

*A Moral Climate: The Ethics of Global Warming.* By Michael S. Northcott. Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2007. xiii + 336 pages. \$20 pb.

Michael Northcott has written an excellent prophetic Christian analysis of, and response to, the issue of global warming. His book, *A Moral Climate*, provides a thorough review of the natural and social sciences of climate change within the context of what might be called a "Christian social green" worldview. Clapp and Dauvergne categorize social greens as operating out of a neo-Marxist framework that places an emphasis on justice, community, and power. Such analyses typically place less emphasis on population growth when addressing sustainability, emphasizing instead the inequities of the modern market economy,

the corruption of political processes by large corporations' influence, and the importance of moving to a more decentralized, participatory society.

Northcott starts with Jeremiah in developing his vision of a Christian social green critique of today's market economy, emphasizing the relatedness of all creatures to one another and to God. His basic thesis is that, prior to the advent of industrial capitalism, traditional concerns with justice, the sacred, and community characterized society. People derived rich meaning from a life based on working closely with their environment and their neighbors to craft goods reflecting the beauty of the world's Creator. The neoliberal market ideology derived from British utilitarianism replaced these concerns with an ethos that derives meaning purely from goods and from the accumulation of wealth and power based upon anonymous exchange. According to Northcott, neoliberals believe that "unrestrained economic growth, deregulated trade in goods and deregulated money markets are redemptive devices that make the world a better place" (35). Yet this growth corrodes the truly private (the household) and the truly public (art, politics, education, and play). The abandonment of dependence on God and on one another in favor of anonymous exchanges of commodities between (supposedly) autonomous individuals has led to the ecological crisis we face. Its solution requires a radical, relation-based (ecological) reform of the way we make things. Also, government and, by extension, international governance institutions have a divinely mandated role to promote the public good. Thus, governments should levy a tax on carbon (a governmental solution) instead of relying on the carbon-trading scheme of the Kyoto protocol that depends on markets, which then turn climate into a commodity and cause the very problem we are trying to solve.

I found the second half of his book particularly interesting and insightful as he further develops his ethical framework, applying it to homebuilding, food, and transportation. He deftly moves in and out of biblical scholarship, reflection, and praxis, calling Christians to rethink how they live and why. As rich and well done as Northcott's book is, however, the Christian economist that I am would like to see more.

I actually agree with the broad sweep of his critique and analysis, as well as with most of the details. Northcott suffers a bit, though, as most proponents of any mode of social analysis may, from failing to examine seriously the insights that alternative social analyses might offer. Numerous critiques of the pros and cons of market and of government exist within mainstream (non-social/green) economics, but Northcott seems to have ignored them. This approach resembles that of describing a statue as if seen only from the back: why move to the front when we already know what it looks like? For example, Northcott rightly excoriates the pollution and injustice of the market system, but he fails to address

the impact of government policy (such as energy subsidies, mineral depletion allowances, and agricultural subsidies) on the environment. Just as markets can fail to account for environmental costs of production, so can governments. What do theory and practice tell us about government, market, and community failure? Is the problem ultimately markets and corporations, or is it rather the cultural values that the Enlightenment embedded in all modern political and economic institutions of whatever ideology? How is it that both market economies and centrally planned economies pollute, the latter even more than the former? How would a truly competitive market economy, with people sharing Northcott's traditional values, fare in practice? Along these lines, while Northcott rightly criticizes the neoliberal economic fascination with efficiency, he fails to give efficiency sufficient due. Failure to pay attention to efficiency can lead to incredible waste, as seen in the pollution and poverty of centrally planned economies. Similarly, Northcott seems to suspect trade, urging us to "buy local." But if others produce so much more efficiently than, even including shipping, they emit less carbon than we do, should we still buy locally? What is "local" anyway? How far away is "nonlocal"? Northcott would benefit from walking around the statue of climate change to broaden his perspective.

We might find a cautionary tale in the rise of interest in, and availability of, alternative energy—despite large corporations, federal government inaction, rampant individualism, and pervasive materialism. The very system Northcott sees as the problem also is bringing us ecological building practices and radically new ways of manufacturing that mimic nature, practices Northcott applauds.

Northcott's book will reward the reader for reading it. It is well worth the effort. I hope that he will turn his formidable scholarship to some of the questions above. Another book, perhaps? If so, I look forward to reading it.

—Robert Gottfried