



# 'Ecological justice': Towards an integrative concept of the protection of creation

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This article submits a proposal to replace the term sustainability with the term 'ecological justice'. This novel expression adds to the term Anthropocene, which largely ignores the significant differences from the perspective of justice concerning which human cultures have profoundly reshaped the Earth. Ecological justice refers to the fact that the Earth is the habitat not only of human beings but also of a multitude of other life forms and includes the rights of nonhuman creatures. Over and above this, the term ecological justice speaks to the rights of marginalised people who suffer because of the destruction of natural resources without having significantly contributed to their misuse. In this sense, a new orientation toward the integrity of creation is necessary to overcome the one-sided technicist and economically determined attitude that has become so typical of modern thinking in the Global North. Churches are challenged to develop an integrative concept of ecological justice from the perspective of the biblical tradition, including recent initiatives such as the 'Wuppertal Call'.

**Contribution:** To overcome generalising and anthropocentric perspectives, the proposal of this article argues for the preferred term, 'ecological justice'. This term is inclusive to nonhuman communities in nature, taking into account the effects of environmental destruction on marginalised people. The challenge should be to develop an integrative and unifying concept of ecological justice. The following contribution addresses the question of semantics concerning the key concepts underpinning ecological challenges.

**Keywords:** justice; sustainability; anthropocentrism; Anthropocene; integrity of creation; ecology.

## Introduction

The following article is an explorative essay. It aims to critically examine the terms 'sustainability' and 'Anthropocene' concerning their respective ranges of meaning and, in light of this, to submit a proposal to replace these two terms with the semantics of justice, specifically by the use of the term 'ecological justice'. Two fundamental concepts are decisive in the thinking behind this: the term 'sustainability' – taking into account the interests of different generations of humans – is anthropocentric, and it is impossible to separate it from this definition. At best, moral justification of the interests of nonhuman life forms plays only a subordinate role. Contemporary diagnostics might well accept the term 'anthropocene' as being entirely appropriate concerning the role of human intervention in fundamentally changing the shape of the Earth. Yet it largely ignores the major differences between how different groups of humans have profoundly reshaped the Earth historically. Here, too, it is possible to detect a deficit in justice that can hardly be dealt with appropriately within the perspective of the term 'Anthropocene'.

## The anthropocentric foundation of the term 'sustainability'

The term 'sustainability' is classically conceived in the Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development (1987) of the United Nations – the so-called Brundlandt Report – as an essential concept for the future viability of societies. It considers not only the interests of present-day people but also those of future generations (cf. United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs [UN DESA] 1998). This definition is clearly focused on the interests of humans. The text focuses on the sustainability of human societies, rather than on the interests of nonhuman nature. This correlation of human and nonhuman creatures is evident in the German language, where the term Nachhaltigkeit, translated as 'sustainability', was initially used to mean the cultivation and management of forests to secure long-term timber supplies. Likewise, the 'Sustainable Development Goals' (SDG) adopted by the United Nations (UN) in 2015 argue

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almost exclusively from the perspective of human interests. In contrast, only SDG 14, which aims for the integrity of the seas and oceans (*conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development*), can be interpreted as essentially relating to nonhuman life forms (cf. Wallacher, Einsiedel & Gösele 2019).

The firm anthropocentric rootedness of the term 'sustainability' has become even stronger in its further conceptualisation because, *de facto*, social and economic interests have been afforded increasingly greater importance compared to ecological concerns. Thus, it has hitherto not even proved possible to achieve an appropriate balance among these three considerations. Consequently, the model or guiding principle of 'sustainability' tends to allow human interests to far outweigh all others. Effectively, the ecological aspect has played only a subordinate role until now. In this regard, the German business ethics expert Hermann Sautter has issued an urgent appeal for a 'sustainability trilemma' that remains unresolved. The trilemma reflects the way of living and doing economy in the countries of the Global North. This trilemma consists in the fact that, in political decisions, 'the growth of resource-intensive prosperity is weighted far more highly than the conservation of functioning ecosystems and the implementation of inter- and intragenerational "justice,"' and that there are 'up until now no efficient and ethically acceptable solutions' (Sautter 2017:731) for this problem.

Moreover, even if the trilemma proved resolvable, the term 'sustainability' exhibits an inherent blind spot with regard to the interests of nonhuman communities in nature. Within the perspective of 'sustainability', it is extremely difficult to establish an intrinsic value for elements in the natural world that are independent of human interests. Enforcing the rights of nonhuman creatures is controversial. Often, such rights are inconceivable apart from their active advocacy by humans (cf. Meyer-Abich 1989). However, it is crucial that the ethically justifiable interests of justice – and consequently, the issues of justice – for nonhuman creatures in nature be addressed, quite apart from their legal enforceability.

