

# **Freedom, Equality, and Community in the Eco-Justice Literature**

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### **The Emergence of the Eco-Justice Paradigm**

The past few decades have been marked by a persistent sense that ours is a deeply troubled planet. That sense is driven by awareness of social realities: widespread poverty and human suffering, entrenched inequalities of status and power, and violent conflicts within and between nations that threaten genocide or nuclear annihilation. It is also driven by ecological factors: projected limits to material resources, environmental degradation, and the abuse and extirpation of countless nonhuman creatures and species.

Responses to such a multifaceted complex of local and global concerns are characterized by fragmentation--differing, diverging and even conflicting focuses on issues, disciplinary approaches, political causes and social movements--and by quests for reconciliation and integration.

A case in point is the tension and occasional open conflict that surfaced in the late 1960's between social justice advocates concerned with the alleviation of poverty and the overcoming of racism and environmentalists concerned with stopping air and water pollution and protecting wilderness and wildlife. Even those committed to both causes have been troubled by the frequent incompatibility between strategies to achieve justice for the poor and oppressed and efforts to protect environmental quality and ecological integrity.

It is increasingly recognized, however, that there are also many ways in which social justice and ecological integrity support, and indeed require, each other, and that environmental and social problems cannot be resolved in isolation from each other. Understanding the connections between ecology and social justice requires a more comprehensive perspective than simply focusing on particular issues. Justice criteria need to be included in environmental policy making and environmental factors and impacts must be considered in formulating social policy. Negatively, such a perspective requires identifying the economic, political and cultural factors which are at the root of both environmental degradation and social injustice. Positively, it means developing visions of the "good society" which embrace both environmental integrity and social justice.

In the quest for such an integral perspective, the Christian churches have played an important leadership role through efforts to develop an ethic and theology of "eco-justice." Norman Faramelli, who coined the term, defined eco-justice in 1973 as "the simultaneous concern for social justice and environmental quality plus their interrelationships."<sup>1</sup> William Gibson included concern for the welfare of "otherkind" as well as humankind in his definition of eco-justice as "respect and

fairness toward all creation, human and non-human."<sup>2</sup>

"Eco-justice" tends to focus on a certain subset of problems for social ethics--those where questions of social justice and questions of environmental ethics overlap. Such issues include: social, environmental, and resource limits to some forms of economic growth; energy production and the distribution of energy and resources; the exploitation of indigenous lands and peoples; land use, agriculture, and world hunger; population growth; the siting of hazardous industries and waste sites in poor and minority communities; and environmental protection and employment.

Yet "eco-justice" is more than the sum of such specific "cases." It also denotes a larger framework or perspective on social ethics. In fact, it can be argued that "eco-justice" is a major, emerging paradigm for doing ethics at the turn of the century. In a fractured and fragmented world, eco-justice tries to see things whole.

The literature dealing with these and other issues and attempting to articulate an integral perspective has grown rapidly over the past three-and-a-half decades. The National Council of Churches of Christ and the World Council of Churches (under the rubrics of "The Just, Participatory and Sustainable Society" and "Justice, Peace, and the Integrity of Creation") have been major forums for this discussion. However, eco-justice under whatever name or form has been approached from a great variety of theological orientations--Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox, evangelical and mainline Protestant, liberationist, feminist, and process theology, and so on.

This essay attempts to sketch the outlines of the Christian eco-justice literature by showing how the understandings of three key social-ethical values--freedom, equality, and community--are extended, enriched, applied, interconnected, and shaped by an eco-justice perspective.<sup>3</sup> To review this extensive literature in a few pages imposes several limitations. Many nuances of and contrasts between the various Christian eco-justice proponents must be omitted, although some important controversies will be noted. Because the focus is on core ethical principles, the complexity of the many problems confronted and responses proposed can only be hinted at, and the theological contexts and bases of the ethical positions described can only be briefly noted. However, such a survey will provide a general orientation to the literature, and produce a recognizable portrait of the emerging eco-justice paradigm which will indicate the contribution it makes to wider public discussion of the future of the entire community of life on earth.

