

# SOCIAL JUSTICE

Steven E. Mayer, Ph.D.  
Effective Communities, LLC

The term “social justice” has a variety of meanings, none of them precise, and all rather abstract. This short treatment of definitions culled from the Web is meant to show the outlines of the subject, rather than to promote a particular definition.

Wikipedia, the web-based encyclopedia, says “social justice refers to conceptions of justice applied to an entire society. It is based on the idea of a just society, which gives individuals and groups fair treatment and a just share of the benefits of society. ... Social Justice derives its authority from the codes of morality prevailing in each culture.”<sup>i</sup>

The values of social justice seem to be rooted in doctrines of religious faith, as well as law and politics. These two themes are intertwined in different ways, and play out differently in different cultures.

One finds references to social justice or social justice values in writings from the major branches of Christianity, Judaism and Islam, which all hold that, before God, all people are equal and must treat each other with respect.

At the Reach and Teach site, definitions were solicited from a variety of practitioners of social justice work. A sampling from this site, illustrating Christian, Jewish and secular views:

Social justice provides the foundation for a healthy community. It grows out of our sense that each person — each created being — has value. Only as we recognize the value and dignity of each person can we build a healthy community, so it's a slow, painful process of learning and growing. To help the process along we develop attitudes of respect for one another. We also shape policies and patterns of behavior to protect and enhance the worth of each person. We do this by building governmental and economic structures, educational and religious institutions, and all the other systems that provide for health and social welfare. This justice is not a goal that we'll ever reach, but a process, a struggle in which we can be engaged through all the pain and all the joy.

- Doug King, editor and WebWeaver, *The Witherspoon Society of the Presbyterian Church USA*

By social justice I mean the creation of a society which treats human beings as embodiments of the sacred, supports them to realize their fullest human potential, and promotes and rewards people to the extent that they are loving and caring, kind and generous, open-hearted and playful, ethically and ecologically sensitive, and tend to respond to the universe with awe, wonder and radical amazement at the grandeur of creation.

- Rabbi Michael Lerner, co-founder of the Tikkun Community

The degree to which social justice is achieved in a given time and place should be measured by two (seemingly contradictory) notions: 1) the greatest good for the greatest number, and 2) how the least powerful and the smallest minorities in a society are faring. The vision of social justice is best articulated through stories that have the marginalized as their subject and that present hard questions to those at the center of power — stories like the ones Jesus of Nazareth told.

The term “social justice” has roots also in law and political theory. This quote captures the basics:

Taken in its broader sense, justice is action in accordance with the requirements of some law.[1] ... This sort of justice is often thought of as something higher than a society's legal system. It is in those cases where an action seems to violate some universal rule of conduct that we are likely to call it "unjust." ... In its narrower sense, justice is fairness. It is action that pays due regard to the proper interests, property, and safety of one's fellows.[2] ... Parties concerned with fairness typically strive to work out something comfortable and adopt procedures that resemble rules of a game. They work to ensure that people receive their "fair share" of benefits and burdens and adhere to a system of "fair play."

[1] James. W. Vice, "Neutrality, Justice, and Fairness," (Loyola University Chicago), available at <http://www.ombuds.uci.edu/JOURNALS/1997/neutrality.html>. [2] Nicholas Rescher, *Distributive Justice*. (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, Inc., 1982), 5. Both cited in: Maise, Michelle. "Principles of Justice and Fairness." *Beyond Intractability*. Ed. Guy Burgess and Heidi Burgess. 1 Jun. 2005. Conflict Research Consortium, University of Colorado, Boulder, Colorado, USA. <[http://www.beyondintractability.org/essay/development\\_conflict\\_theory/](http://www.beyondintractability.org/essay/development_conflict_theory/)>.

A variety of social justice organizations pursue different missions, with different philosophies but a common core:

The Opportunity Agenda believes that true opportunity requires a commitment to a core set of values. These values are integrally related to the principle of human rights: equal treatment, a voice in societal decisions, a chance to start over, and the tools to meet our own basic needs are not just good policy ideas. They are the right of every human being simply by virtue of his or her humanity.

Greenpeace: Social Justice, one of the core values of Greenpeace, reflects the general rejection of discrimination based on distinctions between class, gender, ethnicity or culture.

Tolerance.org, a web project of the Southern Poverty Law Center, offers five criteria by which social justice organizations can be included on its US Map of Social Justice Groups:

1. The group promotes respect, acceptance, understanding and equality in the community, encouraging inclusion across the lines of race, religion, ethnicity, sexual orientation, national origin, gender, class or disability.
2. The group strives for alliances across public and private sectors, maximizing available resources within a community and minimizing potential duplication of efforts.
3. The group clearly provides ways for constituents to contact it for services and/or volunteer opportunities.
4. The group encourages collective activism, supporting partnership work and interaction among the diverse people in the community.
5. The group freely shares information about the impact that its programming has on the community

Alliance for Justice is a national association of environmental, civil rights, mental health, women's, children's and consumer advocacy organizations. Since its inception in 1979, the Alliance has worked to advance the cause of justice for all Americans, strengthen the public interest community's ability to influence public policy, and foster the next generation of advocates.

And a few quotes from The Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., often cited as one of America's best speakers on the subject of social justice and the opportunity for philanthropy.

"All men are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality."

"In the end, we will remember not the words of our enemies, but the silence of our friends."

"Like an unchecked cancer, hate corrodes the personality and eats away its vital unity. Hate destroys a man's sense of values and his objectivity. It causes him to describe the beautiful as ugly and the ugly as beautiful, and to confuse the true with the false and the false with the true."

"Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter. We must learn to live together as brothers or perish together as fools."

Social justice, then, as a concept is broad. Many agendas – for civil rights, human rights, equal rights – can be subsumed under it, including racial equity, a major theme of this project and Web site.

The worlds of philanthropy, religion or spirituality, and the wish for social justice are not so far apart. As Václav Havel said,<sup>ii</sup> "I'm not an optimist, because I don't believe everything will turn out for the best. And I'm not a pessimist, because I don't believe everything will turn out for the worst. But I couldn't do anything without Hope."

## EXTERNAL LINKS

Alliance for Justice, [www.afj.org](http://www.afj.org)

Ford Foundation, [www.fordfound.org](http://www.fordfound.org)

Greenpeace, [www.greenpeace.org](http://www.greenpeace.org)

The Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr.,  
[www.quotationspage.com/quotes/Martin\\_Luther\\_King\\_Jr](http://www.quotationspage.com/quotes/Martin_Luther_King_Jr).

MDC, Inc., [www.mdcinc.org](http://www.mdcinc.org)

The Opportunity Agenda, [www.opportunityagenda.org](http://www.opportunityagenda.org)

Reach and Teach, [www.reachandteach.com](http://www.reachandteach.com)

Tikkun Community, [www.tikkun.org](http://www.tikkun.org)

Tolerance.org, [www.tolerance.org](http://www.tolerance.org)

Wikipedia, [www.wikipedia.org](http://www.wikipedia.org)

The Witherspoon Society of the Presbyterian Church USA, [www.witherspoonsociety.org](http://www.witherspoonsociety.org)

---

## ***Endnotes***

<sup>i</sup> Wikipedia, by definition, is in a constant state of change. The definition of social justice presented here came from a November 2006 presentation.

<sup>ii</sup> Attributed to Ambassador James Joseph, at a presentation to the National Rural Funders Conference, September 2006.