

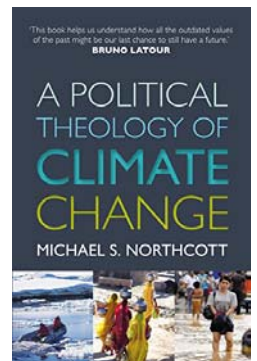
A Political Theology of Climate Change

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■ by Michael S Northcott

reviewed by John Weaver



Michael Northcott builds a persuasive case for the root of climate change in political liberalism and control and abuse of the natural world expounded in the philosophies of Bacon, Grotius, Descartes, Kant, and Locke. He contrasts these with the more positive alternatives of Luther, Giambattista Vico, Blake, and Whitehead.

Woven into the text are some of the frightening statistics of current and predicted climate change through global warming brought about by a rapidly increasing level of CO₂ emissions. Perhaps in the light of his central thesis that global capitalism and its support in western political institutions are the cause of global climate change, the most significant statistic lies at the end of the book, when he records that the IPCC predicts that the 'business as usual' approach will see a 7^o C rise in global surface temperature by 2100, and this will not lead to a new world, but one in which global capitalism will have collapsed, with the world's major cities under water.

Northcott commences his exploration with something akin to the parable of the frog in water, which is being gradually heated, the end result of which is a frog that is boiled alive. He speaks of the geopolitics of a slow catastrophe because the rate of climate change is slow in terms of one generation to another, let alone a 4-5 year term of an elected government.

He notes that those who resist climate science are largely in the Anglo-Saxon countries of Australia, New Zealand, UK, USA and Canada, where influential media support

comes through *Fox News*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and in UK *The Daily Telegraph*. He identifies the main climate change deniers as Nigel Lawson and A W Montford in the UK and Fred Singer and Steve McIntyre in the USA.

Northcott observes that the Industrial Revolution was driven by coal, which led to the control of nature, economic and technical processes, and to the mechanistic cosmology of Newton. Coal remains the largest reserve of fossil fuel, and as such is the greatest potential threat to humanity. It contributes the most to greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions with about 2300 current coal-fired power stations and a further 2000 planned in the next ten years, mostly in China and India. Annual coal exports have grown from 2.1 million metric tons in 2000, to 176 million metric tons, in 2010. Such increases alone will take global climate change to catastrophic levels and Northcott calls for a ban on the burning of coal.

The UK was the first coal economy and the USA the first oil economy. Oil as the basis for travel, especially air travel, has become fundamental to industry and geopolitics. The search for oil in the 20th and 21st centuries has seen colonial expansion, international political action, and war. We have considerable pollution caused by burning oil and gas, the ecological destruction caused by exploration, and the potential increase in these from shale oil and gas.

Northcott rightly observes that the developing arguments of the Enlightenment saw human progress and betterment coming through ►►

- discovery, experiment and the resulting dominion of nature. Political ideals and scientific development aided this, and Northcott notes that Bacon saw this dominion as salvation, linking it to his Christian understanding.

Northcott creatively draws a parallel between the Old Testament story of Eden to Exile, where God is ignored and human control is sought, with the Baconian view of salvation where scientific control is sought and our relationship with creation and the Creator is broken.

Northcott contrasts the concept of commons - communal sharing with that of sovereignty - ownership. While we can speak of air and ocean as commons, limits on pollution of these commons infringe property rights of industrial corporations - the result is a move to emission credits and permits, which give a market price to pollution. Northcott laments that the modern state is first and foremost a protector of property rather than of global commons, which is in contrast to the Old and New Testament statement that the land is God's.

The intrinsic relationship between fossil fuels and capitalism is seen in the counting of reserves of fossil fuels in the stock of wealth of global corporations. He is right to point to the problem for controlling climate change if these stocks were written off as not to be used. This might result in a global financial crisis of greater proportion than that in 2008. But only a reduction in the extraction of fossil fuels will reduce emissions.

In economic terms the bottom line of company balance sheets will place profit-making above ecological and social conditions for some but not all industries.

We note that Northcott gives little space to examples of corporations that do consider the physical and social environment, and his generalised condemnation may be unfair.

He rightly observes that only national governments can legislate to restrict extraction and replace it with alternative sources of energy, but the control of fossil fuel extraction

and its use goes against liberalism and free-market economics. Control over nature (Bacon) or people (Hobbes) or international rule of law (Kant) all rule against our relationship with God and care of creation. All of this is counter to the biblical view of covenant: God, humanity and land.

For Northcott the answer to climate change is a new political covenant with a rebalancing of unjust asymmetric relationships between rich and poor nations, but what we actually have is a fact-based, target-based control of emissions by United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, which does nothing to prevent the powerful continuing to extract, market, and make money from fossil fuels.

If there are to be ecological and physical limits to consumption (and associated atmospheric pollution), these can only become knowable and real when they are acknowledged in the political and economic sphere. However, Northcott gives little attention to the positive actions that are being taken by governments and industry in these spheres.

The scientists pass on their results and predictions to politicians, who are concerned to retain political power. While consumers and voters are often blamed for not being prepared to make sacrifices, Northcott is right to identify that the failure lies with the political judgement which fails to act for the common good of present and future generations.

Northcott appears to agree with Blake's view of industrial capitalism as an empire of the imperial antichrist, and that building the new Jerusalem involves the spiritual battle of dethroning the empire.

This is no doubt a *tour de force* bringing together politics, philosophy and science in the development of a clear argument. But Northcott can be criticised for presenting too one-sided a thesis.

Attention to those who have already grasped and acted on his arguments would probably help to encourage others to change their attitudes and decisions with regard to the natural world. ■

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