

**Eco-Justice is Creation Care:
*Shifting the Foundations of Eco-Theology to Include Stewardship, Justice, and Spirituality***

Check out the entire *Unbound* issue, "[Hope for Eco-Activists: Discovering an Environmental Faith](#)," and watch as new articles are published over the next several weeks.

By Rev. Neddy Astudillo

An uneasy feeling moves freely through the air these days, while the words of the Gospel keep proclaiming: "*Go! and share the Good News with all Creation*" (Mark 16:15).

As a pastor of a Latino/a ministry, I find myself struggling, daily, seeking to find new depths for the Evangelist's words—while I respond to the urgent needs of real people, without forgetting the rest of the earth. Yes! I need to confess: my middle class, westernized-Latina self hoped, when committing to eco-justice ministry, that sharing the Good News would always be an easy, fun and far reaching endeavor. But reality increasingly continues to show me otherwise.

Eco-justice work is complicated, and in many countries today is even dangerous. It touches and challenges many aspects of social life and special interests. But it is necessary, if we want to seriously and faithfully care for God's earth in a sustainable and transcendent manner.

Eco-feminist theologian Heather Eaton correctly said: "*When theology is engaged with the ecological crisis in depth, there are major shifts in the very foundation.*"¹ Eco-justice shakes our faith, and also impacts the way we live our lives. The more we have committed our hearts to a consumerist society, the harder it is to understand the Gospel's message. Eco-justice requires we change more things about our lives than what we may like to accept, or be capable of, if you are poor.

This summer I attended the People's Summit during the Rio+20 (UN Earth Summit) in Brazil. An event attended by more than 50,000 people from all over the world, including representatives of many world religions, all united by our love and concern for the earth, our common home. I joined the World Council of Churches' delegation and had the opportunity to speak with the youth delegation of the World Student Christian Federation about the Biblical basis for eco-justice. Most of these youth were active not in their churches, but in their communities (a pattern very different from when I was a Christian youth). These young people are finding more freedom for their eco-justice work outside of the church than in it. This saddened me.

I used this time in Rio to inquire about the roots of this increasing reality—knowing that as a pastor, I also struggle with doing eco-justice and ministry work at the same time, as if they were two separate matters. I approached several church leaders, and asked them: *What are the obstacles you are finding in the churches and congregations to move forth the work of eco-justice ministry?*

The answer they gave me was that eco-justice work was too political. Church leaders may be convinced about the need for eco-justice (that is: going to the roots of environmental problems, while healing the earth and improving people's lives in a sustainable manner); but how to translate this information, and what to do about it as a church, remains a challenge in each context.

So, there are those inside the church who fear eco-justice for being too political, not churchy enough; and those, outside of the church, who fear the church for not being justice-oriented enough.

The comments of the youth and the church leaders made me wonder how eco-theology can play a role in bridging this gap: to guide our congregations into becoming meaningful creation care centers, understanding the Gospel message, and providing spiritual support to those Christians working outside the church. Eco-justice needs spirituality, as much as faith needs action.

I have personally seen the ecological crisis inform, reshape, and enrich both my life and my theology. I first began my ecological work when I experienced a calling to address the unnecessary killing of dolphins by the industrial tuna and shark fisheries in Venezuela. After a while, I realized there was no way to save the dolphins without defending the rights of traditional fishing communities and dealing with a complex social-political and economic system that pushed traditional fishermen and women, to abandon their own ecological values and adopt self-destructive methods, out of need for survival. Eco-justice in this case required: changing fishing laws to protect small fisheries against big fishing companies; stopping the purchase of old foreign fishing fleets, already banned overseas because of their environmental impact; and supporting local communities to develop and promote programs and education sensitive to their culture and environment.

Engaging with the world in need of healing allowed me to understand the complexity of the Gospel's message (Mark 16:15). It was in that context of eco-justice that I found my calling and experienced what it is to be ministered by the ocean creatures themselves (including people).

My experience illustrates three stages of eco-theology at work: stewardship, eco-justice and eco-spirituality.

