

“SUSTAINABILITY & SPIRITUALITY”: A REPORT WITH PERSONAL REFLECTIONS ON A 2017 GLOBAL CONFERENCE HELD IN ROME AND ASSISI, ITALY

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From June 27 to July 4, 2017, approximately 60 persons from Africa, the Americas, Asia/Pacific, and Europe gathered in Italy—first in Rome and then in Assisi—for a global conference to dialogue on the theme “Spirituality & Sustainability.”

With public inspiration from Pope Francis’s prophetic encyclical letter on ecology, *Laudato Si’ - On Care for Our Common Home*, the Conference had three stated goals:

- *Goal 1 – Visionary Centers & Movements – to network centers and movements seeking transformative global change based on spirituality and sustainability;*
- *Goal 2 - Visionary Recommendations for Future – to identify key recommendations for transformative global change based on spirituality and sustainability;*
- *Goal 3 – Visionary Young Ecological Leaders – to support young ecological leaders seeking transformative global change based on spirituality and sustainability.*

The official Conference Brochure described the event as follows:

This Conference will bring together visionary people from a range of ecological-spiritual perspectives, centers, and movements. Participants will dialogue about transformative global change based on spirituality and sustainability. They will also identify key recommendations for creating a spiritual and sustainable global future.

*The Conference will draw inspiration from eight previous Assisi conferences in the 1990s featuring Thomas Berry. It will also draw inspiration from St. Francis and St. Clare, from the papal encyclical on ecology *Laudato Si’*, from the Earth Charter, and from the work of other leaders in spirituality and sustainability.*

The Conference will focus on worldviews (our guiding stories) grounded in ecological spiritualities, on transformative paths for education, policies, movements, lifestyles, and communities, on current expressions of ecological spirituality and their indigenous roots, and on the great transition toward ecological civilizations with new paradigms of science, economics, and law.

The Conference will explore strategies to deepen and implement the United Nations new development agenda, and to protect and nurture sacred places. Finally, the Conference will dialogue on how we can work together on the way forward toward a just, sustainable and peaceful future that will support human development for all in a flourishing Earth community.

CONFERENCE ORGANIZERS

Two academic centers served as co-conveners for the conference: (1) Saint Thomas University Center for Ethics, directed by the University's Emeritus Philosophy Professor Arthur Kane; and (2) Union Theological Seminary Center for Earth Ethics, directed by ecological leader Dr. Karenna Gore.

The key organizing figure within the Conference's Executive Committee was Dr. Elisabetta Ferrero, who is a native of Italy, teacher of Philosophy at St. Thomas University, Professor of Humanities there, and Senior Scholar at the University's Center for Ethics. Also central to organizing the conference was Dr. Rick Clugston, Program Director of Sustainability & Global Affairs at the Center for Earth Ethics.

Other members of the Conference's Executive Committee were: Prof. Art Kane, again Director of the St. Thomas University Center for Ethics; Msgr. Terrence Hogan, Dean of St. Thomas University School of Theology and University Vice-President for Mission; and myself, Emeritus Professor of Philosophy & Religion at St. Thomas University and Senior Scholar at its Center for Ethics.

In addition, the Conference had multiple co-sponsors:

- Center for Environmental & Sustainability Education at Florida Gulf Coast University, Fort Myers, Florida;
- Earth Charter International, San José, Costa Rica;
- Forum on Religion & Ecology at Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut;
- Franciscan Action Network, Washington, DC;
- Geoversiv Foundation, Minneapolis, Minnesota;
- Glenmary Home Missioners, Cincinnati, Ohio;
- Institute of Noetic Sciences, Petaluma, California;
- Pax Romana / Catholic Movement for Intellectual & Cultural Affairs USA, Washington, DC;
- Saint Thomas University, Miami Gardens, Florida;
- Sukyo Mahikari Europe, Luxembourg;
- Thomas Berry Forum for Ecological Dialogue at Iona College, New Rochelle, New York;
- Tommy E. Short Charitable Foundation, San Diego, California.

Additional supporters included: Convergence Academy of 1God.com & the Interspiritual Network, Melbourne, Australia; Forum 21 Institute, New York City; and Thomas Berry Foundation, Woodbridge, Connecticut.

