Your writings, engagement in global affairs, and philanthropic work demonstrate an underlying belief in the power of spirituality and the ethical dimension of social change. What inspired such beliefs?

The moral and religious traditions of my family were an important influence. I was raised in a liberal Protestant family environment that included morning Bible readings and prayer, Sunday school, and fairly regular church attendance. The influence of my grandfather, John D. Rockefeller, Jr., was particularly significant. He was a deeply religious man, who instilled in his children and grandchildren his firm conviction that with wealth and privilege comes great social responsibility. He was impatient with religious sectarianism, and out of concern to address the big social challenges facing the world, he vigorously promoted shared moral values and ecumenical collaboration among the Christian denominations and with other religious groups.

My family also had a strong interest in foreign affairs and a long tradition of thinking internationally in business and philanthropy. My father, who served in government positions under four presidents and as governor of New York, had a passionate interest in international affairs. He and my grandfather played an active part in helping to establish the United Nations in New York City, and my family has been a supporter of the UN ever since.

In short, I was raised to think broadly and to view the world's big social, economic, and political problems as moral challenges. What I observed in my family was that a sense of moral purpose and responsibility is a powerful motivating force, and shared moral values bind people together and promote partnership and cooperation. Without a common purpose, people and society

lack clear, strong direction and cohesion. Developing and internalizing a sound moral compass is fundamental to a healthy spiritual life. A sense of the sacred can deepen moral conviction.

My personal spiritual quest has been part of a search for the deeper meaning of life, leading me to a study of the history of Christianity, the history of world religion, and the history of Western philosophy. This undertaking began in college and continued during the 1960s in graduate school at Union Theological Seminary and then Columbia University. The 1960s had a powerful impact on me. The civil rights movement, the women's movement, the anti-war movement and, in general, the attack on the establishment in America of which my family was a part—all of these social currents forced me to think seriously about issues of social and economic justice. At the Seminary, the theological vision and social ethics of Reinhold Niebuhr were an especially strong influence. At Columbia University, I wrote my doctoral dissertation on John Dewey, the American philosopher and intellectual leader of the Progressive movement. I was drawn to Dewey's democratic humanism and his ideal of "a common faith" in the form of shared moral values and principles that unite and guide society.

How did the environment fit into this worldview?

There were three major influences. First, the most powerful spiritual experiences I had as a boy were in the mountains and on the sea, where I encountered the magical beauty and awesome power of the natural world. Second, many members of my family were active, passionate conservationists. Third, the national and international environmental movement that emerged in the 1960s and 70s shaped my thinking in fundamental ways. The deep ecology and environmental ethics movements were an especially important influence. Western mysticism, process philosophy, eco-theology, and Buddhist philosophy were also very helpful as I worked to create an integrated worldview.

Over time, I came to embrace what I would call a relational spirituality, such as one finds in the philosophy of Martin Buber. It views the spiritual life as centrally concerned with the quality of our relationships with ourselves, other persons, other cultures, the greater community of life, the larger universe, and the mystery in many traditions known as God.

Economics, science and technology, and politics dominate the discourse about the global future, with far less reference to ethics and spirituality. In light of the perilous times ahead, will the latter assume greater prominence in the coming decades?

As the impact of social, economic, and environmental problems becomes more severe and the sense of urgency spreads, the inclination and willingness to describe change as a moral imperative will grow. Movements for social change tend to gain traction when the public becomes convinced that the goals of these movements involve what is fair, just, right, and good. Defining and facing the ethical and spiritual dimension of our global problems is essential to any long-term solutions.

There are many dimensions to the global environmental crisis: technological, legal, economic, etc. They are all important, but the problem at the deepest level is a moral and spiritual one. It involves a lack of wonder, appreciation, compassion, love, respect, and responsibility. It involves our attitude toward future generations and taking the concept of intergenerational responsibility to heart. It involves our attitude toward the greater community of life and recognizing that

people are an interdependent part of, not a separate entity from, nature. The dominant values and attitudes that shape human behavior in relation to the planet's biodiversity and ecosystems are governed by an anthropocentric and utilitarian view that the natural world is just a collection of resources that exist for human exploitation. In this worldview, nature apart from human life has only instrumental, rather than intrinsic, value. Other life forms are not thought to be worthy of the respect that generates a sense of moral concern and responsibility. The problems this creates are compounded by the fact that human beings are hard-wired to think in the short term. Caring for the biosphere requires long-term thinking inspired by appreciation and love and driven by a deep sense of ethical responsibility.

