SOLIDARITY ETHICS

TRANSFORMATION IN A GLOBALIZED WORLD

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A Theo-Ethics of Solidarity

Over the last two hundred years, Christian ethics has offered two pathways for addressing problems of social injustice: prophetic and pragmatic. While the prophetic tradition traces its history back to the Hebrew prophets, it has more recently been associated with the Social Gospel Movement and liberation theology. In the Christian tradition, there have always been prophets who have functioned as social commentators, challenging widespread social and economic injustice and calling the people of God to accountability. From Jeremiah, Isaiah, and Micah in the Hebrew Bible to the modern-day prophets Dorothy Day and Martin Luther King Jr., prophets function to call their communities to accountability before God and they help imagine what a new world might be like. The Social Gospel Movement responded to the injustice and social inequality that resulted from the Industrial Revolution and the urbanization of US American culture by fighting for living wages, worker safety, abolishing child labor, and a shorter workweek.

Ultimately, the political and moral evil of two world wars led a new generation of theologians to reject the theology of the Social Gospel as utopian and politically naïve. One of the most influential theologians of the twentieth century, Reinhold Niebuhr, shared the Social Gospelers’ emphasis on love as the starting point of Christian ethics. However, Niebuhr’s understanding of love was tempered by a theological anthropology that emphasized the sinful nature of the human condition and led to the development of a more pragmatic approach to social ethics known as Christian Realism. Niebuhr was interested in social ethics and theology that had the capacity to make real social change to improve the lives of people. This pragmatism led to the development of a model of Christian ethics centered on what were called “middle axioms,” which involved the articulation of moral principles that ought to guide social action and policy in the political sphere.² Realism dominated Protestant social ethics from the 1930s to the early 1970s, and the methodology of middle axioms has
strongly influenced the way denominational and ecumenical social policies have been developed even up to the present day.2

In the 1960s, theologians from the developing world and from marginalized communities in the first world developed a new theological movement known as liberation theology, which takes God's act of liberating the slaves from Egypt as the starting point for thinking about God, salvation, and God's desire for life on earth. The prophetic vision of liberation from oppression and injustice that became the rallying cry of the movement hearkened back to the progressive vision of Christianity promoted by the Social Gospelers. In the early 1970s, the tension between pragmatism and prophecy was manifest in the confrontations between Christian realists, who denounced the liberationists as naïve and utopian, and the liberation theologians, who charged the realists with being "Establishment" theologians.3

Balancing Prophecy and Pragmatism

All of these movements are part of the tradition of social Christianity within Protestantism that began with the Social Gospel Movement. This tradition focuses on embodying social justice by working for the democratization of economic and social power in the world. The ethic of solidarity presented here seeks to incorporate insights from all three of these significant theological movements that have shaped faith and life in the United States for the last two hundred years.

Regardless of the hermeneutic that shapes theological inquiry—whether it is hope, sin, liberation, love, or justice—a Christian ethic of solidarity will negotiate the delicate territory between pragmatism and prophetic vision. From a pragmatic perspective, it is true that a shift from neoliberal capitalism to a more just economic model of society appears to be a utopian vision, an impossibility given the political-economic structures of our present-day world. However, prophetic vision plays an important role in society by allowing people to imagine what the world could be like. Even if it is practically unlikely, the vision offers something to strive toward that calls people beyond the reality that they know toward a better future.

Shaped by realism, any justice ethic must recognize and acknowledge the devastation and destruction that humans have waged on one another. Seeking to understand war, terrorism, racism, prejudice, or any other form of personal or systemic violence can help people gain insight into the ways in which human behavior and attitudes contribute to the persistence of evil in the world. Possessing a deeper knowledge of human nature and human sin offers a more realistic foundation for developing strategies for social change that might be effective in establishing economic and political structures that promote peace and stability in the world. Inspired by hope, a Christian ethic of solidarity can learn from the ways in which humans have stood together to fight against oppression and offer believers the possibility of a better world. It is possible to reject the radical idealism of the Social Gospelers while retaining their fierce commitment to hope and possibility and the love that abides within the human heart—the love for children and families, for neighbors, and ultimately for a better world. Having a goal can encourage people to move forward while also helping to guide the way.

Solidarity, as defined here, is fundamentally both a theory and an action.4 From a theoretical perspective, solidarity describes a state of being in which two or more distinct communities or groups of people develop a bond or a relationship based on a shared interest, value, or goal. When we talk about solidarity as an organizing model for changing the direction of globalization in our world, we are talking about the praxis aspect of solidarity: developing a new model for working across chasms of difference toward a common goal. Developing a deep understanding of what solidarity has to offer as a new model of thinking about and living in the world requires both theory and action. It is both a noun and a verb, a way of understanding how we can live in the world and a concrete way of living in the world.

