

Cultural Diversity and Education for Sustainability

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Faith-based Organizations and Education for Sustainability

An International Experts' Workshop on Faith-based Organizations and Education for Sustainability was held in Barcelona in 2007³⁰ bringing together experts representing a wide range of approaches, including eight faith-based traditions (Bahá'í, Buddhist, Christian, Gandhian, Hindu, Jewish, Indigenous, and Islamic) to explore how the strengths and perspectives of faith-based organizations can be mobilized in the service of education for sustainability. This article summarizes the key discussions and outcomes that emerged during the Workshop.³¹

One of the aspects that most deeply defines a culture or civilization is the way in which it accounts for the meaning and purpose of human existence. Apart from the modern secular West (and all the societies under its influence), in most other cultures this has been provided by faith-based traditions. Therefore, most of what is said in the following pages about faith-based traditions and education for sustainability can be equally applied to education for the dialogue among civilizations.

As Prof. Mary Evelyn Tucker noted at the Workshop, religions have always helped to shape civilizations and cultures through their stories, symbols, rituals and ethics. Faith-based traditions add a broader, deeper and necessary dimension to the usually more technical and pragmatic focus of sustainable development. In fact, religions invented education and they can therefore play an essential role in education for sustainability, helping to tap into cosmologies, values, symbols, rituals and

celebrations that can inspire our journey toward a sustainable and life-enhancing world.

Cultures and religions are called to *renew and transform themselves* in order to face the unprecedented challenges of our time, to be concerned with the well-being of the whole Earth community, and to discover and embrace their ecological dimension. This requires that cultural and faith-based traditions, without losing their identity and uniqueness, learn from each other and become much more aware of our human and ecological predicament.

A Time for Radical Transformation

Sustainability is not possible unless we overcome our worship of economic growth and our subtle identification of money with fulfillment. Faith-based traditions have the possibility of presenting an alternative vision to counter the allure of endless consumption and endless economic growth, which is “devouring the planet and driving humans toward a precipice of no return.” We need positive alternative lifestyles that don’t depend on material things, and these can be most readily provided by religions. Religions have the power to open us up to something bigger than our individual selves.

In our time, as Prof. Tucker emphasized, “we are at the cusp of a big transition.” The uniqueness of this transition is widely acknowledged. As Rachel Carson wrote more than forty years ago, “we are challenged as mankind has never been challenged before to prove our maturity and our mastery, not of nature, but of ourselves.” The Earth Charter states in its Preamble that “we risk the destruction of ourselves and the diversity of life”, and therefore “fundamental changes are needed in our values, institutions and ways of living”.³² Ours is “a new axial period” calling for pluralism and planetary awareness: our human and ecological predicament requires the cross-fertilization of all religious traditions. The humility to open up to the experience of other cultures and religions, to become intercultural and interreligious, is necessary for a viable human life on a sustainable planet.

As Prof. Tucker pointed out, sustainable development is usually regarded as “an uneasy alliance of ecology and economics”. This is, however, a very narrow conception. Sustainability needs to be placed in a larger context that includes the following major elements:

- Planetary awareness
- Caring for future generations
- Nurturing bioregional cultures and local knowledge
- Expanding our ethical horizon
- Celebrating life

The world’s cultures can play a major role in fostering this fivefold emerging sensibility.³³

Planetary Awareness

According to Prof. Tucker, in our day “all traditions are realizing that our common ground is the Earth itself.” Religious traditions are being called to come together (without losing their identities) and to renew themselves. We are learning to see people and planet as not separate.

While the currently emerging planetary awareness is new in a number of ways, religions have traditionally embodied values that are akin to it. Prof. Tucker gave examples from three Asian traditions:

Confucianism acknowledges the essential kinship of all beings among themselves and with Heaven and Earth, kinship that finds its highest expression in compassion. This kinship is expressed in the famous words from Chang Tsai’s *Western Inscription* (11th century): “Heaven is my Father and Earth is my Mother, and even such a small creature as I finds an intimate place in their midst”. The human is regarded as completing Heaven and Earth, rather than separate from the Earth.

