

Teilhard's Vision and the Earth Charter

Steven C Rockefeller

It was in the early 1960s as a divinity student in the classroom of the Christian theologian Daniel Day Williams at Union Theological Seminary in New York that I first encountered the work of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. Williams' theology drew heavily on the work of a number of evolutionary thinkers and process philosophers, especially Alfred North Whitehead. Like Whitehead, Teilhard did his most creative work in evolutionary philosophy and theology during the 1920s and 1930s. This was a period that produced a number of highly creative evolutionary philosophers including Henri Bergson in France, Samuel Alexander in England, and John Dewey in the United States. They were all deeply influenced by science and the experimental method of knowledge, and they all sought in diverse ways—especially Teilhard—to harmonize science, philosophy, and religion in an effort to heal a major split in the modern psyche.

This essay was initially prepared for a panel on “The Spirit of the Earth: Global Ethics and a Sustainable Future” at the Teilhard 2005 conference at the United Nations, April 8, 2005. It will focus on the Earth Charter as an articulation of the emerging new global ethics and as a contribution to what Teilhard called “the formation of a veritable spirit of the earth.”¹

Teilhard views the evolution of life on Earth as continuous with the great evolutionary process that is the universe. Convinced that all evolution is an ascent toward consciousness, he regards the emergence of mind in humanity as a great step forward in the evolutionary process. Teilhard asserts that “the awakening of thought” and its development “affects life itself in its organic totality and consequently it marks a transformation affecting the state of the entire planet.” In and through the process he labeled planetization, or what we today call globalization, the cultures and civilizations created by mind form above the biosphere a new layer that encircles the planet. Employing the Greek word for “mind”—*nous*, Teilhard calls this new “thinking envelope” the noosphere. With the development of the mind and noosphere, Teilhard argues that Earth becomes “the thinking earth,” evolution becomes conscious of itself, and “the spirit of the earth” begins to take form.²

To understand fully Teilhard's meaning it is important to recognize that