Although the two distinct people or communities that are in solidarity may have arrived at their conclusions about the moral adequacy of the current form of globalization from radically different experiences of globalization, what matters is their shared moral assessment that the inequalities, excesses, and unsustainable nature of neoliberal globalization make it morally untenable. Solidarity is the expression of support and partnership between these two people or groups of people. It is the enactment of justice in society as a foundation for building a peace between nations and peoples that recognizes our common humanity and our common origin as beings created in God's image.

When we speak of solidarity in a globalized world, we are talking about a model of being in the world that challenges the prevailing social order. The divisions of our world are evident in the nomenclature of "first world" and "third world" that dominate political and economic discourse. These terms reflect a structured system of inequality and hierarchy that shapes the material reality of human experience. We have already detailed the ways in which the current neoliberal model of economic globalization creates situations of injustice around the world. If we understand a movement toward solidarity as a foundation from which we can facilitate a change in the direction of globalization, then we are challenged to move toward a new vision of society.
that is rooted in sustainability, social justice, and the transformation of the present unjust social and political order.

The starting point of a theology of solidarity is unquestionably the life and work of Jesus Christ. As the son of a carpenter raised in humble circumstances, Jesus sought out commoners from his own culture as partners in his ministry. He taught and preached in accessible public spaces and was sought after by people who were on the margins of society. He associated with and ministered to prostitutes, tax collectors, lepers, people with infirmities and disease, adulterers, madmen, soldiers, fishermen, foreigners, children, widows, rich and poor alike. Jesus walked a path of solidarity with the people of his society. He preached a message of radical social transformation in which the blind would see, the lame would walk, lepers would be healed, the deaf would hear, the dead would live again and the poor would have good news brought to them (Matt. 11:5). In this promise of a reversal of the social order of his day, Jesus offered a message of hope and good news to those who were oppressed and marginalized by social, economic, and religious structures. In proclaiming that the meek would inherit the earth (Matt. 5:5) and woe to the rich, the satisfied, and the happy (Luke 6:24-25), Jesus challenged the justice of the present social order and questioned the validity of the most powerful leaders of his own day. He came with a vision for a new world order and he practiced what he preached, living a life in true solidarity with many who were “other” in his society.

His commitment to an alternative worldview and his uncompromising attitude toward seeing God’s will done on earth as it is in heaven was a radical witness to a life of solidarity that can serve as a model for understanding solidarity as a contemporary Christian ethic that offers first-world Christians a pathway for living with integrity in a globalizing world.

While the Enlightenment argued that it was the human capacity to think that set us apart from the rest of the creatures in the world, scientists have documented intelligence, language, and the capacity to learn and think in a wide variety of animals, including chimpanzees and dolphins. In an age of secularism where reason and science are often pitted against faith and religion, it appears that one thing that is distinctively human is the tendency toward belief in something sacred, something that exists outside our capacity to know, something that manifests itself in beliefs, rituals, and practices that have been labeled as religion. While faith traditions, practices, beliefs, doctrines, and deities vary widely across the world’s religions, there is a core experience of something sacred and true that transcends human understanding. The presence of the sacred is sometimes felt as the power of a being, deity, or force that humans feel and experience in the material world. Sometimes the presence of the sacred is felt deep inside oneself, as if in one’s own heart and soul; at other times people describe the sacred as touching their lives through their relationships with other humans and God’s good creation.

Despite the desires of systematic theologians throughout the ages to organize, order, and universalize human understanding of God, sin, humanity and other aspects of religious belief, all theology is subjective, particular, and bound to the social locations and material realities of particular groups of people of faith. Like the proverb of the blind people who each touched a different part of the elephant and described it as something seemingly different, different cultures and peoples who have “touched” the sacred, experience it, understand it, and describe it differently. Theology is the human attempt to understand and describe this sacred presence in light of our experience of the world in which we live.

Some people are disturbed by the idea that different people can hold different understandings of the divine and have different experiences of the sacred. They feel that truth must be spelled with a capital “T,” and that unless it is universal and constant it is less than the truth. But just as the elephant doesn’t change because people know it, experience it, and describe it in different ways, understanding the sacred in different ways says more about the knower than the known. Different types of knowledge (for example, scientific, artistic, emotional) change human understanding of our world. This shapes how we think, not only about our world, but about the divine as well.

In a world on the precipice of epochal change, facing an environmental crisis of our own making, what we need is a new theology for a new age—a new theology that helps to make sense of the chaotic and unjust world in which we live. A theology for people of privilege in the first world will, necessarily, be different from a theology that helps people in the developing world make sense of the world around them. This does not mean that the ultimate reality of the divine is different, just that our experiences of the world in which we live necessarily shapes our theology in distinct and meaningful ways. A theology of solidarity is a meaningful response for first-world Christians to the injustice, economic disparity, and unjust globalization that plagues our world today. If people who wish to practice an ethic of solidarity experience a real metanoia, there is an increased likelihood of true partnership and solidarity. The kind of worldview shift required to live out an ethic of solidarity is related to some of the most foundational aspects of theological thinking—how we understand and think about the relationship between the divine and humankind and about how we humans order our world.
Relationship between the Divine and Humankind

