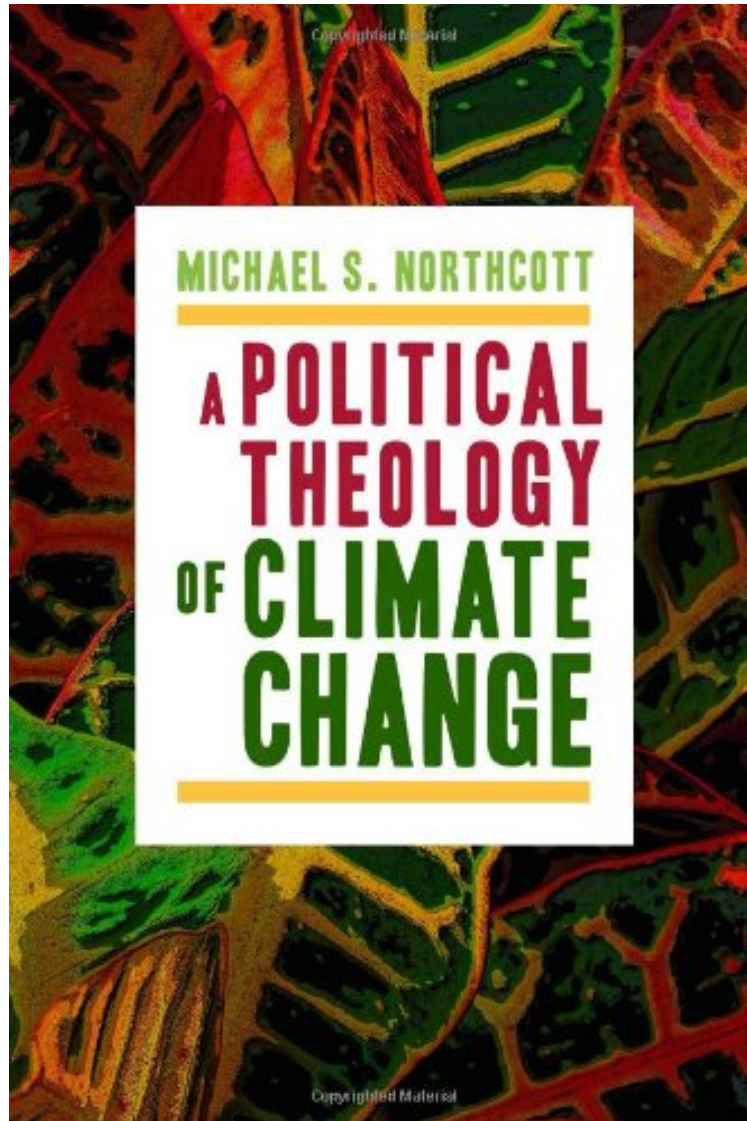


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A Political Theology of Climate Change

Michael S. Northcott

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Michael S. Northcott : A Political Theology of Climate Change before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised A Political Theology of Climate Change:

7 of 8 people found the following review helpful. A Riveting Political Theology of Climate Change By Sheep23A Political Theology of Climate Change by Michael S. Northcott The bombardment of media coverage regarding issues regarding global warming, climate change, and environmental politics assault the modern viewer at every angle. From progressive to conservative viewpoints, we are facing a crisis as to which voice is most trustworthy and worth our attention. At the same time, believers of every Christian tradition recognize the need for judicious analysis of the