Because the Earth<sup>1</sup> is the habitat not only of human beings but also of a multitude of other life forms, it is imperative to raise the question of *their* moral claims and entitlements. The consequence of these entitlements is – at least partially – to restrict the enforcement of human interests. It is necessary to clarify how – as an example of such restrictions – economic exploitation of natural resources can be conceived and enforced. In biblical times, the experience that certain realms of the Earth are beyond human powers of control and exploitation was still a directly evident one. For example, Psalm 104 and God's speeches in the Book of Job (especially the second speech, cf. Job 40, 7–41, 26) call to mind regions that evade human control and in which God and parts of creation encounter each other directly. This circumstance is expressed in the Creator's purpose in having made the

1. Earth is written using upper case because the Earth is – in a theological perspective – the source of living beings (cf. Gn 1, 11f and 1, 20, too).

Leviathan, namely in order to 'play' with it (cf. Ps 104:26). Creation comprises more than the human 'principle of means-end rationality or even simply ... [that] of usefulness' (Ebach 1984:49). In addition, the diversity and variety of creation beyond the world of human civilisation (cf. Ps 104:18, 26) shows how, in many of its 'elements and aspects', creation does not subordinate itself 'to the needs of humankind' (Ebach 1984:48). In view of the present day's technical and economic exploitation of the Earth and large parts of the seas, this reminder calls for the self-limitation of humanity's powers of control and disposal. The theological consequence of this reminder, acknowledging an independent relationship of God with the nonhuman elements of nature, is one of socio-ethical respect for the independent value and worth of that nonhuman part of nature (cf. Meireis 2015:146f). This extends beyond human claims on the exploitation of creation.

One possible means of implementing human self-limitation according to these theological and/or socio-ethical considerations is the creation of national parks and other nature conservation areas, a practice that has already existed since the late 19th century (cf. Wustmans 2015:135–138). It is a matter of great urgency in the present-day situation that nature conservation areas be significantly expanded. For example, protected rainforest areas, protected marine habitats and protection for the low Earth orbit (LEO)<sup>2</sup> would be beneficial to propose and expand. However, implementation would move beyond creating a nature conservation area by a single nation-state; international agreements and/or global regulations would be necessary. A first step should be to progress the development of international humanitarian law agreements for collective security rights with this aim in view, because such rights have been not historically been drafted from the perspective of a 'collective environmental security' – even though this concept, until now, has inherently been purely anthropocentric.

Just claims to reasonable living and developmental conditions belong not only to humans alone but also to the nonhuman living environment and to animals and plants as well, in the sense of Albert Schweitzer's ethics.<sup>3</sup> Theological justification for the protective rights for animals as decreed by God is exemplified in the Sabbath commandment, which also applies to livestock (cf. Ex 20:8–11, Dt 5:12–15). Similar justification patterns can be evinced from the perspective of other interpretations of the world. The prospect of designing a programme of 'ecological justice' introduces the opportunity of devising an integrative concept of justice that respects and shows regard for these various claims, designates their respective scopes and achieves a balance among them.

2. Actually, economic agents are starting activities in the LEO, with problematic ecological consequences (cf. Jähnichen 2020).

3. Cf. the central idea of Albert Schweitzer's (1967:9f) ethics: 'The man who has become thoughtful in this manner experiences at the same time the necessity of offering to every will to live the same reverence for life that he offers to his own. Good, then, for him means to preserve and promote life, raise life capable of developing to its highest worth. Evil, for him, means harming or destroying life capable of developing in its own development. This is the absolute fundamental principle necessary for ethical thinking'.

## Difficulties involved in an undifferentiated use of the term 'Anthropocene'

The suggestion to refer to the present geological era using the term 'Anthropocene' is based on the observation that human actions and activities have fundamentally altered and continue to influence the shape of the Earth – nearly the complete transformation from natural to cultural landscape – for the last two centuries.<sup>4</sup> This geological designation signals a self-critical understanding of human interventions, not least in the field of the sciences. According to this analysis, the Holocene Period, defined as the 'entirely new' era of the warm period since the Neolithic period, was superseded approximately 200 years ago by the Anthropocene.<sup>5</sup> Geological data such as deposits from products of human activity or intervention, as well as climate data, provided evidence of the dominant influence of humankind on the shape of the Earth. This activity clearly distinguished between cultural and natural phenomena that differed from earlier periods. In this respect, the significance of this term is to be seen particularly in the fact that it shifts the centre of focus onto the consequences of human actions and activities and hence onto human responsibility.

