

Climate change and the failure of incarnational nerve

Do we really want God to live with us in a poisoned and degraded world?

by [Norman Wirzba](#) in the [September 27, 2017](#) issue

In Review



The Great Derangement

Climate Change and the Unthinkable

by Amitav Ghosh
The University of Chicago Press

By century's end, Miami will have disappeared. Think about that for a few minutes. Along with tens of millions of people around the world, Miami's residents will have joined the ranks of climate refugees who have been either flooded or burned out of their homes. Rising ocean levels will be just the beginning. If current trends continue, societies will face massive starvation, plagues and disease, perpetual war, and economic collapse. The pain and suffering will not be justly distributed.

If ever there has been a time to get busy with the work of building communities and economies that will help the earth be a livable home, now is the time. But can we do it? The signs are not encouraging. We have data aplenty. What we don't have is the requisite sympathy and affection. These have been bred out of the human imagination by decades of habitual and cultural formation.

Consider two developments that have marked the new millennium: the dominance of urbanization and the recognition that we are living in the Anthropocene era, when humans are the dominant power influencing the earth's future.

In the year 2000, demographers noted that for the first time in history, more people lived in cities than lived on the land. Though urbanization had been going on for some time, especially in industrializing nations, the majority of the world's population, many of them poor and desperate, now found themselves in fast-developing, ill-equipped megacities.

The phenomenon of today's mass urbanization is about much more than a change in location. It is about a change in sensibility, and a shift in desires and expectations. Put simply, the character of modern urban life makes it more difficult for people to have sympathy for anything other than themselves. The world and its many creatures have ceased to be a presence that compels recognition, respect, and responsibility. Life is navigated through shopping rather than through the care of land, plants, and animals. People's imaginations are shaped by market and media-manufactured campaigns that install individual human wants as the only thing that matters.

What hope is there for the world if the humans in control of it lack understanding and respect for it?

As a result, we now live in the most destructive economy the world has ever known. To give just one barometer of how far we have come, my grandfather would have understood his life to be a failure if the animals he cared for and the land he cultivated were abused. My generation, by contrast, depends on energy and agriculture systems that require the abuse of land, water, and creatures.

Also in 2000, Paul Crutzen, a Nobel Prize-winning atmospheric chemist, announced that our epoch should no longer be called the Holocene. Because of industrial development and the massive acceleration in consumption and energy use, our epoch is more appropriately termed the Anthropocene, the age of the human.

The Anthropocene marks the moment when humans became the dominant force in planetary history, responsible for the widespread alteration of the world's land, ocean, and atmospheric systems. If in the past it could have been assumed that nature's power dwarfed and limited human ambition, in the Anthropocene the situation is reversed: human power is now the primary, determining influence shaping Earth's future. Though planetary systems and ecological processes are still clearly at work, their expressions can no longer be understood apart from human activity. From cellular to atmospheric levels, there is no place or process that does not reflect humanity's technological prowess and economic reach.

If our concern is a livable planet, these two developments should activate in us a fair amount of worry. Having entered the "epoch of humanity," the time when human power has attained what used to be thought of as divine proportions, how will these capacities be deployed when the insularity and hubris of so much urban life have shrunk human imaginations to the narrow registers of personal affirmation and acquisition? What hope is there for the world if the humans in control of its future lack a sympathetic understanding and respect for it?

Few have understood our predicament as well as the Indian novelist Amitav Ghosh. In *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*, Ghosh develops with unparalleled precision several of the processes at work within modern art, politics, and economics that make it almost impossible for people to appreciate the plight we are in. Though societies are awash with information on a scale never before seen, people simply lack the imagination, sympathy, and evaluative capacity to respond to what is going on all around us. "Quite possibly, then, this era, which so congratulates itself on its self-awareness, will come to be known as the time of the Great Derangement."

Ghosh identifies multiple developments that have contributed to our deranged condition. We can start with the modern novel, which in its classic form presents us with a bourgeois world in which the only things of interest are the dramas that play out between humans. This fictional world portrays nature as regular and predictable.

But why should we think of the world in this way, especially when we note how hunters and peasants the world over assume nature to be alive, often fierce, and always unpredictable? How will we think seriously about climate change, which is in some ways the epitome of the improbable and unpredictable flash floods, hundred-year storms, persistent droughts, unprecedented heat, if we can't imagine life as inextricably enfolded within a dynamic, alive, and often uncanny world?

We should not be surprised, says Ghosh, that we have yet to see great literature that can speak meaningfully about human life in an Anthropocene world. As the literary imagination developed in modernity, it became radically centered on people, especially males, who, through the powers of personal agency and technological sophistication, make their mark upon the world. This is an "enlightened" humanity marked by a "predatory hubris" that is determined to annex, exploit, and master every part of the globe for human betterment.

