

## THE EARTH CHARTER AS A NEW COVENANT FOR DEMOCRACY

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*The pressing question is therefore how the present system can be modified to become truly sustainable... Are there democratic processes available, capable of bringing about a change of direction? Is it possible at all to find solutions within the framework of democratic structures? Is it possible to institute democratic control at the international level where today de facto the fundamental economic and political decisions are taken? Or do we have to resign ourselves to the fact that the development of society increasingly escapes democratic control? Has the dream of democracy in reality come to an end?*

Lukas Vischer (Vischer 2000, 3)

### **The Question of Politics in the Twenty-first Century**

The defining question that we face at the beginning of the twenty-first century is no different than humans have faced since their emergence as self-conscious, relatively autonomous actors in the course of planetary evolution. This question is the central question of politics: “How might we so construct our lives together that all life flourishes?” (Sturm 1998, 21).

It is impossible to ask this question apart from the debate about the meaning, purpose, and prospects of democracy in world history. Since the end of World War II, the idea of democracy has been widely accepted – at least rhetorically – as the best answer history offers to the central question of politics and the de facto global ethic of our age (Mckeen 1951). More than this, however, it is a particular meaning of democracy, variously named procedural, minimalist, free market, representative, protective, liberal,

or Western democracy, that has achieved widespread acceptance, especially in the latter part of the century following the end of the Cold War (Fukuyama 1992).

Compared with other political systems, this kind of democratic order has undeniable advantages. Procedural democracy guarantees the opportunity for public debate, free elections, protection of minorities, and other liberal constitutional rights (Dworkin 1977). The current debate is occasioned, however, by the failure of this type of democratic order to effectively engage the “global situation.” As the *Earth Charter* describes it, global patterns of production, consumption, and reproduction are widening the gap between rich and poor, undermining communities, threatening global security, and destroying the life sustaining systems of the planet.

Two moral indictments lie at the core of this criticism: the failures of procedural democracy to provide either (1) effective opportunities for morally responsible citizenship locally, nationally, and globally, or (2) a commanding and defensible vision of the common good that can serve as a measure of human action (Westra 1998). Procedural democracy fails on both these counts because it does not believe that democratic societies can or should exercise collective self-government for an explicit and shared idea of the common good. Procedural democracy tends to conceive the public world as an arena of competition between individuals and groups each pursuing its own preferences, where the only ethical constraints are such principles of justice as give others the right or fair opportunity to pursue their interests. Questions of justice regarding the distribution of the goods of the society need to be separated from final questions of the good for individuals, society, or life as a whole, and the latter cannot be dealt with in the public realm. However, it is not merely an absence of a common good, but the implicit

and uncritical assumption that society's most general purpose is to maximize those economic resources with which individuals may pursue their diverse interests, that is being called into question.

A number of efforts have appeared in recent years to offer alternatives to this dominant school of democratic public philosophy. Many of these have focused on the first indictment, the need for a more participatory and responsible understanding of democratic citizenship (Barber 1984; Kariel 1970). Others, primarily addressing the second indictment, have looked to the traditional religions of the world, to science-based natural law, to a new and more relational view of the self and world, or to a theistic metaphysical perspective, to provide the vision of the common good necessary to motivate and direct the citizen initiatives required to solve the world's social and environmental problems (Oelschlaeger 1994; Callicott 1994; Mathews 1991; Gamwell 2000). Still others look to classic civic republican or pragmatist philosophies for clues to constructing a viable theory of contemporary democratic practice (Farrar 1988; Nussbaum 1990; Pangle 1992; Rockefeller 1991a; Selznick 1992).

### **The *Earth Charter* as a Reconstruction of the Democratic Faith**

My argument is that whatever else the *Earth Charter* may symbolize, it stands squarely within this debate. Its grounding premise is the democratic faith that human beings have the rational and moral capacity to govern themselves for the common good of all under the uncertain evolutionary and historical circumstances of life on this planet. Its fundamental purpose is to articulate a universal, holistic, and transcendent vision of the democratic faith for our contemporary global situation, thus answering what Steven Rockefeller, chair of the *Earth Charter* drafting committee, calls the "most fundamental

spiritual quest of our time...a search for a faith and ways of living that at once liberate the self and the other, creating authentic community with nature as well as among people” (Rockefeller 1991b, 238).

