Christianity’s concern for sustainable community and sustainable development has historical roots in what numerous observers refer to as “the social question” or “the modern social problem.” The reference is to the final third of the 19th c., when progressive social theorists in Europe and North America joined popular movements of reform, especially workers’ movements, to protest the exploitative character of rapidly developing industrial society. In giving voice to brutalizing social conditions, reform-minded clergy and laity of the Social Gospel movement, labor leaders and workers, and academic students of society developed an extensive critique of the capitalist industrial order and of political and economic efforts to govern it. In varying ways and degrees they pointed to class suffering (especially poverty and dangerous working conditions, inequality and unemployment) as these were compounded by race, gender, ethnic, and cultural discrimination. And they undertook organized responses to “the modern social problem” (various protest movements with political economic platforms, including both religious and secular socialism). Present Christian concern for sustainable development and community draws on the fact that the social question persists as these have, in many ways, gone global.

In the final third of the 20th c., the social question was joined by “the ecological question.” The language of “sustainability” itself arose here, with some of its first uses in the ecumenical movement. (“Sustainable” as applied to society, and not simply the yield of forests or fisheries, was a mark of the 1975 World Council of Churches program “Toward a Just, Participatory and Sustainable Society.”) While the causes are many, the
ecological question, too, chiefly arises from the destructive downside of the organization and habits of modern industrialized society, whether in the form of corporate capitalism, state socialism, or the competition of these two over decades around the modernization and alignment of non-industrialized or “developing” nations.

In a word, what has given rise to concern for sustainable development and sustainable community on the part of Christianity is the unending transformation of nature knit integrally to the unending transformation of society as these together have degraded land, sea, air, and human communities in the very process of yielding the benefits of modernity. Few seriously propose a return to pre-modern worlds. Yet the present course is itself considered unjust and unsustainable.

Two broad streams of response have followed. One is the search to understand the roles Christianity has played in the travail of society and nature together in the modern period. Sometimes attention is to roughly the last five centuries, beginning with the onset of colonization, conquest, and conversion on the part of Christian Europe, while other times the attention is to the last two centuries especially—the industrial era. The other search is for concrete constructive Christian responses to the “eco-crisis” as that has been given voice from the 1970s onward. Christian-identified groups have often joined other “NGOs” in this (Non-Governmental Organizations).

The internal critique has been extensive. Most of it turns on the complicity of dominant streams of Western Christianity in the making of the modern world. Religiously sanctioned racial, cultural, and gender stratification and oppression are pointed to, together with callousness about the fate of the land and neglect of the requirements of Earth itself for its own flourishing. Christian habits that combine
anthropocentricity with assumptions of the superiority and forms of Western Christian civilization are the subject of detailed analysis. In this worldview God has been separated from nature and the purposes of divine action (salvation, redemption) have been relocated in human history. Humanity itself has been separated from the rest of nature as a unique creation and set in history as a specifically divine/human domain. And throughout, pervasive dualisms of nature and society have been reinforced by church teaching and practice (men are set over women, the rights of humans over the rest of nature, and the dominance of Western technologies and cultures over subjugated peoples, their religions, cultures and lands).

The response to self-examination on the part of Christianity is ongoing. The last decades of the 20th c. have seen the rise of numerous “eco-theologies;” the broadening and deepening of multiple analyses of Christianity’s place in the making of the modern world that go beyond analyses of dominant mainstream Western Christianity to emphasize the resistance to it in the Christianity of indigenous and other subjugated peoples and perspectives; and the explosion of Christian participation in both faith-based and NGO efforts to address socio-environmental maladies around the world.

This last-mentioned item—constructive, on-the-ground organized Christian efforts—achieved a certain focus with the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. That conference, the largest gathering of heads of state to that date, with parallel participation by the largest gathering of NGOs, gave rise to the specific language of “sustainable development”—the capacity to meet the needs of present generations without jeopardizing the capacity of future generations to
“Sustainable development” has since become common discourse amid the international efforts to address the social and ecological questions together.

Yet sustainable development as a shared agenda has encountered dissent from the outset, some of it from Christian communities and some of it already in view at the Earth Summit. Many active participants among environmental NGOs regard sustainable development as yielding too much to economic globalization’s efforts to integrate local, regional, and national economies into a single global economy as led by corporate capitalism. For these dissenting groups—prominent at international meetings of the World Trade Organization, World Economic Forum, and the “G7” (advanced industrial) nations from Seattle to Davos to Genoa to New York in the 1990s and the first decade of the 21st century—greening global capitalism so as to render both the environment and the economy “sustainable” does not truly address social inequities or root causes of environmental degradation. The dissenters’ point of departure asks instead what it is that makes for healthy community. They then seek to wrap both economy and environment around that, on successive levels (local, regional, transnational), all the time being aware that Earth’s requirements are fundamental. The human economy is a subset of the economy of Earth. “Sustainable community,” as distinct from “sustainable development,” thus tries to preserve or create some mix of the following: greater economic self-sufficiency locally and regionally, with a view to the bio-regions themselves as basic to human organization; agriculture appropriate to regions and in the hands of local owners and workers using local knowledge and crop varieties, with ability to save their own seeds and treat their own plants and soils with their own products; the preservation of local and regional traditions, language, and cultures and a resistance to
global homogenization of culture and values; a revival of religious life and a sense of the sacred, vis a vis a present way of life that, because it reduces life to the utilitarian, has little sense of mystery and the sacred; the repair of the moral fiber of society on some terms other than material consumption; resistance to the commodification of all things, including knowledge; the internalization of costs to local, regional, and global environments in the price of goods and services themselves; and the protection of ecosystems and cultivation of Earth as a “commons.” All this is viewed, in the eyes of its advocates, as global democratic community rather than nativist localism. It is global by virtue of its planetary consciousness and the impressive networking of citizens around the world made possible by electronic globalization. Yet its orientation is first of all local in that the key question for sustainable community advocates is how cultural wealth and biological wealth, together with economic well-being, are sustained in the places people live together with the rest of the community of life.

Christian groups have been active participants in the quest for sustainable community and in the debates about sustainable development. They have joined the search for ways of living that meet the norms of genuine sustainability, norms such as participation as the optimal inclusion of all involved stakeholders in socio-ecological decisions; sufficiency as the commitment to meet the basic material needs of all life possible; equity as basic fairness across generations and across the Community of Life; accountability as the structuring of responsibility in ways that prize “transparency” (decision-making structures and processes that are clear and public); material simplicity and spiritual richness as markers of a quality of life that includes bread for all but is more than bread alone; responsibility on a scale that people can handle, i.e., commensurate
with workable community; and subsidiarity—resolving problems at the closest level at which decisions can be taken and implemented effectively, beginning with local resources and talents.

In addition to joining the quest for sustainable practices, Christian groups have also responded to the critique of their own past by undertaking the retrieval and transformation of Christian faith traditions and practices that are explicitly Earth-honoring. They have sought to uncover or to create Earth-positive traditions and practices that address socio-ecological questions in ways resonating with faith as it has been expressed over millennia. Varieties of ascetic, mystical, sacramental and prophetic-liberative practices are all involved. (For examples of faith-based traditions in the quest for sustainable practices, see Sustainability and Local Christian Communities.)

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Further Reading