Daoism stresses the microcosm-macrocosm relation between the human and the Earth, which are seen as interacting all the time. The *qi* running through the human body is the same *qi* circulating in the Earth, and many practices related to Daoism (like *Qi Gong* and acupuncture) build on this kinship between humans and nature.

Hinduism, similarly, expresses microcosm-macrocosm awareness in the concept of *mahapurusha*, the Great Person or Cosmic Person associated with the maintenance of all life.

In the modern West, matter has been divorced from spirit, but in other traditions there is no such split. The Daoist notion of *qi* refers neither to dispirited matter nor intangible spirit.

Billy Wapoto explained that in his native Melanesian culture, rather than living by “*cogito ergo sum*” they have traditionally understood that “it is *the other* who causes my existence:” “if the other doesn’t exist, I don’t exist; if the other suffers, I suffer.” Note that in this context other is not restricted to fellow human beings: it includes the ocean, trees, stones, water and “the whole of creation.” Each native clan is specifically related to a natural feature.

Many indigenous traditions have a sense that all things are connected. The Hindu and Buddhist notion of *karma* reflects a profound sense of the interrelatedness of all things, including our relatedness to other species. The interdependence of the whole of reality is even more profoundly conveyed by the Buddhist notion of *pratityasamutpada* (“interdependent arising”). Nothing is fully independent or isolated. Our actions and intentions send ripples in all directions.

Caring for Future Generations

Prof. Mary Evelyn Tucker began her keynote speech by asking the participants “to reflect on the well-being of our children — the children of every continent and the children of every species,” to think for the long term and to envision a lively planetary civilization for those who come after us.

“Materialism has become the dominant faith of our world” and religions must now help to de-materialize our world view (Dr. Arthur Dahl). One way of countering consumerism would be to set limits to the advertising industry and to explicitly teach children and adults how to critically evaluate adverts (Rabbi Waskow). In contrast with modern individualism, traditional sustainable societies had a sense of care for ancestors and for future generations.

Nurturing Bioregional Cultures and Local Knowledge

Among the estimated 7,000 languages spoken today, most of them indigenous and tuned to the ecosystems and rhythms of a particular bioregion, nearly 2,500 are in immediate danger of extinction. Nurturing local cultures and languages is part and parcel of preserving the ecological integrity of a bioregion.

The general and abstract knowledge that we draw from contemporary science needs to be complemented with the local knowledge still preserved by traditional cultures and indigenous peoples. They can help us to rediscover a sense of belonging to our place and to reconnect with the cycles of nature and the seasons. Native culture and language “is the basis of our relation to life” (Billy Wapotro). Sustainability requires the affirmation of local, place-based cultures and languages.

There is a *core link between cultural diversity and biodiversity*. As Susanne Schnuttgen stated, education for sustainability must “take into account the cultural aspirations, identities, different ways of living, knowledge systems, values systems, religions, traditions and beliefs of all concerned,” while nurturing “the creative capacities and cultural expressions of human beings, in their multiple tangible and intangible forms, notably in seeking and imagining new ways of living together.”

Cultures and faith-based traditions should not give up their calling because the world has become secular. The belief in One Truth that should be imposed on all cultures is to a large extent a Western peculiarity. The modern, secular and scientific worldview cannot be taken, as is usually and implicitly done, as universal and superior to the views of nature from other cultures and traditions. These should be encouraged to step into an

ecological phase (if they are not there yet) and treated as fully valid forms of understanding nature and our place in the cosmos - - rather than being treated, as is often the case, as mere folklore. Embracing the pluralism that our age calls for implies that sustainability and environmental ethics must be place-based rather than universal: they should have diverse expressions according to the environmental context and the local culture, while keeping a strong sense of planetary awareness and kinship with other communities and other forms of life. We need formulations of ecojustice congenial to and emerging from every culture.