## **1. Freedom**

It will be helpful to begin with freedom for two reasons. First, freedom is widely regarded as a--perhaps the--central social value in American politics, economics, and culture. Any effort to critique, reform, or transform the social and

environmental practices of American (and, more generally, Western) society must confront the roots of those practices in the emotionally-charged ideal of individual liberty. The second is that examining eco-justice approaches to freedom will necessarily raise the issues of equality and community, and thus will help to show the relationships between them.

"Freedom" frequently appears in lists of eco-justice norms. And, although liberation theologies (with the exception of feminist theology) have only recently begun to address environmental issues, eco-justice writers often express the norm of freedom in terms of "liberation." Christian eco-justice writers commonly ground their concern for freedom or liberation in the biblical narrative of God's freeing the Hebrew people from bondage, in the mission and ministry of Jesus as a continuation of God's liberating work, and in St. Paul's teachings on Christian freedom. But what is most distinctive is the way in which eco-justice thinking emphasizes the interlaced natural and social constraints, conditions, and ends of human freedom, and extends the scope of freedom to include the nonhuman realm. This emphasis and extension challenges the notion of freedom that predominates in modern society and which is incorporated into its key institutions.

### *The Limits to Freedom*

A common theme in the literature is that the view of freedom dominant in Western, especially American, society is one-sided and inadequate to our ecological and social situation. Freedom in this society is seen primarily as freedom from--as the absence of external constraints on, or outside interference in, the pursuit of one's self-interests and desires. This is the main notion of freedom presupposed by our main social institutions--"free market" economics, and liberal democratic politics, technology, and education. Although often attacking capitalism and capitalistic institutions, proponents of "liberation" also tend to speak of freedom negatively, as the removal of oppression.

As many eco-justice writers argue, such a notion of freedom makes it difficult to deal with social and environmental problems in which the pursuit of short-term individual interests can result in longer-term harms to the whole society. Technology has increased the potential impact of private actions on common resources and on public health and safety (e.g., in air and water pollution). Thus, limits on "negative" freedom are necessary to protect the welfare of others and the integrity of the environment. In principle, at least some such limits are compatible with the idea, accepted even by libertarians, that one's freedom is limited by respect for the freedom of others and by their right not to be harmed. But a stronger sense of environmental and resource limits and of potential environmental harms leads eco-justice writers to advocate a greater degree of government regulation and enforcement. These same writers, however, are also concerned that such intervention not overstep its own limits.

### *The Conditions of Freedom*

Freedom does have a negative aspect, as "freedom from" coercion or constraint. However, freedom also has a positive aspect, as "freedom for." Part of this positive aspect is the presence of opportunities for meaningful choice and the ability to follow through on them. These opportunities depend on social conditions such as some degree of equal power and a system of "law and order" which places some limitations on the actions of others. And because humans are so dependent upon the resources and support systems of the earth for the meeting of their most basic needs, ecological integrity, too, is an essential precondition for the exercise of human freedom. Freedom itself--whether of individuals or markets--cannot survive unless it respects the given limits and life-sustaining structures that are built into creation. (A human being on the moon could be perfectly free from outside interference, but without a life-support system, that freedom would be less than meaningless.) In the Bible, liberation presupposes nature as the matrix of human life: creation is the arena and instrument of God's liberating activity; the liberated Exodus community (eventually) receives the gift of the Promised Land.

### *The Goal and Content of Freedom*

The positive aspect of freedom also includes "freedom for" in the sense of a given goal or content for free action. Reducing freedom to the unhindered pursuit of individual preferences, or equating liberation with the absence of oppression, lacks precisely this sense of a meaningful point to being free that transcends the "free" subject. Such truncated understandings ignore questions of whether all preferences ought to be satisfied, or what should replace the oppressive structures once they are destroyed.

