

ECO-JUSTICE ETHICS: A Brief Overview

Ecological responsibility in linkage with social justice is what the world needs now. Healthy earth community requires advocacy and action on urgent environmental issues in ways that connect with struggles for social and economic justice. “Eco-justice” envisions and values both ecology and justice, since there will be little achievement of environmental health without movement toward socio-economic justice, and vice versa. (Some discussions of “sustainability,” a prominent concept in environmental studies and political discourse, have parallel ethical meaning, to the extent that they also encompass social justice principles. (See Cobb, 1992.)

Today, there is growing appreciation for and “construction of what is often called an ‘eco-justice’ ethic...that holds together concerns for the natural world and for human life, that recognizes that devastation of the environment and economic injustice go hand in hand, and that affirms that environmental and human rights are indivisible” (Pedersen, 1998). The vision and values of eco-justice ethics express a spiritually grounded moral posture of respect and fairness toward all creation, human and nonhuman. E-J ethics are shaped by religious insight and scientific knowledge, interwoven with social, economic and political experience.

How the Term Emerged

After the first Earth Day in 1970, “eco-justice” became the theme of a group of North American, ecumenically-engaged Christian ethicists (including this author). In a seminal article on “Ecological Responsibility and Economic Justice,” Episcopal priest Norman Faramelli of the Boston industrial Mission emphasized that “choosing [to work for] ecology instead of [against] poverty, or vice versa, is to make a bad choice;” the way ahead is to choose both (Faramelli, 1970). That posture was not characteristic of the emerging environmental movement, which even today too often lacks passion for, or adequate principles of, social justice. Conversely, many social justice and peace activists have viewed environmentalism as a distraction (and even today can remain rather disinterested in ecological aspects or environmental dimensions of their engagement). To foster converging commitments to ecology and justice, American Baptist leaders Richard Jones and Owen Owens introduced the term eco-justice.

By 1973, a strategy to advance integrative ethics of ecology and justice became the focus of an ecumenical campus ministry at Cornell University. It was called the Eco-Justice Project and Network (EJPN), initiated and then coordinated for two decades by Presbyterian social ethicist William E. Gibson. He defined eco-justice as

“the well-being of humankind on a thriving earth,...an earth productive of sufficient food, with water fit for all to drink, air fit to breathe, forests kept replenished, renewable resources continuously renewed, nonrenewable resources used as sparingly as possible so that they will be available [to future generations] for their most important uses...On a thriving earth, providing sustainable sufficiency for all, human well-being is nurtured not only by the provision of these material necessities but also by a way of living within the natural order that is **fitting**: respectful of the integrity of natural systems and of the worth of nonhuman creatures, appreciative of the beauty and mystery of the world of nature.” (Gibson, 1985, 25)

In addition to authoring several substantive essays on the subject, Gibson solicited short articles by engaged scholars on a range of eco-justice topics and published them in a quarterly journal he edited called *The Egg*, selections from which were recently republished under one cover (Gibson, 2004, Parts I & II). Within two decades, a significant body of writings emerged that emphasize respect for everykind and show intersecting concern for ecology, justice and faith (See the Venn diagram in Bakken, Engel and Engel, 1995 depicting the intersection of these spheres of concern).

Norms of Eco-Justice Ethics

The basic norms of eco-justice ethics can be summarized as follows:

- * **solidarity** with other people and creatures – companions, victims, and allies – in earth community, reflecting deep respect for diverse creation;
- * ecological **sustainability** – environmentally fitting habits of living and working that enable life to flourish, and utilize ecologically and socially appropriate technology;
- * **sufficiency** as a standard of organized sharing, which requires basic floors and definite ceilings for equitable or “fair” consumption;
- * socially just **participation** in decisions about how to obtain sustenance and to manage community life for the good in common and the good of the commons.

The Solidarity norm comprehends the full dimensions of earth community and of inter-human obligation. Sustainability gives high visibility to ecological integrity and wise, conserving behavior throughout the resource-use cycle. The norms of Sufficiency and Participation highlight the distributive and participatory dimensions of basic social justice. These norms illumine an overarching imperative: to pursue right relations in reinforcing ways that are both ecologically fitting and socially just. (Hessel, 1996 offers a more detailed discussion).