One of the outcomes of the Workshop was the need for international organizations to become more aware of the *core link between cultural diversity and biodiversity*. In fact, “sustainability” is best practiced by indigenous societies that are unfamiliar with such a term and are still rooted in their traditional culture, land and spirituality. The modern, secular and scientific worldview cannot be taken, as is usually and implicitly done, as universal and superior to the views of nature from other cultures and traditions. Approaches to sustainability that subtly impose the currently hegemonic secular worldview over local and traditional knowledge, implicitly remove people from their sense of place and their cultural identity, and therefore go against the grain of true sustainability. *Education for sustainability must nurture local knowledge and cultural diversity*. As has often been noted, we can only really care for what we love. We need awe and reverence for life, not just intellectual understanding.

Expanding Our Ethical Horizon

Social justice has been an important concern in Abrahamic religions. Now we are called to extend our notions of justice, embracing the sacredness of all forms of life and granting rights to other species, ecosystems and the Earth as whole. As Thomas Berry remarks, our moral concerns should include *biocide* and *ecocide* as well as homicide and genocide. This wider ethics calls for *solidarity* with the entire Earth, ecological sustainability, lifestyles of *sufficiency*, and a more *participatory* politics.

We must renew our notions of “progress,” “prosperity” and “development.” Much of what went under these names in the 20th century produced mixed blessings or had a boomerang effect. Dr. Mary Joy Pigozzi noted that “development” needs to embrace “well-being” and “spirituality.” One recent and significant step is to replace our zealous pursuit of a higher GDP (that knows of no other reality than money) with a more humane aspiration: Gross National Happiness, promoted in recent years by a number of international conferences and initially launched in Bhutan. Gross National Happiness has four pillars: good governance, cultural autonomy, environmental justice, and an economy providing enough for basic needs in a sustainable way. Sustainability is strongly related with our sense of place in the cosmos. We need a new relationship with ourselves, with nature and with the wider scheme of things. Fazlun Khalid, quoting Richard Tarnas, argued that since Descartes, the modern world view has desacralized the world and, while claiming not to be anthropocentric, has subtly put the human mind at the centre of all things, cutting itself off from nature and the cosmos. Religions provide a sense of belonging to the cosmos and can play a key role in shaping the new relation to the world that humanity is now called to embrace.

As a Western expert reminded us, the West has plundered the world and therefore it is hypocritical that we want to preach sustainability to other cultures. Many participants emphasized that it would be totally immoral to tell people in the poor South not to have cars and hi-tech gadgets unless we ourselves grow out of our consumerist lifestyles. On the other hand, the West is now plagued with a host of psychological problems and new illnesses. People consuming more are no happier.

For Gandhi freedom arises from *swaraj*, self-rule: learning to rule our own selves. Sustainability, likewise, must start in our own selves. “The means you use will become the ends you strive for” (Martin Buber). “Be the change you want to see in the world” (Gandhi).

Likewise, we must be honest enough to stop playing the game of denial. “Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter” (Martin Luther King). We can not wait

for presidents and “leaders” to lead us. As Bernard Combes and Mary Joy Pigozzi stated, bodies like UNESCO can push initiatives forward “but these need to be initiated by people.”

Celebrating Life

Celebration is essential, as Victoria Finlay emphasized. Having fun is a good way of countering individualism and competition. Faith-based traditions offer us a sense of beauty and harmony, often conveyed through inspiring aphorisms and stories that needs to be integrated into sustainability. Festivals and ritual celebrations can enhance our awareness of the cycles of nature, the Sun and the Moon. In the Andean region PRATEC is successfully reintroducing traditional agricultural festivities into the school calendar.

Most participants agreed that awe is necessary to achieve a sustainable life. The best of science can provide awe and wonder, but awe at the scientific, intellectual level, does not last and does not reach deep enough, while spiritual celebrations strike very deep in the heart of people. Awe at life is most fully expressed through rituals. In most indigenous cosmo-visions, harmony with the local world or bioregion is achieved and sustained by ritual activity: “without it I cannot see how to achieve sustainable living” (Jorge Ishizawa).

If religions are alive they have to keep renewing themselves, addressing the specific needs of the day. This is particularly true in our age of unprecedented challenges, in our “new axial period.” The symposia organized on the sea by Orthodox Patriarch Bartholomew are an example of both ecological and interreligious awareness.