One of the fundamental aspects of a Christian understanding of what it means to be human is that God created us as social beings, as beings in relationship. In Genesis there are two separate creation stories that contribute to theological understanding of human nature as fundamentally relational. In the first story, found in the first chapter of Genesis, God makes all the creation: the heavens and the earth, waters and the land, night and day, birds, fish, and animals. Finally, on the sixth day, God makes humankind. Of all the aspects of the creation, only humans are declared to be made in God’s image. As God creates humankind in God’s own image, they—male and female—are created in relationship. From this creation narrative, Christians can see that one of the most sacred stories of origin understands that part of what it means to reflect the image of God is to exist in relationship with one another and with God.

The second creation story is found a few verses later, in the second chapter of Genesis. As biblical scholar Phyllis Trible has argued, in this story God makes a single, sexually undifferentiated earth creature and places the creature in the Garden of Eden. Then God said, “It is not good that the earth creature should be alone.” God made many living creatures to fill the garden, but none were suitable partners for the earth creature. So God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the earth creature, and from one being, God created two. It was at this point that the two beings were designated as male and female. This story demonstrates that after making the first earth creature, God recognizes that it should not be alone and God works very hard to find a suitable partner.

The important theological insight of this story is that human beings were not intended to be alone. Once again, relationality is a foundational assumption of Christian theological anthropology—there is something ontologically important to human personhood about living in community and caring for one another. This theme is represented throughout the biblical witness, testifying to humanity’s calling to seek justice, to exhibit compassion for our neighbor, and to live in solidarity with one another. If the task of Christians is to seek the will of God and do it, then a foundational aspect of the will of God is to care for one another and to seek to establish solidarity with our neighbors, particularly in instances where we are radically estranged from them.

Solidarity is an expression of a new way of thinking about and modeling human relationships. In the neoliberal vision of humanity, humans exist as individual, autonomous beings who act solely in our own self-interest. This vision of human nature is a fundamental cornerstone of neoclassical economic theory known as homo economicus, a theoretical economic actor around whose expected actions economic theory is built. While it may be true that a large number of people in the world do, in fact, behave in this manner, it is not self-evident that this is an ontological aspect of our human nature, or that it is even the dominant characterization of how most humans behave.

In fact, if we examine who exactly it is that behaves this way, we find that it is predominantly people influenced by Western philosophical notions of the self that were advanced during the Enlightenment. Kant’s influence on Western conceptions of human nature have become deeply embedded in the neoclassical economic theory that undergirds capitalism. Serious critiques of the adequacy of this notion of human behavior have revealed a distinct male bias in this description of how individuals make decisions. Women often make decisions from within a relational matrix of competing obligations that involve the material care of others like cooking, cleaning, or caring for children or elderly relatives. Non-Western communities also often exhibit a different understanding of decision-making than the autonomous individual represented by homo economicus, with a stronger emphasis being placed on how decisions will impact the community.

How We Order Our World

A theo-ethic of solidarity that offers a new worldview for thinking about international relationships and globalization is deeply rooted in two fundamental theological principles that can help to guide our economic and social relationships in a transformed world. These two principles are sustainability and social justice.

Sustainability

The principle of sustainability has become an essential ethical imperative for US Americans given the reality of our environmental impact. The environmental footprint (the amount of the earth’s surface that it takes to provide everything each person uses) of the average US American is twice the average German’s and about twelve times larger than the footprint of the average inhabitant of India. That means that the 3.9 million babies born in the United States this year will have more than twice the impact on the earth as the 22.1 million babies born in India. Do not be fooled by the claims that it is a population explosion that is threatening the health and well-being of our planet. Equally culpable as the culprits of climate change and environmental degradation are those of us who live in societies where consumption and waste exceed the Earth’s carrying capacity.
The globalization of media and the increased interaction between cultures has meant that the lifestyles of first-world people are "sold" to the developing world as the image of prosperity and wealth. While most people living in desperate poverty simply dream of food, health, and survival, many of the working poor and the middle classes in developing countries desire access to the privileges of middle-class life available in the first world. These desires are putting pressure on food and oil supplies that promise only to increase if we continue down the path of globalization that is proposed by consumer- and profit-oriented models of globalization.

It is imperative to change the direction of globalization in our world because the future of globalization and development promises to have a significant impact on the health of our planet. We live on a particular kind of planet that has a unique ability (at least as far as we know) to foster life. The carrying capacity of the Earth is finite; there are real limits to our capacity to grow and develop as a human species on this planet. To gauge the potential carrying capacity of the Earth, environmentalists William Rees and Mathis Wackernagel developed the concept of the ecological footprint to measure the amount of land area necessary to support a particular lifestyle. These calculations are based on the annual productivity and regenerative capacity of the earth, and they indicate that the ecological footprint of the human species outstretched the carrying capacity of the Earth in the late 1970s. By 2003, it had exceeded it by 25 percent.