In the Bible and Christian theology, the goal of freedom is responsibility. "Israel was liberated from oppression and suffering, but she was liberated for community and mutual responsibility."<sup>4</sup> True freedom is freedom from that which impedes, not the satisfaction of our own desires, but our fulfillment of God's intentions for us. It is freedom for faithful response; and while this is not wholly dependent upon political and economic freedom, it is hampered by their absence.

In an eco-justice perspective, this responsibility is accountability for the welfare of one's fellow human beings and of the earth. Authentic human freedom is thus not merely the freedom of spontaneous, self-initiated action or the pursuit of individual, subjective preferences. It is the freedom to love, serve, and honor one's fellow creatures, to respect created structures and limits, and to cooperate with God's ordering of the creation. But the end of freedom is also the freedom to enjoy and to celebrate the human community and the whole world of nature--freed from the pathological denial of the body, matter, and the senses and from the anxious need to consume, to dominate and to control. Liberation thus understood is liberation of oppressed and oppressor both for true humanity and

fulfillment as creatures embedded in nature and society.

### *The Liberation of Nature*

The most striking way in which freedom and liberation appears in the eco-justice literature is in the extension of the value of freedom to nonhuman nature. Nonhuman as well as human creatures are viewed as oppressed and deprived of their "relative autonomy" by unjust and unsustainable human institutions and behavior, and cries out to those who have ears to hear. As with human freedom, the freedom of otherkind has both negative and positive aspects. Nonhuman creatures, wild and domestic, may have the right to be free from human cruelty and abuse. Humans may be obliged to "let nature take its course," to allow wild animals to continue to be wild, to participate in the natural competition for existence. What nonhuman beings are to be free for is even harder to state clearly than it is for humans. Simply to survive and to play their roles, as individuals and species, in the evolutionary drama, is one possibility. To respond to human care by sustaining human life in a mutually supportive relationship may be another part of the answer.

### *Freedom and Equality*

Focusing attention on the eco-social conditions and content of positive freedom is a valuable contribution of the eco-justice literature which requires further exploration and development. However, more attention also needs to be paid to the difficult issues that arise over restricting freedom for the sake of promoting environmental and other social justice values. In particular, we must face the problem of specifying the warrants for constraining individual freedom and defining the goals of authentic freedom under the prevailing conditions of inequality and community fragmentation.

For example, reducing the rate of global population increase appears to be one of the conditions for human fulfillment and responsibility within a finite and interdependent world and for the "liberation of nature" itself. Yet unjust inequalities--between women and men, between more slowly growing but extravagantly consuming populations in the North and burgeoning but low-consumption populations in the South--make discussing the means and ends of steering demographic change extremely difficult and painfully contentious. This is true above all when dealing with the use of coercion and incentives to achieve population goals.

Moreover, talk of limiting individual material and economic aspirations for the sake of a greater good sounds very differently on the ears of the historically privileged and the historically disadvantaged. While the former may need to learn to hear the call to accept limits and responsibility as "good news," to the latter it sounds like the familiar rhetoric that the privileged have used to protect their privileges from the aspirations of the disenfranchised.

These questions indicate one point at which the value of freedom intersects with the next social value to be considered: equality.

## 2. Equality

The quest for social justice, as the pursuit of equality or distributive justice, is often contrasted with the preservation of freedom from interference: deliberate efforts to redirect the allocation of social and material goods involve limiting the freedom of individuals, corporations and the market. However, justice also aims at making the conditions for meaningful freedom available to all, and at limiting the inequalities of status and power which allow some groups to dominate and oppress others. It is this second relationship between freedom and equality that is dominant in the eco-justice literature.

