

# Unity in Diversity

## A Conceptual Framework for a Global Ethic of Environmental Sustainability\*

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### **Abstract**

*In response to the growing need for spiritual solutions to environmental problems throughout the world, many scholars are investigating and promoting various metaphysical and philosophical approaches. The result is the burgeoning field of environmental ethics. By setting the discussion in the context of the Bahá'í writings related to nature, this article contributes to environmental ethics by highlighting common ground among several perspectives and discussing six principles that unite them. The author proposes "unity in diversity" as a conceptual framework for devising a global ethic of environmental sustainability.*

### **Résumé**

*Afin de répondre au besoin grandissant de trouver des solutions spirituelles aux problèmes environnementaux à travers le monde, bien des savants se penchent sur diverses approches philosophiques et métaphysiques. De là naît le domaine de l'éthique environnementale. En situant la discussion dans le contexte des Écrits bahá'ís sur la nature, le présent article contribue au domaine de l'éthique environnementale en faisant ressortir les points communs entre diverses perspectives et en abordant six principes spirituels qui les unissent. L'auteure propose «l'unité dans la diversité» comme cadre de base pour l'établissement d'une éthique visant la survie à long terme de l'environnement à l'échelle mondiale.*

### **Resumen**

*Como respuesta a la creciente necesidad de soluciones espirituales a los problemas medioambientales a lo largo del mundo, muchos eruditos investigan y promueven varias soluciones metafísicas y filosóficas. El resultado es el campo de ética ambiental en crecimiento. Al poner el tono de la discusión en el contexto de los escritos bahá'ís relacionados con la naturaleza, este artículo contribuye a la ética ambiental haciendo relucir la común entre las varias perspectivas y discutiendo seis principios que las unen. La autora propone la "unidad en diversidad" como marco de referencia conceptual para una ética global del medio ambiente sustentable.*

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\* This article is drawn from the author's M.A. thesis and won the Association's Essay Contest in the University Category.

This article proposes the concept of unity in diversity as a means of establishing a spiritual and philosophical framework for the integration of several environmental perspectives. Ethical and spiritual principles that incorporate the inherent organic interdependence of all life provide the central foundation of unity in this discussion. Essentially, the unity occurs at the global level in principles that apply to all human beings regardless of their ethnicity, religion, age, sex, geographic location, economic or social circumstances, or any other factors that are potential sources of conflict in the contemporary world. These principles apply to human beings simply because they are human and, therefore, have a unique responsibility and particular abilities that allow them to transcend some of the natural limitations by which the rest of creation is constrained. The diversity is expressed at the local or individual levels in various systems and patterns of behavior (e.g., agricultural practices that reflect an understanding of the natural balance in the local ecosystem; settlement patterns that minimize alteration of the natural landscape to accommodate human inhabitants; production and consumption practices that reflect the capacity of the natural environment and the ability of its inhabitants to sustain such habits). The reflections offered in this article impel us to return to our basic roots, essentially, focussing our attention on what makes us human and how that identity shapes our interactions with the rest of creation.

The concept of unity in diversity has the potential for profound and far-reaching applications. For the purposes of this article, it is applied to the spiritual and ethical principles underlying various environmental philosophies, offering an articulation of the concept of sustainable development presented in the second World Conservation Strategy Project, *Caring for the Earth*. Development is sustainable when it allows all human beings to meet their basic material and spiritual needs within the carrying capacity of the planet's ecosystems.<sup>1</sup> This refinement of the Brundtland Commission's definition in *Our Common Future* makes more explicit the notion of interdependence of all creatures on the planet—human and non-human—and reflects the balance

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1. By material needs, I mean anything required to sustain the physical well-being of a human being, e.g., protection from adverse weather conditions in the form of clothing and shelter, and adequate nourishment to ensure optimum health. Spiritual needs refer to aspects of a person's life that are nonphysical, such as just treatment by societal institutions and other individuals, adequate time and space for prayer and meditation, and opportunities for education and personal growth. These examples do not represent a complete list of such needs. Carrying capacity is a central principle in ecology. It refers to the natural factors inherent in an ecosystem that limit excessive population growth by the species living in that region. This concept is one of the underlying ecological principles upon which some of the principles discussed below are based.

inherent in natural systems. The challenge for scientists is to discover what that carrying capacity is by applying wisdom and technological expertise in their research. The added challenge for all of humanity is to ensure that our daily practices, our social, political, and economic systems, and all other expressions of human culture do not interfere with Earth's provision of sustenance for its inhabitants.<sup>2</sup> By analyzing the normative factors underlying philosophical and theoretical approaches to human interaction with the natural environment, significant common ground can be discerned among several diverse approaches to offer evidence that unity is possible.

The Bahá'í writings represent a vast source of inspiration and wisdom for those attempting to deal constructively with the malaise that currently grips humankind in our interactions with the rest of creation. The following section offers one synthesis of those writings, demonstrating how the Bahá'í concept of nature reconciles historical divisions in Western civilization and offers a scientifically sound and spiritually compelling vision for humanity's ideal role in the universe.

### **A Bahá'í Understanding of Nature *Order, Hierarchy, and Human Transcendence***

... whatever I behold I readily discover that it maketh Thee [God] known unto me, and it remindeth me of Thy signs, and of Thy tokens, and of Thy testimonies. By Thy glory! Every time I lift up mine eyes unto Thy heaven, I call to mind Thy highness and Thy loftiness, and Thine incomparable glory and greatness; and every time I turn my gaze to Thine earth, I am made to recognize the evidences of Thy power and the tokens of Thy bounty. And when I behold the sea, I find that it speaketh to me of Thy majesty, and of the potency of Thy might, and of Thy sovereignty and Thy grandeur. And at whatever time I contemplate the mountains, I am led to discover the ensigns of Thy victory and the standards of Thine omnipotence.

—Bahá'u'lláh

This expression of divine worship reveals one of the fundamental concepts in the Bahá'í Faith. For Bahá'ís, the existence of the universe and the diversity and majesty of nature, especially human beings, are proof of the existence of an omnipotent Creator who is the source of all that has ever been and will ever be. Accepting evolution as a fundamental process in the universe, the Bahá'í perspective distinguishes between the potential inherent in all life forms that is

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2. My use of a more personified way of referring to Earth reflects a concern that our apparent familiarity with our planet lessens our respect for it. We do not refer to Mars or Venus as "the mars" or "the venus." Perhaps greater awareness of our use of language, especially in terms of our relationship with the rest of creation might contribute to a change in consciousness. See Dowd, " 'Earth' or 'the earth' ."

determined by the laws of creation and the process by which that potential is manifested (Dahl, *Unless and Until* 6). Each species, including human beings, has always possessed the potential to reach its current form, evolving, adapting, and becoming more complex as it reflected changes in the environment as part of a natural process that began millions of years ago. Therefore, human beings have always been human and never anything but human. In the following passage, 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains how the Bahá'í view is distinguished from and reconciles the conflict between evolution and creation:

. . . man, in the beginning of his existence and in the womb of the earth, like the embryo in the womb of the mother, gradually grew and developed, and passed from one form to another, from one shape to another, until he appeared with this beauty and perfection, this force and this power. . . . There is no doubt that the human embryo did not at once appear in this form. . . . Gradually it passed through various conditions and different shapes, until it attained this form and beauty. . . .

. . . from the beginning of man's existence he is a distinct species. . . . [E]ven when in the womb of the mother and . . . entirely different from his present form and figure, he is the embryo of the superior species, and not of the animal; his species and essence undergo no change. (*Some Answered Questions* 183–84)

The distinctions between humans and animals are among those manifested throughout all the “kingdoms of existence” or creation. These “kingdoms” are classified as mineral, vegetable, animal, and human. Bahá'ís distinguish between the material and spiritual planes of existence, acknowledging the elemental connections that link everything on the material plane, that is, the world of physical creation, and emphasizing how the different “kingdoms” are distinguished from each other:

When we look upon the world of existence, we realize that all material things have a common bond; and yet, on the other hand, there are certain points of distinction between them. For instance, all earthly objects have common bodily ties. The minerals, vegetables and animals have elemental bodies in common with each other. Likewise, they have place in the order of creation. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation* 189)

The mineral kingdom is possessed of a certain virtue which we term cohesion. The vegetable kingdom possesses cohesive properties plus the power of growth, or augmentative power. The animal kingdom is possessed of the virtues of the mineral and vegetable plus the powers of the senses. But the animal, although gifted with sensibilities, is . . . absolutely out of touch with the world of consciousness and spirit. The animal possesses no powers by which it can make discoveries which lie beyond the realm of the senses. It has no power of intellectual origination. . . . It understands only phenomena which come within the range of its senses and instinct. It cannot abstractly reason out anything. The animal cannot conceive of the earth being spherical or revolving upon its axis. It cannot apprehend that the little stars in the heavens are tremendous worlds vastly greater than the earth. . . . Therefore, these

powers are peculiar to man, and it is made evident that in the human kingdom there is a reality of which the animal is lacking. What is that reality? It is the spirit of man. By it man is distinguished above all the other phenomenal kingdoms. Although he possesses all the virtues of the lower kingdoms, he is further endowed with the spiritual faculty, the heavenly gift of consciousness. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation* 258; see also 29, 69, 240–41, 268–69)