The development of capitalism is another major factor that contributed to the Great Derangement. The transformation of an economy centered on the procurement of livelihood (as when people worked for the provision of personal and communal needs) to one centered on the purchase of commodities manufactured elsewhere led increasingly to people being unable to understand themselves as inextricably entangled within ecosystems, sharing a common fate. Call it the unmooring of economic forms from ecological realities.

What must not be forgotten is that capitalism has, from the beginning, been a military, imperial project that depended on brutal violence for its success. As Sven Beckert has argued in his magisterial book *Empire of Cotton: A Global History*, even in its early mercantile phase capitalism would be most honestly described as "war capitalism." Entire continents and races of people were brutalized to secure commodities and profits. The project of modern progress, in other words, depended on terrorizing lands and peoples, extracting whatever wealth was available, and thereby keeping vast populations poor.

Both imperial power and capitalist production are driven by the desire to accumulate wealth. The wealth that is sought, however, has little to do with the *commonwealth*, or with John Ruskin's conviction that "there is no wealth but life." In this new economic order, what matters is the expansion of markets and a strong quarterly earnings report. Because money flows in the direction of short-term gain, the pursuit of a long-term common good is hard to imagine or realize. The thought that we might have *enough* is difficult to fathom, even as we enjoy levels of comfort and convenience that would have been the envy of kings and queens in former generations.

Ghosh also points to the modern conception of freedom as central to our derangement. Within this conception, there is no place for nonhuman forces or systems. Indeed, "being independent of nature was considered one of the defining characteristics of freedom itself. Only those peoples who had thrown off the shackles of their environment were thought to be endowed with historical agency; they alone were believed to merit the attention of historians."

A major cause of the "great derangement" is the modern conception of freedom.

It is understandable and laudable that people would have the oppression of (especially marginalized) people as a primary concern, and that emancipation from unjust systems should be a central objective. But when freedom is characterized as liberation from nature, or as the ability of self-determining subjects to annex and exploit the world without end, then the degradation of places and the exploitation of communities are sure to follow. The historian Dipesh Chakrabarty put the point clearly when he said, "The mansion of modern freedom stands on an ever-expanding base of fossil-fuel use."

Ghosh is masterful at showing how modern freedom has a particular feel, just as it has forms that are unique to it. Consider, for instance, aesthetic quests that center on the artist's exploration of interior realms (mind, emotion, the unconscious) as the basis for beauty or meaning or truth. This is a world in which embodiment, and therefore also one's entanglement with all the billions of bodies (large and small) of this world, has disappeared from serious or sympathetic consideration. Artists who rebelled against the status quo were mostly oblivious of their continuing collusion in an economic order that destroys places and communities alike.

Together these developments make something like a robust, effective politics almost impossible. Rather than being focused on the common good, politics in the time of the Great Derangement is reduced to an individual moral adventure, an interior journey in search of personal authenticity and self-discovery. Put in today's Facebook terms, we can call this a diaper politics in which the scope of the political has been reduced to the puny register of self-expression and self-affirmation. This form of politics, as Eve Sedgwick has shown, leads to a "paranoid position" that stifles genuine conversation and leaves people perpetually suspicious and alone.

Ghosh narrates modern politics as Protestantism without a God, because "it commits its votaries to believing in perfectibility, without redemption, and a never-ending journey to a shining city on a hill—constructed, in this instance, not by a deity, but by democracy. This is a vision of the world as a secular church, where all the congregants offer testimony about their journeys of self-discovery." In the time of the Anthropocene, and in a context like this, political virtue is reducible to whether a person drives a Prius or shops at Whole Foods. Trapped within an individual, interior vision of the world, people are rendered incapable of understanding or addressing the systemic, long-term, place-bound decisions that need to be made if catastrophic displacement and suffering of creatures are to be minimized.

What policies, institutions, cross-national collaborations, readjustments of power, and legal and moral frameworks do we need if we hope, as scripture says, to "live long in the land" (Deut. 11:9)? The modern vision of the world and of the economy, deranged and destructive as they are, don't offer much help. Neither do many of the leading environmental organizations, since they too, as Peter Dauvergne has argued in *Environmentalism of the Rich*, are trapped in a worldview that thinks we can shop our way to a healthy planet and a happy humanity.

At the end of his book, Ghosh offers a surprising conclusion: our best hope may be found in the growing involvement of religious leaders in the climate struggle. Ghosh believes that our political, economic, and financial institutions are impotent. They don't have the moral depth or the practical forms to do much. But religions transcend nations and generations, and they have a moral and spiritual depth that can critique and redirect economistic ways of being.