Transforming Education from an Intercultural Perspective

We need a new education, formal and non-formal, that fosters the five values discussed above: planetary awareness, caring for future generations, nurturing cultural diversity, expanding our ethical horizon and celebrating life. The UN should support

efforts in this direction with more financial resources. There is also a perceived need to collect success stories of education for sustainability.

Many participants noted there are important obstacles when trying to introduce sustainability into formal education:

- The curriculum is already full to the brim, and teachers are severely overworked.
- The current formal educational system is geared towards quantifiable results rather than towards real learning (not to mention towards eliciting personal transformation for the sake of sustainability).
- There are vested interests in the Ministries of Education, in the schools' management boards and, last but not least, in the textbook industry.

A number of possibilities were suggested: having more dialogue with curriculum planners and writers, involving scholars and historians of religion, making contents more appealing, developing educational materials *with the children* (it's exciting for them to participate), and creating multimedia tools for children to create their own educational materials. Fazlun Khalid explained that environmental ethics is being introduced in Islamic schools, and Kirti Menon reported that the school subject "Life Orientation" allows South African children to be exposed to the teachings of different religions. On the whole, though, it seems we must "reinvent the formal system" (Bernard Combes).

As Fazlun Khalid observed, non-formal education is easier, faster, and more adaptable, free of the constraints that affect formal education. It is, in a word, more alive. Rabbi Waskow recommended informal educational activities like taking children out to the forest with spiritual books. Formal or non-formal, education for sustainability should aim at learning to transform oneself and society and to love the natural world. And we must remember that children (and all people) need to make sense of what they are learning.

The internet is a tool with many possibilities, and there are nowadays thousands of web pages devoted to sustainability. But it was noted that website-based knowledge can be abstract and

disembodied (luring us into a cyberspace that obliterates the life of specific real places) while ecology has to do with feeling rooted in the land and connecting with actual plants and animals. Besides, the World Wide Web is not truly worldwide: it only reaches the globalized world. We should never forget that in many parts of the world there is no electricity, so e-materials would be of no use there. Therefore, e-materials should be geared towards teaching sustainability to those living in highly developed areas, where there is a major use of the internet.

Most traditional cultures perpetuated sustainable lifestyles over thousands of years through oral, non-formal education. Formal education arrived with colonialism and still embodies an overt or implicit colonial drive, teaching the ways of the West with little or no respect for the local culture, history and languages, and therefore removing natives from their most direct ties with their bioregion.

As reported by Jorge Ishizawa, traditional indigenous authorities in the Andes attribute the present lack of well being and harmony in their communities to “*a generalized loss of respect among all beings*” in their local world. It is not only a matter of lack of respect between humans, but also (or mostly) of lack of respect of humans towards deities and towards nature as a whole. The local indigenous authorities see schooling as one of the major contributors to this situation: the school in the Andean region has spread the modern secularist ideology of progress and has attempted to forcibly replace traditional ways of life by Westernization disguised as modernization. PRATEC is helping local communities in the Andean region to pursue their demand for radical cultural diversity in the school. They realize that the present educational system does not prepare young people for a good and sustainable life (parents are sorely aware of this fact). The new educational pact with the central government that the rural communities are now demanding is based on what is called *Paya Yatiwi* (in Aymara, spoken in the area of Puno) and *Iskay Yachay* (in Quechua), meaning “two kinds of knowledge”. The rural communities want these “two kinds of knowledge” to be taught at school: their own and the modern project of literacy, science and technology. *Paya Yatiwi / Iskay Yachay* has three interrelated components: a) the recovery of respect in the

community (towards their deities, nature and among the community members themselves); b) learning to read and write while respecting and valuing their oral tradition; and c) teaching the “seven skills” that allow people to “pass life”, that is, to live a good and sustainable life.