### *Inequality and the Environment*

In contrast to freedom, which has been a secondary theme in the eco-justice literature, great inequality in the distribution of social and environmental goods and harms has been a central concern. Inequality and environmental concern have been seen to intersect in several ways. One concern has been that efforts at ecological protection, reducing consumption and curbing economic growth will increase poverty and joblessness and limit opportunities for the poor to improve their lot. (Some critics have even implied or openly charged that environmentalism is a deliberate strategy to keep the poor, minorities, and the developing nations "in their place.")

On the other hand, it has been argued that environmental and resource limits to economic growth (at least insofar as such growth depends on increasing resource consumption and waste production) require the global redistribution of wealth: since the earth cannot sustain the whole human population at a standard of living equal to the U.S. and other "developed" nations, the development of the poor requires the "de-development" of the rich. It is also becoming increasingly clear how, in many parts of the world, poverty and environmental degradation form a vicious cycle: poverty causes environmental degradation as those with the fewest resources are forced to overexploit them in order to survive, and ecological collapse leads to hunger and homelessness. Poverty, social insecurity, and high rates of child mortality contribute to rapid population growth, which places pressure on ecological carrying capacity.

Responsibility for environmental degradation, and the costs and benefits of overtaxing the earth's resources and support systems, are not equally distributed under the present system. It is the relatively wealthy who, by their high levels of consumption and the resource- and pollution-intensive technologies they control, cause the greatest environmental harm--but it is the poor who suffer the most

from pollution and resource scarcity.

### *Distributive Justice*

An ecological perspective reshapes the conception of the human and transhuman goods that are at stake in efforts to realize a more just society. Bringing environmental values into the social justice discussion enlarges the "what" that is to be distributed (rights and goods) and those "to whom" they are owed (scope), and influences the "why" (criteria) according to which they are to be distributed.

**Environmental Rights and Goods:** What is to be distributed? One way of defining the material with which distributive justice works is in terms of rights. If distributive justice has to do with "giving each his/her due," rights define what it is that is due to someone as a matter of justice (not simply what would be good to give someone as a matter of charity). For many eco-justice writers, foremost among these is the right of persons to the environmental conditions and means of subsistence. That basic needs ought to be met in a timely fashion is often referred to as the principle of "sufficiency." This may not mean the direct provision of food, clothing, shelter, etc. so much as guaranteeing the opportunity and access to resources so that one may work to obtain them (with exceptions made for those who cannot work). Perhaps the most important means of subsistence for rural people throughout the world is tillable land. Accordingly, much eco-justice literature focuses on issues of land ownership, distribution and reform--including the land rights of indigenous peoples--not only in the Third World, but in the U.S. as well. (The theology of the land in the Hebrew Scriptures has been an important resource in this discussion.) Similar arguments could be made for people who are immediately dependent on other natural resources for their livelihood, such as timber or fish. And, directly or indirectly, all human beings depend on the integrity of ecological support systems and renewable resources for their existence.

Beyond basic subsistence needs, there are other environmental values for human beings which are allocated as costs and benefits of activities which exploit or protect nature. Among these are environmental health and safety, or, put negatively, protection from pollution or other dangerous and damaging consequences of human activity. But there are also aesthetic, spiritual, and moral goods that come from being in contact with aspects of the non-artifactual nonhuman world such as wilderness. The question of the just distribution of these goods is seldom raised apart from charges that environmentalists are preoccupied with securing such amenities for a wealthy elite rather than, or at the expense of, meeting the urgent needs of the poor. But, as liberation theologian Leonardo Boff points out, human beings--including the oppressed--need beauty as well as bread.<sup>5</sup>

Thus far, the emphasis in this section has been on human beings as the

recipients of justly or unjustly distributed goods. The preceding section on freedom and responsibility, on the other hand, emphasized human beings as active agents. But, as we have seen, freedom and responsibility depend on one's having the opportunities--including the environmental conditions--for meaningful choices. Thus, in speaking of distributive justice, we are also talking about the just distribution of the prerequisites of freedom and responsibility, including the freedom and responsibility to exercise environmental stewardship. This raises the issue of private property, insofar as private property is a prerequisite for responsible freedom in the support of oneself and one's family (and hence as something which ought to be widely or universally distributed).