EIGHT EARLIER CONFERENCES

The conference was designed as a reflective follow-up to *eight earlier conferences* on the same theme of "Sustainability & Spirituality," which Dr. Ferrero and Dr. Clugston had organized during the 1990s in Assisi (home of thirteenth-century Catholic patron saint of ecology Saint Francis of Assisi).

Those conferences had focused on the pioneering ecological vision of the late Thomas Berry and on the visionary international ecological project known as the Earth Charter. Thomas Berry – Catholic priest, scholar of Asian religions, and cultural historian, as well as primary protégé of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin – had served as core resource person for those conferences. Also, during those times the

Earth Charter was being advanced with hope that the United Nations would embrace it as a soft-law ecological sequel to the UN's 1948 Universal Declaration on Human Rights – a hope that sadly failed to materialize.

In 2015, Dr. Ferrero devoted her university sabbatical to soliciting from participants in those earlier eight Assisi conferences written essays on the significance of Thomas Berry's work. She then edited those essays for a rich volume titled *Thomas Berry in Italy (Pacem in Terris Press, 2016)*. After publication of that book, she was inspired to invite participants from those earlier eight Assisi conferences, as well as other interested persons, to gather once again in Italy.

Many of the past conference participants were unable to attend the 2017 conference, though a few key individuals did attend. Yet many other talented and visionary people applied to participate. Unfortunately, due to lack of additional lodging space in Rome and Assisi, the Executive Committee soon had to limit the number accepted.

The 2017 gathering proved richer in diversity and perspectives than the earlier Assisi conferences. Participants came from Christian spiritual traditions (Greek Orthodox, Protestant, Roman Catholic, and Russian Orthodox), Buddhist and Vedic spiritual traditions, and American and Japanese indigenous spiritual traditions, plus from the recently formed Interspirituality movement.

Also, a few eco-spiritual individuals participating did not identify with any particular religion. Further, and as noted, the conference gathered participants from across planet Earth – from Africa, the Americas, the vast Asia-Pacific Region, and Europe.

EVENTS IN ROME

The program began in Rome with a focus on the Vatican. The first intellectual event was a presentation and dialogue on Pope Francis' encyclical *Laudato Si'*. A panel made up of experts from the conference provided insightful perspectives on that ground-breaking document.

Cardinal Peter Turkson, a native of Ghana and top Vatican official in charge of preparing *Laudato Si'*, had been invited to make a formal presentation on the encyclical. Shortly before our Conference, however, Pope Francis named five new Catholic cardinals who were to be installed in the Vatican's St. Peter's Basilica during the same time as our visit to Rome. So Cardinal Turkson became no longer available to join our gathering. In addition, at the same time as our visit, all the new Catholic archbishops from across the planet were being invested with what is called the "*Pallium*," which is a special garment once used by classical Greek teachers of philosophy. It turned out to be a very busy and crowded time for anyone visiting the Vatican.

The Rome portion of the Conference also included a panel and dialogue on "The Vision of Thomas Berry plus Saints Francis and Clare." Again, experts from Conference participants served as panelists. Francis and Claire were, of course, the respective medieval founders of the male and female branches of the Franciscan mendicant movement. In regard to Thomas Berry, panelists reflected on his articulation of the cosmic "New Story" or "New Cosmology," emerging from new scientific information about the Universe and from new philosophical interpretations of that information, as well as on Thomas Berry's mystical "Earth Spirituality."

Further highlights of our time in Rome included a special guided tour of the Vatican Museum, special high-level seating for the weekly papal audience, wonderful dinners of traditional cuisine at folkloric Roman restaurants, a night bus tour of the city of Rome, and a moving visit to the Catacomb of San Calisto (named after an early martyred Catholic pope).

The visit to the humble Catacomb, which contains the burial chambers of so many early church Christian martyrs, provided a reflective spiritual contrast to the triumphal Vatican, which long with its contemporary relevance also still carries the Western architectural and institutional legacy of what has been called “Constantinian Christianity.”

