
Sigurd Bergmann, professor at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology, is a familiar name in ecotheology and religious studies. *Weather, Religion and Climate Change* adds to his already varied publication record a wonderfully insightful collection of reflections on what the humanities can contribute to contemporary debates about weather and climate. Though the chapters cohere thematically, several also function as stand-alone treatments of topics ranging from the paintings of J. M. W. Turner to medieval beliefs about weather witches, to the built environment and how some societies have designed architecture that works with, rather than against, the weather. These explorations are fascinating in themselves, but humanities scholars will be particularly interested in the other chapters dealing with broader theoretical issues in the study of religion, weather, and climate. Here Bergmann’s book is not only an indispensable addition to the literature but a call to action.

While it is not possible to enumerate all of the book’s contributions in a short review, several stand out. First, Bergmann astutely describes the paradox that, though the Enlightenment disenchanted the weather in the modern world, the weather still carries moral and religious valences. That is, from a modern, scientific standpoint, weather is neutral, neither ‘good’ nor ‘bad’, but human perception of meteorological flux remains colored in certain ways by a religious lens. Ancient peoples, of course, took religious interpretations for granted. In a premodern context, gods such as Israel’s Yahweh used storms to demonstrate their power or punish iniquity, turning the weather into what Bergmann (following biblical scholar Steve A. Wiggins) calls a kind of ‘moral barometer’. Yet even now, Bergmann notes, ‘the old code about a deep interconnection between threatening atmospheric change and fatally unjust and unsustainable human social behaviour is returning on a global scale’ (p. 83). Bergmann thus argues that religion remains ‘a central cultural skill for creative adaptation to dangerous environments’ (p. 70); its vocabulary, images, and moral urgency are vital resources in combatting global warming and climate injustice.

Second, Bergmann compellingly evaluates the problems and prospects of scientific meteorology. On the one hand, he challenges meteorology’s exclusive ‘claim to power over the full explanation of what weather and climate are’ (p. 129). Meteorology’s persistent temptation is to assume that weather and climate are measurable, even manageable, through purely mathematical means. On the other hand, with the advent of chaos theory, which demonstrated the long-term unpredictability of weather systems, meteorology has come to realize its own inherent limitations. Bergmann sees this as an opening for a rapprochement between meteorology and religion. Chaos theory becomes a way of ‘re-sacrilising weather’ by revealing it as ‘one of the last domains of nature where complexity and variation are
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so high that humans can respond with reverence and feel that they are at its mercy’ (p. 135). Bergmann calls for a new synthesis of meteorological knowledge with religious wisdom about the weather. I am deeply sympathetic to his proposal and wonder whether it could be translated into concrete curricular innovations in schools of meteorology. In today’s STEM-driven university economy, the curricular space for humanities perspectives in science education is dwindling. Could a course in ‘religion for meteorologists’ nevertheless gain a foothold, and what might it look like?

Third, related to his critique of meteorology’s temptation to self-sufficiency, Bergmann is sharply critical of the commodification of weather information in the modern, digital economy. There is a good reason, he explains, that the World Meteorological Organization is located under the umbrella of the United Nations. Meteorological and climatological data, like weather itself, should be part of the ‘global commons’ (p. 142), not traded as commodities to the highest bidder. Bergmann consequently prefers to speak of weather as a ‘sacred gift’ (p. 137) or, as Gregory Nazianzus described nature, as a ‘guest of God’ (p. 141). Here Bergmann’s inclinations as a theologian are evident. While he admits that talking about weather as a gift makes the most sense in a religious context presupposing the existence of a divine giver, the phrase ‘global commons’ serves as a secular analogue to the idea that the atmosphere cannot be privatized but is instead ‘given’ to all people.

Yet even as he criticizes the notion that weather and climate research should be anything other than the common property of humanity, Bergmann resists the monolithic view of humanity often operative in the concept of the Anthropocene, which assumes that humans in general are destroying the planet. A fourth contribution of his book is his call to nuance the Anthropocene by acknowledging that a small minority of nations have enriched themselves and ravaged the planet in the process. Here Bergmann draws on Erik Swyngedouw’s critique of the Anthropocene as a ‘deeply depoliticising’ concept (p. 203). Bergmann insists that we should ‘strongly demand a process of re-politicisation’, and he joins his voice to those envisioning a next epoch, the Ecocene, in which equitable cohabitation would replace imbalances among nations as well as the current antagonism between humans and nature (pp. 206-213). Biblical religion, he notes, offers useful metaphors for a ‘re-politicised Ecocene’ (p. 215), including the images of the new Jerusalem, God as good shepherd and people as his pastoral flock, and the rainbow, which God ‘turns from a symbol of war to a colourful sign of peace between all created beings’ (p. 215).

If this sounds utopian, it is, but Bergmann maintains that a hopeful eschatology is precisely what is needed in current discussions of the Anthropocene. In the end, his book makes a strong case for why religion is still relevant in today’s secular world as humans reassess their own relationship to the atmosphere. Whereas science once convinced humans of their own mastery of nature, religion (at its best) encourages a greater humility that Bergmann sees as key to a more hopeful future. In demanding space for religious insights alongside knowledge from meteorology, Bergmann hopes we can ‘abandon the taken-for-grantedness of weather’ (p. 9). It is a salutary vision that deserves wide consideration.

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