Since the 1960s, various types of international commissions and summits have met throughout the world to address sustainability. Although initially based in the global North (the socioeconomic and political division of wealthier developed nations) and facilitated by their politicians, attention increasingly shifted with the influence of religious groups to the less-developed global South and the indigenous peoples affected by the environmental crisis.

International commissions and summits have been central in articulating the standards of sustainability. The contested terrain of sustainability has been debated perhaps most heatedly in these international venues where nation-states, international political bodies, nongovernmental organizations, multilateral development organizations, and grassroots social and ecological activists meet. For many in the global North (a term used to designate wealthier developed nations, most of which are located in the Northern Hemisphere) and the industrial sector, these events have resulted in important steps toward a global ethic of sustainability. According to many marginalized peoples in the developing world, however, these meetings have provided a cover for the continued legitimization of existing power inequalities. In both cases, religious groups and representatives have played influential roles at and around important international commissions and summits.

Early Articulations of Sustainability

In 1966 the World Council of Churches (WCC) launched a five-year program devoted to studying the impacts of technology, including its environmental effects, on society. The report resulting from that study was accepted by the WCC in Bucharest in 1974, and “accepted the thesis of nature’s limits and called for a society that is both just and sustainable” (Chapman 2000, 12). In 1967 Pope Paul VI voiced support for equitable development, stating that “the new name for peace [is] development” (quoted in Therien 2005, 29).

As the 1960s drew to a close—the then-U.S. president John F. Kennedy proclaimed them as the “decade of development”—environmental concerns arose first in the cities of the industrialized world. Scientists began to better understand the impacts of large-scale agriculture and fishing, the disappearance of flora and fauna, and the limits of industrial exploitation of nonrenewable fuels. The United Nations for the first time addressed environmental issues directly in a 1969 publication entitled Problems of the Human Environment, which noted a “crisis of world-wide proportions...the crisis of the human environment” (Jolly et al. 2004, 125).

Stockholm: Growth as the Solution

This tone of crisis set the stage for the 1972 United Nations Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm, which for the first time brought the idea of an environmental crisis to the global community by suggesting that it was correlated directly with poverty in the developing world. The conclusion drawn by the small number of political representatives and scientists was that development through economic growth was the only salve for the poverty that both made humans vulnerable to environmental fluctuations and encouraged over-exploitation of the local resource base. The most important outcome of this meeting was the birth of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), headed by its conference chairman Maurice Strong and based in Nairobi, Kenya.
Barbados Declarations and the NIEO

Particularly in the poorer global South, a growing emphasis was placed on the social aspects of development. While the Stockholm gathering highlighted poverty as the primary cause of conflict and inequity, it also prescribed a somewhat invasive idea of growth, facilitated by external development bodies and governments, as its cure. In 1971, just prior to Stockholm, the WCC convened a long-term Program to Combat Racism in Barbados. The group of several social scientists took it as their task to criticize three of the primary focal points of social science:

1) Scientism “which negates any relationship between academic research and the future of these people who form the object of such investigation, thus eschewing political responsibility which the relation contains and implies; 2) an Hypocrisy manifest in rhetorical protests based on first principles which skillfully avoids any commitment in a concrete situation; and 3) an Opportunism that, although it may recognize the present painful situation of the Indians, at the same time it rejects any possibility of transforming action by proposing the need ‘to do something’ within the established order.” (Wright 1988, 373)

These social scientists were calling attention to the “Fourth World” peoples in already so-called underdeveloped nations who were disenfranchised not only by the prevailing international economic and political powers, but also by the governments of their own nations.

In the early 1970s, several nations in the developing world proposed a Declaration on the Establishment of the New International Economic Order (NIEO). According to members of a team of U.N. analysts, “the historic importance of this proposal derives from the fact that it was an authentic third world initiative, launched at a time of probably the peak bargaining power of the poor countries in the entire postwar period” (Jolly et al. 2004, 121). However, “on the most important proposals made by the developing countries, almost nothing was done” (Jolly et al. 2004, 23).

A second Barbados conference was held in 1977, its goal to combine the concerns of the first Barbados conference, or Barbados I, with the increasing advocacy around indigenous causes. While the participants in Barbados I were mostly social scientists, many of the participants in this second conference were indigenous activists, marking the extension of their influence into international policy regimes. Like Barbados I, however, little or no action was taken on the declarations that derived from this conference. The Barbados declarations were ultimately disappointing for both indigenous peoples and the social scientists that supported their cause.

The Brandt Commission

Concern about the relationships between the developed and developing world also came from the global North. In 1977, Robert McNamara, chair of the World Bank, asked the former chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany, Willy Brandt, to head a commission to systematically analyze the main obstacles to development, aware that the increasing dialog between the global North and South had failed to generate concrete outcomes. According to U.N. collaborators, the Brandt Commission’s recommendations, presented under the title North-South: A Program for Survival, were “ultimately anchored in ‘the great moral imperatives that . . . are as valid internationally as they were and are nationally,” and appealed “to values more than to rational calculations” (Therien 2005, 33). The commission proposed a four-pronged solution to development problems that included: (1) the transfer of resources from North to South, (2) a global energy policy, (3) international food initiative, and (4) reform of international institutions.