EVENTS IN ASSISI

In Assisi, Conference participants had lovely lodging and wonderful meals at the small family-owned Hotel Posta, which is just steps away from Assisi’s delightful main piazza. Those who were fortunate enough to be placed on the west side of the building found their rooms opening onto a vast and meditative view of the green Umbrian plains – the same view that Francis and Clare and would have seen seven centuries ago.

A special treat for the participant’s arrival in Assisi was a re-enactment of the medieval “flag-throwing” ceremony, in which a team of perhaps a dozen young male flag-throwers in bright medieval costumes provided for over thirty minutes a vibrant performance of motion and color.

For Conference events in Assisi, participants gathered in the city’s *Sala de la Conciliazione*, which in medieval times had been the gathering place for governance of Assisi’s mercantile city-state. Draped with medieval flags and graced with Umbrian breezes flowing through its enormous windows, the *Sala* lent majesty to our humble gathering. In the *Sala*, the young and dynamic major of Assisi, Stafania Proietti – trained as an environmental engineer and consultant for ecology to the Catholic bishops’ conference of Italy–welcomed us to her still medieval and still ecological city.

During our time in Assisi, we also watched the video *Journey of the Universe*, produced by Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim. It featured Brian Swimme, Thomas Berry’s close collaborator who had taught in several of the earlier Assisi conferences on Sustainability & Spirituality. Then, over four days, we engaged in dialogue with panels on the following themes:

1. *Current Expressions of Ecological Spirituality & their Indigenous Roots*
2. *Great Transition: Earth Charter, Ecological Civilization, United Nations Development Agenda, New Paradigms of Science, Economics, & Law*
3. *Transformative Paths: Education, Policy Advocacy, Movement Building, Life-styles, & Sustainable Communities*

We also had a tour of Assisi, hikes in the surrounding hills, visits to the forest cave where St. Francis had lived, a charming concert of medieval music and dance, an evening of wines and cheeses from the Umbrian bioregion, a visit to the artisan center of Deruta, and a delightful farewell dinner. Unofficially, the Conference had been intended in part as a *grand finale* to our celebration of the memory of Thomas Berry in Italy and to the eight Assisi conferences on “Sustainability & Spirituality” held during the 1990s.

But, unexpectedly, at the Conference's final wrap-up dialogue, a call arose to come back again to Assisi in the summer of 2018, in order to advance the important dialogues begin in 2017.

PERSONAL REFLECTIONS

As the final section of this essay on the 2017 Conference on "Sustainability & Spirituality," I would like to offer a series of disconnected personal reflections on additional challenges not discussed, or not fully discussed, during our gathering. I offer these disjointed reflection especially in light of our possible return to Assisi in 2018.

Spirituality as Foundational

Clearly, the unifying and exciting claim that pervaded our gathering was the sense that spirituality is foundational for addressing the global ecological crisis. That claim was heightened by the Conference's constant reference to Pope Francis' *Laudato Si'*. Yet the claim is not widely accepted across vast secular ranges of the contemporary ecology movement.

Most modern academics, national governments, and even the United Nations have all tended to be secularist in their approaches to the ecological crisis. In the case of the United Nations with its "Sustainable Development Goals," only recently has it begun to pay serious attention to its spiritually oriented NGOs.

Yet, while we were in Assisi, conference participant Miriam Vilela, Executive Director of Earth Charter International, shared copies of the second edition of a book by Professor Steven Rockefeller titled *Democratic Equality, Economic Equality, and the Earth Charter* (Earth Charter International, 2015). In his postscript to that second edition, Professor Rockefeller wrote:

At this critical moment in the history of life on Earth, what would heighten awareness and understanding of the need for universal moral values and the ethical vision in the Earth Charter? The support of the world's religions could have a profound impact in this regard, especially if the world's religious leaders were to join forces and work collaboratively in the effort.

Spiritual Diversity

Yet our human family's "world religions" hold *profoundly different approaches to spirituality*. So, we need to explore what this means for seeking a spiritually "united front" in service of ecological regeneration.

The East-Asian religions, developed especially in China and India, as well as recent Western appropriations of East Asian spiritual traditions, carry what may be called a *spatial non-historical approach to spirituality*.

