Preface

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...a true teaching is one in which the universal nature of the truth it announces does not obliterate the name or the identity of the person who said it... all those who cleave to the divine law, all men worthy of the name, are all responsible for each other... in the Covenant, when it is fully understood, in the society which fully deploys all the dimensions of the Law, society becomes a community.¹

How do we get our bearings in today’s world – a world in such obvious global ethical crisis, whose capacity for elementary ethical thought and shared self-governance is in considerable doubt? A world in which climate, biological extinction, nuclear and refugee nightmares vie for our attention with images of the most trivial consumer satisfactions on the omnipresent digital media? Some grip on reality that will provide an anchor for renewed hope and a new beginning – in the words of the Earth Charter – ‘as never before in history’?

We believe that the two chapters which open this book have the power to inspire meaningful dialogue and action and open the way to such a prospect. They are both by environmental ethicist and theologian J. Ronald Engel, whose scholarship and leadership in the international conservation movement over the last half-century warrant his reputation as a trustworthy guide. His work has been the inspiration behind this book and its contributors.

When we speak to people about Engel, the most common word that comes up is ‘integrity’. This is a term that Engel has grappled with in much of his writing, particularly during his long association with the Global Ecological Integrity Group. However, as a descriptor of human behaviour, ‘integrity’ refers to deep ethical commitments and a congruence between words and actions. Engel’s rich perspective on global ethics draws from a wide variety of experience. This is not the place for a personal sketch,² but we would like the reader to understand from the outset that some of the chapters in this book engage Engel’s biography. From an editorial perspective, this does not dimin-

² For more detail, see Taylor’s chapter in this volume.
ish the scholarly nature of these chapters, but rather enhances it and underlines
an important point about objectivity. Here we have in mind a point articulated
by Nietzsche in his *Genealogy*:

Henceforth, my dear philosophers, let us be on guard against the dangerous old
conceptual fiction that posited a “pure, will-less, painless, timeless knowing
subject”; let us guard against the snares of such contradictory concepts as “pure
reason,” “absolute spirituality,” “knowledge in itself”: these always demand that we
should think of an eye that is completely unthinkable, an eye turned in no particular
direction, in which the active and interpreting forces, through which alone seeing
becomes seeing something, are supposed to be lacking; these always demand an
eye, an absurdity and a nonsense. There is only a perspective seeing, only a perspec
tive “knowing”...³

What Nietzsche is saying here is that seeing and knowing always take place
from somewhere – from an embodied, situated existence. Why does he insist
on this? Because the act of apprehending anything is conducted through the
body and the body is always somewhere – not just geographically, but in time
and space. Hence, the knower is always embodied, always situated and brings
something to that information – a frame or an interpretation. We never just
‘take in the world’ – we take in the world through this being. We might stretch
Nietzsche further here and argue that to know is always to interpret. There is
no fact and then interpretation. According to Nietzsche, any attempt to ignore
or eliminate this fact is an assault on what it means to be human. That is why
he is calling the fetish of objectivity ‘the height of asceticism’.⁴ It involves
an attempt to eliminate ourselves completely – to becoming non-willing,
non-interpreting subjects who apprehend the world as though they did not
have bodies, minds and histories. The contributors to this book are each alive
to the fact that our engagement with ecological ethics is always situated. We
seek to engage Engel’s writing in order to understand and perhaps dislodge our
presumptions and predilections. We do so in the tradition of keeping ethical
debate alive and furthering the conversation about the future of the Earth
Charter.

Engel’s ethical perspective is anchored in a courageous faith in life which
is needed more today than ever before. Humanity seems to have lost its faith,
instead surrendering to the ‘inevitable’. But noticing the loss is also a sign of
strength. In times of deepening trenches between the rich and the poor, the
present and the future, the false and the true, noticing what may have been
lost becomes critical. Engel makes us think about it and in this way reminds
us of what has never been lost: the innate desire of human beings to love the

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⁴ Ibid.
world in spite of the worst it can throw at us. This desire can manifest itself in different ways, of course. It can lead to tribalism, exploitation and war; but also to rooted cosmopolitanism, self-restraint and peace. The difference lies in the integrity of our faith in ourselves, in others and in life.

The Earth Charter is perhaps the most powerful contemporary expression of what it would mean for humanity to be faithful to the source and end of Earth’s evolution. It is no coincidence that Engel played such an important role in its inception. And not coincidentally he was never satisfied with the Earth Charter and its impact. It was written during the 1990s, when the world became more interconnected, but also dominated by global markets and economic rationality. Should the destructive forces of globalization not have been clearly identified along with the constructive forces for building a more just, sustainable and peaceful world? Was – and is – the Earth Charter’s non-political, all-inclusive approach a weakness rather than a strength? Engel’s main concern is for authenticity and integrity. As a covenantal plea, the Earth Charter calls for congruence between words and actions. Standing up and speaking out wherever and whenever called upon must therefore be a hallmark of anyone associated with the Earth Charter. For too long, the Earth Charter movement has been relying on some self-fulfilling process instead of digging deep into the living soil of politics and power.

A motive for this book is to ask these kinds of questions and take up the challenge that Engel has put to us with his own words and actions. In this vein, Engel’s chapter entitled ‘Summons to a new axial age’ is a call to the Earth Charter community and those engaged in environmental ethics to seriously address the reality of what is happening across the planet and to stimulate a critical dialogue on what our next steps need to be in light of the enduring vision of the Charter. Engel’s proposal for ‘covenant’ is a key ingredient to any serious response to the serious planetary crisis we find ourselves in. But we also need responses that develop our ecological, social, economic and political thinking.

Further, we also wanted to challenge authors to be self-critical and think hard about the strengths and limits of our current approach to global environmental ethics in light of the powerful ideological currents and vested interests that are violating our hopes for just, peaceful and sustainable planetary governance. Engel’s ‘summons’ is a generative occasion for this work and his proposal on covenant constitutes one of a number of different responses that have been made to that fundamental challenge. As editors, we have also invited Engel’s friends and colleagues to respond to his thoughts and concerns. These contributions continue the dialogue in critical loyalty to the fundamental vision that inspired the Earth Charter and other approaches to global environmental ethics.
In putting together this book, we have consistently been reminded of Engel’s injunction to think clearly and re-evaluate old ideas in light of present circumstances. Unless our values are tested and reinvigorated in every generation, they can easily become platitudes that are devoid of real meaning or content. This requires consistent effort and can only be driven by a belief in the necessity that we must search for thoughts and action to alleviate the multiplicity of crises we face. Of course, our searching might be in vain, but that does not rid us of the responsibility to try to help others transcend feelings of powerlessness and a lack of agency. More than ever, we need to respond to the global planetary crisis we face – not by words, but by words and actions and in accordance with our covenantal promise.

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