Over a century ago, Albert Schweitzer, the theologian, musician, and medical missionary, put it very simply when he emphasized "reverence for life" as the fundamental principle of the moral life and the key to the restoration of modern civilization. Inspired by Aldo Leopold's land ethic, the environmental ethics movement in philosophy has developed compelling ecological variations on this general theme. This support for a universal ethic of this nature has often been missing in the outreach of the environmental movement and in many UN documents. The World Charter for Nature adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1982, however, is one notable exception. Its first principle is the moral imperative to respect nature, but governments quickly withdrew their support for this path-breaking document, and NGOs have done little to promote it. It has been one of the primary goals of the Earth Charter Initiative to highlight the importance of global ethics and the principle of respect for nature.

As you note, the Earth Charter makes a case for a higher calling regarding how we manage our lives, our institutions, and our future. What are the origins of the Charter?

Its origins can be traced all the way back to 1948 and the founding of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN), which included a call to create a World Charter for the Protection of Nature. This goal was realized thirty-four years later with the adoption of the World Charter for Nature. However, the World Charter was drafted before the idea of sustainable development had been fully conceptualized and embraced by the international community. This came about in and through publication of the 1987 report of the World Commission on Environment and Development, *Our Common Future*. Among the recommendations of *Our Common Future* was the proposal that governments draft a "Universal Declaration on Environmental Protection and Sustainable Development" in the form of a "new charter."

This recommendation led Maurice Strong, the secretary general of the 1992 Rio Earth Summit, to make the adoption of an Earth Charter a goal of the Summit. However, it was not to be. The North and the South could not reach agreement on principles for such a charter. Following the Rio Earth Summit, Strong created the Earth Council to pursue the unfinished business of the Summit, and in 1994, with support from the Dutch government, he formed a partnership with Mikhail Gorbachev and Green Cross International to launch a civil society initiative to draft the Earth Charter. An Earth Charter secretariat was established at the Earth Council, which was based at the University for Peace (UPEACE) in Costa Rica. In 1995, I became involved and headed up a research effort in support of the initiative. Late in 1996, an independent Earth Charter Commission of international leaders was formed to oversee the drafting of the Charter, and I was asked to form and chair a drafting committee.

The process that unfolded in the following three years was different from traditional UN processes by virtue of its strong civil society engagement. Did such engagement offer greater legitimacy than the usual intergovernmental processes?

The Earth Charter has a unique legitimacy as a peoples' treaty, and a number of international law experts regard the Earth Charter as having the standing of a "soft law" document. Governments in the 1990s were preoccupied with promoting economic growth; they were not interested in negotiating new, more demanding principles for sustainable development. They certainly did not want a new agreement that defined respect and care for the community of life as a moral imperative. Strong and Gorbachev recognized that the drafting of the Earth Charter could only be accomplished in and through the engagement of global civil society, which they saw as an emerging third force that could hold governments and corporations accountable.

The process that produced the Earth Charter is the primary source of its legitimacy. It was the most inclusive and participatory process ever associated with the drafting of an international declaration. Hundreds of organizations and many thousands of individuals became involved. Earth Charter committees were formed in forty-five countries. Large regional conferences were held in Africa, Asia, Europe, North America, and Latin America. The drafting committee included representatives from various constituencies and diverse cultures and countries, and periodically issued new drafts for broad-based comment. The committee also worked closely with members of the IUCN Commission on Environmental Law in order to build on and extend international environmental and sustainable development law, providing another important source of legitimacy.

Roughly concurrent with the Earth Charter process were those for the Millennium Development Goals and the Global Compact. Was the new millennium an inspiration across all these initiatives, an opportunity to bring to life a new global consciousness?

Yes, I believe that it was. As the Earth Charter drafting process progressed and the year 2000 approached, we felt an increasing urgency to finalize the Charter, which was intended as a guiding vision of hope for the twenty-first century. At a drafting committee meeting in January 2000, I well remember Parvez Hassan, a former chair of the IUCN Commission on Environmental Law, saying to us, "You have to remember two things. First, there is no such thing as a perfect document. Second, every document has its time, and the time for the Earth Charter is now." At that pivotal moment, we all committed to completing the Charter well before the United Nations Millennium Summit meeting in midyear. In March 2000, at a meeting of the Earth Charter Commission at the UNESCO headquarters in Paris, the text was finalized. The formal launch of the Earth Charter took place in June at the Peace Palace in The Hague.

The Earth Charter celebrated its fifteen anniversary this past June. In hindsight, has the Charter met, exceeded, or fallen short of your aspirations?

