



Environmental Justice: Expanding the Catholic Tradition

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While Christian theology has, historically, for the most part been narrowly human-centred, ecotheologians are more inclined to look wider than this to include environmental issues. Public debate about climate change that has hit media discussion in the last few years has been on the agenda of most ecotheologians for the last thirty years. But can there be a specific Christian theory of justice? How do we come to any sense of balance between the good for the planet and for people in poverty? The concept of the common good in Roman Catholic social teaching is equivalent to the secular idea of the public good, one that goes far wider than particular communities. The Roman Catholic Church's social teaching on the environment spells out the issue:

A way of life that disregards and damages God's creation, forces the poor into greater poverty, and threatens the right of future generations to a healthy environment and to their fair share of the earth's wealth and resources, is contrary to the vision of the Gospel' (1)

According to this argument, the fate of human beings is so bound up with that of the planet that we owe respect to the environment for the sake of those persons who are recipients of the Earth's goods, both now and in the future. Here fairness is restricted to the human community, but broadened to the environment for the sake of that community, and widened to include future generations.

Pope John Paul II was perhaps more aware than most of the need for linking the needs of people with planet. In a joint declaration on the environment with the ecumenical Patriarchate of the Orthodox Church, he calls for a deep inner change of heart, so that:



What is required is an act of repentance on our part and a renewed attempt to view ourselves, one another, and the world around us within the perspective of the divine design for creation. The problem is not simply economic and technological; it is moral and spiritual. A solution at the economic and technological level can be found only if we undergo, in the most radical way, an *inner change of heart*, which can lead to a change in lifestyle and of unsustainable patterns of consumption and production. A genuine conversion in Christ will enable us to change the way we think and act. (2)

While most theologians will balk at any idea that God 'designed' creation, he did not intend to mean intervention in a literal way, for what was behind this statement is the belief that the Earth is good as God is the creator, and this is also a view shared by the other Abrahamic faith traditions. His reference to repentance and the need for sustainable living, understood in terms of patterns of consumption, is also reflected in his statement to a general audience a year earlier:

Above all in our time man has devastated wooded plains and valleys, polluted the waters, deformed the earth's habitat ... humiliating – to use an image of Dante Alighieri (*Paradiso* XXII, 151) – the earth, that flower bed that is our dwelling. It is necessary therefore, to stimulate and sustain the 'ecological conversion', which over these last decades has made humanity more sensitive when facing the catastrophe towards which it is moving ... Therefore, not only is a 'physical' ecology at stake, attentive to safeguarding the habitat of different living beings, but also a 'human' ecology that will render the life of creatures more dignified, protecting the radical good of life in all its manifestations and preparing an environment for future generations that is closer to the plan of the Creator. (3)

Pope John Paul II's attention to human ecology here is significant in as much as he seems to be implying that people and planet are so intertwined that one cannot be considered without the other (4). Buried in this message is the recognition that there must be a radical change of heart and mind that includes care for the Earth as an integral part of the spiritual life. This assumes that we are aware of what the problem is and how to move forward. I suggest that this idea of ecological conversion needs filling out in two steps: by recognising what environmental justice might be, and also by recognising where we habitually fall short, that is, a recognition of guilt. This is not negative in the sense of self-punishment, but a necessary step in order to move forward towards positive action, namely, the implementation of environmental justice, and, as I suggest below, ecological justice.

What is environmental justice?

I am defining environmental injustice as the uneven and disproportionate impact of climate change or other impacts of environmental damage, such as pollution and toxicity, on the poorest communities of the world, leading to death, homelessness or a permanent refugee status. It is relatively easy to extend traditional categories of social justice to such situations. Of course, eventually the impact of climate change at least will be so extreme that most human populations will be threatened in one way or another, but for the time being this is not yet the case. Although there is debate about the extent of climate change, doubts raised by those sceptics who have argued that it is not primarily caused by human induced effects have proved invalid (5).

More radical is the possibility of ecological justice. I suggest that this category is relevant in terms of species extinction, either through direct or indirect human activity, which can be categorised in the language used by Marilyn Adams (1999) as a 'horrendous evil'. Ecological injustice is expressed not just in extinction, but also through the lack of flourishing of non-human creatures and lack of a stable habitat that results from extreme distortions in climate, where these are the result of human activity. Ecologists can help us decide which species



might be able to tolerate impacts of climate change or indirect impacts on habitat more than others, but the irreversible loss of many species through loss of habitat is, I suggest, one of the most devastating effects of climate change.

Anthropogenic sin

While in the past theologians and ethicists have been content to ignore what science has to say on a number of issues, when it comes to consideration of climate change there seems little excuse for either the dismissal or ignorance of scientific research. In those parts of the world where climate change has rather less impact, it is relatively easy to be in a state of denial about the importance of human activity in such effects. I suggest that one of the responsibilities of theologians is to remind their listeners that the breakdown of relationships is such that this can be termed a new category of sin. While liberation theologians have, in the past, with due cause, spoken of 'structural sin' as that which impacts on the political sphere, the kind of activity that is relevant in the case of climate change encompasses both individual and structural sin.