This model of creation, although hierarchical, does not endorse supremacy or dominance by species in higher levels over those in lower ones. The Creator is manifest throughout all creation, and therefore all creatures are to be treated with reverence and respect. In fact, human beings alone, of all creatures, possess the capacity to do so. This is one area where Bahá'í cosmology differs subtly from animist views. For example, whereas in some expressions of native spirituality animals are perceived as consciously embodying a divine spirit, in the Bahá'í view there are explicit limits to the extent to which nonhuman beings are conscious of spiritual or divine qualities:

The animal is . . . a captive of the world of nature and not in touch with that which lies within and beyond nature; it is . . . unconscious of the world of God and incapable of deviating from the law of nature. It is different with man. Man . . . is capable of discovering the mysteries of the universe. All the industries, inventions and facilities surrounding our daily life were at one time hidden secrets of nature, but the reality of man penetrated them and made them subject to his purposes. According to nature's laws they should have remained latent and hidden; but man, having transcended those laws, discovered these mysteries and brought them out of the plane of the invisible into the realm of the known and visible. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation* 240–41)

It is precisely because of the human capacity to transcend the laws of nature that morality must be a fundamental aspect of human interactions with the rest of creation.<sup>3</sup> Without ethical limits or inhibitions on the behavior of human beings throughout history, our species would have been even more destructive. Divine educators have been necessary throughout human history to offer guidance regarding those ethical limits, guidance that has remained essentially unchanged since the dawn of human existence, differing only in the specific applications of certain social teachings appropriate for the time period and geographical region in which the guidance was revealed. The geographical spread of divine revelation beyond family and tribal groups to include the entire

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3. Bahá'ís are not alone in distinguishing humanity from the rest of nature. Biologist René Dubos has written: "Animals of whatever kind are specialized. They live only in the ecological surroundings to which they've adapted. But for the past ten thousand years, and perhaps before that, we have been transforming the land in order to adapt it to ourselves. And that, I believe, constitutes a fundamental difference setting the human race apart from all other species" (*World* 23).

planet has occurred as a result of the cumulative influence of each of the world's major religions. Although following in the tradition of the earlier incarnations of divine guidance as expressed in the concept of progressive revelation, the global mandate of the Bahá'í Faith requires that the principles regarding human activity, especially those related to how the human species consciously develops and applies the unique qualities with which it is endowed, be relevant to healing the ills currently plaguing the world as a whole. This monumental task is unprecedented in the history of human existence and represents the dawn of a new era in human civilization.

### ***Balance and Harmony in Spiritual and Material Development***

The unique status of human beings in the material world is due to the endowment of those specific qualities that enable us to transcend natural laws. Those abilities also entail a unique obligation, that is, the proper care, preservation, and use of the rest of nature. Without balanced development of both the spiritual and material aspects of human existence, "severe calamities and violent afflictions" occur. History and the current world situation offer overwhelming empirical evidence that material accomplishments have surpassed the development and manifestation of spiritual qualities to the detriment of human and nonhuman creation. All this material advancement could be for naught if the imbalance is not rectified:

. . . until material achievements, physical accomplishments and human virtues are reinforced by spiritual perfections, luminous qualities and characteristics of mercy, no fruit or result shall issue therefrom, nor will the happiness of the world of humanity . . . be attained. For although, on the one hand, material achievements and the development of the physical world produce prosperity, . . . on the other hand dangers, severe calamities and violent afflictions are imminent. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections* 283-84)

Despite the achievements of human civilization, one must not be blind to the "discovery of destructive and infernal machines, to the development of forces of demolition and the invention of fiery implements, which uproot the tree of life" and reveal that "civilization is conjoined with barbarism. Progress and barbarism go hand in hand, unless material civilization be confirmed by Divine Guidance, . . . and be reinforced by spiritual conduct . . ." ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections* 284). Thus, achievements of science and technology are positive and, indeed, necessary elements in human development as long as they occur in an atmosphere that is balanced with a spiritual understanding of the broader context in which those achievements occur.

The Bahá'í writings stipulate that nature, as a manifestation of divine qualities, is to be treated with respect and the elements of nature are to be viewed as contributing to human progress and development. In fact, they achieve their

ultimate potential in service to humanity. Although each “kingdom of existence” is perfect in its form and essence as part of God’s creation, it achieves its greatest “honor” and “prosperity” in its service to humanity, thereby bringing it closer to its Creator. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá elaborates on this concept:

The excellency, the adornment and the perfection of the earth is to be verdant and fertile through the bounty of the clouds of springtime. Plants grow; flowers and fragrant herbs spring up; fruit-bearing trees become full of blossoms and bring forth fresh and new fruit. . . . This is the prosperity of the mineral world.

The height of exaltation and the perfection of the vegetable world is that a tree should grow on the bank of a stream of fresh water, that a gentle breeze should blow on it, that the warmth of the sun should shine on it, that a gardener should attend to its cultivation, and that day by day it should develop and yield fruit. But its real prosperity is to progress into the animal and human world, and replace that which has been exhausted in the bodies of animals and men.

The exaltation of the animal world is to possess perfect members, organs and powers, and to have all its needs supplied. This is its chief glory, its honor and exaltation. . . .

But real prosperity for the animal consists in passing from the animal world to the human world, like the microscopic beings that, through the water and air, enter into man and are assimilated, and replace that which has been consumed in his body. (*Some Answered Questions* 78–79)<sup>4</sup>

In conjunction with the service that nonhuman creation provides through its assimilation into the human being, humans play an active role in cultivating the rest of creation both as an expression of worship of the Creator and as a means of providing sustenance and shelter for themselves.<sup>5</sup> The existence of human beings on the planet adds a dimension to creation that would otherwise not exist: the conscious and purposeful study of and care for the land and all its inhabitants. When such endeavors are practiced in a spirit of appreciation for the bounties provided by the Creator and with knowledge of the carrying capacity of that region, the various species living there have an opportunity to achieve the “exaltation” described above by having their fertility and productivity increased through the wise and skillful application of scientific knowledge.

The Bahá’í view of the spiritual essence of existence is reflected in various qualities that are expressed in our attitude towards nature, including appreciation, moderation, kindness, compassion, and humility. The first four are implicit in the

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4. Despite the omnivorous diet implied by this paragraph, there are several indications in the Bahá’í writings that consumption of meat is not a prerequisite to health. Bahá’í teachings not only impel human beings to be kind to animals but also warn against hunting to excess (*Conservation* 10–11).

5. The circle is completed with the physical death and eventual decomposition of the human body, the final material gift of each individual to Earth.

foregoing. Humility tempers overcultivation and exploitation of nature by reminding human beings of our role and status in creation:

Every man of discernment, while walking upon the earth, feeleth indeed abashed, inasmuch as he is fully aware that the thing which is the source of his prosperity, his wealth, his might, his exaltation, his advancement and power is, as ordained by God, the very earth which is trodden beneath the feet of all men. There can be no doubt that whoever is cognizant of this truth, is cleansed and sanctified from all pride, arrogance, and vainglory. . . . (Bahá'u'lláh, quoted in *Conservation* 9)<sup>6</sup>

The Bahá'í writings are direct in their repeated reinforcement of the cultivation within each human being of those qualities that are most conducive to the peaceful and sustainable advancement of civilization. In the following passage, Bahá'u'lláh gives a voice to Earth, which, unless human values, attitudes, priorities, and practices change, may surpass in its own "exaltation" that of the human species:

They who are the beloved of God, in whatever place they gather and whomsoever they may meet, must evince . . . such humility and submissiveness that every atom of the dust beneath their feet may attest the depth of their devotion. . . . They should conduct themselves in such manner that the earth upon which they tread may never be allowed to address to them such words as these: "I am to be preferred above you. For witness, how patient I am in bearing the burden which the husbandman layeth upon me. I am the instrument that continually imparteth unto all beings the blessings with which He Who is the Source of all grace hath entrusted me. Notwithstanding the honor conferred upon me, and the unnumbered evidences of my wealth—a wealth that supplieth the needs of all creation—behold the measure of my humility, witness with what absolute submissiveness I allow myself to be trodden beneath the feet of men. . . ." (*Gleanings* 7–8)

It appears that Earth is "losing patience" in "bearing the burden" that humanity has laid upon it. The "unnumbered evidences" of its wealth are being rapidly

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6. Compare with these words from Black Elk, a Sioux holy man: "Every step that we take upon You should be done in a sacred manner; each step should be as a prayer. Because You have made Your will known unto us, we will walk the path of life in holiness, bearing the love and knowledge of You in our hearts" (quoted in Hughes, *American Indian Ecology* 14). Jacob Bronowski also emphasizes that in a society which promotes independence of thought it is important to "cultivate habits of humility, . . . for without humility no one would give close attention to the opinions of others. Truth is not reached merely by the utterance of new ideas; it requires the study of those ideas. . . . Truth is not reached by momentary flashes of individual illumination, but by the careful consideration of many minds. This is why the society of scientists is a model of democracy. It honors the new ideas of the young and it also honors the old ideas even when they have been overthrown, because it recognizes that the old ideas were not necessarily foolish, but simply lay further back along the road to truth" (*Sense of the Future* 201).



depleted, and the submissiveness with which it has allowed itself to be “trodden beneath the feet of men” could soon be replaced by unimaginable catastrophes.