Each norm is ends-oriented and means-clarifying, illumining both where we want to go and how to get there. The observance of each ethical norm reinforces and qualifies the others in contextual decision-making oriented to just and sustainable community. All four are core values or criteria to guide personal and institutional practice, issue analysis and government policy. An ethic of eco-justice applies comprehensively to ominous environmental threats intersecting with major societal problems.

Breadth of Concern

Authentic expressions of eco-justice ethics seek ecological justice in tandem with socio-economic justice. That makes the ethical focus of the eco-justice movement wider than most “environmentalism.” Conferences, forums, networks and publications of the movement have ranged from presenting big picture analyses of the eco-injustice crisis to explorations of specific environmental problems and related issues of hunger action, sustainable agriculture, energy production and use, lifestyle integrity, economic development, debt relief, fair trade, good work, peacemaking, and environmental justice for poor people, racial minorities and women. In that list of concerns one can see the breadth of our subject that now also includes grappling with global warming by reducing carbon emissions while attending to impacts on poor communities, lowlands, oceans, deteriorating places, and threatened species.

The basic objective of earth ethics focusing on eco-justice is to shape just and sustainable community. This purpose connects well with some related emphases that are expressed in public discourse about achieving “sustainability,” “ecological justice” “earth justice,” or environmental justice.”

For example, “environment justice” is an important facet of action for eco-justice, though the latter has wider concerns. Some recent programs of eco-justice education and action fostered by religious denominations have confused matters by calling all that they do “environmental justice” work. This posture does underline the importance of meeting the justice claims of vulnerable human communities and individuals. Obviously, there is much to be done to secure human environmental rights for impacted communities (often racial minorities, and predominantly women and children) that experience the indifference or oppressive power of corrupt governments, privileged classes, and polluting corporations. (Sachs, 1996 offers a brief international overview of the environmental justice movement. On the relationship between a healthy environment and poverty reduction, see Reed, 2006. Schwab, 1994, describes the emergence of environmental justice activism in the U.S.)

Environmental justice, while essential, is only part of the large agenda of seeking the common good for humans in harmony with the sustaining matrix of life. Therefore, “Eco-justice [also] recognizes in other creatures and natural systems the claim to be respected and valued and taken into account in societal arrangements... The concern for ecological soundness and sustainability includes but transcends the concern of humans for themselves.” (Gibson, 2004, 34)

Note well that the eco-justice movement is concerned with a double “eco” – both ecology and economics. Those who equate eco-justice with “ecological justice” inadvertently tend to play down or may lose sight of major social justice requirements in a world of predatory economic exploitation driven by market fundamentalism that widens the rich-poor gap while intensifying pollution and waste. Some recent publications such as the substantive four-volume Earth Bible series, initiated by an ecumenical team of Australian scholars, use the term “ecojustice” to name their ecologically focused principles of Earth Justice, which are ecological interdependence, intrinsic worth, human custodianship, and resistance. (Habel, 2000, 42-53) The Earth Bible volumes offer a fresh Earth-conscious approach to, and some new interpretations of, scriptural passages, but that project fails to also focus on social and economic justice requirements for achieving sustainable earth community.

Ecumenical and Secular Development

The ecumenical movement worldwide, through deliberations and programs spanning more than three decades, has fostered eco-justice ethics, beginning with a thematic focus on “just, participatory, and sustainable society” initiated at the 1975 Nairobi Assembly of the World Council of Churches (WCC). That theme was influenced by insights on Environment and Development articulated at the 1972 U.N. Stockholm Conference. Ecumenical openness to being instructed by emergent global discourse about sustainability was also shaped by biblical-theological reflection on the eco-injustice crisis. E-J ethics have deep biblical roots in the Bible’s opening vision of creation’s Sabbath, the story of God’s rainbow covenant with “all flesh on earth” after the flood

(Genesis 9), and key summaries of covenant obligations to respond to the poor, to give animals Sabbath rest, to let the land lie fallow, and to cancel debts periodically, if not to redistribute land (see Exodus 23, Leviticus 19 and 25, and Deuteronomy 15). The same spiritually-grounded ethical posture permeates Jesus teachings (e.g., in the Gospel of Luke) about living into the kingdom of God (today we might call it “kindom”). Abrahamic monotheists informed by this fresh view of the human-earth relationship can comprehend that all beings on earth are one household (oikos) requiring an economy (oikonomia) that takes ecological and social stewardship (oikonomos) seriously.

