

The Earth Charter: Buddhist and Christian Approaches

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Seattle, Washington, is well known as the home of the coffee renaissance that swept across America in the 1980s and 1990s. Its hometown favorite, The CoffeeBrand, first appeared in 1971 in an open-air farmers' market; the popular round, green logo now seems to appear on the streets of every city and suburb of the world.

But what really impresses the visitor to the Seattle-Tacoma area is not The Coffee; it's The Mountain. When you look to the southeast, it rises there, big and craggy and snow-covered, and alone. It dominates the horizon. Even when you're not looking at it, or when it's obscured by the morning haze, you feel its presence. The Mountain . . . that's what the locals call it, as if it were the only one in the world.

Those of us from other parts of the country call it Mount Rainier, but it looms large just the same. And from August 5 through 12, it seemed to watch over us like an expectant teacher as we convened on the wooded campus of Pacific Lutheran University for the Sixth International Conference of the Society of Buddhist-Christian Studies (SBCS). More than 170 scholars, students, and practitioners (and scholar-practitioners and practitioner-students) joined in a week of dialogue, study, and reflection on the theme "Buddhism, Christianity, and Global Healing."

The conference opened with blessings from both the Buddhist and Christian traditions and with musical performances representing the traditions of the West—the passionate resonance of the pipe organ; and East—the evocative sounds of the simple bamboo *shakuhachi*.

Boston Research Center (BRC) founder and president of Soka Gakkai International, Daisaku Ikeda, sent a congratulatory message to the gathering praising their efforts and noting the key areas in which Christianity and Buddhism can make important complementary contributions to the issues facing the world.

The theme of global healing provided an excellent opportunity to focus on the Earth Charter. Under the title "Spirituality and the Earth Charter: Buddhist and Christian Approaches," co-chairs Professor Jay McDaniel, of Hendrix College, and BRC Executive Director Virginia Straus assembled a rich program of presentation and dialogue, which included some of the most renowned scholars, activists, and scholar-activists of the Earth Charter movement.

Professor Mary Evelyn Tucker, of Bucknell University, began by introducing the Earth Charter not as a document but as a living movement, whose activities are inspired by the ideals and guidelines contained within the charter. Dr. Tucker, who played an active role in the shaping of the charter, spoke of how the input of various constituencies (indigenous peoples, developing economies, businessmen, political leaders, and yes, lawyers) was solicited, considered, and, where appropriate, given voice in the charter. She noted that we now have what will be—more or less—the final form of the charter. Our next step is to make it come alive in our behavior as individuals, communities, businesses, and nations.

Virginia Straus spoke of the contributions of the global Buddhist community to the Earth Charter process. It began with Professor Steven Rockefeller's call for participation, which in turn led to contributions by prominent Buddhist leaders and scholars to the charter language, scholarly and grassroots consultations, publications by the Buddhist Peace Foundation (BPF) and the BRC, and the efforts of Buddhist organizations and engaged scholars to build grassroots support for the charter. Straus noted that the charter now reflects central Buddhist beliefs, with its clear recognition of interdependency and its emphasis on a change of mind or heart, and on "becoming more" rather than "acquiring more."

Jay McDaniel rounded out the Earth Charter introduction by providing a very personal Christian perspective, giving special attention to those elements of the charter that speak to the human soul. As an example, he highlighted the broad spiritual and moral vision contained in Article 16(f) defining peace as "the wholeness created by right relationships with oneself, other persons, other cultures, other life, Earth, and the larger whole of which we all are a part."

Noted theologian John Cobb provided an analysis of the changing central organizing principles for human society. With the Treaty of Vincennes in 1371, the cultures in the North Atlantic Basin moved from an era of Christianity to Nationalism, where the central organizing force shifted from the church to the nation-state. As the two world wars of the twentieth century revealed the evils of this idolatry, prosperity became the new object of veneration for the war-battered peoples of Europe and, later, the United States. As the economy increasingly became the central force of life, it would ultimately transcend national differences, with transnational corporations becoming increasingly influential in our new global society.

What force can counteract the powerful consumption-production cycle of this idolatry of economism? Here Cobb feels that the counterbalancing force may well be "Earthism," where the protection of our environment becomes a central organizing force of life. If so, then the Earth Charter provides an excellent framework for this movement, outlining a moral vision both broad enough to include many of the world's peoples, and specific enough to form a guideline for concrete practical steps that can be taken by individuals, families, businesses, and communities.

Christian theologian Paul Knitter, of Xavier University, spoke of the need to bring both prophetic and mystic qualities to the task of moving the Earth Charter from vision to reality. "To announce the visionary message of the Earth Charter, we are going to have to prophetically denounce some of the fundamental ways in which our

postmodern, neo-liberal world works.” He emphasized, however, that this courage to denounce must be balanced by compassion and the mystic’s view of the unifying forces that unite us all. Without this balance the fervor to denounce destructive systems and practices could lead to a fracturing of relationships along “good-guy/bad-guy” lines and, he warned, “There can be no healing where relationships are broken.”

As our thoughts shifted from ideas to action, from framework to movement, we benefitted greatly from the advice of Buddhist peace activists like Dr. A. T. Ariyaratne, of Sri Lanka, and Thai human rights activist Sulak Sivaraksa. Each brought home to us the message that social action must move hand-in-hand with an internal struggle to reform our hearts and minds. The leaders of any movement cannot be elitist, but rather must organically work side by side with others and lead through their example.

Professor Sallie King, of James Madison University, spoke of the developmental character of Buddhist ethics as a useful guide for any broad-based Earth Charter educational movement. “Buddhist ethics are developmental, addressing us in different ways at different stages of our development. For those who only care about themselves, Buddhist ethics speaks in a voice of enlightened self-interest (i.e. karmic retribution), while for those who feel a bond with other beings, [it] speaks of nurturing wholesome attitudes and behaviors.” Professor King also pointed out that the Earth Charter approach was similar in that it sought to be both practical and idealistic, hoping to address people in an encouraging way at whatever point they were on the spectrum of earth awareness.

While there is no single conclusion to draw from this dialogue between East and West, there was much to reflect upon. And one sensed a growing synergy between these two different, yet—in some important ways—complementary worldviews. As Paul Knitter pointed out, “The earth in its beauty and mystery and in its pain and danger is providing a rich common ground for interreligious dialogue.”

Then, of course, throughout each day, there was The Mountain, our teacher and our constant reminder. For the present, there could be no more appropriate symbol of the challenges that lie ahead on the path toward global healing, with its promise of the vistas to be enjoyed along the way.