

# **Ecological Intentionality: Performing Peace Beyond Human Boundaries**

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## **Introduction**

Good afternoon. I'm honored to be here today to present on the concept of Ecological Intentionality and how it can inform and transform our understanding of performing peace beyond Human boundaries. My work explores the intersection of ecology and religion, theology, and phenomenology, drawing particularly on process thought, embodied consciousness, and participatory awareness via decolonization. Today, I want to suggest that ecological intentionality offers a framework for peace that extends beyond Human interactions, challenging anthropocentric models of peace and instead envisioning peace as a relational, ecological, and more-than-human performance.

I'll begin by defining this concept of *ecological intentionality* within a phenomenological and process-relational framework, then explore its implications for peace beyond Human boundaries through examples drawn from both ecological and spiritual contexts. Finally, I'll propose that peace, in this framework, is not simply an absence of conflict but a mode of relationality grounded in ecological reciprocity and mutual flourishing. This is part of a larger project for my PhD work that I'm calling *Ecology of the Cross* in reverence to Edith Stein and her influential work (on me) *Science of the Cross*.

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## **Defining Ecological Intentionality**

The term *intentionality* has deep roots in phenomenology, particularly in the work of Edmund Husserl and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. In a classical sense, intentionality refers to the directedness of consciousness toward an object, or the idea that consciousness is always about something. However, this model presumes a Human subject directing intentionality toward a discrete object.

### *Phenomenological Foundations*

Edmund Husserl introduced the concept of intentionality as the foundational structure of consciousness. For Husserl, consciousness is never a self-enclosed entity but always directed toward an object or experience. This implies that intentionality is not passive but an active process of meaning-making and a co-constitution between subject and object. Consciousness, therefore, is inherently relational.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty extended this idea by situating consciousness within the body and the material world. In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty argues that intentionality is not

purely cognitive but embodied. The body is not simply a vessel for the mind; it is the means through which we engage with and perceive the world. The body's intentionality is not directed toward abstract objects but toward the flesh of the world or the interwoven fabric of nature, matter, and perception.

Merleau-Ponty's notion of the flesh, the chiasmic intertwining of self and world, dissolves the boundary between subject and object. When I touch the bark of a tree, I am not simply touching it as an external object; I am being touched by the tree. Perception, in this sense, is a reciprocal exchange between human and more-than-human beings. This is where the concept of ecological intentionality begins to emerge in that it is a perception that is not a unilateral human act but a mode of participation in the world's unfolding.

### *Edith Stein and Empathy as Ecological Intentionality*

Edith Stein's work on empathy (*On the Problem of Empathy*) provides a crucial bridge between classical phenomenology and ecological intentionality. Stein defines empathy as the ability to experience the consciousness and emotional states of others through a form of participatory perception. Unlike Husserl, who viewed intentionality primarily as a cognitive act, Stein insists that empathy involves an affective and embodied process of entering into the experience of another.

What makes Stein's model of empathy important for ecological intentionality is that it expands the boundaries of intentionality beyond Human consciousness. If empathy is not limited to Human-to-Human relationships but reflects a broader capacity for intersubjective connection, then it opens the possibility for empathy toward the more-than-Human world.

Stein's notion of eidetic reduction, the process of bracketing out subjective interpretation to encounter the essence of another's experience, has direct ecological implications. To encounter a tree, a river, or a forest empathically is to bracket out anthropocentric projections and allow the other to disclose itself on its own terms.

Ecological intentionality, then, draws from Stein's understanding of empathy as an affective and relational act. Just as we can empathize with another person's suffering, we can empathize with the suffering of a dying forest or an acidifying ocean. Ecological intentionality is not just about knowing the world, it is about feeling with and through the world.

### *Processual Extensions of Phenomenology*

Alfred North Whitehead's process philosophy extends this phenomenological framework by rejecting the static distinction between subject and object altogether. In Whitehead's cosmology, all entities, Human, more than Human and non-Human, are processes of becoming constituted by their relationality. Whitehead's notion of *prehension* suggests that all entities "feel" the presence of others and respond creatively.

John Cobb extends this insight into theological reflection, suggesting that God's presence is not external but relational, and a lure toward creative and harmonious becoming. Thus, ecological

intentionality involves not only an empathic perception of the world but a participatory process of becoming within the web of ecological life. Peace, in this view, is not a static state but an ongoing relational achievement, or a balancing of diverse needs and potentials within the cosmic and/or ecological order.