While the ideas may have been somewhat innovative, the payoff was less than hoped for, as the Commission’s findings were released into a Cold War world ripe with political strife. Third and Fourth World activists and the Brandt Commission repeatedly made the case that the prevailing brand of development was not environmentally and socially sustainable in most cases. But these concerns were transposed into the language of increasing economic globalization and integration into global markets.

Security and Sustainability

In 1982, former Swedish prime minister Olof Palme, chair of the Independent Commission on Disarmament and Security Issues, formed a commission modeled after the Brandt Commission, which focused on charting a long-term course toward nuclear disarmament, focusing attention on short-term arms control and stimulating public debate over security issues.

Palme and his fellow commission members suggested that the buildup of long-range Soviet missiles in Eastern Europe, far from ensuring security, was compromising not only the security of the Cold War states but of the global community. They challenged the long-revered language of nuclear deterrence with a doctrine of common security, which avoided all such competitive representations of nuclear conflict (Wiseman 2005, 46). Although largely overlooked by top leaders from the two primary Cold War nations, it was adopted and adapted undercover by various high-ranking officials, making its way across the Atlantic to the United States and through the Iron Curtain, by the end of the 1980s. In retrospect, the recommendations of the Palme Commission were adopted—at least in
explicitly connected this mandate to the spiritual dimension to discuss several points:

Invited six of the world’s religious leaders to Assisi, Italy,ness Prince Philip and the World Wildlife Fund (WWF)

The Palme Commission is particularly important to susta-

inability for three reasons. First, security and peace are often touted as prerequisites for achieving sustainability. Wars and other armed conflicts, it should be remembered, are some of the most ecologically devastating activities in which humans engage. Second, the Commission framed such common security as pivotal for the global community, noting our interdependence, particularly in matters of nuclear warfare. Third, it demonstrated the potentially widespread political impacts of such commissions.

**WCED and the Road to Rio**

In the midst of these global concerns about thermonuclear warfare and unpleasant encounters with Earth’s limits, the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) was convened in 1983 by the U.N. secretary-general. Chairperson Gro Brundtland, former prime minister of Norway, stated in the foreword of *Our Common Future* (1987), the publication of the Commission's recommendations (also known as the Brundtland Report), that the WCED was to be a “third and compelling call for political action: After Brandt’s *Programme for Survival and Common Crisis*, and after Palme’s *Common Security*, would come *Our Common Future*” (quoted in Smith 2005, 85). The Brundtland Commission’s report preserved the idea put forth in Stockholm fifteen years earlier that raising standards of living in the developing world could only be achieved through economic growth facilitated by expanding technology to stretch carrying capacity (the maximum number of a particular organism that can survive indefinitely within a given resource base). The central feature of this “compelling call for political action” was the phrase *sustainable development*, broadly defined in *Our Common Future* as “the ability to meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (WCED 1987, 8). The Commission explicitly connected this mandate to the spiritual dimension of sustainability: “We have the power to reconcile human affairs with natural laws and to thrive in the process. In this our cultural and spiritual heritages can reinforce our eco-

Worldviews that encourage materialistic, dualistic, anthropocentric, and utilitarian concepts of nature

• that environmental organizations and politicians are victims of the same economic and technological think-

• that alternative worldviews and ethics must be respected to counter current dominant thinking

• that the world’s religions constitute enormous human and spiritual potentials. (Golliher 1999, 494)

This early meeting of environmental and religious minds had two important offspring. First, according to the cultural anthropologist Jeff Golliher (1999, 446), it inspired the 1993 Parliament of Religions, under the leadership of the Swiss theologian Hans Kung, to propose the Declaration Toward a Global Ethic. Second, in 1995 (nine years following the first meeting) HRH Prince Philip, the WWF, and a larger number of religious leaders (representing nine world faiths this time) met in the United Kingdom to revisit their commitments. At that meeting, the Alliance of Religions and Conservation (ARC) was formed under the leadership of the scholar Martin Palmer (Golliher 1999, 494). The ARC has maintained important working relationships with the WWF, the World Bank, and the United Nations, all of which have their own working definitions of sustainability.

The importance of global interconnectedness and moral values to the sustainability ferment was important in these northern, institutionalized venues (that is, within the established world religions, international conservation groups, and development organizations). Such optimistic assessments about the global future helped to support and preserve the idea of sustainable development.

