

Biodemocracy and the Earth Charter

with Matthew T. Riley, "The Earth Charter and Biodemocracy in the Twenty-First Century"; Mary Evelyn Tucker, "The Earth Charter and Journey of the Universe: An Integrated Framework for Biodemocracy"; Heather Eaton, "Global Visions and Common Ground: Biodemocracy, Postmodern Pressures, and the Earth Charter"; and Matthew T. Riley, "The Democratic Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis: Lynn White, Biodemocracy, and the Earth Charter."

THE EARTH CHARTER AND BIODEMOCRACY IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

by Matthew T. Riley

Abstract. This essay introduces the themes that motivate the three articles that follow. Their common aim is to explore the connections between the Earth Charter and the concept of *biodemocracy* with the intention of highlighting ways of thinking about the relationship between science, religion, and the environment in the twenty-first century. Informed by the science of ecology and written by scholars of religion, the articles included here seek to integrate movements and ideas as diverse as postmodern thought, the much-debated thought of Lynn White, jr. (his preferred spelling), and the synergy emerging between the Earth Charter and *Journey of the Universe*.

Keywords: animism; Christianity; cosmology; ecology; environment; ethics; religion; theology

This issue of *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* brings together three articles that explore the relationship between biodemocracy and environmental thought in the twenty-first century. The articles are organized around the Earth Charter's assertion that a sustainable future requires a fundamental shift in awareness of the embeddedness of the human community in the larger biotic community. As the Preamble to the Earth Charter states, "we must recognize that in the midst of a magnificent diversity of cultures and life forms we are one human family and one Earth Community with a common destiny." Continuing, the "Preamble" affirms 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

Matthew T. Riley is a PhD student at Drew University, 36 Madison Ave., Madison, NJ 07940, USA; e-mail: mriley@drew.edu.

generations.” This shift in awareness suggested by the Charter—a sense of a common future and a shared responsibility for all life outlined therein—is accompanied by a commitment to democratic processes. These articles explore democracy within this context as “biodemocracy.”

These essays are informed by a wide array of sciences including but not limited to ecology, biology, sociology, and evolutionary cosmology. Indeed, the relationship between religion and science is a central concern around which core questions that drive the field of religion and ecology have germinated. Questions regarding the extent of humanity’s ecological footprint, the moral implications of humanity’s genetic and evolutionary relationship with nonhuman others, and the complex and constantly shifting boundary connecting ecological knowledge with religious wisdom are indispensable inquiries for current scholarship in the field. Although focused on the Earth Charter and the notion of biodemocracy, the articles that follow extend out of a common interest in the environmental crisis as revealed by science and the shifting notions of community, ethics, and religion that have emerged in response.

THE HISTORY AND GLOBAL ETHIC OF THE EARTH CHARTER

The twenty-first century is likely to be defined by the ecological crisis. While history is marked by moments of great human tragedy and conflict, one might observe that these struggles are situated within a broader ecological context. Global economics and politics are shaped by the struggle over energy and resources; human health is intimately linked to air quality, access to clean water, and to a rapidly expanding assemblage of human-made chemicals; biodiversity is steeply declining; and humans struggle to find their place—physically, metaphorically, spiritually, and ethically—in an ecological landscape that is marked by anthropogenic climate change.

Yet even amidst this struggle, it can be said that a remarkable and unprecedented turn toward inclusivity, environmental consciousness, and compassion is taking place. More than half a century ago, environmental luminary Aldo Leopold observed that ethics could be conceived of as a perpetually widening circle of concern. An extension of ethics to include the land, Leopold mused, would also invite an extension of how humans conceive of themselves as members in larger, meaningful ecological community. “[A] land ethic,” he wrote, “changes the role of *Homo sapiens* from conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it” (Leopold 1970, 262).

This expansion of ethics—and broadening of community and citizenship—to include the more than human is a theme that has resonated deeply in the heart of ecological thought. Thomas Berry, one of the field of religion and ecology’s most insightful synthesizers of religion and science, envisioned the future of the Earth as one of profound, celebratory

inclusiveness. “I would suggest,” wrote Berry, “that we see in these early years of the twenty-first century as the period when we discover the great community of the Earth, a comprehensive community of all living thing and nonliving components of the planet” (Berry 2006, 141). This felt need for a rethinking of religion, community, and citizenship unfolds in a profundity of ecological thought.

A key document situated at the forefront of efforts to rethink human-Earth relations is the Earth Charter. The Earth Charter represents a comprehensive and long-term set of principles that seeks to establish an ecological future for all life. The Earth Charter, broadly conceived, is a soft-law document and a social movement that emerged out of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in Rio in 1992. The Charter proposes a global ethic that aims to achieve parity between economics, justice, rights, and the environment. It is, in effect, a rapprochement between human economy and human ecology. While the key ideals and insights of the Charter are many, the mission of the Charter is organized under four guiding principles: Respect and care for the community of life; ecological integrity; economic and social justice; and democracy, nonviolence, and peace. The Charter is, in a sense, more than the sum of these four parts: It is a global ethic, it is a social movement, and it is cosmological and ecological in its orientation.

The Charter is remarkable not only for its comprehensiveness, but also for its inclusiveness. These aims and values of the Earth Charter are reflected in the drafting process. It is, to date, “the most inclusive civil society document ever negotiated” (Grim and Tucker 2014, 157). To this end, the Charter recognizes diversity and difference as central to the Earth community. Not only are the independence and rights of all people honored, but also the rights and independence—and *interdependence*—of all life.