The *Charter* pursues this aim in a number of ways. It strongly affirms twentieth century doctrines of universal human rights. It retrieves strands within the democratic tradition that have been muted in recent years, in particular, our common humanity, the embeddedness of the human community within the order of nature, and the dependence of politics and ethics upon a substantive ontology or conception of the good. It draws extensively upon understandings of environmental ethics that have grown out of modern democratic moral traditions, such as the land ethic and responsible resource conservation. And it boldly sets forth the new and radical democratic claim that all citizens bear “a universal responsibility” for the perpetual flourishing of the whole of life on planet Earth.

The words “democracy” or “democratic” appear four times in the *Charter*: “The emergence of a global civil society is creating new opportunities to build a democratic and humane world” (Preamble); “Build democratic societies that are just, participatory, sustainable, and peaceful” (Principle 3); “Democracy, nonviolence, and peace (title Part IV); and “Strengthen democratic institutions at all levels, and provide transparency and accountability in governance, inclusive participation in decision-making, and access to justice” (Principle 13). Indeed, a close reading of the text reveals it to be permeated with democratic vocabulary, principles, and assumptions, beginning with the opening declaration that humanity can and must collectively choose its future, and concluding with the assertion that as members of a common humanity with a common destiny we are beckoned “to seek a new beginning.”

It is important that we read the *Earth Charter* in this way. Otherwise, we miss its power to challenge the dominant social consensus. This is true for several reasons. As the American civil rights movement suggests, reformers transform public attitudes through their ability to hold societies accountable to their highest ideals (Goulet 1985). In the final analysis, our present political arrangements are only retained because they are perceived to be legitimate, and their legitimacy rests on the perception that they are ethically justified. In spite of the fact that popular rhetoric identifies free trade and democracy, leaders the world over still must give lip service to larger and more substantive meanings of democracy to legitimate their regimes, as President George W. Bush's explicit appeal in his 2001 Inaugural Address to "our democratic faith" in the capacity of citizens to seek a common good beyond their own comfort indicates.

General prescriptions for public policy, such as those of the *Earth Charter*, can only be effective if they are solidly grounded in concrete historical movements, in the sweat and blood struggles over many centuries for rationally, morally, and empirically defensible democratic ideals and institutions. There is far too much skepticism today regarding the nature and power of moral ideals to make it credible that good will, or agreement on abstract values, or changes in individual motivation, can, by themselves, move us much closer to justice, peace, and ecological integrity. Real progress entails these things in combination with the hard work of democratic public debate and social change.

Only by assuming the full burden of the democratic inheritance – its vulnerabilities as well as its strengths – will we be able to transcend its current distortions. Democracy, like any other great moral and cultural tradition, is tragically flawed. The democratic idea

of freedom emerged in the ancient West as a direct result of the social dialectics of slavery (Patterson 1991). Democracy has flourished in close association with commercial cultures, exclusive social bonds, imperial ambitions, and Promethian defiance of natural limits (Sagan 1991). The democratic experience amply demonstrates our all too-human efforts to escape the moral burdens of public life by the duplicitous substitution of bargaining for deliberation, our tendencies to paranoia, apathy, and over-indulgence of the appetites, and our readiness to withdrawal into islands of sectarian self-righteousness. But the democratic inheritance also contains sources of its own criticism and renewal, a cumulative wisdom of hard-won institutional principles and public virtues to counter such tendencies and enable ordinary people to create self-governing communities that can limit ambition and corruption and serve justice and the common good (Farrar 1988).