Moreover, at their best, these traditions call people out of their interior, myopic obsessions and into service for the common good. Religions call people to an acceptance of limits, and without an acceptance of limits to human ambition there

is, says Ghosh, no way out of our planetary crises. What we need are traditions and practices that will enable us “to transcend the isolation in which humanity was entrapped in the time of its derangement” and that will help people “rediscover their kinship with other beings.” Pope Francis’s recent encyclical *Laudato si’* is in Ghosh’s mind, since it is a religious document that has surprised many for its power to ignite fresh conversation and action among secular and religious environmental groups.

I will admit that upon first reading, I was fairly energized by Ghosh’s high estimation of the potential of religious groups to make a difference. But it didn’t take long for me to see how much Christianity is itself firmly stuck within, and resolutely committed to, the forms of imagination and ways of life that characterize the Great Derangement. Christian leaders have long blessed and marched hand in hand with the political and military leaders who have brutalized land and people alike. They still do.

Moreover, the way of Christ has been consistently reduced to a self-help, self-enhancement gospel that has little interest in the plight of others and their places. The thought that God’s reconciling, redeeming vision extends to every creature in heaven and on earth (Col. 1:15–20) and that Christ is the creator and Lord over every square inch of the universe (John 1:1–14) strike many professed believers as an absurdity or a capitulation to some pagan animist agenda. Even self-described progressive Christians seem stuck within the modern emancipatory ideal and the politics of identity and self-affirmation.

Ghosh sees modern politics as Protestantism without God.

If Christians hope to be of much help in the tough future ahead, our first task will be to identify and root out the derangement that is operative where we are. How should we proceed?

Christians can start by remembering that God is with us. I don’t mean this in the feel-good sense that God is constantly around us, eager to affirm the unique being that is you or me. Sure, God loves you and me, but that is just the beginning of the much more radical desire of a God who, quite literally, wants to be with us—teaching us, inspiring us, and healing us and our economic forms so that we and our places can be embodied witnesses to God’s continuing presence on earth. We need to address the failure of incarnational nerve that believes that “the fullness of God” (Col. 1:19) did not really dwell bodily in Jesus and that the point of faith is ultimately

to escape embodiment and Earth.

I recommend that we keep John's Apocalypse firmly in view, especially the declaration that "the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them" (Rev. 21:2). This passage shocks many Christians. It shouldn't, because God's trajectory throughout scripture has always been *toward* Earth rather than *away* from it. Christians need to reject all privatizing, escapist models of salvation and learn to participate in God's restoring and redeeming ways with the whole world.

In this effort, Christians are not alone. We have the promise of the Holy Spirit as the divine power that is constantly at work perfecting and beautifying the whole of creation. The work to which God calls us is economic, political, and legal, since it involves the preparation of a planetary home to which we hope to make God welcome. Do we really want God to live with us in a poisoned and degraded world? We need to rethink salvation as the art of permanent and life-giving homemaking. Jesus and the prophets have a lot to teach us in the ways of this art.

Second, Christians are going to have to work hard to correct the individualizing, emancipatory ideal that inspires and shapes our most basic assumptions about humanity. From a strictly physiological point of view, there is no such thing as life alone or life separated from others. To exist is necessarily to be rooted and entangled within places with a multitude of (seen and unseen) others. Our essential work is not liberation from places or from others. It is, rather, to learn the art of hospitality, which welcomes, nurtures, and releases others into the fullness of their lives, so that our presence contributes to the healing and flourishing of all.

The work ahead will not be easy. In many instances, it will be overwhelming because so many of the social and ecological contexts we inhabit are marked by disease, violence, and injustice. For this reason, it is especially important to develop an understanding of human beings in terms of their creaturely and ecclesial life. The work of hospitality is not a solitary effort. It is best carried out communally, with the protection and support of the body of Christ, and with the knowledge that the love of God is daily working in creation to heal and to promote life. The measure of an abundant life is not that one has been able to make it alone but rather that one has contributed to the creation of a world in which the relationships that shape and nurture us are inspired and empowered by the love of God.

Both humanity and the earth have been poorly served by the forms of liberation that leave us isolated, suspicious, cynical, bored, and sick and that render this world increasingly inhospitable, even uninhabitable. Ghosh is right. The problems of our derangement are not technocratic. They are fundamentally about who we think ourselves to be and what we think it right to do. The dream of a perpetual growth economy that will fuel the individual ambitions of billions is over. In our Anthropocene world, it has become more important than ever to devote ourselves to the sort of homemaking that makes hospitality to all people and all creatures a distinct possibility. Christians have much to learn from and much to contribute to this work.

A version of this article appears in the September 27 print edition under the title "Waking up to the Anthropocene."