This spatial non-historical approach is expressed especially through the central role of meditation practices, which seek to detach from the self of historical time. In these meditation practices, the

central goal is *transformation of subjective consciousness*, yet a transformation that also overflows into compassion for all creation.

The West-Asian Abrahamic religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, (which arose sequentially within the Arabian Peninsula), all carry by contrast a *temporal historical approach to spirituality*.

That is to say they all carry a prophetic historical mission, seen foundationally in Judaism's central historical event narrated in the Book of Exodus as the Divine liberation of Hebrew slaves from their oppressive exploitation by the Pharaonic Egyptian Empire. In these historical-prophetic religions, the central goal becomes *transformation of objective society*, yet one also involving personal transformation and eschatological fulfillment.

Of course, these are not absolute contrasts. East-Asian meditative religions have all played important historical roles, and West-Asian Abrahamic religions all have their own mystical-meditative traditions. The profound spatial and temporal contrast of these religions could prove globally complementary, rather than regionally divisive.

Indigenous spiritual traditions are even more foundational. The above "world religions," except for the later religions of Christianity and Islam (again, heirs of the ancient Abrahamic tradition), belong to what Karl Jaspers called the "Axial Age" of the First Millennium BC.

Far older than the "world religions" of the Axial Age and primordial for our human family, the indigenous spiritual traditions followed by our ancient ancestors are still followed by many today. These indigenous traditions may be seen as forming our human family's common, foundational, and yet still living spirituality, which is *spiritually grounded in Nature*.

They constitute our human family's deepest religious heritage of Cosmic Spirituality and Earth Spirituality. Further, these indigenous traditions, as still living, also remain still dynamic and still open to future unfolding, including in their relationship to "world religions."

Thomas Berry's Vision

Although the late Thomas Berry was a key inspirational figure behind the convening of the Conference, *the influence of his thought did not truly pervade the gathering*. The reason was that, this time, participants came from a wider range of spiritual traditions and experiences than had been the case for the earlier Assisi Conferences.

As a result, many participants knew little or nothing about his work, and the fine presentations by a few panelists could not be sufficient for assimilating the depth and breadth of his ecological vision. So, if there is a follow-up conference in 2018, an important question will be whether or not greater educational space needs to be given to the vision of Thomas Berry.

Urgency & Alternatives?

During our time in Assisi, one participant, Dr. Timothy van Meter of the Methodist Theological School in Ohio, criticized the gathering (in a friendly and humorous manner) for its *lack of urgency*. That friendly and humorous critique was clearly an expression of the Christian prophetic concern with the spiritual meaning of actual contemporary history.

Professor van Meter argued that the ecological crisis was acute, and that the time to address it was short. In particular, he implicitly stressed the need to create alternative and viable forms of social life. He shared, for example, how his academic community had already created an organic farm that was feeding his school.

This issue of urgency and alternatives also reminds us of other alternative ecological movements that were not reflected, or perhaps not sufficiently reflected, within our gathering. Pointing out their absence, however, need not be understood as a criticism (since beginnings are always partial), but rather as a challenge for the next round. Let us note here some of these other perspectives.

Modern Industrial Civilization?

Many of the conference participants came from organizations supporting the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals and also the Earth Charter which was created with the hope of influencing the UN.

Some ecological critics, however, see the UN's theme of "Sustainable Development" as an attempt to become ecological within the framework of existing corporate and governmental structures, which they judge to be incapable of overcoming the ecological crisis of Modern Industrial Civilization (either in capitalist or in socialist forms).

Among these alternative groups, there are two different tendencies.

Surviving the Breakdown?

In strategic response to their predicted ecological collapse of Modern Industrial Civilization, the first tendency is already attempting to create alternative spaces for survival (like the above-mentioned farm).

One example of this tendency is the *Transition Movement* which calls for educating "Transition Towns" to learn the skills needed to survive the ecological breakdown of Modern Industrial Civilization. Another example is the *Global Ecovillage Network*, which links alternative ecovillages around the world.

Ecological Civilization

Another tendency also sees Modern Industrial Civilization as unsustainable, but it proposes an historical transition to what I call "Postmodern Ecological Civilization," though it is more generally referred to in more simple terms as "Ecological Civilization."