As pointed out by scientists in the Global South (cf. Diallo 2017:194–195), the use of this terminology is problematic because the general term 'Anthropocene' tends to conceal and obscure how the development of colonialism and the globally dominant economic system of capitalism, both of which primarily have their roots in Europe, were the key drivers of this ambivalent development, which has improved the living conditions nearly worldwide by exploiting the natural resources of the Earth. It is important to note that not all humans have dramatically changed the Earth. Not all cultures and people groups are responsible for the current problematic consequences. Historical and contemporary legacies of societies predominantly in Europe and, for roughly the century, in North America have significantly contributed more than other nations. In Europe and in North America, primary contributors have been the ruling classes in the 19th and early 20th centuries and, since the beginnings of mass consumption in the 1950s and 1960s, the majority of the population, who as a result of their everyday behaviour and activities were the cause of the Earth changes referred to as the 'Anthropocene'. Other sections of the world's population – particularly women, whose income and capabilities of consumption are still under the average of the whole population, even in industrialised countries (cf. Vergès 2020) – have been significantly less involved in these processes. As a consequence, the generalising term 'Anthropocene' is problematic. The respective groups responsible for ecological damage must be designated with greater precision.

4. Cf. on the designation of the present-day geological era as 'Anthropocene': Crutzen and Müller (eds. 2019).

5. Humans are the most important agents of change during a short time of their existence. The shape of the Earth is going to be fundamentally changed by humans since the 19th century, before only in some small areas.

In this respect, the term ecological justice is preferable because it facilitates an awareness of the effects of the lifestyles of people in developed countries on the living conditions on Earth in general and the people of developing countries in particular. Especially, ecological justice seeks to factor the historical perspective into the debate of the Anthropocene. In this way, the Global North's specific responsibility is taken into account, placing a central emphasis on the term justice. Presently, people of developing countries are already suffering more severely from the repercussions of ecological crises than the citizens of developed countries, although they have contributed the least to the destruction of the environment, despite the population growth in these countries. A look at the cumulative CO<sub>2</sub> emissions in the world from 1850 to the present time reveals that Europe has contributed 30%, the United States of America (USA) 25%, China 13%, Russia 7%, Japan 4% and the rest of the world in the Global South 21% of the total (cf. data sourced from the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung newspaper of 26 October 2021:19). Taking the per capita figures into account, the imbalance to the discredit of the European countries and the USA becomes even more marked.

In addition to the extreme imbalances and/or disparities with respect to causing ecological damage and the questions of justice that these raise, another problematic issue that needs to be discussed is the extent to which measures are needed to protect natural resources in the North and in the South (cf. Buitendag 2019; Club of Rome 2018). For example, there are frequently-voiced calls for the countries in question in the Global South (such as Brazil, the Democratic Republic of the Congo or Indonesia) to implement measures to protect their rainforests as a means of stabilising the global ecological balance. It would make a great deal of ecological sense for them to do so. However, the assumption that these countries should make less economic use of their natural resources than today's industrial nations did in the past with regard to their land areas (which in some cases they still continue to do), is violating the logic of equality and not acceptable under conditions of justice. One possible means of resolving this dilemma in order to protect the environment could be the economically plausible but politically highly challenging solution of making monetary payments to dissuade the states concerned from economically exploiting certain areas. One option would be to pay the local landowners or to improve the infrastructures for the population as a whole, whereby the respective rationales and implementations raise a whole series of justice issues. However, although such payments could be interpreted as an ecological variant of neo-imperialism, they could nevertheless be justified on several counts in terms of a theory of justice. It is necessary primarily in the interests of ecological stability and, not least, in order to safeguard the legitimate interests of nonhuman life forms to enforce such self-limitations in the economic exploitation of land areas and/or to safeguard vitally important biotopes. In the process, reasons of justice would compel the international community of states – above all the industrial nations – to make compensation payments offsetting any de facto and/or potential economic profits that might arise from the areas to

be protected. Considering the increasing global demand for land areas for agroproducts and corresponding investments in land properties, extremely large sums of money would have to be raised for this purpose. The challenge of calculating these sums and how they might be fairly raised and distributed poses relevant justice-theory questions. A developed concept of ecological justice would have to point out adequate criteria to answer these questions.

Ecological justice, used as a comprehensive term, could include sustainable safeguarding of the cultural lifestyles of indigenous inhabitants. This is most appropriately seen in the 'Amazon Synod' that was held in the Vatican in October 2019. This synod of bishops for the pan-Amazon region and representatives of the indigenous inhabitants was an impressive demonstration of how, in the region of Amazonia, especially in Brazil, the safeguarding of nature and the culture of indigenous people are complementary.<sup>6</sup> Another example is the displacement of indigenous people in Brazil. While this is not a case of genocide in the narrower sense of the term, the destructive exploitation of the rainforest is a threat to the lifestyles of these people and, consequently, to the diversity of the global community. Such actions express colonial thinking and can be described as calling 'cultural sustainability' into question (cf. Huber 2019:36–46).

