

A [sample entry](#) from the

# **Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature**

(London & New York: Continuum, 2005)

Edited by

[Bron Taylor](#)

© 2005  
All Rights Reserved

services use texts from all of the major religious and secular traditions.

Native American and pagan traditions are often used to transform religious consciousness by returning to the pre-monotheistic world, a world held to be friendlier to nature than that of the supernatural monotheisms. Among the more important yearly events is the Flower Communion in which each member of the congregation is asked to bring a flower that is placed in a common vase at the front of the meeting room or sanctuary. At the end of the service, each member takes a different flower home. The Czech Unitarian minister Norbert Capek created this service before the Second World War. Capek also created the symbol of the flaming chalice, which combines the naturalistic symbols of enlightening fire and the wisdom-holding cup, which is now the central liturgical object in the Unitarian Universalist movement. Capek was executed in a Nazi concentration camp in 1942 for his resistance work in which the symbol of the flaming chalice was used as a code to help escaping Jews.

Along with a strong social gospel tradition, Unitarian Universalists today fully participate in the worldwide movement of the greening of the Church. There is a direct involvement in local issues of justice and the use of resources in a way that distributes them equitably and does minimal harm to the environment. Each member of the congregation is asked to use ecologically friendly practices in all dimensions of personal and social life. In the national realm, the Association works to create laws that will bring these practices into being. On the international level, the Association has long fought for forms of just trade and reduced First World consumption. One particular focus of this concern is with critiquing the growing power of international corporations as they control the yearly sale and distribution of hybrid seeds for which they have the patents. Given that Unitarian Universalism denies the reality of a potentially salvific deity who could create an apocalypse that would rescue a few of us from our abuse of nature, congregation members feel compelled by conscience to work toward the reversal of the natural degradation partially caused by the monotheisms.

*Robert S. Corrington*

#### Further Reading

- Bumbaugh, David E. *Unitarian Universalism: A Narrative History*. Chicago: Meadville Lombard Press, 2000.
- Dorrian, Gary. *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Imagining Progressive Religion 1805–1900*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001.
- Parke, David B. *The Epic of Unitarianism: Original Writings from the History of Liberal Religion*. Boston: Skinner House Books, 1985.
- Robinson, David. *The Unitarians and the Universalists*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1985.

Wright, Conrad. *The Prophets of Religious Liberalism: Channing, Emerson, Parker*. Boston: Unitarian Universalist Association, 1986 (2nd edn).

See also: Corrington, Robert S.; Emerson, Ralph Waldo; Nature Religion in the United States; Pantheism; Spinoza, Baruch; Transcendentalism.

**United Nations** – See Bahá'í Faith and the United Nations; Earth Charter; Religious Studies and Environmental Concern; United Nations' "Earth Summits."

#### United Nations' "Earth Summits"

The first international United Nations' "Earth Summit," formally known as the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, was held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil from the 3rd to the 14th June, 1992. It included 172 national representatives (of which 108 were heads of state) and over 2400 representatives of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and addressed the threat of global environmental degradation as nations seek economic development. The gathered national leaders signed the Convention on Climate Change and the Convention on Biological Diversity and the conference itself adopted The Rio Declaration on Environment and Development, The Forest Principles, and Agenda 21, a plan for coordinating environmental and national development by the next century. The Commission on Sustainable Development was formed to monitor and report on the implementation of these declarations and principles.

The 1992 Earth Summit emerged from an earlier United Nations Conference on the Human Environment, held at Stockholm in 1972, which for the first time placed environmental issues before the international community, and led to the formation of the United Nations Environment Program. By 1983 the relationship between environmental degradation and economic and social development had led to the formation of the United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development, known as the Brundtland Commission. This issued the 1989 report entitled *Our Common Future*, which defined sustainable development as "that which meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs" and called for international strategies combining both environmental protection and development. Significantly, the envisioned programs include action not only at the international, but also at regional, national and local levels, and involving state and non-state actors. The United Nations General Assembly voted in 1989 to hold the first United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in 1992.

UNCED was a watershed, but not only for the obvious environmental reasons. The United Nations moved toward

the Rio meeting by hosting several preparation committee meetings in New York. Those who attended these meetings included not only government officials but also representatives of non-governmental organizations who could apply for official NGO status with the UN and provide input into the process. Each country could solicit contributions from numerous organizations and individuals, including that of both organized religious bodies and other groups motivated by nature-related spirituality whose main identity was not religious. These official conversations involved intense debates and disagreements about what was to be included and excluded from the agenda. Many compromises were made prior to and at UNCED.