As Australian biologist Charles Birch, addressing the 1975 WCC gathering, explained,

A prior requirement of any global society is that it be so organized that human life and other living creatures on which human life depends can be sustained indefinitely within the limits of the Earth. A second requirement is that it be sustained at a quality that makes possible fulfillment of human life for all people. A society so organized to achieve both these ends we can call a sustainable global society...with a new sort of science and technology governed by a new sort of economics and politics. (Birch, 1975)

A follow-up ecumenical conference at MIT in 1979 on “Faith, Science, and the Future” pursued the subject in more detail, and the next WCC Assembly (Vancouver, 1983) emphasized the theme of “Justice, Peace, and Integrity of Creation.” In response, member communions of the WCC began to develop earth ministries. In the U.S., initiatives of that kind were led by the Eco-Justice Working Group of the National Council of Churches (Hessel, 2004. 86-90)

A Roman Catholic response began to unfold with the Pope’s 1979 trip to the Americas (first Puebla, Mexico, and then Des Moines, Iowa), where John Paul II emphasized land stewardship. Pastoral letters on the same subject issued by Catholic Bishops in Appalachia and the Great Plains preceded the Pope’s visit (Hart, 1984). A decade later, the Vatican issued a 1990 message on “The Ecological Crisis” A Common Responsibility.” Then on Pentecost, 1992, in Brazil, parallel to the 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development (the “Earth Summit” in Rio de Janeiro), an inclusive gathering of Protestant, Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Anglican leaders facilitated by the WCC issued a *Letter to the Churches*, which concluded its confession of complicity and expression of commitment with these words:

“The Spirit teaches us to go first to those places where community and creation are most obviously languishing, those melancholy places where the cry of the people and the cry of the earth are intermingled. [There] we meet Jesus, who goes before, in solidarity and healing” (Granberg-Michaelson, 1992).

Thought and action for just and sustainable community, post-Rio, have animated a religiously and ethnically pluralistic network of engaged persons on six continents. (In this brief essay I will not discuss parallel expressions of eco-justice ethics related to other world religions, such as Judaism and Confucianism. See the Forum on Religion and Ecology volumes on Judaism and Ecology; Confucianism and Ecology.)

Even as ecumenical earth ethics developed, a parallel secular focus on sustainability -- seeking to protect the environment while combating poverty -- gained

momentum in a series of U.N.-sponsored events, beginning with the 1972 Stockholm Conference on Environment and Development, followed by the 1987 Brundtland Commission Report, the Rio Declaration of the 1992 Earth Summit, and the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg. Cumulatively, these global deliberations exposed the inseparable link between environmental issues and socio-economic problems and the geo-political proportions of the struggle to integrate them.

The Stockholm Conference underlined the significance of sustainability as a standard of authentic, healthy development, and the need for both intergenerational and intragenerational equity among humans to move toward achieving it. The Stockholm Declaration called on the nations to improve the environment “for present and future generations... a goal to be pursued together with, and in harmony with, the established and fundamental goals of peace and worldwide economic and social development.”

This set the stage for two important shifts of emphasis in global ethics discourse: seeing holistic connections between humanity’s social, ecological, and economic obligations; and asserting responsibility for future as well as present generations. The two shifts in ethical sensibility show up quite clearly in the 1987 Brundtland Commission’s definition of sustainable development: i.e., it “meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” The ethical thrust, however, was still toward meeting the needs of humankind, without direct attention to the well-being of otherkind, beyond their instrumental value to humans. The 1992 Earth Summit had a similarly anthropocentric emphasis on the use value of the environment, though there were some leads toward more environmentally promising ethics... For example, Principle 1 of the Rio Declaration asserts that “human beings are at the center of concerns for sustainable development,” and that “they are entitled to a healthy and productive life in harmony with nature.” Principle 7 asserts that “states shall cooperate in a spirit of global partnership to conserve, protect, and restore the health and integrity of Earth’s ecosystem....” And Principle 25 declares that “peace, development and environmental protection are independent and indivisible.”

