
Book Reviews

Michael S. Northcott, *A Moral Climate: The Ethics of Global Warming* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2007), 336 pp., \$20.00 (pbk), ISBN: 978-1-57075-711-2. Review doi: 10.1558/jsrnc.v4i4.499.

Michael Northcott, Professor of Ethics at the University of Edinburgh and a priest in the Scottish Episcopal Church, argues in *A Moral Climate* that the present crisis we are experiencing as a result of global warming is caused by the existence of a worldwide market empire that in the last fifty years has allowed banks and corporations to maximize wealth accumulation at the expense of local patterns of land use and governance, thereby destabilizing both climate and community. *A Moral Climate* is particularly relevant today. Indeed, in late 2009, world leaders gathered in Copenhagen, Denmark, to forge a new global climate agreement, one that both lowers carbon emissions to safer levels and is equitable to developing as well as developed countries. Many of the issues raised at the Copenhagen conference (emission targets, aid from rich to poor countries) are also discussed in Northcott's book.

A Moral Climate contains an introduction and nine numbered chapters, as well as a notes section, an index, and a foreword by Sir John Houghton. In the introduction, which nicely encapsulates the whole book, Northcott writes about the ancient Hebrews in the time of the prophet Jeremiah (around 600 BCE), and draws parallels between the situation at that time and our own today. Referring to Jeremiah as the 'first ecological prophet', he states that Jeremiah specifically identified neglect of the Sabbath law—which required that God's people rest every seventh day and which set human work within divinely ordained moral and ecological limits—as the root cause of the downfall of Jerusalem. Through their idolization of wealth and power and their enslavement of people and land, the Israelites had upset the very 'order of Creation' because, for the ancient Hebrews, 'justice was not a human invention but a divine attribute set into the character and structure of Creation' (p. 12). Northcott argues that the moral and ecological collapse that Israel experienced offers a 'powerful narrative with which to frame the current ecological crisis' (p. 14). Today, as in Jeremiah's day, the solution to the problem requires 'new practices and new politics'; it requires bringing economy 'back into scale with the ecology of the earth' (p. 15). But of course the stakes are much higher now than before because the devastation and suffering that will occur as a result of global climate change will be on a much larger scale. Indeed, it will involve the whole earth with all its ecosystems and human inhabitants.

In Chapter 1, Northcott displays an impressive grasp of both the science of climate change and economic theory. First, he discusses concepts such as the greenhouse effect, tipping points, and feedback loops. Then, in a scathing assessment, he connects the 'neoliberal phase of modern capitalism', which began with the abandonment of

the Gold Standard in 1969, to the rabid destruction of ecosystems and communities that has ensued (p. 35). He argues that the separation of consumption and production that the new global economy fosters has led to a 'moral perversion of making, which is at the heart of the human vocation on Earth' (p. 37). Moreover, this separation between consumer and producer obscures the real source of material wealth, which is the earth and its ecosystems. Finally, following American farmer and essayist Wendell Berry, Northcott links the rise of global violence and terrorism—including the attacks of 11 September 2001—to 'the imperialist nature of the global economy' (p. 39).

By the end of the first chapter, Northcott has introduced many key arguments. The remaining chapters further elaborate these arguments and introduce others. In Chapter 2 he offers a withering critique of the fossil-fuelled lifestyle of the rich who live mostly in the Northern hemisphere and who are responsible for the bulk of the greenhouse gases in the atmosphere today. He highlights the great disparity between these rich persons and those living in poverty in the South, who emit much less carbon but who will bear the brunt of the devastation (drought, flooding, cyclones) wrought by climate change. He discusses the mechanistic mindset that asserts that human actions will not affect the earth because the earth obeys its own mechanistic rules that operate independently of human activity. Finally, he relates the story of Noah, saying that 'God has Noah build the ark to train him to live *with* creation and to discover his fellow creatures as companions' (p. 73; emphasis added). Northcott offers Noah as the example we should follow in order to recover our proper relation to creation, for in Noah we see 'giving without mastery' and the 'willingness to offer all creation back to God as gift and not as human possession' (p. 79).

In Chapter 3, Northcott takes note of the strong association between oil and war, and in Chapter 4, he comes down against carbon trading, also known as cap-and-trade. In the latter chapter, he argues that carbon trading will *not* reduce global carbon emissions, but instead will cause the destruction of old growth forests and will reduce biodiversity. On the other hand, carbon taxation, he says, will be effective in lowering carbon emissions because it 'promotes low carbon activities' and 'enables a shift in taxation away from polluting to non-polluting activities' (p. 142). In Chapter 5, Northcott argues that a denial of our 'situatedness'—the fact that we exist within a nexus of social and biological relationships—is at the heart of the 'pathology of global warming, resting as it does on the human refusal to *be* creature' (p. 182; emphasis original). The key to the successful treatment of this pathology, he believes, is for us to recover a sense of self-in-relation, and take responsibility for our actions. In Chapters 6, 7, and 8 Northcott investigates how our modes of dwelling, getting around, and eating can impact climate. Here, he suggests that a return to 'traditional moral and spiritual practices, emanating from the prioritization of being over having, and love over justice' holds great potential for ameliorating the situation and promoting a healthier and happier life. Finally, in Chapter 9, Northcott gives some ideas about how we can provide 'hopeful witness to climate justice'. He emphasizes that every attempt we make to lower our energy consumption at home, in the workplace, at the dinner table, or on the highway is important because it 'expresses solidarity with the victims of climate change and with the earth itself' (p. 281).

In conclusion, *A Moral Climate* presents an intense analysis of the economic, scientific and theological aspects of climate change. The book's author argues for the recovery of a radically local way of living and governing, one that recaptures the moral and ecological limits that Jeremiah and the ancient Hebrews believed were

embedded in the fabric of the cosmos. As he goes about developing his argument, Northcott sometimes overstretches a bit—such as when he criticizes climate science and the intergovernmental panel on climate change (IPCC) in Chapter 3—but that does not detract from the authority with which he writes. As liberation theologians might say, he is ‘speaking truth to power’.

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