It also raises the issue of participation, which has been a major theme in the eco-justice literature. Participation (in an economy) can simply mean access to goods and resources. More often, it means having a say in the decision-making procedures that affect one's own life. Participation is closely linked to freedom and community, but it is also a matter of equality. Large inequalities of power (including economic power) concentrate decision-making into the hands of a few while shutting out the many who are directly affected. The "free market" allows those with the most money to determine whether and how a particular resource is to be exploited; technology is often controlled by a relative few. Such concentrations of power can mean that decision-makers are remote from (even ignorant of or indifferent to) the communities and ecosystems they manipulate, and are insulated from the social and environmental costs of their actions. Checks and balances on environmental malfeasance that might come from personal knowledge and involvement are bypassed and subverted. Thus, in yet another way, inequality fosters environmental degradation.

The dependence of human well-being on the environment does not mean that issues of "environmental integrity" must always take priority over "social justice" issues. Rather, it means that any effort to meet human needs and defend human dignity will eventually be self-defeating if it fails to take into account the environmental preconditions of those goods.

**Criteria for Distribution:** What are the criteria for distributive justice? How do we decide who gets how much of what? In the eco-justice literature we find both a critique of existing patterns of distribution and their determinants, and proposals for how environmental (and other) goods such as those described above ought to be distributed.

Whatever de jure principles may be appealed to to justify the inequalities of existing distributive patterns--merit, effort, contribution, etc., the de facto determinant (apart from good fortune), in the eyes of many or most eco-justice writers is power. In particular, they focus on economic power (wealth) and technological (including military) power as enabling dominant nations and classes to appropriate natural resources and other environmental goods to themselves and shift the burdens of environmental degradation to others. The

preceding discussion of how concentrations of power subvert participation shows how this can come about. Wealthy individuals, corporations, and financial institutions exert a disproportionate influence on where resources flow and how they are used; those who control technology benefit disproportionately from its use; militarily or politically powerful peoples colonize weaker nations and extract their resources and destroy their environments; and so on. Thus it is not surprising that not only a great gap between the rich and poor exists, but also that it is widening.

Social, racial, and cultural status also play a major role in the way environmental benefits and harms are presently distributed. A major theme in eco-justice writing (especially in ecofeminist writing) is the critique of domination according to hierarchies of value and authority which set men above women, "civilized Christians" above "savage pagans," and whites above persons of color, and the rejection of the religious warrants for such hierarchies. That these hierarchies have damaging environmental consequences for those in the subordinate position is seen in the impacts of deforestation, water pollution, and land degradation on Third World women (who often have primary responsibility for meeting their families' basic needs); the siting of toxic waste dumps and hazardous industries in minority communities; and continuing struggles over indigenous land and resource rights.

Over against such power- and status-based distribution, the eco-justice literature places stronger emphasis on distribution to meet basic needs and to reduce or limit, if not eliminate, inequalities of wealth and power. (Eco-justice writers vary, however, in their degree of support for more centrally-planned or more market-based economies.) In large part this bias is grounded in those themes in the Bible and in Christian tradition which emphasize the equality of all persons under God and God's special concern for the poor. But a second source may be the ecological paradigm itself. Humans are not totally autonomous, self-sufficient beings. Rather, like all other creatures, they are enmeshed in webs of ecological interdependence. We do not have our being; "we receive our being in our being-with" God, humankind, and nature.<sup>6</sup> Thus we have duties of beneficence to others as well as non-maleficence; we are obliged to not withhold needed sustenance from others, as well as to not deprive them of the goods (life, freedom, health, property) they already possess.<sup>7</sup>

**The Scope of Distributive Justice:** Among whom are the goods of the earth and of earthly living to be distributed? What is the scope of distributive justice? With lengthening economic and technological reach--into the future as well as around the globe--and deepening ecological awareness, our sense of interdependence with others has expanded. We are increasingly interdependent with the distant human neighbors who share our atmosphere, our oceans, and our economic markets; with future generations (or at least they are increasingly dependent upon us); and with nonhuman life-forms and ecosystems. What obligations of justice do we have toward them? With respect to the latter two

classes, this question is especially challenging.