I would like to expound this interpretation of the *Earth Charter* by showing how it expresses a more universal, holistic, and transcendent covenantal understanding of the democratic faith than any comparable aspirational international document so far written. Covenants are critical components in the maintenance of any social order. They establish obligations, regulate behavior between parties, introduce a measure of predictability into social life and, most important of all, articulate a purposive and shared vision of the common good. Any effort to deliberately change the values of a social order involves an attempt to articulate a “new covenant” that challenges former implicit or explicit covenantal understandings. It is a tenet of the democratic faith that covenants need to be constantly criticized and renewed in light of new deliverances of human reason, experience, and conscience.

The difference between the *Earth Charter*'s covenantal understanding of democracy and that of procedural democracy runs deep. It ultimately turns on the issue of whether human beings have the potential to make meaningful covenants for the common good across wide cultural, national, and religious differences. Advocates of procedural democracy believe such covenants may be possible for relatively homogeneous communities, or for voluntary organizations within civil society, but not for the political institutions that embrace such diverse constituencies as modern democratic societies, and certainly not for the international institutions that embrace world civilization as a whole. Today's diverse citizenry, it is presumed, cannot share a common vision of the good, or even a substantial conception of justice. As Ronald Dworkin puts it, "Political decisions must be, so far as possible, independent of any particular conception of the good life, of what gives value to life. Since the citizens of a society differ in their conceptions the government does not treat them as equals if it prefers one conception to another" (Dworkin 1977, 127). At best they can reach agreement on the neutral procedures by which the global market of economic and political competition is to be ordered. The covenantal democratic faith of the *Earth Charter* believes otherwise.

### **Rewriting the Global Compact**

The *Earth Charter* may be viewed as a culminating product of repeated attempts since the founding of the United Nations in 1945 to rewrite the global social compact along more comprehensive covenantal lines. I refer here to the many hundred declarations, commission reports, and people's treaties relevant to environment, development, human rights, and peace adopted by international governmental and non-governmental bodies over the past half-century (see Burhenne 1983; Commonweal

Sustainable Futures Group 1992; Kung and Kuschel 1993; Rockefeller 1996; Weston, Falk, D'Amato 1990). All of these efforts in one way or another have sought to challenge the capacity of procedural democracy and the corporate-dominated global free market system with which it is allied to adequately answer the political question. All offer some ingredient for an alternative vision of the democratic ideal, and many, such as the *Stockholm Declaration* in its call for "a common outlook and for common principles to inspire and guide the peoples of the world," explicitly call for a new global ethic. Taken as a body they reveal the trends in progressive international thinking that have led to the universal, holistic and transcendent covenantal vision of the *Earth Charter*. Especially significant precursors in this respect are the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (1948), the *Stockholm Declaration on the Human Environment* (1972), the *World Charter for Nature* (1982), *Our Common Future* (1987), *Caring for the Earth* (1991), the several declarations of the People's Earth Summit at Rio (1992), the declaration of the Parliament of World Religions, *Toward a Global Ethic* (1993), and the agreements and reports of the seven United Nations summit conferences held during the 1990s on children, the environment, human rights, population, social development, and women.

Behind these documents, of course, lies an even greater body of covenantal statements and understandings that have served as vehicles for the articulation of democratic aspirations and principles throughout human history. The covenants of many cultures and religions have contributed in this way to the *Earth Charter*. The *Earth Charter* draws extensively, for example, upon the universalistic democratic principles of the great eighteenth century revolutionary declarations and the philosophy of creative public action that underlies them (see Ravitch and Thernstrom 1992). In this view the

covenantal activities of promise-making, promise-keeping, and forgiveness of broken promises made by free and equal citizens in self-governing communities are an authentic exercise of the inherent human capacity for politics, and one of the chief means whereby democratic communities can control human selfishness, nurture public virtue, and achieve justice and the common good (Arendt 1958).

