In the last three or four decades I have rejoiced when the forces promoting social justice were seemingly victorious: as when the Whitlam and Fraser governments legislated for human rights; or when people power swept the Filipino dictator Marcos out of office; when the segregation laws of the USA’s southern states were over-ridden; and most especially when Nelson Mandela led the ANC beyond the era of South African apartheid. But in every case the promise of these dramatic social changes was not fulfilled.

Subsequently, a certain disillusionment eventually soured the struggle for social justice. By the 1990s the rhetoric of social justice was abandoned even by certain social reformers who began to champion “a third way”. The instruction of my lifetime leads me to temper programs for justice with realism, for an ideal like social justice, though essential, will remain elusive in practice. Moreover, campaigns for social justice may have ambiguous, even counter productive, outcomes.

As the term “social justice” was omitted more and more from the lexicon of Australian governments in the 1990s even social justice advocates showed a preference for less confronting nomenclature like “social inclusion”. In fact shifts in the social discourse indicate how individualism has supplanted a sense of the common good: we now accept the reification of “the economy” or the “market-place”; the new economic-speak refers to “customers” while we hear too little of the concept of “citizenship”; we rarely speak of the “public service”, hearing rather of a “public sector” which has been “downsized, outsourced and corporatised”.

We need to recover an understanding that the ethical justification for economic arrangements is that they serve “the common good”. As John Ralston Saul’s treatise The Unconscious Civilization suggests, it is time for us to wake up to the fact that we must recover a sense of public responsibility based on an ethic of interdependence - a notion fundamental to what we mean by social justice.

Consequently, in some quarters, as with the Pauline Hanson’s One Nation Party, concepts like “equality” become bastardised, emptied of any sense of the affirmative action which equality with justice requires for severely disadvantaged groups. John Howard’s clean sweep to victory in the 2004 Federal election further entrenched the cultural hegemony of individualism while threatening the Australian ethos of a “fair go”.

Right-wing influences have eroded the sense of “justice as fairness” - made philosophically relevant in liberal democracies by the impact of the Harvard academic, John Rawls. Rawls effectively revived the Aristotelian dictum that there is nothing so unequal as the equal treatment of unequals, emphasising that discrimination is warranted when it aids the disadvantaged.

A recent assault on this approach was the flirtation with mandatory sentencing in some Australian jurisdictions preventing the criminal justice system from dispensing justice in an appropriately discriminatory way. Even more outrageous was the appropriation of the language of justice by George W. Bush after September 11, 2001, who named his retaliation on terrorism “Operation Infinite Justice”.

In my view, to abandon the term justice (and its content) to this right wing agenda and to submit to taunts about “bleeding hearts” from some political quarters is to deny the fruits of both the biblical prophetic tradition and the hard won gains of the liberal social democratic tradition. That is why, in 2001, when I was asked to develop an initiative for the Uniting Church’s community service group in Queensland, I was delighted we rejected the pleas of some that the term, “social justice”, was passé or counter productive. Instead we nominated the initiative, the Centre for Social Justice.

A key element of that Centre’s activity has been to focus on the reality of poverty and financial disadvantage in Australia’s hitherto egalitarian society. Certain opinion making forces, such as the conservative think tank Centre for Independent Studies, have exploited the complexity of this matter, particularly in relation to the problematic use of poverty lines.
While the claim can be validly made that in recent years the poorest in Australian society have had some
improvement in their living standards, the undeniable and disturbing fact is that Australia is becoming an hourglass
society with a shrinking middle class in which the rich are getting richer and the poor are getting relatively poorer,
while access to the bulwarks of a fair society, quality public education and healthcare, is becoming more difficult
for more and more citizens.

Unfortunately, the creation of so called choice in these matters for those who aspire to greater affluence has become
a platform of social policy, threatening to overtake the struggling minority for whom choice and aspiration is a cruel
hoax. In such circumstances an insistence on social justice is imperative.

On a larger scale, in a globalised world with its technologically driven economies, let alone on an environmentally
threatened planet, an understanding of social justice must be revisited. The conceptual boundaries traditionally
circumscribing this term must be expanded. Only when we reframe the economic agenda to start seeing it as one
which serves the planetary community will we have a chance of establishing the common good.

At the outset of this new millennium, as citizens of a global village, or as bio-components of this planetary organism,
Gaia, our generation of homo sapiens, can reflect more accurately than our predecessors on the story of life, the
magnificence of spaceship Earth and the wonder of the universe. Our scientific and technological expertise not only
gives us greater knowledge but also a greater ethical responsibility. Until recently, life on Earth flourished, but in my
lifetime the level of damage done to a system that has been almost five billion years in the making gives us cause to
reconsider the most important ethical question: how ought we live with the Earth?

My sensitivity to this question has been enriched as I have aged. Conversations with my wife, Coralie, whose
interest in astronomy and bird-watching along with a deep commitment to eco-feminism, have enriched my
understanding. Times of serious illness have generated the potent insight that my individual and embodied self is but
part of a greater whole. This is an insight which puts a certain perspective on the nature of life itself.

