
Book Review

Michael Northcott, *A Political Theology of Climate Change* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), 316 pp., \$30.00 (pbk), ISBN: 978-0-8028-7098-8.

Michael Northcott's books tend to proffer interdisciplinary arguments on environmental topics that eventually crescendo into broad theological concern. Such is the case with *A Political Theology of Climate Change*, which methodically presents scientifically rigorous, theoretically nuanced, and religiously grounded arguments about the historical-materialist and philosophical-theological dynamics of the current era's climatic woes. He argues that industrial humanity is not only not modern—it is in fact precisely the apocalyptic specter of climate change that reveals the lie, and its best remedy may reside in communitarian and place-based action such as those that he finds in Christian tradition.

The gist of Chapter 1 is, first, that the genre of 'climate apocalyptic' has precursors in the Hebrew Bible and Jewish and Christian apocalypticism in ways that can shed light on the current situation; and second, that the Newtonian/modernist legacy of the nature/culture split is disproven by the very fact of industrial, anthropogenic climate change. Chapter 1 will be useful to those who want a methodologically unique approach to the moral dimensions of climate change, or who engage contemporary media/film studies on topics of environmental degradation, or who seek a philosophical-theoretical diagnosis of the failures of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC).¹

The following chapter links the history of coal with post-Newtonian understandings of nature and poses a number of contemporary problems squarely. First, there are 'differential burdens from, and responsibilities for, climate change' (p. 59). Second, 'the material culture advanced by coal, in which the earth is dominated and reengineered from its depths to its outer atmospheric limits, also sustains the cultural objects and values that until today make it difficult for industrial societies to respond to or resolve the ecological and climate crisis' (pp. 62-63). Third, 'the idea of anthropogenic climate change challenges the relations of nature and culture in space and time in ways that are fundamental to the Newtonian schema' (p. 73). Fourth, the 'UNFCCC treaty process is... a supreme example of the fallacy of misplaced concreteness' (pp. 82-83). For Northcott, only a political theology can repair what such epistemologies and relations have ripped asunder (p. 84).

1. It would, in fact, pair well with Dale Jameson's discussion of the same in *Reason in a Dark Time* (2014).

Northcott then provides a detailed discussion of oil, colonialism, imperialism, and the legacies they have wrought. He situates anthropogenic climate change within a study of the expropriation of coal and other fossil fuels, to which 'is now added a new kind of spatial expropriation'—the atmospheric (p. 87). The author's familiarity with the data on and vagaries of various forms of conventional and unconventional fossil fuels is on full display before he recapitulates that climate change is the 'denouement of the Baconian salvation story' in which humans control nature (p. 117). This leads nicely into a chapter exploring several inherited juridical concepts that continue to shape contemporary discourses on private property regimes, and the emptiness of those paradigms for environmental goods; articulates the importance of the global commons and gestures towards Christian ethical approaches; and engages Marxian interpretations of ecological debt and rift before concluding that 'the climate crisis reveals the moral and spiritual limitations of Marxism *and* capitalism' (p. 158). Northcott also shows how even the much-feted international efforts informed by Kantian cosmopolitan legacy (such as the UNFCCC) are in crisis—'modernity was not supposed to end like this', he aphorizes—in no small part because such supranational mechanisms fail to accommodate place-based uniqueness of distinct cultures and histories (pp. 166-67).

Northcott has little patience for colonial-imperial mindsets, so it would have been nice to see a broader spectrum of author diversity—in geographic as well as other senses—represented and substantively engaged in the text. While the epistemic insights of subaltern activists and communities are recognizable in various places, the theorists or activists themselves are not. Instead, they tend to be relegated to footnotes while several chapters offer extensive interpretations of and meditations upon a more predictable group of authors: Kant, Hume, Taubes, Latour, Schmitt, and Blake, for example.

Chapters 6 and 7 deliver Northcott's constructive communitarian proposal, informed by visions of ancient Christian communities that he says were able to avoid a nature/culture divide or, more accurately, failed to perceive one at all. He restates the quandary that 'human history and natural history are converging again', while these dynamics remain irremediable at present in part 'because modern political economy is premised on the interest theory of human well-being, which neglects the reality that to live together in bordered territories, and a finite earth, the rich and powerful need to restrain their interests for the sake of the good of those other persons and creatures with whom they share the earth' (p. 244).

For Northcott, virtue theory remains a more promising approach to ecological action than the postulates of Kantian reason, and he finds 'the modern state... incapable of inculcating the virtues in its citizens, as the Classical polis or medieval guilds did' (p. 264). By contrast, he sees a productive nature-culture synthesis in place especially in medieval Christianity (one cannot help but summon Lynn White to mind here, or perhaps Carolyn Merchant). In my view, Northcott is at his best when he links seemingly disparate discourses to depict a moral quandary in new ways: for example, when exploring what to make of individual, domestic ecological action for matters of industrial, planetary scale in light of the Jevons Paradox (p. 202), or assessing whether and how carbon emissions are morally akin to drone attacks (p. 232).

Of all the chapters in this book, it was the Conclusion (Chapter 7) that puzzled me most. It leans heavily on William Blake's 'Christological spiritualized geography... combined with a deep sense of the interconnectedness of all things' (p. 300). Had Northcott engaged Blake (or Romantic authors more generally) in prior chapters, the chapter might feel contiguous with the whole. Had he engaged theological ecofeminists such as Sallie McFague or Ivone Gebara, the chapter's communitarian appeals could feel less prosaically idealist. Nor am I entirely convinced by his conclusion that the 'Jewish and Christian messianism of empire-challenging love' is fodder to encourage 'local and national communities...to conserve their own fossil fuels in the depths of the earth', create 'a new energy economy', and 'so recreate the historic and customary connections between nature and culture, land and life' (p. 316).

Then again, as Northcott ably argues and current politics arguably demonstrates, liberal-capitalist cosmopolitan conceptualizations of international politics have not exactly succeeded in linking rights and privileges with responsibilities and duties about climate change. In light of the United States absconding from the Paris accords, a bit more communitarian, place-based love—Christian or otherwise—would surely not be a panacea, but it could be a start.

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Reference

Jameson, Dale. 2014. *Reason in a Dark Time* (New York: Oxford University Press). Doi: <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199337668.001.0001>.