climate change quandary. Into the mass of connective tissue that holds together climate change politics steps Michael S. Northcott, Professor of Ethics at the University of Edinburgh. His new book, *A Political Theology of Climate Change*, is a riveting in-depth analysis of both anthropogenic climate change and theological reflection on creation. Rather than run the risk of bringing out the outmoded conflict of political polarizing views on the climate change issue, Northcott provides the reader with both the climate change science that is behind the issues and counters the philosophical underpinnings of the view that nature and culture, science and ethics are at odds with each other at their foundations. Engaging with writers as broad as J.R.R. Tolkien, Carl Schmitt, Bruno Latour, and Alasdair MacIntyre, Northcott digs deeply into climate change science and deeply reflects on the world that God has made including his good creation. The first chapter targets the 'second Copernican revolution' caused by the repositioning of man as the shaper of planetary history (22). Labeling this turn of events as Anthropocene, Northcott characterizes this movement in history as being held by man as controller, in a state of god-like power over the destiny of the earth. Therefore, the problem arises very quickly here when climate change scientists seek to report their findings (physics of the earth), and are rebuffed by politicians for supposedly lobbying for political ends. If man is the arbiter of not only reason and rights, but also climate change, then the science of climate change is only redeemable as it suits the desires of the most vociferous. The description of an Anthropocene narrative is drawn out in contrast to a Christocene narrative in which Christ stands at the helm of his creation. The trajectory that comes out of this view with respect to a climate apocalyptic view takes into consideration the narrative beginning in Genesis journeying through to Revelation is one of restoration, not domination. Northcott beautifully weaves together a synthesis of concepts that the early Christians used concerning the restoration of the created order, namely the social body of Christians and the Eucharist (38). These early practices of fellowship and table are political to the extent that they resist the secular liturgy that divorces nature from culture, bodies from souls, and subjective from objective realms (45). Renewal, restoration, and proper cultivation are all part of both Israel's Scriptures as well as the practices of the early Christian community regarding nature. Much of Northcott's book is a deliberate wading in the waters of the philosophy behind climate change politics. Part of this investigation behind climate change is the recognition of certain figures that sharpen the underpinnings of the arguments behind climate change. Concerning Francis Bacon, Northcott writes, "For Bacon, human beings truly know only what they make.....By contrast (from Descartes), Bacon found a way back from the mind to the real world after Copernicus through a revised and more empirical approach to sense perception: the correspondence between human sense perceptions and physical reality could be reconstructed through the empirical method." (103) The great vision of empirical science verifying new discoveries in nature is a double edged sword however. The greater knowledge about the earth and the anthropogenic effects on the earth should necessitate a measure of 'seminal responsibility,' however, the goal Bacon finally resorted to was the ultimate happiness of man and his progress over the cosmos at the expense of nature. Political theology for Bacon was a means of reinstating the notion that progress was humanity's aim alongside a broader utopian ideal that held science in salvific proportions. The preponderance of sources in this book is amazing. One such reference point that helps us anchor the discussion of climate change is found in the comments relating to the work of Sergei Bulgakov. Northcott writes, "Hedonism for Bulgakov is the characteristic sin of modern political economy, just as asceticism - particularly asceticism for the poor - was the besetting sin of the pre-capitalist era." (156-7) Bulgakov repeatedly drew connection points between the 'spiritual state of a nation' and its economic life. Luxury tears apart the wisdom that to repair what is broken is better than to just discard the broken. Secondly, the lure of luxury does not produce a moral and social posture toward others and nature, but a rather brutish individualism. Bringing the discussion of climate change into proper perspective while relating to the writings of Giambattista Vico, Northcott writes, "The climate crisis is not a threat apart from culture. It is a threat to human culture as it is situated in nature." (109) Vico was transparent in bringing back the human side of the sciences, which speaks to the moral obligations of human discovery and militates against a power over nature trajectory. The emotivist/preferential dictates of individuals are indicative of the modern problems with climate change science/discussion. Drawing on the work of Alasdair MacIntyre, Northcott writes, "...the attempt to ground morality in emotions, rationality, or utility neglects the transcendent roots of morality in human and natural history and, ultimately, in the divine origination and destiny of human life on earth." (248) What climate change scientists point to as facts about fossil fuel consumption are both facts about the way things are on the earth and a moral judgment. But, many see these 'facts' as politically motivated tools of oppression or in many ways feelings about the way humans view the earth. Feeling based assertions tend to squash historical and moral arguments from the past and instead deaden the discussion regarding climate change politics. Far from providing a blanket answer to the growing problem caused by fossil fuel pollution, Northcott sees a way forward in the burgeoning commitment of people with a shared vision. By chronicling the Transition movement in England and looking away from the nation-state to provide sufficient answers, the way forward is the combination of local collective efforts and sustained moral commitment on behalf of the members of many associations and communities. The rich tradition of Christian fellowship and the ethic of loving one's neighbor points to a wealth of wisdom in moving the climate change discussion along. No, there is no magic spell that can cast aside the fossil fuel challenges that we face, but the combination of a rigorous rejection of the nature/culture divide and a community based vision will help climate change initiatives to hold sway over an

individualist culture. With wisdom and clarity, Michael Northcott pushes the reader to know the truth about climate change and see the Christian vision of the restoration of all things as leading the way to a better political theology of climate change. Thanks to Englewood Review of Books and Eerdmans for the copy of this book in exchange for an honest review.

Much current commentary on climate change, both secular and theological, focuses on the duties of individual citizens to reduce their consumption of fossil fuels. In *A Political Theology of Climate Change*, however, Michael Northcott discusses nations as key agents in the climate crisis. Against the anti-national trend of contemporary political theology, Northcott renarrates the origins of the nations in the divine ordering of history. In dialogue with Giambattista Vico, Carl Schmitt, Alasdair MacIntyre, and other writers, he argues that nations have legal and moral responsibilities to rule over limited terrains and to guard a just and fair distribution of the fruits of the earth within the ecological limits of those terrains. As part of his study, Northcott brilliantly reveals how the prevalent nature-culture divide in Western culture, including its notion of nature as "private property," has contributed to the global ecological crisis. While addressing real difficulties and global controversies surrounding climate change, Northcott presents substantial and persuasive fare in his *Political Theology of Climate Change*.