Although differences need to be noted, the *Earth Charter* covenant is also indebted to the covenantal thinking of the Hebrew prophets (Adams 1986; McCoy 1991). Like the biblical covenants, the *Earth Charter* entails an unconditional agreement of community, friendship, peace, and justice; it establishes the terms for an inclusive community of mutual respect and trust of indefinite duration – a community within which persons can grow to moral and spiritual maturity by assuming responsibilities for the continuing well being of all parties. Like the Hebrew prophets, the *Earth Charter* proclaims a covenant inclusive of the entire created order whose moral law is the law of the creative process itself and whose imperative is to “act so as to meet the conditions for the progressive creation of the world of humanity and of all being” (Sturm 1988, 128), or alternatively stated, as “the kind of human activity that nourishes and perpetuates the historical fulfillment of the whole community of life on Earth” (Engel 1990, 10).

The *Earth Charter* is conceived as a “people’s treaty” and written in the voice of the first person plural to make clear that it is a binding enactment of free individuals with the capacity to reach beyond ties of blood, religion, ethnicity, and nation to choose their future together, to mutually commit to enduring and comprehensive moral purposes. As the Preamble concludes: “Together in hope we affirm the following interdependent principles for a sustainable way of life...” and the Endorsement Statement on the Earth

Charter website ([www.earthcharterinaction.org](http://www.earthcharterinaction.org)) reads: “We, the undersigned, endorse the Earth Charter. We embrace the spirit and aims of the document. We pledge to join the global partnership for a just, sustainable, and peaceful world, and to work for the realization of the values and principles of the Earth Charter.” The *Charter* thus stands in the classic democratic tradition that assumes the sovereignty of the people as a whole to choose the purposes for which they live and the form of government that will best embody those purposes (Selznick 1992). It is the ultimate “consent of the governed,” democracy in its radical root meaning of “the rule of the people.” The agreement of the people precedes the formation of the state. But it is a covenantal rather than a contractual understanding of the agreement of the people.

The *Earth Charter* is even more explicit in this regard than its most important comparable predecessor, the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. The latter, although it is addressed to all peoples and nations, and constitutes a standard toward which “every individual and every organ of society” should “strive,” was not conceived as an international agreement of this kind. However, the *Universal Declaration* did eventually come to serve as a “soft law” covenantal foundation for such “hard law” treaties as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. In similar fashion, the *Earth Charter* has developed in tandem with the proposed *International Covenant on Environment and Development* – the text that is referred to in the conclusion of the *Charter* as “an international legally binding instrument on environment and development” (Commission on Environmental Law 1995).

## A Universal Democratic Covenant

Those who join the covenant of the *Earth Charter* are pledging themselves to abide by moral understandings that are universal in two primary senses of the word: they are principles that are to be held universally, by all persons and peoples, and they constitute a moral standard that is to be applied universally – to all human relationships, both between humans and with the rest of life as well. The key concept of “universal responsibility” in the Charter encompasses both these meanings: “Everyone shares responsibility” for the “human family and the larger living world.”

The concept of world citizenship took a quantum leap forward after the founding of the United Nations. Although the authors of earlier national declarations, such as the French *Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen* assumed that they were speaking directly to and for universal humanity as well as their fellow nationals, only after 1945 did major international declarations appear that were the products of extensive deliberations among representatives of diverse nations, and that spoke in covenantal terms regarding the obligations pertaining between the peoples of the Earth. When the Preamble of the *Earth Charter* announces, therefore, that: “it is imperative that we, the peoples of earth, declare our responsibility to one another, to the greater community of life, and to future generations,” it carries forward a movement that began with the *Charter of the United Nations*: “We the peoples of the United Nations, determined to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war, which twice in our life-time has brought untold sorrow to mankind. . . .” However, no document written since the founding of the United Nations has entailed such extensive international consultations as the *Earth Charter*, and none is more explicit about the identity and vocation of world citizenship:

“We are at once citizens of different nations and of one world in which the local and global are linked.”