### ***Creating a Global Community***

In their attempt to assist in the process of preventing such a disaster, individual Bahá'ís and institutions such as the Bahá'í International Community (BIC) are actively involved at the local level in hundreds of development projects that include sustainable agriculture programs, tree planting initiatives, and irrigation schemes, and at the global level in conferences and other events devising policies and action plans to deal with environmental problems. In October, 1987, the Bahá'í Faith joined the World Wide Fund for Nature's Network on Conservation and Religion and released its “Declaration on Nature.” Through its Office of the Environment at the United Nations in New York, the BIC has been involved in other projects in an advisory role (e.g., the second World Conservation Strategy Project, published as *Caring for the Earth*). The BIC has also actively collaborated with other like-minded organizations, resulting in, among many activities, its involvement in the preparatory conferences for the Earth Summit in June, 1992, and its high profile not only at the Global Forum but also in the main sessions of the Summit itself.<sup>7</sup>

A recent release from the BIC is “World Citizenship: A Global Ethic for Sustainable Development,” which was submitted to the Commission on Sustainable Development. This statement offers “world citizenship” as a unifying term that encompasses “the constellation of principles, values, attitudes and behaviors that the peoples of the world must embrace if sustainable development is to be realized.” In this view, world citizenship

begins with an acceptance of the oneness of the human family and the interconnectedness of the nations of “the earth, our home.” While it encourages a sane and legitimate patriotism, it also insists upon a wider loyalty, a love of humanity as a whole. . . . World citizenship encompasses the principles of social and economic justice, both within and between nations; non-adversarial decision-making at all levels of society; equality of the sexes; racial, ethnic, national and religious harmony; and the willingness to sacrifice for the common good. (BIC, “World Citizenship”)

The document offers practical proposals for the implementation of world citizenship through education programs in schools all over the world. Referring to the opening words in the original UN Charter, the document draws attention to the concept's implicit and explicit inclusion in numerous United Nations documents and its application by diverse NGOs, social movements, entertainers and artists all over the world. “World Citizenship” also highlights the

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7. For more information on these and other such events, see *One Country*, the newsletter of the Bahá'í International Community.

importance of teaching the principle of unity in diversity as the “key” to building the strength and wealth of nations and the entire global community.

Coalitions of governmental and non-governmental organizations and events such as the Earth Summit represent progress in humanity’s effort to deal effectively and constructively with the problems with which it is faced in the closing decade of the twentieth century. In the words of one scholar:

The effort required to avert the environmental crisis is more significant than just a response to a temporary, though serious emergency. It may in fact push nations into precedent-setting measures for the creation of effective international institutions and legislation. It will be a painful process, but it will elevate society to a new level of global integration and cooperation, and will help reveal the true identity, nobility and beauty of the human race. (Dahl, *Unless and Until* 88)

### **Voices of Environmental Ethics**

Bahá'ís share many of the visions of activists and theorists involved in the environmental movement, whether these visions are applied through deep or social ecology, bioregionalism or ecological humanism, or by ecofeminists, natives, Christians, Jews, or promoters of other religious perspectives. The challenge for all these groups and the individuals comprising them is to find unity in their common goal—to heal our Earth and refocus human activity and policy on a more sustainable vision. This article assists in finding that unity by drawing attention to moral and spiritual principles shared by many environmental philosophies. Before moving on to a discussion of some of the principles underlying a global ethic of environmental sustainability, the points of unity among several approaches to environmental ethics will be highlighted. Figure 1 is a simplified version of the framework that appeared in an earlier work (Lalonde, “Geographic, Religious, and Philosophical Thought” 138). The following summary is necessarily cursory, highlighting in a very general way the main thrust of each movement. Some of the permutations demonstrated by diverse advocates of these perspectives are revealed in the works cited.

*Deep ecology* is a term coined by Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess in 1974. Naess contrasts deep ecology with more “shallow” contemporary approaches to resource management in terms of their perspectives on issues such as pollution, resource depletion, population growth, and cultural diversity. For Naess, the shallow perspectives reflect an objective to improve the well-being and affluence of people in so-called developed countries. Naess and his colleagues do not view deep ecology as an academic, philosophical theory but rather as a social movement that includes people who share similar attitudes and lifestyles primarily characterized by a spiritual (but not orthodox religious) approach to nature. The vision of deep ecology is grounded in an awareness of the inherent spirituality and interconnectedness of all life. The movement is an alternative to the symptom-oriented strategies

implemented in Western society to deal with environmental problems. Deep ecologists advocate a moderation in human excesses to recover harmony with nature. Similar ideas can be traced back to earlier voices in ecological perception such as Aldo Leopold, Henry David Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and John Muir.<sup>8</sup>

**Social ecology** shares with deep ecology a criticism of those same symptom-oriented approaches manifested by “reform” environmentalism and offers as well a critique of the systems and institutions that breed social injustice. In contrast to deep ecology, social ecology reintegrates the special role and status of human beings into the ecological equation; however, it resists explicit endorsement of a hierarchical order in nature. It also endorses the promotion of biological and ecological diversity. Of those environmental philosophies identified in this article, social ecology is the most secular.<sup>9</sup>

**Ecofeminism** reinforces social ecology’s more humanistic alternative to deep ecology but goes one step further by integrating a feminist critique into the analysis by linking men’s oppression of women with humanity’s oppression of nature. Advocates of ecofeminism share social ecology’s criticism of institutional hierarchies that tend to foster dominance and oppression. Ecofeminists are actively involved in a wide range of pragmatic programs and solutions to current social and environmental problems, working within the broader feminist movement by emphasizing the unity and diversity of women’s voices on a number of social as well as ecological issues.<sup>10</sup>

**Ecological humanism** presents a potential bridge between secular and more explicitly spiritual approaches by integrating humanism and ecology in the framework of an “evolution-centred” cosmology. Ecological humanism acknowledges and accepts the status of the human species in the natural hierarchy that is ignored or rejected by other environmental philosophies. Although similar to social ecology in this regard, ecological humanism is less political in its vision. The vision of ecological humanism is more normative and theoretical than prescriptive, offering a spiritual but not necessarily religious foundation for attitudes toward the nature of the universe and all of creation (Skolimowski, *Eco-Philosophy* and *Living Philosophy*).

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8. For more information on the deep ecology movement, see Devall and Sessions, *Deep Ecology*; Devall, *Simple in Means*; Naess, *Ecology*. For the writings of earlier thinkers, see, for example, Thoreau, *Walden* and Leopold, *Sand County*.

9. See Bookchin, *Remaking Society*; Clark, *Renewing*; and Bookchin and Foreman, *Defending*.

10. For contributions to the deep-ecology–ecofeminism debate, see Cheney, “Ecofeminism”; Zimmerman, “Feminism”; Fox, “Deep Ecology”; and Salleh, “Deeper” and “Ecofeminism/Deep Ecology.” For other ecofeminist writings, see Merchant, *Death of Nature*; Gray, *Green*; Warren, “Feminism”; Cuomo, “Unravelling”; and various anthologies.