Running parallel to the UNCED was an "Earth Summit" – a people's conference – an exclusively NGO event that coexisted with UNCED also in Rio. Although sponsored by the UN, this event drew environmental and political activists from all over the world. Seventeen thousand or more people (or their organizations) paid their own way (or their organizations did) to discuss the social and environmental situation around the world. Here a radical environmental and social agenda emerged and alternative treaties were written. The Earth Summit represented the critical social politics that had been emerging over decades, such as international feminism, indigenous peoples' rights, post-Marxist and post-colonial analyses, peace, human rights, and environmental agendas. The crucial presence of these groups pressured the UNCED's official governmental representatives to strengthen their environmental commitments, with particular attention to marginalized peoples. One result of UNCED and the Earth Summit was that it was now evident that citizens groups had developed their own analyses and viewpoints, were no longer going to accept their government's positions, and would be very active in planning and presenting alternatives. One of the most dynamic conversations took place at the Women's Tent – Planeta Femea – with speakers such as Wangari Matthai, Peggy Antrobus, Bella Abzug, Vandana Shiva, and over a hundred other engaging radical feminists, all of whom asserted strongly that the environmental crisis is connected to the oppression of women. The women's caucus worked hard to make the negotiators respond to the world's most disadvantaged peoples, especially women, who make up the majority of the world's poor in every country and are critical to sustainable agriculture and poverty eradication.

Others, such as the Canadian Scientist and television documentarian David Suzuki, North American Indian Faithkeeper Chief Oren Lyon of the Onondaga, economist Hazel Henderson, and world-famous television oceanographer-documentarian Jacques Cousteau, and many more, brought a sharp and multidisciplinary focus on the complexity and urgency of the environmental crises around the world. Religious voices were woven through-

out these presentations. Oftentimes there was an open speaker forum, such that the conversation was participatory, democratic and lively. Music from indigenous drummers, the Earth musician Paul Winter, and the North American popular singer John Denver, brought home the need to connected together spirituality, music and politics.

Thousands of journalists reported on Rio 1992. This event showed clearly the signs of a global citizens movement, which continued on to Rio+10 and is manifested in the World Social Forum.

A strong religious voice promoting environmental sustainability and social justice emerged at Rio and continued to develop through subsequent United Nations environmental events. The World Council of Churches, the Vatican, and representatives of other world religions, notably Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, Bahá'i for example were represented at the 1992 Earth Summit. The Dalai Lama played a significant role as a spokesperson for religious sensitivities. He spoke at UNCED and especially the Earth Summit, offering a sunrise ceremony for participants at the latter venue. Given his respect for diversity and reputation for moral and spiritual integrity the Dalai Lama was able to call to awareness the many religious traditions that teach the sacredness of the Earth. Reverence for the Earth was a dimension added to intense environmental and social analysis, which strengthened both. His presence also brought a certain spiritual authority to the NGO community at the Earth Summit, as it pressured the UNCED delegates to take action. In addition, hundred of indigenous peoples gathered nearby at Altimura and brought both indigenous teachings and a powerful political presence to the events. They focused attention on the importance of protecting "Mother Earth" and helped contribute to the growing appreciation among some United Nations officials and delegates of the value of their cultures and "traditional ecological knowledge."

Although many religious traditions were present in Rio, the overall effect was an interreligious cooperation on social and environmental issues. The fact that religious leaders from around the world, representing many faiths, symbols and customs, could join as one voice in claiming the religion is an integral aspect of any viable solution. Rituals occurred at many times, and most often in a combining of rituals, teachings and wisdom. This multi-religious presence registered the need for religions to work together, and initiated a host of public and political collaboration on environmental issues. As well, religious leaders were often on panels where economics, human rights, gender equity and biodiversity were discussed, which led to an understanding that religion is an integrated voice in the conversation and solutions.

A proposal for an "Earth Charter" may prove to be the most significant religion-related development at the UNCED. This initiative mimics the strategy that guided the

United Nations Declaration on Human Rights, in which ratification by member-states is sought as a means to leverage better environmental behavior among individuals, institutions, and nation-states. Although not officially embraced at the UNCED the idea was soon championed and developed by influential actors in the non-governmental community.

