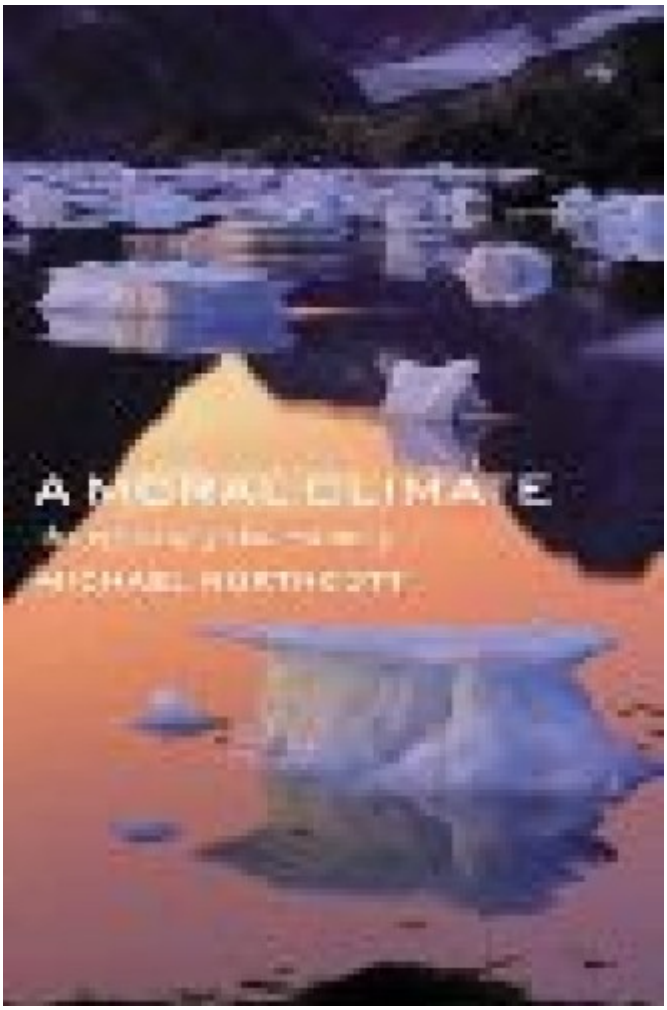
A Moral Climate: The Ethics of Global Warming

reviewed by Samuel Wells in the May 6, 2008 issue

In Review



A Moral Climate: The Ethics of Global Warming

Michael Northcott
Orbis

A theological engagement with the current global environmental crisis needs to do four things. It needs to show a thorough grasp of the scientific and historical context in which these questions are being discussed. It needs to have a close exegetical eye not just to the early chapters of Genesis but to the whole of scripture as the portrayal of Earth in the purposes of God and of appropriate human responses to the ways God loves the world. It needs to have a broad theological grasp of the trinitarian, christological, anthropological and eschatological issues at stake, and to break new ground in an overgrown and largely undertilled area. And it needs to locate the political and economic dimensions of a timely response that invokes both church and kingdom, holding back from utopian fantasy but moving the reader to repentance, empowerment and engagement. There has not previously been such a book.

Now there is. Michael Northcott has long been one of the most dynamic exploratory thinkers in theological ethics. In this work, his finest to date, he has finally offered the church and the academy what it has needed for so long: a profound academic, spiritual, theological, exegetical, politically grounded and energizing rendering of the global climate and sustainability crisis. It is not a perfect book: at times Northcott's passion and frustration and breadth of knowledge combine to offer one illustration or collection of evidence too many, clogging up the flow of the argument. But this is understandable given the nature of the subject and the author's commitment to addressing it in body, mind and spirit.

Three features make this the outstanding book in the field. In the first place, it offers a substantial ethical treatment not only of what the crisis is and how it might be engaged but most importantly why it is significant theologically and philosophically. The most visible characters in the conversation, from the Kyoto Protocol to Al Gore, argue almost entirely on consequential grounds: if we don't do something now, we (or our grandchildren, or the people of the poorer countries of the world, or their grandchildren) will be in deep trouble.

Northcott understands this urgency and places it in eschatological context, imagining that such people will say to us in heaven, "But you *knew* the science was right, you knew the predictions were real, and yet you carried on burning this stuff and wrecking the earth. Why? Why did you not change before it was too late?" But for Northcott it is fundamentally a deontological issue, not a consequential one:

> The rituals encouraged by the recognition of global warming—turning off lights, turning down the heating, cycling or walking instead of driving, vacationing nearer to home, buying local food, shopping less and conversing more, addressing the issues of fuel poverty locally and nationally—are good because they are *intrinsically* right, not just because they have the consequence of reducing carbon emissions.

It is quite simply wrong to enslave people and ecosystems to the high resource requirements of a corporately governed consumer economy. Thus the current crisis offers a kairos moment for renewal of church and world.

In the second place, the quality of Northcott's theological and exegetical engagement surpasses all other treatments, reliant as they tend to be on the rather tired language of stewardship. At times his work attains the holy grail of ecological theology: that is, "what Wendell Berry would sound like if he were a theologian." Here, for example, is Northcott on eco-economics: "It makes more sense to think of the human economy as a wholly owned subsidiary of the earth's systems rather than as a monetary system which is physically independent from the great economy of the earth and therefore endlessly expandable."

Impressive also is the way Northcott's argument for vegetarianism is entirely theological: meat eating is not only a concession after the Fall, it is tied to the sacrificial scapegoat system transformed by the blood of Christ the Lamb; hence vegetarianism is grounded in a theology of the atonement. The penultimate chapter on food is the highlight of the book and will take an honored place in the growing literature on the social significance of the Eucharist.

Northcott's exegesis is similarly imaginative and appropriate. Particularly gripping is his treatment of the Joseph saga in Genesis as a portrayal of bureaucratic and manipulative approaches to the environment. "Joseph is like those who respond to climate change with technological schemes to engineer the climate . . . and so attempt to stave off global warming without reducing industrial civilization's reliance on the wasteful burning of fossil fuel." Noah's flood and Joseph's 14-year plan represent rival notions of the threat and opportunity of the current crisis.

In the third place, Northcott shows vividly and persuasively how the ecological crisis is a truly political issue that can be addressed only by a political revival focused on radical democracy. Perhaps the most striking feature of this book is the way it

carries forward a political and economic argument with the full force of theological conviction and scientific evidence. The issues are always about power, always about social change, always about human relationships, but always also about the church. For example, Northcott locates the U.S.'s coming off the gold standard in 1971 as the launchpad for the unprecedented growth associated with neoliberalism, but the gold standard becomes a metaphor for the many ways in which humankind has come to deny its contingency, with disastrous results.

Similarly, Northcott applauds the way households in some countries have been transformed by attention to recycling and other such issues, but he soberly points out that "the offshore carbon emissions of British banks and corporations exceed all British-based emissions by a factor of six or seven." This is not just a household issue, nor just a government one. Despite the grim statistics, Northcott's argument is not just a lament either. He offers a number of imaginative proposals, such as a carbon tax. As he says, "Industrial economies tax productive activities by corporations and workers." A return to the premodern practice of taxing commodities (in this case emissions) would be "the most effective means for shrinking the carbon footprint of advanced industrial economies in the short timespan of twenty years"—which is all the time it seems we have before crisis becomes disaster.

A Moral Climate moves the spirit, challenges the mind and empowers the body. In the face of ecodespair and climate paralysis, it's hard to ask for anything more.