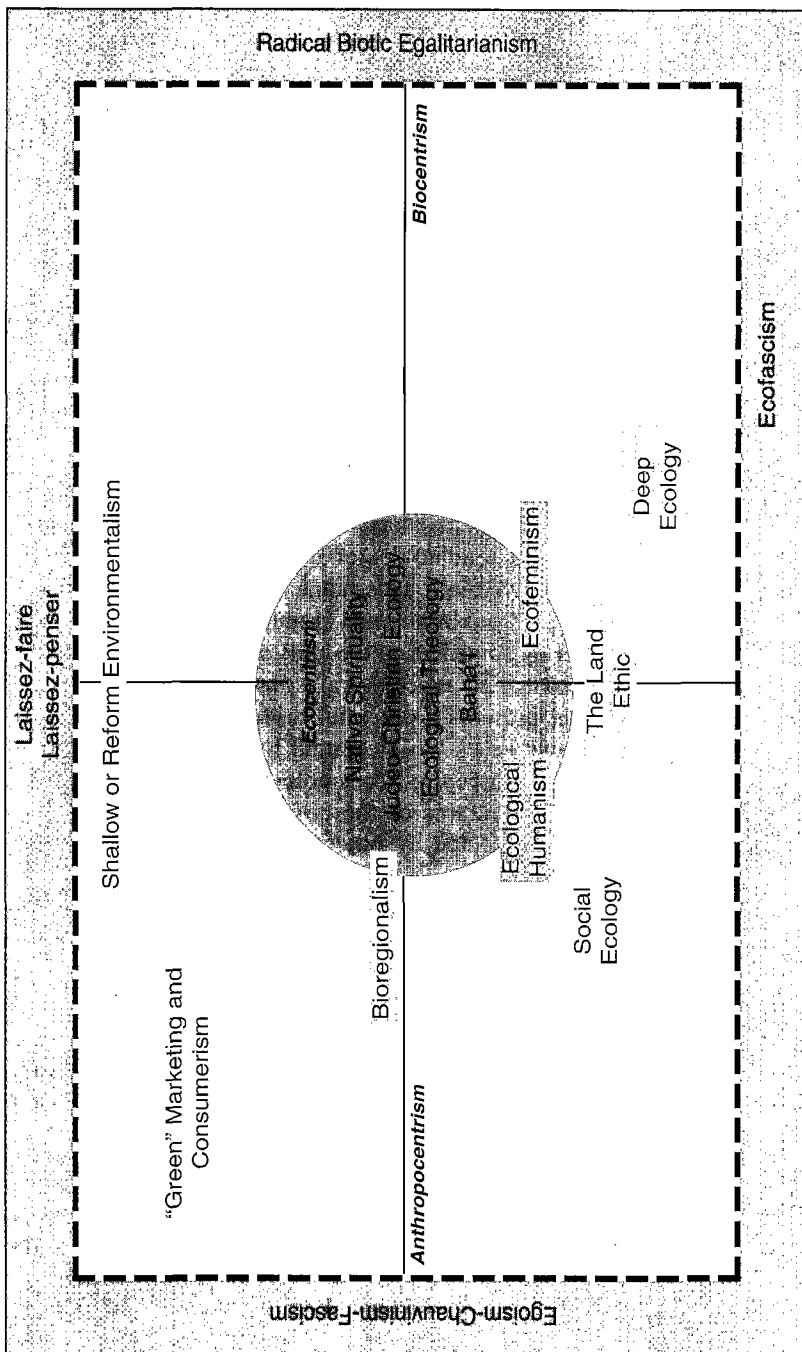


Figure 1. Map of Selected Environmental Philosophies

**Bioregionalism** (“living-in-place”) offers a geographically informed application of a “land ethic” that values natural resources in noneconomical ways. In its normative conception, it presents a framework for local or regional communities based on the ecosystemic properties of the natural environment, promoting a scale and style of human activity that reflects the capacity of the local resources to sustain such activity. As such, it advocates moderation, a sensitivity to balance, and an appreciation of the interdependence of all life forms.<sup>11</sup>

**North American Native** attitudes toward nature offer a spiritual foundation upon which to base an ethic of environmental sustainability. Their visions reflect a deep awareness of and sensitivity to manifestations of the divine throughout creation. Many native traditions have provided the inspiration for nonhierarchical visions of environmental ethics such as deep ecology, social ecology, and ecofeminism. Bioregionalism has found common ground with the native view in its emphasis on the importance if not the sacredness of place. Native spirituality reflects a sensitive understanding of the interdependence and balance inherent in nature that unites all living things. Most native traditions also advocate an understanding of Earth’s capacity so that human activity does not exceed the bounds of moderation, thus impeding the ability of the rest of creation to flourish.<sup>12</sup>

**Judeo-Christian theology**, as it is applied by some contemporary eco-theologians, shares with native spirituality an awareness of the spiritual connections between the Creator and the creation.<sup>13</sup> Each individual is inextricably part of the larger ecological community, and the community is manifest within each individual. This interconnectedness implies an understanding of the interdependence of each constituent element in creation in maintaining the integrity and sustainability of the whole. This vision shares common ground not only with native beliefs but also with deep ecology and

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11. See Sale, *Dwellers* for an overview of bioregionalism. and Alexander, “Bioregionalism” and Parsons, “On ‘Bioregionalism’” for cogent analyses of the movement.

12. It is crucial to emphasize the generalized image that is portrayed in this summary. Each aboriginal society has its own unique characteristics and culture: however, there are several common elements that are highlighted here. This summary is drawn primarily from Hughes, *American Indian Ecology*; with supplementary material provided by Tooker, *Native American Spirituality*.

13. Distinctions must be drawn between the traditional interpretation of Judeo-Christian scripture as it relates to nature and that which is summarized here. The traditional view is probably most thoroughly articulated in the debate that was launched in response to Lynn White, Jr.’s 1967 presentation to the American Academy of Science. In his paper, White cited Chapter 1 of Genesis as the foundation for the development of the contemporary Western attitude toward the environment. The ensuing debate revealed the complexity and potential pitfalls associated with simplistic interpretations of divine scripture. See White and Dubos in *Western Man*.

ecological humanism. The inclusiveness of the self-in-community concept shares some of the ecofeminist vision as well. Contemporary theologians also draw attention to inspirational figures from within the history of the Judeo-Christian tradition, such as Hildegard von Bingen, who manifested qualities now perceived as crucial in understanding and solving contemporary environmental problems. Ecotheologians present a religious vision which builds on the tradition that has shaped the development of Western culture, and they suggest alternative interpretations to those traditional Christian endorsements, such as "dominion" that have been destructive to ecological sustainability in the past.<sup>14</sup>

Although not a widely recognized "voice" in environmental ethics, the Bahá'í vision is certainly a valid contributor to the field. The Bahá'í emphasis on the spiritual principles underlying human interaction with the rest of creation offers a much needed perspective to an often contentious debate. As noted above, advocates within environmentalism all have a common goal; it is their methods and applications that often create divisions. By focussing on the moral and spiritual foundations of these approaches, common ground can be discerned. Several of the principles upon which an ethic of environmental sustainability might be based are drawn from those movements or theories that appear to offer the greatest potential for providing solutions to the environmental crisis. Concepts such as interdependence, interconnectedness, moderation, justice, and balance appear repeatedly in many frameworks for understanding our relationship with nature.

### **Spiritual and Moral Foundations of a Global Ethic for Environmental Sustainability**

What is missing from too many worldviews today . . . is the connectedness of human beings with the land from which all of us—today and tomorrow—*must* find our sustenance. Each culture must retrieve within its vision what many primitive peoples understood about their relations with the soil, air and water of Earth. . . .

Without deep appreciation of the beauty of the land that nourishes us, we cannot long survive. Yet such appreciation is not limited to the visions of primitive societies; it exists in the sacred texts of every major religion. We need but search our own heritage to recapture a sense of ecological harmony.

—Mary Clark

The ground rules of sustainability, development and equity rest on the universal need for life, progress and justice, and apply to all societies individually as well as collectively. A world society that is sustainable, developing and equitable does not

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14. See especially the work of process theologian John B. Cobb, Jr. in joint publications with Charles Birch (*Liberation of Life*) and Herman Daly (*Common Good*), and in the anthologies edited by David Griffin (*Reenchantment of Science and Spirituality and Science*).

spend the resource capital of future generations, does not suppress motivation for social and economic growth, and does not violate the sense of justice of the vast majority of its people. But it can be a highly diverse society in which different cultures, ideologies, values and ideals flourish side by side, and to mutual benefit.

—Ervin Laszlo

The diversity of approaches to dealing with the environmental crisis offers a clue to the different motivations and beliefs that drive human interaction with the rest of creation. Contrary to what contemporary politicians and pundits *might try to tell the public, the conflict is not simply between the economy and the environment.* That type of superficial dichotomy is merely a smokescreen that blurs a clear picture of the fundamental essence of the problem and potential solutions.