A leading figure in the call for an Ecological Civilization has been the great disciple of Alfred North Whitehead, Methodist theologian John Cobb, who was co-founder with David Ray Griffin of the Center for Process Studies in Claremont, California. (Whitehead's thought is called "Process Philosophy.")

That work has been strengthened globally by Herman Greene, a Director of the "think-and-action tank" *Toward Ecological Civilization*," and founder of the International Process Network as well as the Center for Ecozoic Studies.

Surprising to some perhaps, the Government of China has officially endorsed the call for transition to an Ecological Civilization. Further, there are now twenty-seven Chinese universities hosting philosophical centers for Whiteheadian Process Studies, including in relation to Ecological Civilization. To a great degree, that development is due to John Cobb's pioneering work.

Also, my recent book, *Postmodern Ecological Spirituality* (Pacem in Terris Press, 2017) has called for a Catholic-Christian new lay monastic movement, centered in ecovillages attempting to assist the ecological regeneration of their surrounding rural communities, and planting seeds for a Postmodern Ecological Civilization.

The Anthropocene

Recently, I finished reading four major books about what has been named the "Anthropocene" (from the Greek word *anthropos*, meaning "human"). These books argue the claim that, due to the vast scale of current ecological devastation inflicted on planet Earth, we have now entered a *new and devastating geological period of Earth history*.

That scientific claim (still being debated) argues that we have come to the "end of the Holocene," which was the period of Earth history that began approximately 11,700 years ago with the invention of human agriculture.

In this argument, both the Holocene and the Anthropocene constitute the most recent two "epochs" within the far longer "Cenozoic Era." ("Epochs" in Earth Science run thousands of years, while the framing "eras" run millions of years.) The Cenozoic is approximately 66 million years old, and is linked to extinction of the dinosaurs (due to the crash of a meteorite or asteroid into our planet).

Interestingly, Thomas Berry – well before the current Anthropocene debate – proposed an even more radical claim. He argued that the current ecological devastation of our home planet constituted not a new "epoch" within the Cenozoic, but rather end of the Cenozoic Era itself. In turn, he called for creation of new "era" in Earth history, which he named the "Ecozoic Era."

Neo-Catastrophism

Accompanying the argument that Anthropocene has already begun, there is also being proposed a deeply pessimistic scientific-historical conceptual framework for the Earth Sciences' understanding of the Anthropocene. That framework is called "Neo-catastrophism."

In this even more pessimistic framework, proponents argue not simply that the current ecological crisis constitutes the end of Modern Industrial Civilization. More radically, they argue, it may cause the collapse of every human civilization. Thus, they argue, it may cause the end of civilization itself, with catastrophic consequences for our human species.

There is also a debate within proponents of the Anthropocene analysis about whether the current global ecological breakdown is simply a tragedy of human evolution, or whether it is the specific result of the social system ruthlessly pursued by modern elites and known as Capitalism.

Ecomodernist Visions

Finally, we have several schools that seek not to move beyond Modern Industrial Civilization, but rather to further expand it.

One strain among these eco-modernist visions seeks to undertake vast global projects of “*geoengineering*,” which they see as taking human control of the entire Earth system. Critics argue, however, that such projects are the destructive fruit of late modern bourgeois hubris, and that such projects will dramatically compound the ecological crisis. But those criticisms do not worry eco-modernists. They believe that modern human science and technology need to *replace Nature*. Then there are ecomodernist schools of thought which focus on our human species. They seek to replace humans with advanced computerized and roboticized technologies into which human consciousness may be “downloaded.” Thus, we hear of schools of thought called “Post-humanism” and “Transhumanism.”

Lest these eco-modernist tendencies seem marginal, it is interesting to note that in 2012 the leading eco-modernist writer, Ray Kurzweil, was hired by Google to work on visionary projects.

Of course, it would have been impossible to address all these topics within the short number of days dedicated to the 2017 Rome-Assisi Conference on Spirituality & Sustainability. But, if we gather again in 2018, perhaps some items from this list of topics may find their way onto our agenda.