Viewed against the background of postcolonialism debates, the colonial context is of major relevance as a key aspect in the global use of resources. The close correlation between colonialism and the destruction of the environment, resulting in the climate crisis, is frequently ignored in traditional 'sustainability' or 'Anthropocene' discourses of the North. There is a need for further historical research into this question in order to highlight the dramatic imbalance in terms of the protagonists, profiteers and victims of ecological destruction worldwide. One reason why this is highly relevant is that the energy revolution and, in particular, the mobility revolution in the Global North, would not be possible without the intensive use of resources from the Global South. In countries such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Guinea or Bolivia, the extraction of bauxite and lithium is often organised in ways that show a disregard for fundamental social and ecological standards, such as using child labour or causing dramatic environmental damage in the countries concerned. Currently, there is a real danger that the North will seek to solve its environmental problems at the huge expense of the South. There is no ethical justification for this. In any case, it would also be misguided in view of the global effects of environmental destruction. With this in mind, further discussions on these effects might serve well to focus on the term ecological justice, addressing differing

responsibilities and approaches, as a fundamental concern of the worldwide Church, for example, the 'Wuppertal Call' of Kairos for Creation (cf. Call 2019:9–12).

## Outlook

The theologically grounded recognition of the need for a self-limitation of human action is the anthropological consequence of the concept of ecological justice. With this in mind, it is imperative that the attempt be made to overcome the dynamic of modern unrestrained technical and economic civilisation that has caused destructive growth. The achievements of science and technology have had their proper place within the context of economic activities conducive to life but need to be viewed in the service of the integrity of creation.

Therefore, the ecological crisis calls for a fundamentally new orientation towards creation that can overcome the one-sided technicist and economically determined attitude that has become so typical of thinking in the Global North. Therefore, societies and churches in the North need to develop a new worldview as a precondition for ecological justice. In place of the self-assuredness of the dominant modern technological mindset, there is need for a rediscovery of a fundamental reliance on God's good creation (Gn 1) as a living environment received as a gift. This gift, depicted in the German language in the word *gabe*, speaks of divine abundance flowing freely from God. However, the gift simultaneously presents the task, depicted in the German word *aufgabe*, of handling it responsibly and realising in justice the opportunities for a good life that the gift of creation establishes for the whole of creation. The Kairos for Creation initiative of churches in the South as well as in the North is a good example of how, acting in ecumenical solidarity, churches commit themselves to pursue this path with profound dedication. As a means of realising this initiative, liturgical and other spiritual approaches can be devised within the Christian tradition in order to promote dialogue within religious contexts worldwide.

Finally, a theological and ethical perspective is needed for further developing ecological justice. The question is particularly one of analytically describing the ecological challenges of the present and, by accommodating the biblical perspective of the role of humans in creation, pointing to prospective answers in the sense of changing the predominant mindset in the Global North, especially within the Christian tradition. First of all, insights expressed generically in global agreements such as in the Earth Chapter Initiative should be taken on board.

The profound ambivalence of scientific and technological progress is now more apparent than ever before and, for this reason, 'we urgently need a shared vision of basic values to provide an ethical foundation for the emerging world community' (ECI 2000). In particular, this means 'respect and care for the community of life with understanding, compassion, and love' (ECI 2000). In order to establish this perspective on a global scale, however, and give concrete political shape to it, what is needed is a concept of ecological

6.Cf. Francis (2020), a reflection on the results and challenges after the Amazon Synod, No. 8: 'Our dream is that of an Amazon region that can integrate and promote all its inhabitants, enabling them to enjoy "good living." But this calls for a prophetic plea and an arduous effort on behalf of the poor. For though it is true that the Amazon region is facing an ecological disaster, it also has to be made clear that "a true ecological approach always becomes a social approach; it must integrate questions of justice in debates on the environment, so as to hear both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor.'" See the following statement of Patriarch Bartholomew, too. <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/church/news/2020-09/bartholomew-i-message-for-world-day-of-creation-full-text.html>

justice that describes the interests and rights of all humans as well as of all other living beings (cf. Jähnichen 2021). It is the task of religious and philosophical belief communities to play their part in formulating an integrative concept of ecological justice, drawing upon theologies and philosophies of nature from their particular traditions. If nothing else, the issues raised in this article – the one-sidedness of the sustainability approach and the problem of generalising terminology such as ‘Anthropocene’ – need to be redefined. A more precise term could be ‘Capitalocene’.

In this way, Christian churches face the challenge of giving more precise expression to the doctrine of creation. The theological provisions that describe the relations between God, humankind and other parts of creation need further development in the biblical understanding of justice, in order to develop a more sophisticated programme for the integrity of creation from this perspective.

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