One of the most powerful factors inhibiting a clear view of the crisis is the lack of unity among those attempting to solve it. Attempts have been made to offer theoretical frameworks or visions by which environmentalists might unify their efforts. Bryan Norton's *Toward Unity among Environmentalists* responds to the fragmentation in environmentalism: "There has emerged within the movement no single, coherent consensus regarding positive values, no widely shared vision of a future and better world in which human populations live in harmony with the natural world they inhabit" (3). Norton suggests focusing on single policy issues and advocates "moral pluralism" within a broad, overarching worldview. Although he never actually uses the phrase, Norton appears to advocate a "unity in diversity" conception for what he calls an "integrated worldview": "The moral pluralist can look for common ground from which to construct a new, philosophically, culturally, and politically viable worldview that sees humans as integrated into large systems and that values objects as parts of their human, cultural, biotic, and abiotic contexts." However,

to simply say that different principles of value apply in different contexts introduces moral chaos unless something is said about which particular principles apply when. . . . Pluralism can provide guidance in environmental policy only if it includes second-order principles that help to determine which of its diverse first-order moral criteria apply in given situations. . . . A truly integrated system of thought, an adequate environmental worldview, would state rules of application according to the systematic context of the management problem faced. The criterion, according to a contextual approach such as Leopold's land ethic, should be based on the temporal and spatial scale appropriate to the problem at hand. (*Toward Unity* 200–201)

To Norton, scientific knowledge is the empirical foundation for determining these temporal and spatial scales but not the moral criteria associated with them: "The emerging consensus is unquestionably naturalistic in the broad sense that science informs and constrains decisions about what to do in these cases, without dictating specific values and in the sense that a consensus in policy

emerged within an inductive debate concerning scientifically determinable local conditions" (202). Basically, scientific evidence affects the types of action that are taken without *directly* imposing values. Values are not logically derived from facts but can be developed through increased knowledge of facts. Scientific knowledge (or lack of knowledge) of, for example, a wetland will play a large but not exclusive role in determining whether one shoots with a gun or with a camera.

It is apparent, then, that environmentalism, in addition to being a political activity engaged in critiquing and transforming current economic and social systems, is a fundamentally moral endeavor. The various contributors to the movement can and do play a crucial role in educating the public. The fragmentation within the movement, however, inhibits its progress. In addition to Norton's work, efforts have been made to find common ground between deep and social ecologists (Bookchin and Foreman, *Defending the Earth*) and ecofeminism and bioregionalism (Plant). This unity is being discovered not only at the level of specific issues but also in terms of values. Although there are others, the following principles appear to be the most compelling in this preliminary analysis: interdependence and interconnectedness, balance and moderation, equity and justice.

### *Interdependence and Interconnectedness*

This we know: the earth does not belong to man; man belongs to the earth. This we know. All things are connected like the blood which unites one family. All things are connected.

Whatever befalls the earth befalls the sons of the earth. Man did not weave the web of life; he is merely a strand in it. Whatever he does to the web, he does to himself.

—Attributed to Chief Seattle<sup>15</sup>

In this world we may be diverse but we are also interdependent. There can be but one future for all of us in the human family. And we must choose whether it will be a future of distinction, or a future of extinction.

—Ervin Laszlo

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15. This passage is "attributed" due to the historical perception that the statement is drawn from a speech made by Chief Seattle in the mid-nineteenth century. However, recent scholarship reveals that the famous speech was actually written by screenwriter Ted Perry, who wrote a fictional speech, based on Chief Seattle's original speech, for a film called *Home*. For more details on this story, see the editorial "The Gospel of Chief Seattle is a Hoax," *Environmental Ethics* 11.3 (1989): 195–96.



The intimate, inescapable interdependence of living things implies a certain stability, a certain dynamic reciprocity. Its weakening or destruction unleashes the capacity of creatures to destroy each other and themselves as well.

—Barbara Ward and René Dubos

*Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* identifies *interconnected* as an adjective invented in 1865, meaning (1) "mutually joined or related"; and (2) "having internal connections between the parts or elements." *Interdependent* is defined in the *Random House Unabridged Dictionary* as "mutually dependent or dependent on each other." In both cases, the concept of mutuality, represented by the prefix *inter-* is explicit. That this concept is expressed in terms of human relations with the rest of creation is a crucial factor in the development of a unifying environmental ethic.

The concept of interconnectedness arises out of an ecological understanding of the universe. In fact, the roots of "ecology" itself also date back to the mid-nineteenth century when the term was originally coined, thus reinforcing the linkage between this new scientific discipline and one of its central concepts. Theodore Roszak has described ecology as "the closest our science has yet come to an integrative wisdom" and as "the one science that seems capable of assimilating moral principle and visionary experience" (*Where the Wasteland Ends* 368, 371). Indeed, ecology forms the scientific and epistemological foundation of efforts to understand the complexity of the biosphere and to deal constructively with current problems. There is a growing awareness and consensus regarding the interdependent and interconnected nature of all life, that *nothing occurs without a reaction, that changes on one side of the planet can have significant impacts on the other side*. As scientific knowledge is gained regarding the complexity of ecosystems, human efforts based on outdated explanations become increasingly ineffective and, eventually, destructive.

Several of the approaches discussed above exhibit an awareness of the interconnectedness of life. Deep ecology, ecofeminism, bioregionalism, native spirituality, some Judeo-Christian interpretations, and the Bahá'í Faith appear to be most sensitive to this aspect of nature. They all offer a spiritual insight into an understanding of the concepts of ecology. In this respect, they integrate their respective conceptions of religious or spiritual truth with ecological insights based on scientific knowledge. The result is that we have collectively acquired a comprehensive and balanced understanding of life on this planet in the twentieth century.

The clearest source of division among the groups mentioned above is in their respective concepts of natural hierarchy. Deep ecology, ecofeminism, and some expressions of native spirituality adopt an egalitarian view in which all creatures on the planet are accorded the same inherent value. Some extreme deep ecologists are radically biocentric, showing so-called eco-fascist tendencies that fail to include human beings in their scheme of rights and inherent value. Ecofeminism,

in following the tradition established by its parent, the broadly based feminist movement, denounces any form of hierarchy as inevitably oppressive. In this respect, ecofeminism makes its strongest link with social ecology. The animistic and pantheistic expressions of some native cultures view all creation as inherently equal, each creature possessing a spirit and being interconnected and interdependent at this spiritual level and, in practice, at a physical level.

Environmental approaches that are more directly rooted in theological tradition view nature as inherently hierarchical but not necessarily implying oppression from above. The Judeo-Christian tradition in the West has been expressed in forms derived through human interpretations and sometimes misinterpretations of religious scripture. Religious institutions have often been characterized by the same kinds of domination and abuse of power that secular institutions can reflect. However, it is important not to reject the source or substance of a religion simply because the human beings who have "organized" it have created a form or structure that is unattractive. Newer interpretations of religious scripture, such as process theology, are attempting to formulate conceptions of traditional religions that reflect and incorporate contemporary scientific knowledge. Current shifts in policy in the Roman Catholic Church exemplify attempts to reconcile the historical conflict between science and religion. The Vatican's recent admission of error in its historical treatment of Galileo is further evidence that orthodox and literal interpretations of religious scripture pertaining to the natural world must make sense scientifically.<sup>16</sup>

The Bahá'í Faith deals with these issues explicitly. The Bahá'í conception of natural hierarchy is clearly based on an ecological understanding of the planet that is integrated with the manifestation of spiritual qualities originating in the Creator. Contemporary interpretations of many of the principles contained in the Bahá'í writings reinforce these concepts. For example, in discussions of social and economic development, concepts that pertain to the natural world, such as interdependence, are equally applicable to human relations:

As individuals become more sure of themselves and more self-reliant, they paradoxically find their relationships with others improving and can learn to cooperate more fruitfully. Thus there is an important distinction to be made between interdependence and dependency. As individuals grow and mature, interdependence increases and dependency decreases. Interdependent people have a sense of dignity and self-worth, while dependency undermines these essential human qualities. (Dahl, "Bahá'í Perspective" 166-67)<sup>17</sup>

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16. In November, 1992, the Vatican reversed the 1633 excommunication of physicist and astronomer Galileo for publishing his discoveries about Earth's relationship with the Sun, which contradicted Roman Catholic doctrine.

17. For other examples of Bahá'í writings on interdependence, see 'Abdu'l-Bahá in *Conservation 4* and Shoghi Effendi in *Social and Economic Development 8*.

This notion of interdependence among human beings has been expressed in feminist literature in the concepts of “self” and “other.” Patriarchal societies have effectively demonstrated the domination of “other” in their historical attitude toward and treatment of women, nature, and the feminine principle in men. A mature outlook allows for an integration of “self” and “other,” accepting difference as positive rather than as something to be feared, suppressed, or rejected. Deep ecologist Bill Devall refers to the “subversive” insight of ecology “that not only is everything connected with everything else but there is a literal intermingling of person and Other, of mind-in-nature” (*Simple in Means* 19). Human beings are viewed not only as interdependent with the rest of creation but also as interdependent with each other. In the Bahá’í view, this interhuman unity is essential if we are to deal effectively and sustainably with current problems.