With regard to the first understanding of universality, therefore, the *Earth Charter* completely universalizes the community of human moral agents that are included in the covenant and accountable to it and in so doing eloquently expresses the emerging identity of cosmopolitan citizenship felt by many people throughout the world. The *Earth Charter* explicitly aims to express the rights and obligations of all individuals, the deprived and poor as well as privileged, and through individuals, all human institutions. All “organizations, businesses, governments, and transnational institutions” are now bearers of global moral responsibility and are to be impartially judged as such (the Charter also recognizes in principles 2. a. and b. that universal responsibility entails differential obligations depending upon circumstances). This radical universalization of the global covenant is based both on intrinsic moral grounds, and on the conviction that we have reached a point in the history of the world where the majority of persons and groups must take responsible citizenship seriously if the Earth is to continue to flourish. It is not an option, or mere ideal, but a universal imperative grounded in the very nature of the planetary condition. As Latin American liberation theologian and member of the Earth Charter Council, Leonardo Boff, declares: “We have come to such a point of interdependence that we are either all saved or all lost” (Boff 1997, 131). World civilization will become a universal moral democracy, or perish. “The choice is ours: form a global partnership to care for Earth and one another or risk the destruction of ourselves and the diversity of life.”

The *Earth Charter* covenant also involves a radical universalization of the spheres of human activity to which its moral standards apply. Signatories are asked to pledge themselves to principles of moral responsibility that apply to all beings, human and non-human, present and future – in effect, to principles that are truly and fully comprehensive principles of universal moral law. Principles 1 and 2, “Respect earth and life in all its diversity,” and “Care for the community of life with understanding, compassion, and love,” are comprehensive universal principles in this sense. They constitute a thoroughgoing Gandhian or radically expanded Kantian moral imperative: every being must be considered an end in itself and not a means, and as an end is worthy of our respect and care.

### **A Holistic Democratic Covenant**

The heart of the *Earth Charter* covenant is the affirmation that all citizens of the world must covenant to work together for the common good of the biosphere – for the flourishing of the whole community of life. The *Earth Charter* is profoundly holistic in its vision of the evolutionary passage of the “one Earth community” (repeatedly referenced as “community of life,” “Earth and life in all its diversity,” “whole Earth community,” and “greater community of life”) whose well-being and destiny is the ultimate end or reference point on behalf of which responsible citizenship by all individuals and groups should be exercised. At no point does the *Earth Charter* depart more radically from the perspective of procedural democracy than in its assertion of the priority of the good conceived as the maximal flourishing of the unity in variety of the Earth community inclusive of humans and the rest of nature.

It is possible to see behind the *Earth Charter* the vision of the Greek polis that has inspired the democratic ideal throughout the course of history. The ontology that is presented here is the ontology of the polis, a relational whole in which the good of the whole is inseparable from the good of each of its members and the right ordering of mutual relationships between them (Sturm 2000). The Charter states this ontology most explicitly in principle 1. a.: “Recognize that all beings are interdependent and every form of life has value regardless of its worth to human beings,” and in the concluding sub-principle 16. f., but the relational ontology of unity in diversity pervades the text (e.g., principle 1: “Respect Earth and life in all its diversity”).

Moreover, since the individuals and particular life forms that compose the Earth community each have value (an “inherent dignity” in the case of persons, principle 1. b.) the model of global community proposed is richly suggestive of what Aristotle in the *Politics* conceived as a polity or what we today would call participatory democracy. This may not be an adequate model for the biosphere apart from its human members. But for its human members, who can identify with the biosphere and make free self-conscious moral decisions to respect and care for it as a whole, as well as for each of its individual members and life forms in their uniqueness and diversity, the “one Earth community” can be conceived as a democracy and they should relate to it as such. This is congruent with what Herman Daly and John Cobb call the “biospheric vision”: “Human beings can derive part of their identity from membership in the biosphere. They can participate in decisions it makes, and they can care for the whole, as well as for its individual members in their diversity. In this qualified sense, *for its human members*, the whole biosphere can

and should be a community of communities” (Daly and Cobb 1989, 202). This is the holistic democratic covenant that the *Earth Charter* asks us to join.