Environmentalists acknowledge that we can manage to exceed the carrying capacity of the Earth for only so many years before we also deplete the reservoir of resources like water, oil, coal, fish, wildlife, soil, and the natural capacity of the Earth to assimilate chlorinated chemicals and carbon dioxide.

Ecological footprint calculations are based on actual usage. If we recognize that many proponents of neoliberal globalization promote the development of the world’s population to match that of the first world, the potential environmental impact of over seven billion people consuming at the level of the United States must also be taken into consideration. Projections from the Global Footprint Network, which specializes in measuring the ecological footprint of various societies, warn that it would take 5.3 more planets to sustain the entire world living at the current level of US consumption. Given that only 5 percent of the population currently lives in the United States and the developing nations of India and China are home to approximately 35 percent of the world’s population, the way in which these countries develop will have significant ramifications for the health and well-being of our environment and its inhabitants.

However, the solution to our sustainability crisis is not simply to redirect the patterns of development in the two-thirds world. In order for the actions of first-world citizens to move to an ethic of solidarity, the basic equality of worth that exists among all people must be acknowledged. We must see the *imago Dei* that is present in each person. We cannot place more value on lives in the first world than we place on lives in the two-thirds world. We must also understand that people in the first world cannot live our lives in one way (namely, exploiting and consuming the resources of the planet) while asking or requiring people in another part of the world to live more simply. An ethic of solidarity must put into practice the fundamental belief in the shared goodness of all God’s creation. From this perspective, changing the direction of globalization is not simply about people in the first world working to help those “less fortunate.” Changing the direction of globalization from the standpoint of solidarity is about recognizing that the path down which we are headed is leading us to mutual disaster. The issue is not simply how we can get China and India to develop their economies in more sustainable ways. The issue is also: how do we reshape all the structures of industrial society in ways that are compatible with life on Earth? From a theological perspective, we have to recognize that this is the planet that has been entrusted to us, and we are not currently doing a very good job in caring for it.

**Social Justice**

The most fundamental concept of the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures that pertains to thinking about the social order is the concept of social justice. Social justice, as it is presented in Scripture, demonstrates a structuring of society in ways that reflect God’s concern for the well-being of all people and the created order. The social structure of Israel was designed to protect the dignity and humanity of the people by ensuring that they had access to justice.

The law codes forbade lending with interest (Exod. 22:25), as it could sometimes reach as high as one-third to one-half the amount of the original loan. They also required farmers to leave crops around the edges of the field for the poor to glean (Lev. 19:9). There is also particular attention in the law codes to forbidding practices that would further impoverish the poor, like the provision in Exodus that requires cloaks given as a pledge for a loan be returned before sundown because otherwise a poor person would have no covering for the night (Exod. 22:25). This provision is extended in Deuteronomy, which simply prohibits the use of a widow’s garment as a pledge at all (24:17). The provision for social justice is not limited to people alone. There is also an understanding that social justice extends to the health and well-being of the
land. In Leviticus 25, God commanded that every seventh year the land would lie fallow so that the land could rest as well.

From Isaiah to Malachi, the prophets constantly remind the people that God desires that they care for the marginalized in their midst. These are most often represented by the poor, widows, orphans, and foreigners. Archaeological evidence indicates that in the early days of Israel, the society was broadly egalitarian with no sharp divisions of income or labor.16 It was the adoption of a monarchy, with a royal cult and culture that developed in its wake, that introduced stark divisions of class and economic inequality.17 By the eighth century BCE and the time of the prophets Amos, Micah, and Isaiah, the disparities between the classes were enormous.18 “Excavations at Tirzah, an early capital of the northern kingdom, show uniform houses in the tenth century, the period of Solomon. By the eighth century, some houses were mansions, and others were hovels.”19

It is in this context that the biblical principle of tzedakah came to the forefront of how God was calling the Israelites to order their social and economic relationships. The Hebrew term tzedakah, often translated “righteousness,” is a complex one that incorporates two contemporary ideas that are often at odds with one another, namely, “justice” and “charity.” Rabbi Jonathan Sacks explains that the meaning of the term tzedakah depends on whether the person receiving a particular gesture is entitled to it.20 This is a reflection of a social structure in which people are entitled to dignity, respect, sustenance, and care. In this context, acts of tzedakah that care for people in need are acts of justice rather than charity, based on a social understanding of the requirements of human dignity. In this sense, the Israelite understanding of righteousness referred to behavior that was right and just. Acts of charity, on the other hand, were gestures offered to people who were not entitled to them.