This interdependence not only is ecological but also, extended beyond the interpersonal level, it becomes the guiding principle for unification at the global level. The devastating effects of two world wars within one half-century resulted in the formation of the United Nations as a preliminary effort to prevent such catastrophes from ever recurring. In the 1990s, the effectiveness of that organization comes increasingly under scrutiny, but the initial context in which it was formed must not be forgotten. The perception of the interdependence of nations that gave rise to the establishment of the United Nations is more relevant than ever, despite the atrocities underway throughout the world that challenge the will for a planetary level of governance. The tribalism that perpetuates such tensions is now increasingly perceived as a deterrent to dealing with problems occurring at every geographical scale of human activity, especially those at the global level. One scholar perceives contemporary political ideologies such as liberalism and socialism as counterproductive to “recognizing interdependence and safeguarding diversity” because they perpetuate dreams of “extending national hegemony into international uniformity” (Laszlo, *Inner Limits* 75). Laszlo’s inclusion of diversity as a concept to be safeguarded along with a recognition of the inherent interdependence of nations underscores the importance of the concept of unity in diversity.

### ***Balance and Moderation***

The engines of distraction are gradually destroying the inner ecology of the human experience. Essential to that ecology is the balance between respect for the past and faith in the future, between a belief in the individual and a commitment to the community, between our love for the world and our fear of losing it—the balance, in other words, on which an environmentalism of the spirit depends.

—Albert Gore

Life and the environment are one thing, not two, and people, as all life, are immersed in the one system. When we influence nature, we influence ourselves; when we change nature, we change ourselves. A concern with nature is not merely a scientific curiosity, but a subject that pervades philosophy, theology, aesthetics, and psychology. There are deep reasons that we desire a balance and harmony in the structure of the biological world and that we seek to find that structural balance, just as our ancestors desired and sought that kind of balance in the physical world. . . .

—Daniel Botkin

One of the fundamental principles underlying an ecological understanding of nature is the balance that must be maintained within and among the ecosystems of the planet. Barbara Ward and René Dubos have described this ecological principle as “the interplay between vast cosmic unities and the minute instruments of equilibrium [that] is the very stuff of existence” (*Only One Earth* 42). Another way in which this principle has been expressed is carrying capacity, the natural limitations that shape the existence of the various elements in a particular ecosystem. The natural laws inherent in an ecosystem’s carrying capacity result in the relationships between predators and their prey, ultimately determining the population size of each species. When human beings appear in an ecosystem, there is great potential for disruption of that natural balance since humans possess the ability to perceive and transcend natural laws. Human behavior is constrained to a certain extent until the acquisition of knowledge, the development of technology, and the size of a population permit activities that exceed the carrying capacity of the ecosystem unless this knowledge is balanced with wisdom and moderation.

Moderation as a principle is characterized by an avoidance of excess or extremes of behavior. When moderation is not practiced, one has “undisciplined expansion and self-inflation” (Berry, *Dream of the Earth* 44). René Dubos writes that Western society is

threatened by the absurd development of characteristics that were highly desirable when they first emerged. Thus the escape from physical drudgery has degenerated into contempt for physical work; the struggle for equality of rights has led to the belief that there is equality of talents; the use of the automobile for greater freedom of movement has turned into a compulsion; efficiency has become an end unto itself, destructive of diversity and of the quality of life; economic growth, which originally produced more goods for more people, is now largely pursued for its own sake, even when it means ecological degradation. (*World of René Dubos* 246)

Bahá'u'lláh is equally explicit regarding some characteristics in Western society:

It is incumbent upon them who are in authority to exercise moderation in all things. Whatsoever passeth beyond the limits of moderation will cease to exert a beneficial

influence. Consider for instance such things as liberty, civilization and the like. However much men of understanding may favorably regard them, they will, if carried to excess, exercise a pernicious influence upon men. . . . (*Gleanings* 216)

If carried to excess, civilization will prove as prolific a source of evil as it had been of goodness when kept within the restraints of moderation. (*Gleanings* 342–43)

With the growing sensitivity to the ecological impacts of human behavior over the centuries comes an understanding of the need for balance and moderation in human affairs not only within the species but in human relations with the rest of creation as well. “The fullest enjoyment of the fruits of nature is obtained . . . if they are taken in moderation or according to the golden rule” (Huddleston, *Earth* 48). Many aboriginal cultures around the world have displayed these characteristics for millennia. Early Judeo-Christian societies also practiced more sustainable or moderate approaches to nature. It is only in Western society in recent centuries that this wisdom has become obscured by other pursuits.

The most critical distinction between modern Western culture and those of the hundreds of preindustrial cultures around the world seems to be in terms of the depth and breadth of their respective conceptions of spirituality. Those ethics that have advocated more restrained interactions between humans and the natural environment have been based on profound sensitivities to the spirituality inherent in all creation. In the post-Enlightenment period, those ideas were eloquently expressed in the Romantic era. In contemporary Western society, the literary (as opposed to extreme activist) expressions of deep ecology have had the largest impact on public awareness of and sensitivity to a more spiritual perception of nature. Newer movements such as ecofeminism and bioregionalism also contribute to this recaptured awareness of the spirituality inherent in nature that was lost after the Middle Ages. Secular society is again recognizing what the various religious scriptures have taught since the dawn of human existence: the importance of incorporating a spiritual component in one’s worldview. The crucial element here is a recognition of the need for balance between the physical or material world and the spiritual world. The Bahá’í writings offer an explanation of this balance that reinforces the inherent harmony between science and religion:

Scientific knowledge is the highest attainment upon the human plane, for science is the discoverer of realities. It is of two kinds: material and spiritual. Material science is the investigation of natural phenomena; divine science is the discovery and realization of spiritual verities. The world of humanity must acquire both. A bird has two wings; it cannot fly with one. Material and spiritual science are the two wings of human uplift and attainment. Both are necessary—one the natural, the other supernatural; one material, the other divine. (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Promulgation* 138)

This discussion demonstrates how intertwined these spiritual and moral principles are in their applications to human behavior. The inherent interdependence and interconnectedness of creation impel a balanced and moderate interaction among the creatures who share the planet. Only human beings have the capacity to perceive these relationships and transcend the laws that govern them. Therefore, humans have a unique responsibility to themselves and the rest of creation: to engage in behavior that reflects and respects their knowledge and wisdom. Equity and justice are also interdependent, not only with each other but also with those principles already discussed.<sup>18</sup>

## Equity and Justice

Without equity there is no justice, and without justice there is no morality.

—Peter Kropotkin

There can be no justice without sustainability, and there can be no sustainability without justice.

—Charles Birch and John B. Cobb, Jr.

Observe equity in your judgment. . . . He that is unjust in his judgment is destitute of the characteristics that distinguish man's station.

—Bahá'u'lláh

Justice and equity are two guardians for the protection of man. They have appeared arrayed in their mighty and sacred names to maintain the world in uprightness and protect the nations.

—Bahá'u'lláh

Whereas concepts like interconnectedness and interdependence have arisen only in the last century or two as ecology has emerged as a valid scientific endeavor, moral and political philosophers, legal professionals, politicians, and others have been dealing with the concepts of equity and justice for centuries. The cornerstone of the Enlightenment could be said to be based on notions of justice and how human society could best provide for the equitable distribution of rights and goods for the entire population. The development of theories like utilitarianism were certainly based on that vision. Contemporary scholarship

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18. For example, Bahá'u'lláh links moderation and justice as follows: "Overstep not the bounds of moderation, and deal justly with them that serve thee. . . . Deal with them with undeviating justice, so that none among them may either suffer want, or be pampered with luxuries" (*Gleanings* 235). And again, "Whoso cleaveth to justice, can, under no circumstances, transgress the limits of moderation" (*Gleanings* 342).

continues the debate, constantly seeking explanations for injustice and trying to devise theories of justice that will reveal solutions to current problems.<sup>19</sup>

In *The Search for a Just Society*, John Huddleston offers the following definition of a just society: “. . . a society which gives freedom to all its citizens and encourages them to achieve their full potential—physical, mental and spiritual” (xiii). This vision is based on four principles: (1) “an ethical system that inspires a sense of the oneness of mankind, intellectual integrity, and responsibility both for development of the self and for promoting the welfare of others; that creates a balance between rights and duties”; (2) “provision of physical security, both for the person and necessary personal property”; (3) “all citizens have a say in the management of the affairs of their community,” either directly (e.g., through referenda) or indirectly (e.g., election of representatives); and (4) “equal opportunity for all citizens,” which means no discrimination on the basis of sex, race, culture, economic status, or religion. The practical ramifications of the last principle are (a) no extremes of wealth and poverty and (b) universal access to education for the development of the body, mind, and spirit (xiii–xiv).