According to Aristotle, the polis is a self-sufficient community because it is the community within which all the goods necessary to the good life may be found in proper relationship (O’Neill 1993). In today’s globally interdependent world, the only self-sufficient community within which all the goods necessary to the good life may potentially be found in proper relationship to one another is the Earth as a whole. Some of these goods, such as the atmosphere, the oceans, the integrity of most ecosystems and the biosphere itself – are global common goods, and must therefore be governed in common. But in a global civilization, it takes global cooperation to achieve the proper conditions for the production, distribution, and consumption of most other important goods as well.

The *Earth Charter* conceives the Earth as a polis, at least for its human members, and the well-being of the one Earth community as a plural good. Indeed, it is a plural good in plural ways, each good and each way vital to the flourishing of the whole. This holistic quality of the *Earth Charter* is vividly captured by the remarks of Marcus Arruda, representing the Institute of Alternative Policies, Rio de Janeiro, at the People’s Earth Summit in 1992: “People came here concerned not only with nature, but with every different aspect of human life on earth. They came here to discuss human rights, nature rights, racism, forests, water, air, the foreign debt – everything that seems to be an isolated issue that has nothing to do with the rest – until all of a sudden the pieces become part of a whole unified picture that is seen by people everywhere” (Commonweal Sustainable Futures Group 1992, ii).

In addition to the diversity of the world's individual organisms, human and non-human, the Charter embraces a plurality of kinds of communities, so that its vision of the global polis might be best characterized as a community of communities and potentially for humans, as a democracy of democracies. It acknowledges a diversity of ecological systems and cultures, scales of community (local, regional, global), types of natural processes and areas (nature reserves, wild lands, marine areas), and social organization (families, civic organizations, businesses, governments, international regimes). It highlights a long menu of moral concerns, from species extinction, resource depletion, pollution, and genetic engineering to poverty, gender inequality, international inequity, military violence, and ignorance. And it offers a plurality of principles of justice to address these moral concerns, both general and particular: respect and care for Earth in all its diversity, protection and restoration of ecosystem integrity, preservation of biodiversity, recycling, conservation of renewable resources; universal human rights, economic justice, a culture of peace; freedom, equality, equity, solidarity. And if this plurality is not sufficient, it proposes fifty-three distinct and specific policy prescriptions in its sub-principles!

There are multiple cultural layers to the *Earth Charter*. At one level, the Charter draws upon overlapping convergences among the diverse national and regional cultures of the world; at another level, upon the world's diverse religious and philosophical traditions; and at still another level, upon the plurality of democratic moral traditions that have emerged from these diverse national, religious and philosophical cultures and, ecologically reconstructed, now provide the primary moral frameworks in which contending moral concerns and principles are to be sorted out.

*Democratic humanism* inspires the Charter's strong emphasis on the "inherent dignity of all human beings and in the intellectual, artistic, ethical, and spiritual potential of humanity" 1. b.), on beauty, the natural and cultural heritage, scientific knowledge, art, tradition, education, and the importance of being rather than having. *Democratic liberalism* informs the Charter's insistence upon fundamental freedoms, including transparency and accountability in governance, an independent judiciary, and the rights to freedom of opinion, expression, peaceful assembly, association, and dissent. *Participatory democracy* informs the Charter's repeated support for meaningful participation in decision-making, strengthening local communities and civil society, awareness and knowledge of the commons and its ecosystemic relationships, and holding multinational corporations and governments accountable to the citizenry. *Democratic socialism* informs the Charter's emphasis on social, economic, and environmental rights (such as rights to potable water, clean air, food security, education, and sustainable livelihood), and on the equitable sharing of wealth. *Civic republicanism* inspires the Charter's strong conception of the common good, self-sacrifice, and public virtue, including the virtues of prudence and restraint, such as the precautionary approach; the assumption of those responsibilities befitting one's freedom, power, and capacities; and stewardship of Earth's resources for future generations. *Democratic humanitarianism* undergirds the Charter's principles of care and compassion for all living things, protecting the vulnerable and serving those who suffer, preventing cruelty to domestic and wild animals, and pursuing a life of non-violence. Finally, the claims of various contemporary *liberation movements* are evident in the special attention the Charter gives to the needs of women, minorities, indigenous peoples, and youth.