The Earth Charter was initially brought forward by Maurice Strong, the Canadian who was the main organizer of the Earth Summit. In subsequent years Strong laced his speeches promoting the Charter with Gaian spirituality. The Charter's most famous early proponent was Mikhail Gorbachev, the former leader of the Soviet Union, who promoted Glasnost and presided over the Soviet Union's rejection of communism, before going on to serve as the President of Green Cross International, which is devoted to turning international institutions green. Less well known is that Gorbachev's environmentalism was grounded in a biocentric axiology in which "life has value in itself" (Gorbachev 1997:14), and a pantheistic, earthen spirituality, as he put it, "I believe in the cosmos . . . *nature is my god*. To me, *nature is sacred*. Trees are my temples and forests are my cathedrals" (1997: 15). It is not uncommon for actors engaged with the United Nations' sustainability efforts to express such spirituality.

After the UNCED at Rio, the next United Nations Conference on environment and development was labeled the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) and held in Johannesburg, South Africa from 26 August to 4 September 2002. This summit was the largest UN conference ever held, with 65,000 participants, including 104 heads of state, and with representatives from over 8000 NGOs and voluntary associations. There were, however, fewer heads of state than at Rio; in contrast, there were many more NGO representatives and other citizens. The conference was contentious as it spotlighted the growing imbalance in living standards between developed and less developed nations. According to most observers, the progress that was made on a number of issues was insignificant when compared to the scale of the problems, and overall the conference failed to gain a comprehensive implementation plan for Agenda 21, a chief conference objective.

There was, however, significant evolution in the religious, ethical challenge to business as usual by the nation-states. A "Sacred Space" was designated at Ubuntu Village, for example, the main exhibition venue, where interfaith ritualizing and prayer for the well-being of the Earth's community of life was a regular occurrence. The primatologist Jane Goodall, for example, spoke widely from the official venue as well as at the venue devoted to non-governmental organizations representing "civil society" and at a conference organized by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature. She brought her own biocentric ethics and animistic spirituality to a wide

audience, including during one session devoted to promoting the Earth Charter, which by 2002 had been through many drafts and had been officially brought before the United Nations. At this Earth Charter celebration, an "Arc of Hope" was present, which was on its own pilgrimage around the world, taken by those promoting this initiative. Its outside was adorned with Earth-related symbols from the world's major religious traditions, and inside of it, in addition to messages of hope from children around the world, was the Earth Charter itself, as a new sacred text, painstakingly scribed on papyrus. The Charter was mentioned favorably by a number of heads of states, or their representatives, during the WSSD, and in the conference's political declaration, a phrase from it urging respect for the wider "community of life" remained in the final text, which was the first such reference in a United Nations International Law document, according to Stephen Rockefeller, one of the Charter's most influential proponents (email correspondence after the conference).

Jane Goodall and some other important figures who had promoted Earth-focused spirituality at the official WSSD venues also appeared at the so-called "People's Earth Summit," held nearby at an Anglican school, which became during the WSSD the epicenter of anti-globalization resistance. At that venue, spiritualities of connection and belonging to an Earth considered sacred were often expressed, even being included in declarations protesting the failure of the WSSD itself to take decisive action to protect the environment and promote social justice. African traditional religions and religious leaders (*Sangomas*) were given a special place of honor. Among the well-known activists and scholars speaking at that venue, in addition to Goodall, were the ecofeminist Vandana Shiva and the anti-globalization leader Helena Norberg-Hodge. For them and others at the venue, "disconnection" with nature was viewed as a fundamental cause of environmental decline and "reconnecting with nature" as the antidote. African *Sangomas* led rituals to connect people to the ancestors and solicit their guidance and power for the present environmental struggle, explaining that in African traditional religion the ancestors live in a corporeal world connected to this one, and that the well-being of the Earth and the worlds inhabited by the ancestors are connected, and that environmental protection is necessary for our well-being not only in this world, but also in the one to come.

But it was not only at the WSSD's margins that Earth-related spirituality appeared, and was evolving. In addition, the Japanese power industry ran expensive advertising in the *International Herald Tribune* under the headline "Let's Be Grateful to Mother Earth", then defending nuclear power as an energy source. Less commercially, the major institutional religious actors who had been present at the Rio Summit were represented again, issuing

position papers, and endeavoring to influence delegates toward strong positions in defense of ecosystems and for greater equity in the distribution of the world's natural resources. Perhaps even more significant were developments in Earth-related spiritualities beyond the sphere of institutional religions, some of which may presage the emergence of a kind of non-sectarian global civic Earth religion.