How can we have obligations to those who do not (yet) exist? To what extent can we impose hardship on present generations for possible benefits to future ones? How far can we risk harm to our descendants in order to benefit ourselves and present neighbors? In the eco-justice literature, the belief that we do have obligations to or for those to come is represented by the norm of "sustainability"--the duty to pass on adequate resources and preserve earth's capacity to sustain a reasonable quality of life.

What obligations do we have to nonhuman beings, and what characteristics make something worthy of moral regard: intelligence? capacity to suffer? life? existence? Are all morally considerable beings equal, or are there gradations of value? Does the language of "rights" apply, and if so, does it apply to species and ecosystems as well as individuals? How do we deal with conflicts of interest between humankind and otherkind? The trend has been to affirm that all creatures (at least, those which can be harmed or helped in some way) have intrinsic value as beings whom God created, sustains, and loves, although not necessarily equal intrinsic value. Enlarging the sphere of moral regard is also supported by pointing to ideological parallels and connections between the domination of nature and the domination of certain groups of humans--especially women, non-European peoples (often considered "closer to nature"), and slaves. Just as the moral considerability of these and other groups was denied until moral and legal rights were expanded to encompass them, so the notion of rights must be widened to include animals and other nonhuman beings. However, some writers object to this extension of intrinsic value and argue that only human interests can and should be taken morally into account.

### *Equality and Community*

Further development, discussion, and defense of an eco-justice perspective on distributive justice is necessary if Christian ethicists are to stimulate and contribute to public deliberation on environmental and social justice issues. The links between poverty and environmental degradation are becoming more widely recognized by environmentalists and development theorists and practitioners, but serious conflicts between economic and ecological interests remain. We are only beginning to understand the ways in which our relationships to the natural environment are important for our physical, mental, and spiritual well-being. Controversy about the place of otherkind in our moral scheme of things continues, as does uncertainty about whether and how non-anthropocentric values can be effectively incorporated into decision-making and public policy.

But it is also necessary to probe the sorts of questions about distributive justice that lead to the third value in our triad. Equality is generally regarded as a matter of relations between individuals, just as rights are generally seen to be held by individuals and distributions as being made among individuals. For many, the

emphasis on rights and the plurality of competing interests in the tradition of classical liberalism is overly individualistic, and has eclipsed the values of sociality, solidarity, and the common good. Thus it is to the norm of "community" that we now turn.

### **3. Community**

The creation and nurture of communities and relationships characterized by interdependence, mutuality, diversity, cooperation, conviviality, communion, and love is a prominent norm or goal in the eco-justice literature. Closely related social ethical principles frequently cited include the common good and solidarity.

However, community is not just another social-ethical value alongside freedom and equality in the eco-justice literature. It also informs the meaning of freedom and equality. Understood as embracing both the human community and the "biotic community" in a wider community of creation, it is perhaps the crucial concept underlying eco-justice itself.

#### *Community, Equality, Freedom*

Community can be seen as both the presupposition and the goal of just distribution. Those who are included in "the community"--distant neighbors, future generations, or nonhuman beings--are those who are entitled to their fair share of the goods of the community. Those goods--for humans, at least--include the means and opportunities to participate in the community through work, citizenship, stewardship, etc. The welfare of nonhumans, too, is communal insofar as it depends on right relationships among the members of their ecological community, including human beings. Equitable and inclusive distribution of many goods is required, it can be argued, because those goods--natural resources, clean air, fresh water, climatic stability, etc.--are held in common, by the community, as part of a common heritage. The absence of domination is also a precondition for community.