In the global polis all of these goods and contending democratic philosophies are present and in various complex interdependent relationships. What kind of overarching moral and practical priorities does the *Earth Charter* establish between them?

A good case can be made that principle 5, “Protect and restore the integrity of Earth’s ecological systems with special concern for biological diversity and the natural processes that sustain life,” has a certain moral and practical priority. Not only does it have pride of place, as the first policy prescription within the first set of policy prescriptions, Part II. Ecological Integrity, but it sets the ultimate biological context within which all other concerns must be addressed, as the Preamble states, the “conditions essential to life’s evolution.” The Charter exists first and foremost for the sake of the community of life in its wholeness and therefore its unity in diversity or integrity as a functioning system.

But an equally good case can be made for the moral and practical priority of humanity’s well being. Three of the four pillars of a sustainable global society are matters of social ethics: universal human rights, economic justice, and a culture of peace. The global situation is described largely in terms of human suffering and inequity, and most of the policy prescriptions involve changes in social institutions and attitudes. Moreover, the *Charter* repeatedly drives home the message that not only are human well-being and social justice priorities in their own right, but only through the elimination of poverty and other human deprivations, and the establishment of just and non-violent social and economic relationships, will the citizens of the world be in a position to protect and restore the integrity of Earth’s ecological systems.

The single most significant development that may be traced through the long line of international declarations that paved the way to the *Earth Charter* was the recognition, beginning at Stockholm, that the most urgent environmental issues are inseparable from the most urgent social issues of the world. Growing awareness of these relationships fueled the discussion of “sustainable development” in the 1980s and “just and sustainable communities” in the 1990s (Engel 1995). Principle 7 vividly expresses this need to integrate a wide range of competing ecological and social values: “Adopt patterns of production, consumption, and reproduction that safeguard Earth’s regenerative capacities, human rights, and community well-being.”

The *Earth Charter* thus embraces what has come to be called an “eco-justice” ethic – a comprehensive and holistic moral approach in which ecological and social (including economic and cultural) well-being are considered both dependent and independent variables (Bakken, Engel, and Engel 1995, 5). It is not possible to adequately address one without also addressing the other; yet each also needs to be addressed on its own terms. Eco-justice ethics include, but are broader than, “environmental justice,” the concern for the disproportionate burden of environmental degradation borne by poor and minority communities. Systematic expositions of eco-justice approaches based on one or more moral tradition may be found in the philosophical and theological literature. Peter Bakken uses both philosophical and theological resources to explicate how the great triad of democratic justice – freedom, equality, and community – may be creatively reformulated when placed in the context of a holistic vision of the Earth community with its immense constraints as well as opportunities for novel ethical relationships (Bakken 2000). Dieter Hessel, former chair of the Eco-justice Task Force of the National Council of Churches,

has long argued that the basic norms of eco-justice ethics can be summarized as solidarity, ecological sustainability, sufficiency, and socially just participation, and that the observance of each of these norms reinforces and qualifies the others (Hessel 1996). The *Earth Charter* does not settle any of the tensions that exist between these various approaches or the principles they espouse, but provides a comprehensive moral agenda to guide citizen deliberation and choice.

If there is one overarching moral and practical priority for the *Earth Charter*, it is the radical democratic imperative of forming a global compact among all citizens to engage in individual and collective moral deliberation for the sake of the flourishing of all life. Only through such a covenant will they be empowered to take responsibility for the integrity of the biosphere; to redress global injustice; to establish peace. Only through such a covenant will they have reason to think that success in restoring ecological systems and building just human communities in specific places and situations can be sustained under conditions of global interdependence. Again and again, the *Earth Charter* insists that the way forward is through local, national, and international relationships that have the qualities of partnership, mutual respect and care, cooperation, dialogue, a collaborative search for truth and wisdom, participatory decision-making, and shared commitment to serve the common good – precisely the kind of holistic covenantal relationships that are intrinsic to the democratic ideal of free and equal citizens engaging in mutual deliberation and choice in a polis.