Charity, which comes from the Latin caritas, has come to be understood in the Christian tradition as acts of goodwill that arise out of feelings of love and kindness on the part of the actor.21 To the extent that Jewish law understood tzedakah as “charity” when received by someone who was not entitled to it, contemporary US understandings of acts of charity correspond to the ancient Hebrew use of the term. However, what differs is the larger social context within which people define and understand what people are or are not “entitled” to. Rabbi Jill Jacobs argues that tzedakah reflected a worldview and legal system in which the powerful were responsible for the powerless, and the social structures of society were expected to be ordered in such a way as to mitigate against oppression. Sacks argues that tzedakah would more accurately be translated “social justice,” because it reflects a Jewish understanding that “no one should be without the basic requirements of existence, and that those who have more than they need must share some of that surplus with those who have less.”22 The rights associated with justice in Hebrew society were due to each individual in the community and were meant to restore equity and harmony in the community.23 Many of the legal codes were intended to uphold and ensure the practice of social justice, and many of the reprimands from the prophets related to the failings of the Israelites in following God’s call for social justice in their relationships and in their society.

This deep sense of social justice continues in the New Testament where biblical scholar Joseph Grassee has described it as “the equal and just distribution of economic, social, and cultural resources to all people without discrimination of any kind.”24 Social justice is the foundation of the ministry of Jesus, whose actions went beyond charity. He called for the rearrangement of the social order in which he was to bring good news to the poor, release to the captives, sight for the blind, and freedom for the oppressed (Luke 4:18). He confronted the prevailing social injustices of his time by challenging stereotypes about tax collectors and women, by challenging the legalism of the Pharisees who sought to use the law against him, and by challenging dominant notions of hierarchy and social class by redefining the way we think about family and gathering a band of followers who defied expected social norms.

God’s commitment to social justice is the foundation of the exodus, in which Moses, Miriam, and Aaron lead God’s people out of slavery. Christian ethicist Ed Long has argued that because the experience of the Hebrew people’s liberation from Egypt shapes their identity as “Israel,” liberation is the initial moral category that grounds a biblically informed ethic.25 It is the story of the oppression and liberation of the Hebrew people and the establishment of a society based on social justice that should ground a Christian understanding of covenant relationship with God as well as the social relationships that we create on this earth. Rooting an understanding of justice in the liberating nature of God and modeling human relations and responsibilities on God’s concern and passion for God’s people is foundational for understanding solidarity. A Christian norm of social justice can help to guide our inquiry as we examine the current form of economic globalization and ask if it lives up to our expectations as Christians and to God’s expectation for how we should order human society.

**AN ETHIC OF SOLIDARITY**

A theology of solidarity offers a vision of covenant and partnership between Christians in the first world and their brothers and sisters from the two-thirds world. A theology of solidarity offers hope and promise that sustainability is a
more faithful and fulfilling life for Christians than consumption and prosperity. A theology of solidarity will require listening to the voices of people from the global South, it will require thinking more carefully about how our lives are bound to theirs through economic transactions in the global economy, and it is likely to require that we reshape those transactions as well as the structure of the global economy. If a theology of solidarity helps people understand how to think about living in the world, an ethic of solidarity offers a blueprint for how to live through the maintenance of four tasks—metanoia, honoring difference, accountability, and action.

**Metanoia**

Embracing an ethic of solidarity requires the ability to develop meaningful relationships with people across lines of difference. For many people, this will require both a new way of seeing and thinking about the world and a transformation of habits and lives. Because the lives of first-world citizens are so carefully molded, constructed, and influenced by dominant values and visions of globalization as well as dominant ideologies about poverty, development, and aid, the nurturing of a new perspective rooted in solidarity requires a radical act of metanoia, or transformation, of body, mind, and soul. While metanoia is most often translated in the New Testament as “repentance,” it is more accurately understood as a total personal transformation that is reflected in both thought and behavior. Metanoia is a radical transformation of heart, mind, and soul that literally makes one a new person. It is the word that is used to signify changes so substantial that they literally cause people to “turn around.” The concept of metanoia does not simply refer to a spiritual experience of transformation, but suggests an accompanying transformation of behavior and lifestyle. The change that occurs is manifested in a change in how one both thinks and acts. It is this kind of transformation of one’s understanding of the world that is required in order for people to generate the political will to work together toward a different vision for the world. For those first-world Christians who are shaped and formed by dominant cultural attitudes and expectations about economics, development, consumerism, growth, and happiness, metanoia is a prerequisite for engaging in an ethic of solidarity.

An example of this use of metanoia comes in the third chapter of Luke, where John the Baptist proclaims a baptism of metanoia and goes on to challenge the crowds to “bear fruits worthy of metanoia” (Luke 3:8). When John is pressed by the crowds to explain what he means, he responds with very specific instructions: all of them are called to think about their positions of power and privilege and respond in ways that promote increased justice and solidarity in their community. Those who have more clothes or food than they need are instructed to share out of their abundance; those who stand in positions of power (like the tax collectors) or authority (like the soldiers) are called to use their power and authority in ways that embody righteousness or right relation. John’s vision for the community is a vision of mutuality and justice where those with privilege are called to rethink their understanding of power in ways that promote community solidarity rather than personal aggrandizement. In a world where the benefits and attraction of being a tax collector or a soldier lay largely in the possibilities that these professions offered for getting rich through greed and exploitation, John’s injunction to live righteously, take no more than their fair share, and to be satisfied with their wages was a real call to live against the cultural status quo. John’s understanding of the social obligations required by justice is contextual. He does not call each person to do exactly the same thing to embody solidarity; rather, his targeted responses to different groups of people in the crowd demonstrate the ways in which people are called to think carefully and critically about their sources of power and authority and to try to determine how God is calling them to use their social position and privilege in ways that promote justice.