In *The Liberation of Life*, Birch and Cobb equate the notion of justice with “the idea of the good life” (236). Their vision does not require absolute equality, but, drawing from the notion of interdependence, it does, according to John Rawls,<sup>20</sup> require that “we share one another’s fate and provide equal opportunity for each person to develop his or her talents” (*Liberation of Life* 236). Like Huddleston, Birch and Cobb’s notion of justice includes freedom and democracy, the ability of people to “participate in decisions about their own destiny,” including the freedom to dissent (238).

The liberal ideals of freedom, equal opportunity, and participatory democracy are essential features of any society that calls itself just. How do these principles relate to the natural environment? At first glance, it might appear that natural resources would be perceived primarily for their instrumental value to human beings. As long as humans are free to use those resources, have equal access to them, and can participate in the decision-making processes involved in their conservation and development, the principles underlying a just society are satisfactorily met. Indeed, early twentieth-century American conservationists “stressed that natural resources, which belonged to all people, should be retained in public control in order to insure that the

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19. A thorough examination of the distinctions among the Enlightenment, contemporary secular, and spiritual views of justice as it applies to nature would take this article far beyond its set parameters. The following is merely a cursory exploration.

20. Rawls is seen as offering the most cogent contemporary theory of justice in his widely cited *A Theory of Justice*. His work is not examined here because a thorough analysis is far beyond the scope of this exercise and because his theory depends on and incorporates political rather than metaphysical concepts.

benefits of resource development were distributed fairly." These conservationists also "saw wise use of the environment as a tool to foster grass-roots democracy" (Koppes, "Efficiency, Equity, Esthetics" 235). The promotion of equity in terms of environmental conservation insured that ideally "the benefits of natural resources development . . . [were] widely distributed rather than concentrated in a few hands" (233–34).

However, viewing natural resources solely in terms of their instrumental value denies and ignores the value inherent in creation. The ongoing attempt by various proponents of a more ecologically informed ethic to offer a sustainable alternative to that attitude has been the cornerstone of the environmental movement. Equity and justice are essential to the *sustainable* development of human civilization.<sup>21</sup> And since human civilization ultimately depends on the health of the natural environment, these principles are also essential in a global environmental ethic.

Secular approaches that offer the greatest potential for contributing to further debate on notions of social and environmental justice are social ecology and ecofeminism, already establishing their mandate as critics of the prevailing social and political systems and their underlying ideologies. Political parties working within the current political framework to promote the environmental agenda also have limited potential.

For spiritual insights into these principles, native spirituality, contemporary interpretations of Judeo-Christian scripture, and the Bahá'í Faith all offer visions and analyses that bear further examination. In terms of justice in human interactions with the rest of nature, native beliefs are based upon the universal balance that must be maintained to ensure that life continues. The dispensation of justice should humanity exceed its bounds would be the extermination of the species to ensure that the rest of creation could survive and progress. The epigraph from Birch and Cobb that opened this section links justice with sustainability, thus reflecting the interdependence of these principles in the ecological worldview of process theology.

The Bahá'í concept of justice is based on Bahá'u'lláh's proclamation of justice as "the best beloved of all things" in his sight (*Hidden Words* 3). Justice is the foundation and the "crowning distinction" of the governing institutions of

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21. The Bahá'í writings offer many exhortations, especially to those in positions of authority, to deal with others with justice and fairness: "The structure of world stability and order hath been reared upon, and will continue to be sustained by, the twin pillars of reward and punishment. . . . Take heed, O concourse of the rulers of the world! There is no force on earth that can equal in its conquering power the force of justice and wisdom. . . . Blessed is the king who marcheth with the ensign of wisdom . . . and the battalions of justice. . . . There can be no doubt whatever that if the day star of justice, which the clouds of tyranny have obscured, were to shed its light upon men, the face of the earth would be completely transformed" (Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* 219).



the Bahá'í Faith (Shoghi Effendi, *Advent of Divine Justice* 27). In the Bahá'í writings, the numerous references to justice reveal it as an essential prerequisite for the inevitable unification of humankind.<sup>22</sup> In this respect, it guides human interactions with other humans, rather than in their relationship with the rest of creation. However, the implications of interhuman relations have a profound impact on the natural world. In the Bahá'í view, when human civilization recovers from its rigid attachment to materialism and recognizes and appreciates the inherent spiritual essence of existence, the entire planet will display the benefits of that achievement.

The diverse interpretations and applications of the six principles discussed above—interdependence, interconnectedness, moderation, balance, equity, and justice—reflect the complexity of the issues involved in dealing with the environmental crisis. Although many of the movements engaged in dealing with environmental problems are making incremental progress, there is a definite need for a means of uniting these often fragmented and competing interests. Unity in diversity provides such a framework.

### **Unity in Diversity: Acceptance and Integration in an Era of Intolerance and Fragmentation**

The use of the phrase “unity in diversity” and similar concepts is not a new phenomenon. Its roots reach back hundreds of years in non-Western cultures such as the aboriginal peoples of North America and the Taoist societies of the fourth and fifth centuries B.C. In premodern Western culture, this concept has been implicit in the organic conceptions of the universe expressed in the ancient Greek and Roman civilizations through medieval Europe and into the Romantic era. The most profound use of the concept has developed over the last 150 years as an integral aspect of an ecological understanding of the world. Outside the natural and social sciences and humanities literature that draws from ecology, the concept appears in a well-articulated form in only one other place that I was able to discover in my research—the Bahá'í writings. It is interesting to note that the origins of the Bahá'í Faith coincide almost to the year with the roots of ecology, although none of the original members of either “movement” had any earthly connection with the other.<sup>23</sup> The parallels in the development of both movements are also interesting to note in that they continue to emerge from

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22. Shoghi Effendi's *The Advent of Divine Justice* contains numerous extracts from the writings of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá as well as his own lucid commentary on this subject.

23. The term “ecology” was coined in 1858 as *Ökologie* by German biologist Ernst Heinrich Haeckel. Henry David Thoreau used the term in English in his later writings. The Bahá'í Faith was officially “formed” in 1863 when Bahá'u'lláh confirmed to his followers that he was “the Promised One” foretold in the previous religious dispensations.

then the suffering of one affects us all. When a person receives an injury to one part of the body, the entire system of that person is affected as the body attempts to heal itself. If the injury is severe, the whole body, not just the affected part, becomes debilitated. The treatment in that situation is multifaceted. Not only is the injured area treated with specific remedies but the whole body also benefits from nutrients provided to assist in the healing. Human beings have not yet learned how to apply this concept of healing to the planet or to the human species itself.

To carry the organic analogy one step further, each component of the body performs an essential and specific function, without which the entire body is handicapped. Each human being possesses talents and the capacity, when given the opportunity, to acquire skills that contribute to the ongoing development of the species. Those special talents and capacities ideally contribute to the richness of the human community as each individual expresses herself or himself freely and in harmony with others. However, human beings have developed institutions and systems that inhibit the optimal functioning of each individual in the collectivity. Because we possess ingenuity and creativity, humans have developed coping mechanisms that have obscured not only the underlying, hidden damage caused by ignoring certain fundamental characteristics of the human species but also the direct causal connections between our efforts to "improve" human existence and the devastation wreaked by such "improvements."

As long as human beings in any part of the planet are inhibited from developing their individual potential, the entire species will remain handicapped. True unity will be achieved when each individual becomes an active and functioning participant in the whole, contributing constructively and productively to their local, regional, and global community. This goal can be accomplished only if the balance between the physical and spiritual dimensions of human existence is achieved, enabling productive contributions to human society to be offered as a measure of service to the ongoing progress and development of the world without fear of exploitation and oppression.

The Bahá'í writings contain many beautiful analogies to express a vision of unity characterized by diversity rather than uniformity. 'Abdu'l-Bahá uses this description of a flower garden to illustrate the concept:

As difference in degree of capacity exists among human souls, as difference in capability is found, therefore, individualities will differ one from another. But in reality this is a reason for unity and not for discord and enmity. If the flowers of a garden were all of one color, the effect would be monotonous to the eye; but if the colors are variegated, it is most pleasing and wonderful. The difference in adornment of color and capacity of reflection among the flowers gives the garden its beauty and charm. Therefore, although we are of different individualities, different in ideas and of various fragrances, let us strive like flowers of the same divine garden to live

together in harmony. Even though each soul has its own individual perfume and color, all are reflecting the same light, all contributing fragrance to the same breeze which blows through the garden, all continuing to grow in complete harmony and accord. (*Promulgation 24*)

The “light” that we all reflect is the spiritual foundation for the concept of unity described in this article. This light manifests the source of all creation, the qualities latent within each creature, including humans, that reflect those of the Creator. It is perceived and expressed by participants in the deep ecology, ecofeminist, and bioregional movements and by aboriginal peoples and various religions around the world. This passage from the Bahá’í writings also alludes to the differences within the human community, emphasizing that this diversity should be a reason for unity rather than discord, a vision that in the contemporary post-modern ideological environment requires further elaboration.