Stewardship sees the rest of nature as a gift from God, and humans as tillers and caretakers of the earth. Recycling, reducing, reusing, preservation, saving, healing, and caring are some of its most common expressions. Its critics say that, if left alone, it is too hierarchical; humans are seen as separate from the rest of nature, and as more important; not just special for their own right. While seeking to protect wildlife for future generations, for example, it leaves other spaces vulnerable to destruction, because nature is mostly seen as a resource for human life. Stewardship seeks comfort and avoids controversy. Stewardship alone is seeking to save dolphins, without engaging to

transform reality from its roots. So, stewardship is a great start, but faith engagement cannot end there.

Eco-Justice, as faith practice, understands there can be no social justice without ecological justice. We are inter-related, so eco-justice tackles both. It believes the non-human nature has rights also and suffers due to human sin (Rom 8:22). Both realms are in need of liberation. Human beings are special partners with God in the tilling and keeping of the land, but also are creatures like any other living thing on this earth (Gen 2:18-19). Eco-justice envisions a Realm of God where there will be no more bloodshed and we all will live in peace (Isa 11:6-9).

Eco-justice critics feel it is still hierarchical. In its struggle for justice, it sometimes forgets to see the lilies of the field, or ask the animals for their wisdom (Job 12:7-11; Prov 6:6-8). The realm it envisions is very anthropocentric. In a funny way, its critics ask: “Have you asked the lions how they feel about eating grass forever?” (Isa 11:6-9). Eco-justice struggles to allow itself to be transformed by the world it wants to save, and it struggles to find support in Scripture; not because there is none, but because the church has not caught up with it yet. So it prefers to exist outside of the realm of the church, and at times, it loses its sense of spirituality.

Something more is still needed.

Eco-spirituality, as a spiritual practice, moves us to recognize that, although humans have a special mission in the natural world, so does each creature, in ways that no human can duplicate. As we care for the earth, she ministers to us, and in this relationship we discover the Good News she has been waiting for: We are made of the earth. She is our home and our partner in ministry.

Eco-spirituality teaches us that the Spirit of God is immanent in all creation. Critics of this theology say, among other things, that the particulars of the “Christian” faith and Jesus message are lost in these teachings. But defendants of this theology, like Christian eco-theologian Ivone Gebara,ⁱⁱ say that Christ is present where there is community, where there is solidarity, where there is any moment of compassion and tenderness. If creation is capable of healing and teaching, it is because Christ is there.

Today’s environmental crisis requires we seek ways to understand and translate its information, recognizing the pros and shortcomings of each eco-theology and faithfully deciding a course of action. We may already be late in some of our responses, but the Gospel of Mark’s words are the more poignant, as time goes by, not less.

Church representatives in Rio added that they cannot always speak openly about the complexities of these issues; but church leaders, youth, teachers, pastors, community groups, theologians, and NGOs can. We must do it without delay, helped by the fact that, far from inhibiting action, the complexity of these issues gives us plenty of ways and places from where to start.

I, personally, will continue my advocacy work for immigrants' rights. I will continue supporting our local community-supported farm and will eat organic food as long as my budget allows. I will give rides to my church members who collect scrap metal and cans for food. I will collaborate with the Backyard Chicken group, to translate materials into Spanish, now that they have convinced our City Council to pass an ordinance allowing chickens in the city. I will continue loving my family, and will celebrate Saint Francis day at church. I will be steward, and justice advocate, and spiritualist, for while these varying approaches may be insufficient alone, they can together inform an eco-theology capable of inviting those young people back into the church, and the church back into the world and its deep need.

Check out Rev. Neddy Astudillo's blog, "Eco-Justicia" (www.eco-justicia.org)

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ⁱ Eaton, Heather, *Introducing Ecofeminist Theologies*; 2005 (T&T Clark International, New York NY); Pg 77.

ⁱⁱ Ivone Gebara, "¿Quién es el 'Jesús liberador' que buscamos?" *Diez Palabras Claves Sobre Jesús de Nazaret*, Estella, Navarr: Editorial Verbo Divino; 1999.