The experience of metanoia offers the possibility that people’s lives can be transformed when they discover ways to embody justice and solidarity in whatever profession or vocation they have chosen. In this transformation, one experiences a turning toward God that redefines one’s understanding of the purpose of life. This kind of transformation would be noticeable by the ways in which it changed the behavior (or the “fruits”) of the transformed. God’s call to be faithful and to practice justice wherever you are challenges people to think beyond providing charity (by meeting the immediate needs of people) to actually seeking justice, “to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free” (Isa. 58:6). Communities of justice require social, economic, and political structures that embody and enact justice in people’s lives.

The experience of metanoia allows people to see the world differently and to identify the incompatibility of neoliberal globalization with the health and well-being of humankind and the planet. It is the transformative nature of metanoia that engenders a desire a move toward a more just social order that is consonant with God’s call of how to structure society. In theological terms, this vision of global interaction can be understood as seeking to live in solidarity with our neighbors, those next door as well as those across the globe. This is no mundane version of solidarity-as-charity masquerading as a way to make people
of privilege "feel good" about themselves. Solidarity is a way of describing the actions of persons and communities who seek to enact social justice in the world.

**HONORING DIFFERENCE**

A theory of solidarity offers a new paradigm for thinking about and understanding human behavior and human relationships. While solidarity is similar to the Christian concept of brotherhood—referring to the bonds that Christians share with one another through their common faith in God and to the political concept of fraternité—solidarity offers something more nuanced, more inclusive, and more useful for creating a transformational ethic for the twenty-first century. Despite the obvious objection to the patriarchal nature of the concept of "brotherhood" that is rooted in masculine identity and relationships, the concept of brotherhood also implies a negation of difference. Differences are subsumed by the bonds of family, faith, or nation that are intended to draw people together and to highlight what is shared in common rather than to expose what separates people. The concept of solidarity, on the other hand, is predicated on recognizing that differences between people not only exist, but that they are meaningful.

Before people can even hope to create relationships of solidarity that truly reflect justice, they must learn how to understand the differences that separate them. Among other things, this includes learning about differing religious traditions, cosmologies, belief systems, and habits of the heart. Understanding the ideological differences that separate people requires a deeper understanding about how those ideologies are shaped by religious practices and belief systems.

If the greater goal is to achieve the kind of solidarity that respects human dignity, care of the planet, and genuine understanding of our interdependence as a human and earth community, then this requires a broad-based democratic participation of a wide representation of people in global political and economic systems and the ethical frameworks in which they are embedded.

Too often a discomfort with difference—or a fear of discord that might accompany difference—causes people to rush too quickly toward the call of brotherhood (and sisterhood), to "unity" in Christ. This problem is commonplace in contemporary churches and civil society. The appeal of unity is that it implies the absence of strife; it claims to look beyond race, gender, class, sexual orientation, and any other human characteristic that threatens division. Unity appeals because humans crave safety and harmony. When it comes down to it, many people desire for everyone to just get along.

However, the ones who often promote the status quo the loudest and the ones who avoid conflict and discord the most are often the same people who benefit from the world the way it is. It is those minority voices calling for change that are often dismissed as "troublemakers," "rabblerousers," "dissidents," or "malcontents." Certainly, the call to unity can be compelling for the obvious reason that peace is preferable to strife, but too often the call to unity has been a tactic to suppress voices from the margin who seek to challenge the utilitarian claim that the unity of the whole is more important than the well-being of individual members of society.

A theory of solidarity that reflects an appreciation of the differences that mark human existence can offer people the opportunity to create new partnerships that recognize and respect the varied perspectives, gifts, and talents that different people bring to the task of social analysis, economic theory, and the creation of new social structures that respond to the material needs of a variety of communities of people around the world. If we can agree to join together in common cause to work toward moving society to a more sustainable and just model of globalization, then the principle of solidarity can offer a foundation for organizing our efforts as individual actors and as communities of change. Understood this way, solidarity is a postmodern concept that allows us to retain the essence of what calls to us about unity—the idea that we are joined together in common cause—while still allowing us to recognize the important differences that mark our identity and our life experience.