Furthermore, it includes what traditional philosophy has termed 'natural evil' as well, insofar as its impacts are mediated through natural disasters of one sort or another. In the case where a natural disaster happens due to the indirect impacts of, for example, pollutant effects, or wider still, climate changes, it is easy to blame the event itself, rather than the people and politics behind the situation as it has arisen. As climate scientists predict that the planet is approaching what might be termed the tipping point beyond recovery, the timing of this action is crucial; there simply is not the luxury to sit back and do nothing anymore, as doing nothing constitutes an action in itself. I suggest, therefore, that we need to come up with a new terminology appropriate for this kind of activity, and name it as 'anthropogenic evil', that is, evils brought about by human activities at the broadest level (6). I also think it appropriate to name this as 'anthropogenic sin', insofar as it reflects a breakdown of relationships in a manner that is dishonouring to God as Creator of all that is. Of course, the level and extent of sin or evil will vary, but it leads to both environmental injustice and ecological injustice. The corollary of this is, that having recognised such injustice, we not only simply confess our guilt, but also find ways to seek to ameliorate the situation through a constructive approach to the issues at all levels, be they local and practical, or political and economic.

Recipients of justice

The category of justice lends itself to such an analysis at different levels and helps to develop a constructive theology that goes beyond individual analysis towards what I would term a public ethic. Of course, we might need to ask ourselves what we mean by ecological justice, since traditional writers have commonly excluded the non-human in moral categories as they cannot have responsibilities. However, along with many other secular sociologists, such as Andrew Dobson (1998), I would argue for the importance of considering all creatures as worthy recipients of justice, even if the extent to which they can also be agents of justice might be debatable. In addition, the advantage of the language of justice is that it allows us to consider the levels of just working between people, in constitutive justice between a state and individuals, in distributive justice, and between the individual and a state in what might be termed, to use classic characterisation, legal, general, or contributive justice. Climate change also includes, of course, international justice in that any one state or nation acting alone will not be able to ameliorate the impacts of climate change.

The classic notion is also complicated today by the fact that many multinational companies have even greater economic powers than some nation states, yet in legal terms are treated as individuals. For theologians, justice has a theological dimension insofar as acting justly is one of the vocations of the Christian community, reflecting an understanding of a God who acts justly and has special care for the poor and vulnerable in society.



Finally, I suggest that understanding justice in terms of principles to be enacted is not sufficient for the witness of the Christian community. Instead, I believe that far greater attention needs to be paid to justice as a virtue to be nurtured and developed. The demands of principled justice provide only the baldest of outlines of what needs to be done; justice as virtue anticipates a greater degree of commitment to action, in so far it as is not just about what I am doing, but who I am becoming in showing forth and demonstrating just acts.

A recovery of prudence as practical wisdom

Aquinas reminded us forcefully that justice is the second of the cardinal virtues, the first being prudence, or practical wisdom (7). In the context of climate change, prudence is as necessary to enable appropriate action as justice; one cannot be considered without the other. Moreover, it is important to point out that, like justice, prudence has a political as well as an individual dimension. Planting biofuels in poor regions of the world in a way that deprives subsistence communities of their basic needs shows clearly a distortion in prudence, for the good that is supposedly sought is one that is good for the companies themselves at the expense of others, in order to get round technical legislation on carbon footprints. The rhetorical gloss of environmental sustainability should not confuse us. For this language has been used as a marketing tool in order to allow further pollution; it is, if you like, an 'environmental indulgence' that resists the need for facing up to the underlying guilt and lack of wisdom. Furthermore, rather like the climate change it is intended to relieve, it has a doubly negative effect on the poorest communities of the world.

Finally, just as charity is integral to wisdom and the means through which wisdom can flourish, it is an essential ingredient of justice-making. This is one reason why a virtue approach to justice is necessary as well as more principled approaches, for it reminds us of the importance of a holistic approach to other virtues and it is doubtful that any single approach to such complex problem-solving will be sufficient. Charity is also a reminder of the need to work for reconciliation between peoples that has opened up as a result of the conflicts arising out of environmental injustice. Ernst Conradie has suggested that, as in South Africa, where the admission of guilt was often buried but was necessary to open up in order to move beyond the political stranglehold of Apartheid (8), so too an admission of guilt and a working towards reconciliation and negotiated settlements may prove to be a gift that the Christian Church can offer in this complex and difficult area of environmental decision-making.

Notes

- (1) Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales (2003) *The Call of Creation, The Natural Environment and Catholic Social Teaching*, London: Catholic Bishops' Conference, 2nd edition, p 1
- (2) 'Declaration on the Environment', signed by Pope John Paul II and Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople, June 10th, 2002
- (3) Pope John Paul II, 19th January 2001, to a General Audience in St Peter's Square.
- (4) Of course, what he meant by 'human ecology' is a topic that is a research project in its own right and is currently being pursued by Fr Peter Conley, one of my doctoral students at the University of Chester.
- (5) The most recent reports, published in 2007 and 2008, by a consortium of many thousands of scientists making up the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) bear this out.
- (6) I discuss this and other areas of ecotheology in Deane-Drummond, C. (2008) *Ecotheology* London: Darton Longman and Todd.
- (7) See Deane-Drummond, C. (2004) *The Ethics of Nature* Oxford: Blackwells, pp 10-15, for discussion.



(8) Professor Ernst Conradie (February 28, 2008) 'Confessing Guilt in the Context of Climate Change', public lecture delivered to the University of Chester.

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