Among those of us who have been deeply engaged in the Earth Charter Initiative, there is a sense that much has been accomplished and much remains to be done. The Charter has been translated into over forty languages and has been endorsed by over 6,000 organizations, including UNESCO and the IUCN World Conservation Congress. Over a hundred essays have been published on the Charter, it is widely used in schools and universities as a teaching tool,

and it is taught as soft law in a number of law schools. The Earth Charter International secretariat, which has over one hundred affiliates in sixty-seven countries, directs the Earth Charter Center for Education for Sustainable Development at UPEACE. There is a UNESCO Chair on Education for Sustainable Development and the Earth Charter. Many cities have used the Earth Charter as a guide in their sustainable development planning processes.

The Earth Charter's influence takes many forms. For example, I doubt that the UN Millennium Declaration would have affirmed the principle of respect for nature as a fundamental value had not the hundreds of NGOs attending the Summit endorsed the Earth Charter and called on the Summit to endorse the document. One especially significant example of its continuing relevance is Pope Francis's new encyclical, *Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home*, which supports and quotes from the Charter, giving it new visibility. The encyclical is a beautiful theological defense of the ethical values of respect and care for the community of life that lie at the heart of the Earth Charter. The pope's outspoken leadership in support of a global ethic of care is a very promising development.

Perhaps our biggest disappointment, though, has been that the UN General Assembly has not endorsed or recognized the Earth Charter. Then again, the General Assembly has never endorsed a document that it did not draft. The Johannesburg Declaration issued by the Rio+20 Summit in 2002, however, does include wording drawn from the Earth Charter that constitutes a concise summary of its ethical vision: "We declare our responsibility to one another, to the greater community of life, and to our children." (The Charter, by contrast, refers to "future generations.") There is a great deal of consistency between the sixteen Earth Charter principles and the seventeen new UN Sustainable Development Goals with their 169 targets. From the perspective of the Earth Charter, the SDGs are a major step forward in the effort to implement the Earth Charter vision, and the Earth Charter provides the inclusive ethical framework needed to support and inspire action on the SDGs.

It is nearly a quarter century since the publication of your book *Spirit and Nature: Why the Environment is a Religious Issue*. Do you feel the key goal of the book, infusing international discourse with a regard for spirituality and ethics, has achieved satisfactory progress?

We need more ethical clarity from the United Nations and our political and social leaders regarding the great global challenges that face humanity in the twenty-first century. The lack of moral clarity contributes to the lack of political will for setting and implementing sustainability goals. President Obama now talks about addressing climate change as a moral obligation, but most political and corporate leaders do not want to be restrained by moral imperatives and global ethics. They, for example, do not want to acknowledge that the environment is an ethical issue and that human beings as members of the community of life have responsibilities to, as well as for, the greater community of life and other life forms. Part of the problem is that, with very few exceptions, state constitutions are anthropocentric documents.

Given the resistance to seeing major social and ecological issues as involving critical ethical choices, one approach is to look to the world's religions to elevate and highlight this dimension. This has been the goal of the religion and ecology movement. The origins of the movement can be traced back to the writings of a few prophetic thinkers in the 1960s, and it began to gain traction in the late 1980s and 90s. No one has done more to advance the movement than

professors Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim, who head the international Forum on Religion and Ecology. Religious leaders like the Dalai Lama, the Patriarch Bartholomew, and Pope Francis, and organizations such as the United Religions Initiative and Green Faith, are now providing the kind of religious leadership in support of shared values, human rights, climate justice, the environment, and peace that the movement has been calling for. In my recent essay "[Democratic Equality, Economic Inequality, and the Earth Charter](#)," I try to explain further the need for moral and spiritual leadership.

Would you describe the other issues addressed by the Earth Charter, such as human rights, poverty eradication, and democracy, as religious issues as well?

All those issues fall into the category of social and economic justice. One certainly does not need to be a member of an organized religion to be passionate about ending poverty and promoting justice. However, religious leaders from the ancient Hebrew prophets to Jesus of Nazareth to Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Thich Nhat Hanh have viewed social and economic justice as involving fundamental ethical values, beginning with respect for the equal dignity of all persons—values that organized religion should be concerned to advance and protect. From the perspective of a relational spirituality that emphasizes the quality of our relationships with each other as human beings and with nature at large, all these issues are legitimate religious concerns. The organized religions serve society best when they cooperate in providing clear and strong moral leadership regarding human rights, environmental protection, and peace, as well as interpersonal morality. There is increasing collaboration among religious groups, but tragically, division and conflict continue to be more common.

Last year, the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, of which you are a trustee, decided to divest from fossil fuels, joining a growing movement of foundations and academic institutions. What motivated the RBF to take this action?