The international drafting committee, chaired by Steven Rockefeller, composed the Charter over the course of four years from 1996 to 2000. The world’s religions also played a key role in shaping the Charter. Mary Evelyn Tucker, whose article is included in this issue of *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science*, co-organized a series of conferences from 1996 to 1998 on the world’s religions and ecology. In this landmark conference series, which marks a pivotal moment in the field of religion and ecology, scholars, activists, and religious leaders weighed in on the drafting process of the Charter and also invited it to inform their conversations on the intersection of religion and the environment.

The Earth Charter has been endorsed by a broad spectrum of political bodies, scientists, and religious leaders and organizations. This includes endorsements from the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN). In addition, the Charter is supplemented by

a book, *The Earth Charter in Action*, which highlights inspiring stories of the Charter put into action around the globe. Presently, the mission, policies, and implementation of the Charter are overseen by the Earth Charter International Council and the current Executive Director of the Earth Charter International Secretariat, Mirian Vilela.

BIODEMOCRACY

Democracy, nonviolence, and peace, as noted earlier, is one of the four major themes of the Earth Charter. Although these four themes can only be understood in relation to one another, this set of articles focuses its attention on democracy in an attempt to draw out ways in which respect for life and inclusiveness in decision making can be reconceived. In this context, they explore democracy via the category of *biodemocracy*.

Biodemocracy is a diverse and evolving concept. In the past, it has been understood as an ecopolitical movement organized around agricultural practices, it has been linked to the ecological philosophy of deep ecology, and it has been adopted by—and applied descriptively to—a diverse array of other environmental thinkers and movements. The authors who utilize this term in this issue of *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* are drawn to it despite—or perhaps even because of—its ambiguity and its rich potentiality as a verdant econeologism. No single definition of the term exists. But it is in this diversity of possible meanings that the authors gathered here find room to converse.

THREE PERSPECTIVES ON THE EARTH CHARTER, BIODEMOCRACY, AND RELIGION

The articles that follow explore the role of religion in both the inward and outward processes of social transformation. Biodemocracy, in this sense, encompasses more than policy making and governance: On the one hand, the articles discuss the *inward* work of religion and democratic thought in fostering and sustaining environmentally friendly attitudes. Religions have the power to shape worldviews and to positively impact environmental ethics. This ability of religion to transform perceptions, generate values, and orient individuals in relation to the larger community is broadly considered in the articles that follow.

On the other hand, the articles collected here also reflect on the *outward* work of religion and democratic process in promoting ecological flourishing, affecting policy change, and organizing groups and resources. As social forces, religions often provide the ideas and resources for communal organizing and action. Democracy, similarly, can provide the mechanism and processes to bring about the type of change outlined by the Earth Charter.

The articles that follow, therefore, examine change that is simultaneously inward and outward, global and local, and constructive and critical.

The first article in this section on biodemocracy and the Earth Charter is by Mary Evelyn Tucker. Tucker, who was involved in the drafting of the Charter, integrates the cosmological story of the book and film *Journey of the Universe* with the social vision of the Charter. A sustainable planetary future, she maintains, can be fostered through the synergy of these two. Together, the soft-law policy and ethical norms elucidated in the Charter, along with *Journey of the Universe's* retelling of humanity's cosmological context, can offer a creative grounding for the flourishing of human and nonhuman life. A flourishing Earth community that promotes economic, spiritual, and ecological well-being, she observes, is possible through a comprehensive grounding in biodemocracy.

The second article, by Heather Eaton, considers notions of planetary community and the tensions generated by such thought in global-local and universal-contextual debates. Her goal, simply put, is to examine the need for a global, ecological vision on the one hand, considered against the postmodern criticisms of such unifying worldviews on the other. To accomplish this, Eaton provides a brief history of the term biodemocracy and locates its emergence in the problematic balance between global thinking and respect for local diversities. She draws upon postmodern thought and environmental perspectives in an attempt to highlight ways in which a viable planetary future can be configured, if at all. In this assessment, she weighs the skepticism of postmodern thought against the need for constructive, engaged thought for a common ecological future. The global, unifying vision of the *Charter*, she maintains, is one potential way—out of many—from which common ground can be established.

The third and final article, which I wrote, examines Lynn White, jr.'s assertion that humanity is a member in a larger "spiritual democracy of all God's creatures." Although White is well known for his controversial position regarding the ecological culpability of Christianity made famous in his 1967 essay, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," in this issue of *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* I observe that White was more than a mere critic of religion. He advocated, I argue, for an inclusive ecological culture rooted in Christian theology that offers creative biodemocratic resonance with the tenets of the Earth Charter. In this article, I draw from archival research and White's lesser-known publications to shed light on White's religiously inspired, animal-friendly biodemocratic thought. White's scholarship, I suggest, can be reconciled with the Earth Charter and its assertion in its Preamble that "we are one human family and one Earth Community with a common destiny."

CONCLUSION

This collection of articles, each considered alongside the others, is intended to be an exploratory glimpse into ecological culture in the twenty-first century. The scholars of religion gathered here do not offer these articles as definitive, conclusive statements on biodemocracy. Rather, these articles are intended to evoke new constellations of mutually enhancing human-Earth relations, highlight controversies and potential tensions, reflect upon past accomplishments and current developments of ecological thought, and provoke discussion and further scholarship on biodemocracy and the Earth Charter. The value of such an endeavor does not lie in the conclusions offered herein. Rather, it arises in the conversations and constructive inquiry that grows from it. We invite the readers, therefore, to participate with us in this engaging conversation.

NOTE

This thematic section arose from presentations at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion in a panel titled “Biodemocracy: Religion, Democracy, and the Earth Charter in the Twenty-First Century” (November 23, 2013). My thanks go to Christopher Key Chapple for moderating, and especially to my colleagues who joined me in sharing papers: Heather Eaton, James Miller, and Mary Evelyn Tucker.

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