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### **Performing Peace Beyond Human Boundaries**

What would it mean to perform peace beyond human boundaries? This requires a shift from peace as a Human-centered political or ethical state to peace as a mode of ecological reciprocity. Peace, in this sense, emerges not from the absence of Human conflict but from the flourishing of interdependent relationships across Human and non-Human worlds.

One example is found in Indigenous ecological practices that treat ecosystems not as passive backdrops but as active agents in the process of community formation. The practice of controlled burns among many Indigenous people in North America reflects a form of ecological peace: a reciprocal relationship between human communities and fire-adapted landscapes that ensures the health and sustainability of both. This practice challenges Western models of peace as stability or containment, reframing peace as an ongoing process of participatory ecological reciprocity.

We might also consider the theological implications of this framework. Thomas Berry's concept of the *Earth Community* reflects an understanding of peace rooted in interdependence and shared flourishing. For Berry, peace is not solely a human achievement but an ecological performance, and a harmonious balancing of biospheric and human needs.

Religious traditions have long recognized this interdependence. In the Christian tradition, the biblical notion of shalom implies not only Human wholeness but right relationship with the land, the animals, and the broader creation. Similarly, Buddhist traditions frame peace as a state of inter-being, where the suffering or flourishing of one being is tied to the suffering or flourishing of all others.

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### **Implications for Theological and Ecological Praxis**

Ecological intentionality reframes peace as a participatory and ecological act. It demands that we move beyond Human-centered models of conflict resolution and embrace a broader vision of relationality. This has profound implications for theological and ecological praxis, particularly when viewed through the framework of Ecology of the Cross, a theological model that holds together the suffering and flourishing of creation within the example of the Cosmic Christ.

Ecology of the Cross challenges anthropocentric readings of peace and redemption by presenting the cruciform pattern as a decolonized ecological reality and not only a Human drama, but a cosmic and ecological process of death and rebirth and ultimately peace. If peace is not just an ethical or political goal but a state of relational balance within the web of life, then faith

communities have a crucial role to play in performing peace through liturgical, ethical, and ecological practices.

This shift has profound implications for theological and ecological praxis, particularly for faith communities and individuals who are seeking to cultivate deeper relationships with the Cosmos.

For faith communities, in this Christian context from which I speak as an ordained person, the framework of ecological intentionality presents an opportunity to reshape how they understand and perform peace, moving beyond Human-centered conflict resolution into a more expansive model of relational harmony with the land, water, air, and non-Human beings. This also offers individuals new pathways for spiritual formation and ethical engagement, as ecological intentionality invites a shift in both perception and practice.

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### *1. Ecological Reframing of Peace and Justice*

One of the most immediate implications of ecological intentionality for faith communities is a theological reframing of peace and justice. In many Christian traditions, peace is understood primarily as a Human or theistic moral or political goal, such as the absence of violence, conflict, or injustice between Human beings. However, ecological intentionality challenges this definition by suggesting that peace is not merely the absence of conflict but the presence of right relationship a dynamic equilibrium within the web of life.

Possibilities for Churches and Faith Communities:

- Revising the concept of justice: Justice can be reframed not only in terms of Human rights but also in terms of environmental justice such as protecting watersheds, ensuring biodiversity, and advocating for the rights of Indigenous communities to manage their traditional lands.
- Eco-theology and sermons: Preaching and theological teaching can incorporate ecological themes, exploring peace not only as human reconciliation but as harmonious interdependence within creation. Sermons might engage scriptural texts like the Psalms' call for rivers to "clap their hands" (Psalm 98) or Paul's vision of creation groaning for redemption (Romans 8) as invitations to ecological intentionality.

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### *2. Liturgical and Ritual Practices*

Liturgy is one of the most powerful ways faith communities embody theological truths. If peace is an ecological and relational reality, then liturgical practices can become spaces where this relationality is both symbolized and performed. Faith communities can integrate ecological intentionality into their rituals and sacraments, recognizing that acts of worship are not only directed toward God but also toward all Creation.