Healing times in rainforests, at the beach or with the humpback whales, together with reading an emerging body of
literature around environmental ethics and eco-spirituality have expanded my worldview and theology. I now see
that “social analysis” and “bio analysis” (the analysis of life systems) must be linked - an argument advanced by the
feminist Indian ecologists, Vandana Shiva and Arundati Roy. Another influential author is Thomas Berry, a priest
who calls himself as a “geologian” rather than a “theologian”, and who is described by Theodore Roszak as “the
bard of the new cosmology”. Berry (in The Great Work) makes a claim about the human spirit which emphasises the
fundamental place of bio analysis:

*We have no inner spiritual life if we don’t have the outer experience of a beautiful world.*

Complementing this observation is that of another leading thinker, Franciscan theologian Leonardo Boff. He invites
us to link social analysis with bio analysis.

*The most threatened threatened of nature’s creatures are the poor ...*

Taken together these insights suggest a need to extend our understanding of social justice to what is better termed
“eco-justice”. Eco-justice signifies that poverty in human societies is an ecological problem, just as violations of
nature’s biodiversity and the biosphere have exacerbated the extent of global poverty. Therefore to achieve
eco-justice we must not only address environmental degradation but also challenge the exploitation of the poor.

Eco-justice will not be achieved while one section of earth’s population lives in an orgy of unrestrained consumption
and the rest destroys its environment just to survive. If global equity were to be achieved by all poorer economies
reaching the consumption level of the United States, the annual global environmental damage from the resulting
economic activities is inconceivable - 220 times what it is now.

The contemporary challenge is consistent with the message we were articulating in Action for World Development
in the 1970s, a message sometimes summarised by the slogan, "Live simply so others can simply live". Not
surprisingly therefore one of the most compelling and comprehensive expositions of eco-justice comes from the
liberation theology voice, Leonardo Boff. The introduction to his evocatively titled *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*
is clear:

*It is not only the poor and oppressed that must be liberated; today all humans must be liberated. We are hostages
to a paradigm that places us - against the thrust of the universe - over things instead of being with them in the
great cosmic community. That is why I am extending the intuitions of liberation theology and demonstrating their*
validity and applicability for the questions enveloping the Earth, our bountiful mother.

In the Felix Arnott Memorial lecture which I delivered in 2002 I outlined a theory of eco-justice which is fundamentally grounded in biological sustainability together with a view that the membership of the society in which we are to practice justice must be inclusive of all living beings, non-human as well as human.

From his liberal political and philosophical perspective John Rawls defended a view of justice which seeks to include the most vulnerable minority victims of injustice. He proposes a social contract that emerges from a hypothetical veil of ignorance behind which rational persons are invited to consider what kind of society they would want if they belonged to a vulnerable and disadvantaged minority.

Potentially his theory could be extended to address situations of vulnerable and threatened species. Though Rawls addresses the issue of justice for future generations, there are inadequacies in Rawls’ theory. It is based on establishing rights, essentially within a society following a western model of democracy. A rights-based approach to eco-justice is limited, because it emphasises the individual too much and lacks the concept of collective or common ownership necessary for eco-justice.

Some of Rawls’ critics argue that we must go beyond a rights-based approach to justice, to one fundamentally built on an ethic of care and community. Moreover, there are situations where the inequalities of power are such that no appeal to rights will remedy the injustice. In criticizing Rawls, Anne Primavesi calls for an approach to justice “which sees violations through the eyes of the powerless victims of development, of progress, of technical fixes; of those whose cultures have been ransacked and whose peoples, whether in Irian Jaya, Ogoniland or the cloud forests of Colombia, have been ruined”.

I agree. Eco-justice must be passionate and empathetic, emanating primarily from our capacity to care rather than being simply based on rationality. Like social justice, eco-justice requires the constant nourishment of love if it is be transformative in the face of inequalities of power.

Eco-justice is premised on an ecocentric understanding of the interconnectedness of all life on earth, which respects, values, loves and cares about all life. It therefore highlights the responsibility of human beings to promote the common good through right relating with all life forms. In exercising this responsibility eco-justice, as the new name for social justice, requires practices and policies which support sustainability and which respond, as a high priority, to the needs of the most disadvantaged and marginalised human and non-human beings.

Based on an extract from Noel Preston’s latest book, Beyond the Boundary: a memoir exploring ethics, politics and spirituality (Zeus Publications, April 2006).

Dr Noel Preston is Adjunct Professor in the Griffith University Key Centre for Ethics, Law, Justice and Governance. He is the author of Understanding Ethics (2001, Federation Press, Sydney), and several texts on public sector ethics. His web page can be found here.

Noel Preston’s recent book is Beyond the Boundary: a memoir exploring ethics, politics and spirituality (Zeus Publications). He is a member of the board of the Centre for an Ethical Society.

© The National Forum and contributors 1999-2012. All rights reserved.