Solidarity implies a respect for difference in the midst of working together with others toward a common goal. It reflects a desire to maintain differences because they are uniquely important to our identity and to our common humanity. Not only are differences real, they are essential aspects of identity that shape our consciousness and our consciences in different ways. Identity politics do not dominate social and political discourse simply because they are "trendy"; they dominate discourse because people on the periphery of power—people of color, women, people with disabilities, gays and lesbians, people living in poverty, people living in the two-thirds world, people living with HIV, all sorts of people who have not historically had a recognized voice or political role in shaping politics, culture, and economic systems—have unique perspectives to offer, perspectives that help in understanding the world and its problems in new and different ways. Honoring difference will require learning how to understand and respect the lives of our global neighbors, a task that entails a good deal of listening. Democratizing our political, economic, and civil society discourses by welcoming new voices to the table brings new perspectives
that help to shape public policy, economic systems, and corporate culture and behavior in new ways that are responsive to a broader set of constituencies in our world. Ultimately, the incorporation of new voices and perspectives into the discourse leads to the development of more practical, realistic, and egalitarian solutions to our collective social problems.

ACCOUNTABILITY

Beverly Harrison argued that solidarity required genuine accountability, describing it as concrete answerability to oppressed people. Understood in Harrison’s terms, solidarity has to be more than a sympathetic gesture in support of a cause or the pain and suffering of others. True solidarity must move beyond the wearing of a wristband or buying a T-shirt. If solidarity is to genuinely reflect accountability, it must move beyond expressions of support and into a genuine partnership with others. Solidarity implies a relationship that goes beyond a mere meeting of the minds or agreement about philosophical or even theological ideas. It represents a bond between people that calls for loyalty, compassion, and companionship, a bond rooted in the ἀγάπη love of the Christian tradition. Learning how to live in solidarity with one’s neighbors is an expression of the Christian call to “love your neighbor as yourself” (Mark 12:31).

Certainly, it is much easier to practice this teaching if you know your neighbor, like your neighbor, or even feel kin to your neighbor in some way. This kind of provincial attitude about who counts as one’s neighbor engenders a social ethic in which people can continue to care for their local community, church, and family while remaining oblivious to the ways in which their lives impact the larger world. To the extent that the United States continues to act in unilateral ways that further its own interests without regard to the perspectives, counsel, and wisdom of leaders of other nations, US Americans continue to think and act in provincial ways that distort their capacity to see people outside of the United States as their “neighbors.” To the extent that Christian churches function primarily as social clubs, support groups, and havens for personal spiritual growth, people who participate in them risk further isolating themselves from the material reality of the lives of their “neighbors” who are sick, hurting, and hungry in the United States and abroad. To the extent that white Christians isolate themselves in fictive communities that reflect their own race and class positions, they live in an alienated and narcissistic world insulated, protected, and hidden from the global realities of poverty and environmental degradation that mark contemporary existence. In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus teaches in the parable of the Good Samaritan that he expects people to see their neighbor even in those people whom they do not know and might not even like. In an era of globalization, people may not even meet the neighbors they are called to love as themselves; nevertheless, they remain our sisters and brothers, loved and cherished by God and deserving of dignity and respect.

To live out an ethic of solidarity, first-world people must get involved in some concrete engagement with oppressed or marginalized communities—locally or globally. This is important because the idea of solidarity is based on a relationship between one group that is suffering from some situation of oppression and another group that is not suffering from the oppression but acts in partnership with them or on their behalf. Botswanian New Testament scholar Musa Dube points out that “those on the dominant side are not always adversely affected by international imperialism, unless they make a conscious effort to identify with the oppressed for ethical reasons.”

One of the foundational questions that an ethic of solidarity asks is, How is it possible for Christians to be right with God and to be right with each other and the earth when there is so much unnecessary suffering and exploitation? This is particularly important for US Christians who occupy positions of relative power and privilege vis-à-vis the poor and the marginalized peoples of the world. An ethic of solidarity thus requires that people actively engage in the building up of ties of mutuality and friendship with persons and/or communities of people who have been marginalized by their privilege.

ACTION

Denouncing neoliberal globalization as sin and working toward changing the direction of globalization requires people to live in the world in new ways. Admittedly, this is not easy work. Transforming the unsustainable consumer habits that enslave first-world communities is difficult. Restructuring systems of corporate accountability seems impossible. Developing new, sustainable, justice-oriented economic theories seems unattainable. One of the key distinguishing factors of solidarity is that it is a state of being that demands that people who are in a relationship of solidarity be willing to act on behalf of one another as a result of the bond that they share. This means that an ethic of solidarity is an ethic of action rather than simply an attitude toward others. It necessitates that individuals engage in the transformation of their own lifestyles and that they participate in changing the systems and structures of the world that create injustice. This entails the development and implementation of public policies—economic, political, and social—that establish and maintain right relationships or righteousness. It also requires individuals, families, and
communities to discern together how to reshape their own lifestyles and consumer habits in ways that reflect a transformed consciousness about how to embody sustainability and justice in our daily lives.