Jane Goodall, South African President Thabo Mbeki, and the Secretary-General of the UN, Kofi Annan, for example, along with many other dignitaries, led a pilgrimage on 1 September to Sterkfontein, which was located near the WSSD site, and had been inaugurated in 2001 by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization as a World Heritage Site. There the *Australopithecus*, an extinct form of pre-humans dating to 4 million years ago, had been found in the 1930s, leading the place to be called the "Cradle of Humanity." Mbeki himself gave a speech there (and during his comments during the WSSD's opening ceremony) and although not overtly religious, his words were in many ways reminiscent of the Epic of Evolution, expressing a reverence for the natural world as the habitat of humanity. He asserted that this site in particular, and evolution in general, shows the kinship of all humanity, and the interconnection of all life forms. The pilgrimage to and celebration of this site was remarkable, as was the way in which it was repeatedly mentioned at the WSSD and viewed as relevant to the conference's mission, given that so many, on religious grounds, reject a Darwinian understanding of human origins, and because politicians generally avoid making pronouncements that might give offense. Even the pageantry of the conference's opening ceremony assumed an evolutionary understanding, implied a reverence for life, and envisioned an (at least) quasi-religious utopian hope for the reharmonization of all life on Earth. Such events suggest that the consecration of evolutionary narratives is making progress beyond the figures and religious enclaves that have birthed and nurtured such religious production.

The United Nations has thus become a venue where the world's religions and newer forms of religiosity increasingly press an environmental agenda upon nation-states and international institutions. Increasingly these diverse voices express the conviction that all is interconnected and that the Earth and its living systems are inherently valuable and sacred in some way, understood either as divine themselves, or as divinely imparted gifts from a beneficent Creator.

Bron Taylor  
Iain S. Maclean  
Heather Eaton

#### Further Reading

Clifford, Anne M. et al. *And God Saw That It Was Good:*

- Catholic Theology and the Environment.* Washington, DC: National Catholic Bishops Conference, 1996.
- Fowler, Robert Booth. *The Greening of Protestant Thought.* Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1995.
- Gransberg-Michaelson, Wesley. *Redeeming the Creation: The Rio Earth Summit: Challenges for the Churches.* Geneva: WCC Press, 1992.
- Hessel, Dieter and Larry Rasmussen, eds. *Earth Habitat: Eco-Justice and the Church's Response.* Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2001.
- Keenan, Marjorie, Sr. *From Stockholm to Johannesburg: An Historical Overview of the Concern of the Holy See for the Environment.* Vatican: The Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, 2003.
- Posey, Darrell Addison. *Cultural and Spiritual Values of Biodiversity.* Nairobi, Kenya: United Nations Environmental Programme, 1999.
- Rasmussen, Larry. *Earth Community: Earth Ethics.* Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996.
- UNESCO (Man and the Biosphere Program). *Man Belongs to the Earth.* Paris: UNESCO-MAB, 1988.
- See also: Bahá'í Faith and the United Nations; Biosphere Reserves and World Heritage Sites; Earth Charter; Epic of Evolution; Environmental Ethics; Environmental Sabbath; Globalization; Goodall, Jane; Indigenous Environmental Network; Primate Spirituality; Religious Studies and Environmental Concern; Shiva, Vandana; Sustainability and the World Council of Churches; World Conference of Indigenous Peoples (Kari Oca, Brazil); World Council of Churches and Ecumenical Thought.

#### **P** Universal Pantheist Society

Founded in 1975, the Universal Pantheist Society (UPS) is the world's oldest membership organization dedicated to the advancement of modern pantheism. The Society's stated purposes are

to unite Pantheists everywhere into a common fellowship, to undertake the conveyance of information about Pantheism to the interested public, to encourage discussion and communication among Pantheists, to provide mutual aid and defense of Pantheists everywhere, to stimulate a revision of social attitudes away from anthropocentrism and toward reverence for the Earth and a vision of Nature as the ultimate context for human existence, and to take appropriate action toward the protection and restoration of the Earth.

The Society's name underscores its "universal" outlook, not tied to any single view of pantheism, but rather recognizing a diversity of viewpoints within it. UPS accepts and