### **A Transcendent Democratic Covenant**

As leader of the worldwide consultative process that led to the decision to make a “world ethic for living sustainably” the foundation for *Caring for the Earth* in 1990, and

as a member of the core drafting committee for the *Earth Charter*, I can attest to the authenticity of the covenant-making process that culminated in these texts. They give cause for hope that people can indeed govern themselves for the good of the whole. Most especially, they show how the moral and spiritual imaginations and good faith commitments of many thousands of mis-named “ordinary citizens” can outrun the thinking of democratic theorists who insist that ethics are relative and that people of diverse cultures cannot agree on a vision and standard of the common good. But they also show something else: the shared sense that such ultimate commitments involve a relation to the transcendent.

The sense of transcendence in human experience – of ideals, purposes, meanings, laws, potentialities, loyalties, affections, gifts that outrun what we can see or understand – is expressed in the *Earth Charter* in a number of ways. Each points to an embracing creativity in the nature of things that presents itself as the source, ground, and end of our shared existence. The experience of transcendence has been thematized in a wide diversity of religious and secular traditions throughout human history. The *Earth Charter* takes the radical democratic posture that there is a natural religious piety we all can share and a common covenant we can all make with the ultimately reliable powers of life.

It may come as a shock to recognize that in the last analysis the *Earth Charter* is built upon trust in the transcendent. Everything that it prescribes is the result of decades of the most rigorous scientific, legal, and moral argument and debate; moreover, it takes an entirely this-worldly evolutionary and historical world view. Why then do I make this claim?

In part it is simply a matter of hearing what the Charter literally says. The *Earth Charter* confesses that the beauty and vitality of life we joyfully celebrate and wish to protect, restore, and enrich, is a “gift” not of our making; that an attitude of “reverence for the mystery of being” and “humility regarding the human place in nature” is required if we are to feel “human solidarity and kinship with all life”; that the responsibility of citizenship we are asked to assume is a “sacred trust”; that the peace we may hope to find after all our striving is a matter of right relationship to a greater whole than the Earth itself, “the larger whole of which all are a part.”

For the rest it is simply a matter of recognizing what the Charter logically implies. The pledges it asks us to make with one another on behalf of Earth and the community of life are not provisional or qualified, but indefinite, open-ended pledges to and for all present as well as future human generations, and pledges not to this nation alone, or this belief system, or even humanity alone, but to and for the whole community of life in which we are to stand in a new relationship of unwavering respect and care. They lead at every point to our need to reach out towards more than we can ever experience, do, or know. Citizenship becomes an ethical union within the context of a spiritual vocation. What we are pledging to do is beyond what we have any assurance we can actually achieve; and the success of the work we are being asked to take up is out of our hands. We cannot, simply by willing it, make ourselves feel love and compassion for the community of life; we cannot force the “change of heart and mind” that will enable us to commit ourselves to the values of the Charter; we cannot see the present and future generations we are asked to take responsibility for, much less can we know how to truly secure Earth’s bounty and beauty for them; we cannot deliberately achieve right

relationships with the universe. Everywhere we turn we encounter our dependence upon sources, purposes, meanings, and consequences beyond the bounds of our intentionality.

The more one ponders the *Earth Charter* the larger loom hope, trust, commitment, and faith. They are not sufficient to save us. Scientific knowledge, good institutions, hard work, informed moral choices, the fifty-three policy prescriptions, and much more, are all necessary. But without the democratic faith that a greater creativity than we command is being mediated to us through the evolutionary process and our cooperative efforts for the common good, and that there is that in existence which will not betray our trust, we have no adequate foundation for the covenant we are asked to join.

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