A decade later, the U.N. Report of the World Summit on Sustainable Development (2002) emphasized that “sound environmental, social and economic policies, democratic institutions responsive to the needs of the people, the rule of law, anti-corruption measures, gender equality, and an enabling environment for investment are the basis for sustainable development.” (Beware, however, of the last phrase,)

Meanwhile, anthropocentric thinking, shallow views of ‘sustainable development,’ along with unrealistic cornucopian optimism about the results of deregulated economic growth and innovative technology have remained dominant in most government and business circles. These ethically barren approaches are being challenged by a more substantial, holistic paradigm of sustainable community (Rasmussen, 1995), or “Earth Democracy” (Shiva, 2005). Vandana Shiva favors Earth Democracy as an alternate name for an ethic of justice, sustainability and peace that “allows us to reclaim our common humanity and our unity with all life” over against development schemes that enclose or privatize the commons and deny poor communities sustainable livelihoods.

“Earth Democracy relocates the sanctity of life in all beings and all people irrespective of class, gender, religion, or caste. And it redefines ‘upholding family

values' as respecting the limits on greed and violence set by belonging to the earth family" (Shiva, 2005, 8)

21st Century Earth Ethics

The global reach and intercultural salience of deepening eco-justice ethics show up most cogently in sixteen "interdependent principles for a sustainable way of life" that are articulated in the Earth Charter (2000). The Charter is an international "peoples treaty" endorsed by a growing number of NGOs and government representatives in the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN or World Conservation Union). Its ethical imperatives (presented as sets of four principles in Parts I-IV of the Charter) actually unpack and broaden the meaning of the four basic eco-justice norms – solidarity, sustainability, sufficiency and participation – in that order. As Earth Charter drafting committee member, J. Ronald Engel, emeritus Professor of Social Ethics, Meadville-Lombard Theological School, Chicago, points out,

The Charter repeatedly drives home the message that...only through the elimination of poverty and other human deprivation, and the establishment of just and non-violent social and economic relationships, will the citizens of the world be in a position to protect and restore the integrity of Earth's ecological systems... The Earth Charter thus embraces what has come to be called an 'eco-justice' ethic -- a comprehensive and holistic moral approach in which ecological and social (including economic and cultural) well-being are considered both dependent and independent variables. It is not possible to adequately address one without also addressing the other; yet each also needs to be addressed on its own terms." (Engel, 2007)

Mature eco-justice ethics offer vision and values to shape just and sustainable community in a socially-conflicted and ecologically-stressed world. This approach to ethics rejects two popular false assumptions. The first is that the natural environment should be a focus of responsibility apart from considerations of human well-being. E-J ethics assert to the contrary that interhuman justice is part of environmental wholeness. Not only is nature's health inseparable from human well-being; environmental health will never get the priority attention it deserves in religion, ethics, business or politics if nature is viewed as external to human society, or we to it. The second false assumption being challenged is that societies can wait to become ecologically sustainable until they "develop" economically. This false assumption is a major drag on national and international action to mitigate if not avert climate change. Neo-liberals and Marxists alike have assumed that economic development has priority, to be followed eventually by environmental protection measures. But that is an impossible scenario for today's crowded, technologically toxic and mal-developed world, facing severe biophysical limits and increasing socio-economic inequity. Healthy society depends upon ecological security and vice versa. Therefore, E-J ethics now emphasize that ecology and justice are non-sequential, simultaneous requirements, all the more so when economic problems become dire.

E-J ethics will be all the more pertinent as the world community seeks to meet the challenges of global warming in a time of widening social inequality. Affluent sectors of wealthy countries, which account for 2/3rds of the atmospheric buildup of carbon dioxide

over recent decades, must recognize their ecological debt to poor communities and countries which have suffered major polluting effects and little social benefit from natural resource exploitation at the hands of corporate investors and their government sponsors, while experiencing disproportionate negative effects of climate change.

In retrospect, a posture that first emerged to reconcile post- Earth Day competition between social justice and environmental action groups turns out to offer much more than trade-offs. Eco-Justice vision and values provide a dynamic framework for philosophical and ethical reflection that should continue to animate religious communities, environmental and economic organizations, government entities, educational institutions, social action groups, and mass media to meet the real needs of distressed Earth community. That is the urgent moral assignment of our time.

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[An earlier version of this essay was posted on the website of the Forum on Religion and Ecology. For a profile of the author, who in the 1980s was a founding co-chair of the Eco-Justice Working Group of the National Council of Churches in the U.S.A., see Brief Profile of Website Editor.)