Community is also essential for the understanding of freedom that is proposed in much of the eco-justice literature. Not only must the needs of the community be weighed against the exercise of individual freedom in the negative sense, but community is a necessary condition for the freedom in the positive sense. The contrast between emphasis on the negative or on the positive aspect of freedom is a contrast between a more individualistic and a more social understanding of the human person. And, as we have seen, responsibility to and for the well-being of a wider community is a common eco-justice understanding of what human beings are to be free (or liberated) for.

#### *Community as Conceptual Model*

Thus, community is not simply part of the subject matter with which eco-justice is concerned, but is a fundamental paradigm for interpreting the eco-social reality in which human beings live and act, and for understanding human beings themselves.

Explicit or implicit in the eco-justice literature, is what could be termed a "relational anthropology:" a view of the human being as constituted--not merely impinged upon--by social and ecological relations. The extreme individualism of modern, and especially American, society is a frequent target for critique, and an interpretation of persons as "persons-in-community" is the usual alternative. Also criticized is the tendency to view human beings as separate from and independent of--and even fundamentally at war with--the natural world

Complementary to this relational view of the person is a holistic or ecological model of the whole of reality in which all beings or events are internally or essentially related. The contrast here is with the atomistic, mechanistic, reductionist world-picture that has dominated modern science, at least until the emergence of the "postmodern" perspectives of ecology and particle physics.

Such anthropological and cosmological or ontological perspectives can be developed from a number of bases. Process theology is a major philosophical articulation of persons as essentially related to society and nature, but it is not the only source for such a view. Biblical themes supportive of community include covenant (embracing humans and the land in an interdependent community); shalom as health and wholeness of communities as well as persons; and the Kingdom of God as inclusive community. The cluster of words and concepts rooted in the ancient Greek term *oikos* (household)--economy, ecology, ecumenical, etc.--and the Trinity as a mutually interpenetrating community of persons are among classical Christian ideas drawn upon. Metaphors from outside the dominant traditions in Western theology, such as the world as God's body, are also used. Non-Western cultures, especially those of indigenous peoples, present an alternative worldview to the pervasive individualism and nature/humanity dualism of Western thought.

### *Levels of Community*

Given this fundamental conceptual orientation toward social and ecological interrelatedness, concrete community on several levels becomes very important within the eco-justice literature.

**Global Community:** The facts of ecological interdependence between nations and regions of the world raised by environmental issues such as transboundary air and water pollution, global atmospheric changes (global warming and ozone depletion) and worldwide loss of biodiversity create the need for global solidarity and cooperation. Resource shortages--water, land, oil, strategic minerals--also play a role in issues of global war and peace. These are among the factors

leading to calls for a "global ethic" that can give persons of different nations, cultures and faiths a ground for common action on behalf of human beings and the earth.

**Local Communities:** Global economic interdependence, however, is viewed with more ambivalence in the eco-justice literature. Some authors believe that the integrity of communities is undermined by free trade, global markets, and transnational corporations, and recommend more local or regional economies loosely linked in a planetary "community of communities." Others, while critical of the practices of economic globalism, argue that abandoning globalism altogether is impractical or inadvisable. There are intermediate positions: the notion of "subsidiarity," as the principle of assigning particular social functions to the smallest social unit that can carry them out, gives preference to smaller communities without ruling out larger, more centralized agencies.

Also under scrutiny are the destructive effects of market economics, agribusiness, technology, and Western models of economic development on various communities, from Midwestern farming communities to rural Appalachia to the indigenous peoples of the Amazonian rain forests. Cultural degradation, the loss of sustainable lifeways, alienation from the land, and loss of autonomy and self-reliance--as well as poverty and environmental destruction--are major concerns.