### ***Diversity without Fragmentation***

The growing interdependence of the communities of the world over the last century or two has resulted in an increasingly interwoven and complex system of relations. The growth of the Western hegemony that has coincided with the development of this interdependence threatens to impose a uniform set of ideals and values directly and indirectly on all the peoples of the world. Notions of “the good life” are increasingly viewed as synonymous with the possession of consumer “goods” from the West rather than the Judeo-Christian and Enlightenment morals and values that in varying degrees shape Western society.

As a result of the increasing dominance of the trappings of Western civilization throughout the world, endeavors to promote cultural diversity have become more prevalent in the last half of this century. As the traditional lifestyles of aboriginal communities around the world become disrupted, efforts have been made to preserve those cultures in various ways. In contrast to the “melting pot” approach of the United States, some Western countries like Canada express their commitment to the preservation of multiculturalism through open immigration policies and the fostering of community-based events and organizations that enable participants to continue many of the practices that are unique to their culture. One scholar has expressed the ethic in this way:

. . . the presence of cultural diversity, with the constant exchanging, through travel, trade, intermarriage and so on, of cultural traits, offers humankind a rich source of new adaptive possibilities for cultural evolution to meet changing conditions in the future. . . .

. . . Preservation of cultural diversity, far from being perceived as a threat to human survival owing to rivalries and differences, needs rather to be respected and fostered by all cultures. Our global goal must not be simply tolerance of diversity, but its positive nurturing. Each culture represents an important, perhaps crucial, experiment in the unfolding drama of human life on Earth. (Clark, *Ariadne’s Thread* 477)

Multicultural events provide opportunities for members of different communities to learn more about each other, thus fostering increased awareness and understanding of the diversity within the human community.

The increased visibility and promotion of cultural diversity have been accompanied by stronger feelings of attachment to ethnic roots, often causing conflicts among and within different groups. When the open acceptance of diversity is perceived as a threat to the preservation of one's own traditions, tension develops and conflicts arise. The sustained potential for conflict at individual or community levels despite efforts to promote tolerance by national or international institutions is a reflection of a rigid and often blind attachment to certain traditions that can impede the climate of tolerance necessary for unity.

When disharmony among individuals arises as a result of adherence to traditional expressions of culture (including religion), perhaps it is time to examine those traditions in light of a changing world. Perhaps a reexamination of a certain cultural practice will reveal the reason it was developed in the first place many decades if not centuries ago and will offer a resolution to contemporary conflicts. Such an analysis will reveal why cultural traits are so important to the members of that group and what makes culture such a powerful aspect of human existence:

Each person, in order to retain those attributes we recognise as human, must live in relation to others, within a social context, a culture which gives meaning to individual existence. This need for cultural meaning is at once the *sine qua non* of human existence and the source of our greatest danger. . . .

It is apparent that people everywhere, as they struggle to adjust their traditional worldviews to meet changing circumstances, must take care that they do not throw out the "baby" of cultural meaning and bondedness with the "bath water" of maladaptive institutions, lest they end up with new institutions that are destructive of the human psyche itself. (Clark, *Ariadne's Thread* 474–75)

Religion, as the most powerful of cultural expressions, is also the greatest source of conflict. If it is destined to be a source of disharmony, the planet would certainly be better off without it.<sup>25</sup> However, religion continues to be a powerful force in human existence; it is likely to exist in one form or another. Therefore, an even more intensive examination of religion might be necessary to reveal the sources of the tensions between different religious groups. It is just possible that the evidence will offer not only a resolution to the problems that continue to perpetuate the fragmentation within and between national communities but also a source of inspiration to unite the global family through guidance for each individual at the interpersonal and community levels. This release of guidance

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25. The Bahá'í writings contain many expressions of this point. See, for example, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Bahá'í World Faith* 247.

and inspiration has the potential to have a massive impact on every aspect of human activity, a possibility that reinforces the basic focus of this article, articulating a conceptual framework for an ethic of environmental sustainability.

### **Unity in Diversity: Environmental and Human Applications**

In terms of the issues dealt with throughout this article, the message is clear when it comes to the geographic scale of human awareness of and action to deal with the environmental crisis. In addition to learning how to think globally and act locally (the ubiquitous slogan coined by René Dubos), human beings must learn how to think globally and locally and to act globally and locally.

This ethic has profound geographical, ecological, social, philosophical, and spiritual implications. During most of recent history, regions have generally been perceived in terms of their political boundaries. However, as ecological awareness has developed, there is a broadening perception of the difficulties posed by such arbitrary determinations of territory. Research in both the action-oriented and philosophical streams of environmental studies is resulting in increased knowledge relating to the physical foundations of human existence and the impact of human attitudes and activities on the planet. Heightened awareness of and sensitivity to the ecological factors of the human–environment relationship reveal a need to broaden our concept of territory beyond the politically created boundaries that currently determine the international social and economic climate. By adopting scales of attention that reflect the bio- and geophysical factors that shape the planet, human beings can recapture the connection with their natural roots. By learning more about their local ecosystem and how it connects with the biosphere, human beings not only increase their sensitivity to and understanding of the immediate factors that influence their lives but also heighten their sense of interdependence with the global community of which we are all an integral part. The diversity of ecosystems comprising the planet is the physical foundation for the diversity of cultural groups that have evolved throughout human history.

However, focussing on the natural environment as the source of unity for the human family is not sufficient. There are far too many other factors that need to be considered. The human psyche is profoundly affected by more than just our connections with nature. We must focus on how knowledge gained from studying human interactions with nature affects human interactions with each other. If humanity is ever to find peace with itself, it will come from a massive transformation in the way humans relate to one another both individually at the family and local community level and in terms of the national and international institutions that are developed to organize broader scales of human interaction. The moral foundations for such relations are deeply rooted in human history in the inspirations for the religious and cultural traditions that provide meaning for the billions of people who share the planet. Unity will be found in the

development of broader understanding and acceptance of the diversity in the human family and in the fostering of the basic principles that sustain healthy interpersonal relations.

## Conclusion

One way in which many of the ideas expressed in this article could be analyzed in more depth is to examine the feasibility of this proposition: The development and environmental ethic toward which humanity is striving is based on an all-encompassing spirituality that includes belief in the Creator as the source of all life and light; the practical means by which global systems could be managed on a cooperative basis is based upon that ethic. This article has highlighted the first part of this proposition, offering a vision of harmony between religion and science and a unifying theoretical framework with the concept of unity in diversity as a means to achieve consensus among many conflicting worldviews.

Examining the second part of the proposition presents a challenge, since there is not yet a substantial body of evidence upon which to base one's analysis. Through further investigation of some of the movements described earlier and their activities and communities around the world, it would be possible to determine whether such an ethic is feasible and effective. Many people in general and Bahá'ís in particular perceive a growing coalition of effort to begin creating the mechanisms for change.

The growth of environmental ethics as a subfield of philosophy and an adjunct of a diversity of social and natural sciences is one piece of tangible evidence that a shift in perceptions and attitudes is occurring. The burgeoning body of literature on the subject offers a plethora of viewpoints. There are, however, many common themes, several of which have been addressed in this article. As the dialogue continues, these themes could provide the foundation for a global ethic. Social ecologists and ecofeminists offer constructive critiques of the present and positive visions of the future. The trend among many in the deep ecology movement toward a less exclusive, more practical perspective is evidence of progress. The increased attention to more holistic approaches to environmental management and more pragmatic moral philosophies indicates that people are concerned with their interactions with each other and the rest of creation. The appearance of bioregionalism as a valid environmental ethic reveals the geographical and ecological foundations of comprehensive moral visions. The spirituality and practices of aboriginal peoples provide an enormous body of knowledge still largely unexplored. The efforts of contemporary ecological humanists, theologians, and members of religious traditions new and old offer spiritual visions that are crucial for a global ethic that responds to every facet of life. And finally, inherent in the Bahá'í sacred writings are the principles, organizational system, and processes necessary for establishing such an all-encompassing formula.

As the third millennium of human history recorded by the Christian calendar approaches, the enormous task with which human beings are faced both collectively as a species and in our individual lives becomes increasingly evident. During the present period of transition, we are in the process of reexamining our institutions and the tools that we use in those examinations. The process is and indeed must be holistic in its focus. We can no longer simply treat the symptoms as abstract concepts to be examined in isolation but, rather, must seek solutions that address the root and systemic causes of humanity's problems. Some of the discoveries and cures are extremely challenging, penetrating to the depths of human consciousness and requiring a massive transformation of much that is familiar. The solutions, however, could be exhilarating, allowing humanity to scale previously uncharted heights of sublimity. They are ours to discover.

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