Education for sustainability must clearly distinguish between two very different target groups: the 20 percent of humanity living “overdeveloped” lifestyles (including wealthy people in privileged areas of poor countries) must learn to *undevelop*, to reduce our current overconsumption and to find fulfilling lifestyles based on a much more moderate use of natural resources. But for the masses of the poor the challenge is totally different. The not-yet-overdeveloped rest of humanity, including all the poor in the South and all indigenous and traditional peoples, must learn to fulfil their needs (including running water, food security, and adequate health care) in a sustainable way and without falling into the lure of overdevelopment and consumerism. Rather than being exposed to the subtle colonialism of advertising and of series like *Dallas*, they should be offered models of non-material success. The lifestyle of the overdeveloped 20 percent of the world, besides consuming 80 percent of the Earth’s resources, generates greed and envy. In fact, as was often noted at the Workshop, not only should we, in the overdeveloped world, not preach sustainability to indigenous peoples: we should aim to learn from those who have been practicing sustainable lifestyles over the centuries.

Endnotes

³⁰ This International Experts’ Workshop on Faith-based Organizations and Education for Sustainability was held in Barcelona from 22nd to 24th March 2007, organized by Unescocat — Centre Unesco de Catalunya. Besides a number of local authorities and UNESCOCAT staff, the following twenty-one international experts participated in the Workshop: Dr. Abelardo BRENES, University for Peace / Earth Charter International, Costa Rica; Bernard COMBES, Programme for Education for Sustainable Development, UNESCO, Paris; Somboon CHUNGPRAMPREE, International Network of Engaged Buddhists,

Thailand; Dr. Arthur DAHL, International Environment Forum, Switzerland; Victoria FINLAY, Alliance for Religions and Conservation, United Kingdom; Peter GICIRA, All Africa Conference of Churches, Kenya; Jorge ISHIZAWA, Andean Peasant Technologies Project (PRATEC), Peru; Fazlun KHALID, Islamic Foundation for Ecology and Environmental Sciences, United Kingdom; Dr. Mathew KOSHY, Joint Ecological Commission, India; Kirti MENON, Gandhi Centenary Committee, South Africa; Dr. Mary Joy PIGOZZI, UNESCO High Level Panel on ESD, USA; Ranchor PRIME, Friends of Vrindavan, United Kingdom; Mayra RODRÍGUEZ, Ecumenical Forum for Peace and Reconciliation, Guatemala; Hiro SAKURAI, Soka Gakkai International, Japan/USA; Susanne SCHNUTTGEN, Division for Cultural Policies and Intercultural Dialogue, UNESCO, Paris; Michael SLABY, Earth Charter International, Sweden; Christian TEODORESCU, Ecumenical Association of Churches, Romania; Prof. Mary Evelyn TUCKER, Forum on Religion and Ecology, Harvard University, USA; Philippe VAZ, Tariqqa Al Alawiyya, France; Billy WAPOTRO, Alliance Scolaire, New Caledonia; Rabbi Arthur WASKOW, The Shalom Center, USA.

³¹ The full report of the Workshop can be downloaded at <http://www.arcworld.org/downloads/Barcelona%20Report.pdf>.

³² See www.earthcharter.org for the full text of the Earth Charter.

³³ There is a consistent overlap between the Earth Charter (widely regarded as a comprehensive and inclusive framework for sustainability) and the five core values that emerged in the Workshop. However, some differences of emphasis might be pointed out. Three of these core values seem to be sufficiently addressed by the Earth Charter. Thus, *planetary awareness* is explicitly or implicitly present throughout it; *expanding our ethical horizon* to include issues of ecological justice is, likewise, present in many of the principles and paragraphs of the Earth Charter, and *caring for future generations* corresponds to principle 4. The remaining two values are somehow less represented, not appearing in the phrasing of any the 16 principles of the Charter, but they are not missing: *celebrating life* is praised in the very last sentence of the Earth Charter, and *cultural diversity* is implicit or explicit in several subprinciples: 8b, 12b, 12d and 13f, as well as in “The Way Forward”. It is not surprising that a Workshop drawing on the culturally diverse perspectives of faith-based traditions put more emphasis on cultural diversity and celebration. Even if the creation of

the Earth Charter might be considered “the most open and participatory worldwide consultation process ever associated with the drafting of an international declaration”, from the perspective of faith-based traditions and non-Western cultures it might not have given enough relevance to cultural diversity and celebration.