**The Rio and Johannesburg Earth Summits**

The Brundlandt Report concluded by suggesting that the United Nations sponsor “an international Conference . . . to review progress and promote follow-up arrangements that will be needed . . . to set benchmarks and to maintain human progress” (WCED 1987, 343). The 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro, which drew together over one hundred heads of state and thousands of other delegates from all over the world (Rist 1997, 188), was the largest such gathering of heads of state and government to that time (Baker 2006, 55).

In preparation for the upcoming United Nations-sponsored conference, a World Conference of Indigenous Peoples on Territory, Environment, and Development was held the week prior at Kari Oca, a site on the outskirts of Rio (perhaps symbolically highlighting the marginalization of
indigenous voices in the development dialog). Invoking the metaphor of “Mother Earth” or pachamama, many indigenous leaders claimed that they were “knowers of nature” and that their “resistance, [their] strength comes from a spiritual relationship with nature” (Hart 2005a, 1764). One indigenous activist from Ecuador named Valerio Grefa noted that they had “come to share with the world and the United Nations our way of thinking, our visions, our way of life, an alternative. We do not speak of the ‘environment’; we speak of the spiritual and physical world in which we live” (quoted in Hart 2005b, 1763). As Onondaga (of the Six Nations of the Northeastern United States) faithkeeper Oren Lyons reminded the gathered peoples, “Life is community” (quoted in Hart 2005b, 1763). This alternative summit drew some 20,000 additional people to Rio. This group, philosophically, politically, and geographically separated from the U.N.-sponsored Earth Summit, highlighted a different set of issues, including food production and alternative economic and environmental positions (Rist 1997, 188, 191). Thus, the idea of sustainability, and its major benchmarks, have been attended to and promoted by both institutional and elite sectors of society as well as subcultures of resistance. The values and practices that these constituencies imagine as central to achieving sustainability, however, differ greatly.

Though its overall contribution to the quest for sustainability is still contested, the Rio Summit did have five important outcomes:

1. the approval of the Rio Declaration, which included twenty-seven principles of sustainable development;
2. the approval of Agenda 21, a document of over 800 pages, that provided sets of guidelines for implementing sustainable development;
3. the formation of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC);
4. the approval of the Convention on Biodiversity (CBD), which endorsed the value of indigenous ecological knowledge and stated that sovereign nations should have rights to the biological resources of their territory (not approved by the United States);
5. a Declaration on Forest Principles, which created broad frameworks and recommendations for sustainable use of forest resources.

The eventual outcomes, in most cases, were more modest than hoped for by many participants. One of the reasons is that the above resolutions are nonbinding, so countries that sign on cannot be held legally responsible for noncompliance. Moreover, negotiations at the international level have typically honored the principle of subsidiarity, where decision making and binding laws are, to the extent possible, left to the smallest (most local) legislative bodies.

Although the outcomes of the Summit have been criticized, since then sustainability has been taken for granted as a part of global governance, and an environmentally grounded spirituality is an increasingly frequent complement to the evocation of the need for sustainable development. For example, the 2002 Earth Summit in Johannesburg, South Africa (sometimes called Rio +10) saw the emergence of what environment and religion scholar Bron Taylor has called a global civic earth religion. During the opening ceremony, participants were treated to a performance that depicted the common emergence of humanity in Africa and suggested that humanity’s past, and also its future, must be bounded by the limits of a finite world (Taylor 2004, 1003). As Taylor argues: “It may be that such a religion, in which the evolutionary story, embedded in the broader Universe Story, fosters a reverence for life and diverse practices to protect and restore its diverse forms, will play a major role in the religious future of humanity” (2004, 1004). In the end, however, the Johannesburg Summit is described as making “at best modest” contributions to making sustainability a cultural reality (Kates and Parris 2003, 8066).

Implications and Future Research

When participants in the sustainability movement express their goals as alternatives to the prevailing political and economic powers or invoke the outlines of a global ethic based on human worth and dignity, they often tap into religious and spiritual narratives, metaphors, and language. The emotional power of such rhetorical devices helps to reveal the values implicated in the reports from these international commissions and summits and provides the substance of various emerging sustainability ethics. While the effectiveness of these commissions and summits has been questioned, what is clear is that, since sustainability has grown into an international concern, religious institutions and groups have played an important role in generating affective and values-based narratives to promote the sustainability transition. In many cases, the most effective sustainable development programs have succeeded in large part because they were able to motivate local religious authorities to connect the goals of sustainability to local religious narratives. Moreover, when sustainability is discussed in a variety of venues, from subcultural gatherings to international political arenas, it is frequently couched in language that is explicitly religious or that promotes a naturalistic reverence for the nonhuman world, or even the entire cosmos. In such cases, normative sustainability narratives do religious work (drawing on the definition of religious work offered by Chidester 2005) by fostering community, focusing desire, and facilitating exchange. These trends deserve more focused research in coming decades.

Lucas F. JOHNSTON
Wake Forest University
FURTHER READING