**Creation as a Community:** Community membership need not be limited to human beings. Other creatures are frequently included in morally significant community and the common good, visions of an "earth community" or the "community of creation." "The integrity of creation" has emerged from discussions in the World Council of Churches as a prominent term to denote the common good of the whole creation. Eco-justice thus becomes primarily a question not of choosing between human and nonhuman life, but of deciding what forms of "mixed" human-nonhuman communities ought to be realized, keeping in mind both the similarities and the differences between persons in culture and wild creatures in nature.

A crucial and controversial question for eco-justice is: what is or ought to be the role of human beings as members of the community of creation? Possible answers tend either to emphasize human distinctiveness and responsibility (such as dominion, stewardship, co-creatorship, or priesthood) or stress that humans are part of and dependent upon nature (partnership, cooperation, participation, subordination, etc.). The way one defines the human role will strongly influence one's understanding of the inherent dignity that belongs to humans and to other beings, and thus the kinds of freedom and equality appropriate to each.

### *Community: From Ethics to Praxis*

Community is of particular importance because it is not merely part of the ethical

theory of eco-justice. Eco-justice values can become real and effective only insofar as they are incarnated in concrete communities. This raises questions of how to reshape and redirect politics and civil community to be more compatible with social justice and ecological integrity. But Christian eco-justice writers have also expressed their hopes--and doubts--about the possible roles of the church in realizing eco-justice: as community of moral deliberation and formation; as the embodiment of an alternative to the status quo; as an agent of societal transformation; as a witnessing community, and so on.

Attempts to realize such communities will put the adequacy of eco-justice thinking to the test, as well as provoke new insights and raise new issues for reflection. One shortcoming of the extant eco-justice literature is a paucity of in-depth analyses of just such concrete efforts to put eco-justice values into practice.

## **Conclusion**

The eco-justice literature adds weight to arguments, also found outside the literature, that we must understand freedom as freedom for responsibility, that global issues of distributive justice must be confronted, and that we must work to build and strengthen communities. But it also adds new dimensions and richness of texture to freedom, equality and community by recognizing--in contrast to conventional social and ethical thought--that human persons are constituted by ecological as well as social relationships. Even more radically, it expands the scope for application of these norms to the whole community of the terrestrial creation, and in so doing drives us to again ask fundamental ethical questions--what is freedom? equality? community?--as ontological and cosmological questions, as questions about the natural world as well as about the human world. In short, eco-justice gives ecological substance to the concept of the human good, and embeds that enriched human good within the larger, transhuman good of the biosphere.

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See also: Birch and Cobb, Boff, Pitcher, Rolston, Stivers above under "Freedom"; Robb and Casebolt, ed., Sindima in Birch et. al., eds. above under "Equality."

## Notes

1 Norman Faramelli, "The Role of the Church in Eco-Justice," *Church and Society* 64 (November-December 1973): 4.

2 William E. Gibson, "Eco-Justice: Burning Word: Heilbronner and Jeremiah to the Church," *Foundations* 20 (Ocober/December 1977), 318.

3 These are three of the four facets of the "prism of justice" as enunciated by Douglas Sturm in his presidential address to the Society of Christian Ethics, "On Meanings of Justice," reprinted in his *Community and Alienation: Essays on Process Thought in Public Life* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988). The fourth, "wisdom" has been omitted here for reasons of space; for a brief treatment of its relation to the eco-justice literature, see Peter W. Bakken, Joan Gibb Engel, and J. Ronald Engel, Ecology, *Justice and Christian Faith: A Critical Guide to the Literature* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1995), 21.

4 Bruce C. Birch and Larry Rasmussen, *The Predicament of the Prosperous* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1978), 85.

5 Leonardo Boff, *Ecology and Liberation: A New Paradigm*, trans. John Cumming (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995), 2.

6 Douglas John Hall, *Imaging God: Dominion as Stewardship* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans; New York, Friendship Press, 1986), 133. Emphasis mine.

7 L. Shannon Jung, *We are Home: A Spirituality of the Environment* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1993), 104