Worldviews "Northcott's impressive synthesis of the climate science with critiques of the modern worldview is no small feat. He has taken a significant step in the task of identifying the deeper drivers of the climate crisis." Englewood of Books "A riveting in-depth analysis of both anthropogenic climate change and theological reflection on creating. . . . With wisdom and clarity, Michael Northcott pushes the reader to know the truth about climate change and see the Christian vision of the restoration of all things as leading the way to a better political theology of climate change." *Modern Believing* "An intellectual tour de force. . . . [Northcott's] message is uncompromisingly prophetic. It deserves the widest possible audience." *Books at a Glance* "Makes a compelling case for the fact that we face climate problems not simply because of scientific problems or political problems but because of theological developments that found and fund a certain way of relating to the world. . . . Theologians from various perspectives can find wisdom here, as well as relevant challenges that any Christian thinking about climate change must confront." John Milbank -- University of Nottingham "This book offers us a new level of seriousness in developing a theological ecology. . . . Michael Northcott has the unusual intelligence to be able to see the link between 'soft' green issues on the one hand and 'hard' issues of international relations theory on the other. . . . If we are not once more to resort to an oppressive mode of imperialism which is only likely to speed up global warming, then we have to discover a more cultural and consensual mode of international collaboration, within a horizon of virtue. Since any such collaboration must take a substantive form, the role of the church here remains crucial." Oliver O'Donovan -- University of Edinburgh "Michael Northcott has devoted the best part of his career to understanding the problems of the environment and climate from a theologian's viewpoint, but this is no repetition of what he has said before. *A Political Theology of Climate Change* is the book he has been working towards, and he here achieves a powerful synthetic integration of scientific findings and policy questions with a theology of creation and eschaton and with philosophical and political critiques of modernity. This is a book to persuade us that the climate is not just a problem to be solved, but a question to be reflected on deeply, searching deep into the relation between mankind and its creator." Norman Wirzba -- Duke Divinity School "In this wide-ranging, compelling book Northcott shows why it is a great mistake to think that weather is a topic of concern only to farmers and gardeners. Anthropogenic climate change -- and all the pain and suffering it will bring to humanity and fellow creatures -- is a profound challenge to theological reflection in all of its forms because what is at stake is nothing less than hope for life that honors the gift of creation and gives glory to God. Drawing on the latest scientific research on climate and energy, Northcott develops an ambitious political theology that has the potential to bring healing to our lands and our communities. This book is a wake-up call." Bruno Latour -- Paris Institute of Political Studies "Drawing on the vast resources of Christian spirituality and of the much more recent climate sciences, Michael Northcott continues to bring alive the most implausible hybrid -- a carbon theology! By reawakening the dormant meaning of Incarnation, he also provides new energy for an ecological movement that could learn to thrive on the long tradition of political theology. This book helps us understand how all the outdated values of the past might be our last chance to still have a future." *Theology Today* "Northcott offers a compelling analysis and searing critique of the underlying political, social, and economic basis for climate change and the ineffectual political and economic attempts, such as the Kyoto Protocol and carbon emissions trading, to harness the human addiction to carbon-based forms of energy production. . . . An interesting and insightful theological analysis of global climate change." *Library Journal* (STARRED review) "Northcott, one of the most vocal and eloquent writers on the morality of ecological awareness, makes a passionate and scholarly case against the increasing abuse of our planet's environment and for the revolutionary change necessary to stop it. . . . His far-reaching writing brilliantly calls us all to account and to a deeper discipleship. Churches, pastors, and individuals, Christians or not, will respond." *Presbyterian Outlook* "This may be Northcott's most important book. It is both a haunting portrayal of the realities of climate change and hopeful in the proposal of a cultural theological shift. . . . Compelling and, at times, page-turning." *Choice* (American Library

Association) "Northcott presents in a compelling fashion the salient scientific information regarding climate change that could bring on an environmental catastrophe. ... He successfully weaves together and grounds his study in historical, theological, political, and moral reflections on how people of faith can respond to the challenge. ... The book ends on a strong and realistic sense of hope. Recommended." Sojourners "The most comprehensive, ambitious, and demanding volume on the combined subject of theology and climate change. Northcott culls from various sources across diverse disciplines and attendance at hearings on climate issues and proposed solutions. His theological and political commentary is especially compelling."