The overarching concern at the RBF has been to find ways to align our endowment investments with the Fund's mission and the goals of its three main programs of democratic practice, sustainable development, and peace building. The subject of divestment came up in that context, with specific reference to the sustainable development program, which in recent years has focused primarily on climate change and the transition to a clean energy economy. Further, we wanted to support the message of the divestment movement that the transition from fossil fuels to clean energy is an urgent moral, social, and economic challenge that requires a massive, coordinated worldwide effort. Proceeding carefully in an effort to preserve the value of the endowment, the Fund is divesting from fossil fuels and reinvesting in clean energy and related initiatives in two phases. The first phase involves divestment from coal and tar sands oil; the second, from other fossil fuels. We hope to have eliminated all fossil fuel investments by the end of 2017.

Your recent letter to Middlebury College in support of divestment described divestment as "an act of moral and educational leadership." What do you mean by "educational leadership?"

Middlebury has for five decades had programs in environmental studies, and it is today highly respected as a leader in the field. By joining the rapidly growing divestment movement, the

college would be making a public statement, calling attention to the dangers and risks associated with fossil fuels and to the urgent need for strong implementation of the recent international climate agreement in Paris, as well as action at the local, state, and federal level in the US. A Middlebury College decision to divest would attract considerable media attention and help to educate the public about the seriousness of the moral, economic, and environmental challenges associated with carbon emissions.

In your essay “The Transition to Sustainability,” you argued that the Earth Charter makes a distinctive contribution to the Great Transition. What is that contribution?

All of the great civilizations of the past have generated their own distinctive ethical and spiritual consciousness. Each of these great civilizations has been located in a particular geographical region of the planet, and its natural environment has influenced its cultural traditions and spiritual outlook. Over the past two hundred years, a new civilization has been emerging: the scientific, industrial, and technological civilization that we are living in today. For the most part, we regard industrial-technological society as a secular enterprise with no particular spiritual and ethical consciousness of its own.

However, industrial-technological civilization has provided the economic and physical structure for the creation of a global community. A global civilization is now emerging, and with it, a deepening awareness of the increasing interdependence of all peoples and nations. In addition, contemporary science is fostering a new awareness of the planet as an interconnected, self-organizing whole and of humanity as an interdependent part of the planetary ecosystem. As a result of these developments, a new global consciousness is emerging, especially among young people.

Further, there is a distinctive ethical and spiritual awareness that is part of this new global consciousness. It reflects the influence of the democratic social and political revolution that has been transforming society over the past two centuries as well as the interdependence of all peoples and of humanity and nature. The photographs generated by space exploration have given us beautiful images of Earth that are a powerful symbol of this new global ethical and spiritual consciousness. These images of Earth are a symbol of unity in the midst of great biological and cultural diversity and of the mystery, sacredness, and fragility of life in a vast, evolving universe.

One vitally important aspect of the human story since World War II has been the endeavor to clarify and articulate the values and principles that form this new ethical and spiritual consciousness awakened by social democracy, ecology, and globalization. The drafting and adoption of the UN Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was a major moment in this process. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the many human rights agreements it has inspired can be understood as expressions of spiritual democracy. Documents like the World Charter for Nature give expression to the ecological dimension of the new global consciousness. The Earth Charter with its vision of “one human family and one Earth community with a common destiny” seeks to integrate the democratic and ecological dimensions of the emerging global consciousness.

This new ethical and spiritual consciousness is arising organically as a result of evolving conditions on Earth. It is an expression of the life force that has generated the community of life. It is a powerful force. We can resist it, but we cannot control it. The hope for the future is that it will

take hold of humanity fast enough to help us make the changes in how we think and live that have become essential to the survival and flourishing of the human species and the greater community of life. It is now a race against time. This, for me, is the contribution of the Earth Charter to the Great Transition. It is a civil society effort to give expression to and advance this emerging global ethical and spiritual consciousness.

About the Interviewee



Steven Rockefeller is professor emeritus of religion at Middlebury College, where he also served as dean of the College. He received his Master of Divinity from Union Theological Seminary in New York City and his Ph.D. from Columbia University. He is the author of *John Dewey: Religious Faith and Democratic Humanism* (1991) and the co-editor of two books of essays, *The Christ and the Bodhisattva* (1987) and *Spirit and Nature: Why the Environment is a Religious Issue* (1992), and his essays have appeared in many books and journals. Over the past twenty years, Professor Rockefeller has played a leading role in the drafting and promotion of the Earth Charter, which is a declaration of global interdependence with fundamental principles for building a just, sustainable, and peaceful world. Active in the field of philanthropy, he is a trustee of the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, an international foundation that he chaired from 1998 to 2006.

About the Publication

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