As people contemplate what change might look like in their personal lives, new ways of imagining daily life can begin to challenge deeply embedded cultural expectations: What would life be like without a television? Without meat? Without a two-story brick home in the suburbs? Without a high-paying job? Without the latest fashions in my closet? Without McDonald’s or Coca-Cola or Walmart? Many people fear that the change that is required is so radical that they will lose something important, something that seems essential to life, something they do not want to give up.

However, perhaps this fear is misplaced. Maybe a better starting point is to ask to what extent increased consumerism has made people “happier.” Psychologists who study life satisfaction have documented that while the average person’s income in the United States more than doubled between 1957 and 2002, the percentage of people who reported themselves as “very happy” remained constant at around 30 percent.32 If that’s the case a better set of questions might be: What would my life be like if I worked toward decreasing my environmental impact on the world? What would my life be like if I lived sustainably? What would my life be like if I lived in solidarity with people in the two-thirds world? What would my life be like if I took a job that contributed toward solving the problems of economic and environmental globalization rather than a job that contributed to them? What would the United States look like if Christians demanded these things? What would the world look like if all people of faith began to demand these things? Thinking about the ways in which building lives of solidarity might offer deeper and more meaningful vocational opportunities as well as personal satisfaction is a more positive way to approach the lifestyle changes that will be required in developing sustainable economies and just societies.

While the lifestyle changes that accompany solidarity are necessary for changing the direction of globalization in our world, it is important to also recognize that the health and well-being of our world is not anyone’s individual responsibility. As important as individual behavior is, the problems of poverty, environmental degradation, and inequality in our world cannot be solved simply by individual lifestyle choices. Individual behavioral transformation is a necessary but insufficient condition for changing the direction of globalization. The larger challenges that face us as a human community require a concerted effort at systemic transformation. While the choices people make as individual consumers are important, individual consumer behavior must be examined within the context of the global market economy in which it is exercised. Economic justice is, at its heart, an issue of systemic transformation that requires a careful look at how we have theorized and structured our economies. An ethic of solidarity requires people to be engaged in working toward structural change in society.

**Conclusion**

The task of changing the direction of where we are headed as a global community is not simply a call for a new direction for public policy in our world; it is also a radical call for people living in the first world to change the direction that their own lives are headed. And getting to a place where we are able to join together with our compatriots in the two-thirds world in ways that move us toward a true partnership that honors each of our unique gifts and strengths is a journey that requires much work. For first-world citizens, developing relationships of solidarity across lines of difference requires acknowledging complicity in contemporary forms of globalization and examining the forms of privilege that shape life in the developed world.

**Notes**

3. For a detailed analysis of this debate, see McCann, Christian Realism and Liberation Theology, 53.
5. Phyllis Trible’s essay, “A Love Story Gone Awry,” argues that the original Hebrew poetry has been misunderstood and mistranslated within patriarchal religious traditions. Trible argues that adam is a Hebrew word that means “earth creature” and that it is not until the second creature is created woman, ishshah, that the first creature becomes man, ish. See Trible, “A Love Story Gone Awry,” in God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), 72–143.
13. Ibid., 23.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid., 10–11.
17. Ibid., 11.
18. Ibid., 12.
19. Ibid.
22. Ibid., 114.
27. Ibid.
28. "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise" (Luke 3:11).
29. To the tax collectors he said, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you" (Luke 3:13), and to the soldiers, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages" (Luke 3:14).

Moving Toward Solidarity

For people of privilege, one of the first steps in moving into an ethic of solidarity is to come to terms with their own privilege. The challenge of this task is that it requires people to acknowledge aspects of their identity and social location from which they benefit. This can be a difficult task in a culture where very few people think of themselves as privileged, wealthy, or powerful. In fact, the majority of people in the United States classify themselves as "middle class," even many of those who fall in the upper 20 percent income bracket ($100,000). For the 1.29 billion people in the world who live on less than $1.25 US dollars a day, that fact is quite remarkable. What becomes obvious is that wealth has both absolute and relative qualities to it. People in the United States often think about wealth in absolute terms.

Popular perceptions of what it means to be wealthy in the United States relate to those people who can afford to buy or do whatever they want, whenever they want. In a recent survey of US investors conducted by UBS, a global financial services firm, 50 percent of respondents defined "wealth" as not having any financial constraints. For these people, wealth is defined as the point at which money is simply not a factor in one's decision-making processes. Only 31 percent of the millionaires in the survey considered themselves "wealthy," and $5 million was the threshold at which the majority of respondents (60 percent) began to indicate that they considered themselves "wealthy." For better or worse, most people think of themselves as people who do have to think about money, and most people who have to think about money define themselves as "middle class." Most people have to plan for their retirement, save to buy a new car, a new house, or to go on vacation. They have to make budgets and stick to them in order to cover their expenses, regardless of their income level. However, from the vantage point of the majority of people in the two-thirds world or even from the perspective of people in poverty within the first world, wealth is relative. New cars, new houses, and vacations are not even on their radar screens. The wants and needs of people who live on the margins