Possibilities for Churches and Faith Communities:

- Blessing the more-than-Human world: Rituals like the blessing of animals, water, or land can be expanded to reflect an intentional recognition of non-Human life as sacred. A ritual of blessing could include water drawn from a local river, soil from a community garden, or plants representing local biodiversity.
  - Seasonal and agricultural liturgies: Faith communities can integrate seasonal changes and ecological rhythms into worship. Celebrating the beginning of planting or harvesting seasons, or offering prayers of lament during times of ecological destruction, can embody peace as relational engagement with the land.
  - Eucharistic expansion: In traditions that celebrate the Eucharist, there is an opportunity to explore the ecological significance of bread and wine as products of Human and non-Human collaboration. Bread depends on soil health, water access, and pollinators; wine depends on grapevines shaped by climate and weather patterns. Eucharistic liturgies could recognize these dependencies, reframing the sacrament as an act of ecological gratitude and celebration.
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### *3. Spiritual Formation and Individual Practices*

Ecological intentionality offers individuals a new framework for spiritual formation. Just as contemplative traditions have emphasized inner peace and mindfulness, ecological intentionality calls for a broader, outward-facing form of contemplation — an intentional attunement to the rhythms and needs of the natural world. This involves not only perceiving the world differently but responding to it with care and reciprocity.

Possibilities for Individuals:

- Sabbath as ecological rest: The biblical model of Sabbath involves not only Human rest but also rest for the land (Leviticus 25). Individuals could practice ecological Sabbath by ceasing certain activities that harm or limit ecological health, reducing consumption, refraining from single-use plastics, or setting aside time for ecological restoration.
  - Walking as spiritual practice: Pilgrimage and walking meditations could be reframed as intentional acts of ecological engagement. Walking through a local forest, a park, or along a coastline could become a practice of attunement to the interdependence of Human and non-Human life.
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### *4. Political and Advocacy Engagement*

Ecological intentionality challenges faith communities to extend their peace and justice work into the political sphere. If peace involves ecological balance, then protecting ecosystems,

advocating for biodiversity, returning national and state parks to Indigenous people for leadership and direction, and supporting climate justice become theological and ethical imperatives. Faith communities and individuals can leverage their moral authority to advocate for political changes that support ecological flourishing.

Possibilities for Churches and Faith Communities:

- **Climate action and legislation:** Faith communities can engage with local, state, and national governments to support policies that protect ecosystems, reduce carbon emissions, and ensure environmental justice for marginalized communities.
  - **Community-based ecological stewardship:** Churches could sponsor community gardens, urban reforestation projects, or wildlife corridors as expressions of ecological peace. These projects would reflect the theological claim that peace involves active participation in the flourishing of creation.
  - **Water justice:** Churches could partner with Indigenous communities and environmental organizations to protect access to clean water and resist pollution and extraction. Recognizing water as a sacred gift and a living presence aligns with Indigenous ecological frameworks and Christian sacramental theology (e.g., baptism).
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### *5. Reimagining Mission and Evangelism*

Ecological intentionality calls for a reimagining of mission, not as conversion or colonialist domination, but as relational participation. If performing peace involves reciprocal relationship with the natural world, then mission becomes an act of learning from and alongside creation rather than imposing Human control over it.

Possibilities for Churches and Faith Communities:

- **Mission as listening:** Instead of traditional missionary work framed around changing Human hearts and minds, mission could be reframed as a process of listening to and learning from local ecosystems and Indigenous knowledge.
  - **Ecological pilgrimage:** Mission trips could focus on ecological restoration and cross-cultural dialogue with Indigenous communities. Participants would engage in ecological restoration not as an act of charity but as a recognition of shared vulnerability and interdependence.
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### *6. Interfaith Collaboration and Ecological Peace-building*

Ecological intentionality provides a common framework for interfaith engagement. While doctrinal differences have often divided religious communities, the shared recognition of ecological interdependence creates an opportunity for collaboration.

Possibilities for Churches and Faith Communities:

- Joint ecological action: Faith communities from different traditions could collaborate on local environmental projects, such as tree planting, river restoration, and habitat protection, as shared acts of peace-building.
- Interfaith prayer and ritual: Sacred sites like rivers, mountains, and forests could become spaces for interfaith prayer and contemplation, grounded in the shared recognition of the sacredness of creation.
- Ecological dialogue: Faith communities could hold interfaith dialogues focused on theological visions of peace, exploring how different traditions understand the relationship between humanity and the natural world.

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## Conclusion

Ecological intentionality challenges the anthropocentric assumption that peace is a Human achievement. Instead, it calls us to recognize peace as a mode of relationality that encompasses Human, more-than-Human, and Non-Human beings alike. Performing peace beyond Human boundaries requires attunement to the rhythms of ecological reciprocity and a willingness to engage in the ongoing, dynamic process of becoming together.

As Thomas Berry reminds us, “The universe is a communion of subjects, not a collection of objects.” Peace, in this sense, is not the absence of violence or conflict but the flourishing of interdependent relationships within the broader webs of life. Ecological intentionality, therefore, offers a vision of peace that is not static or anthropocentric but dynamic, participatory, and deeply ecological.

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