

Climate Change: Cultural Change - religious responses and responsibilities

Edited by Anne Elvey & David Gormley-O'Brien

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This book is a collection of twelve essays based on presentations at a symposium of the same name held in October 2011. The contributors are not all professional theologians, but all have an important light to throw on this fascinating topic and each essay is well-researched. The book would be an excellent introduction to eco-theology for students unfamiliar with it, and adds new insights for those who already have some familiarity.

After a thought-provoking Foreword by Norman Habel, the collection is divided into three parts. The first begins with scientist Peter Rayner's outline of the case for human-induced climate change and the need for self-transcendence to respond effectively. Miriam Pepper, Rosemary Leonard and Ruth Powell then analyse data from the National Christian Life Survey of 2006, showing differences in levels of concern along denominational lines but overall much the same level of concern as the general population. The many unanswered questions formed the basis for a fuller 2011 survey. Clive Ayre, a Minister in the Uniting Church, gives an optimistic assessment of church activity in response to climate change.

The second part of the book explores the call to respond to climate change from various theological and religious perspectives. Jione Havea reflects from his non-Western cultural perspective on the notion of "home" for the peoples of Oceania, given the rising sea levels caused by global warming. Anne Elvey explores climate change in the light of Jesus' challenge in Luke 12: 54-56 to interpret the present time, and suggests this is a "*kairos* moment" similar to the *kairos* of Jesus' own time. In the next essay, Patristics scholar David Gormley-O'Brien puts forward the teachings of Clement of Alexandria who recommended living frugally and sharing any superfluous possessions with those who are less well off in the community. Yet a fair distribution of resources would need the external restraint of legislation.

Deborah Guess' essay convincingly recommends a paradigm shift in Christology away from a human-centred personal Saviour to a coherent integration of the particularity of Jesus Christ with his more general, cosmic dimensions. I found her concept of "deep incarnation" quite inspiring. Sally Cloke provides a fascinating account of the link she sees between creationism and climate denial. In the final essay of Part 2, Shelini Harris shows via two case studies how people do not feel deprived by living ecofriendly lives when their spiritual identities are fully shaped by values different from prevailing worldviews.

The third and final part of the collection contains three essays which relate the authors' own experiences. Julie James, Richard Mallaby, Robin Pryor and Cath James each consider, based on their own work with people, how a commitment to a different future might be nourished. For example, Pryor noted a great excitement in children when they are brought close to Nature.

Taken as a whole, the book explored interesting themes. Is the key to transforming our responses to climate change the nurturing of a sense of connection with Nature? Is it more about moral self-transcendence? As Christians, do we need a more complete understanding of Christ's mission? How important is it to fundamentally transform our values and worldviews which are otherwise so influenced by the ideology of free-market capitalism? Or is cultural change realistically less important than legislation to create a fairer, more sustainable world?

As a Catholic Christian I wonder if a sacramental perspective could have brought further richness to this collection of essays. More importantly, as a climate activist, considerations of cultural change would be more complete if influences from the broader socio-political context were acknowledged more fully. There is a particular evil which is worth naming separately because of its shaping influence.

For decades, the fossil fuel industry has funded climate denial think tanks and aggressively spread misinformation. Each year they routinely use their considerable financial power to employ influential lobbyists to ensure legislation is passed which limits environmental action and maximizes their profits. (For Australians, see *Big Coal* by Guy Pearse et al.) To my mind, they are among the "principalities and powers" to which Paul referred in Ephesians.

Methodist, climate activist and author Bill McKibben, among others, has recently added this key insight to our understanding of the climate crisis and it has led to an energetic global divestment movement. Encouragingly, once made aware, the churches have been among the first to respond by taking their investments out of fossil fuels. By challenging the social license fossil fuel companies have had to date, hope is growing that the worst of the climate crisis might just be averted.

The essays in this collection provide a wealth of insights, but this more complete understanding of the cultural genesis of the current climate crisis will help us break its power.

Reviewer: *Thea Ormerod BSW is chair of the Australian Religious Response to Climate Change (www.arrcc.org.au), a multifaith organization responding to the issue of climate change. She has recently written articles on climate change and divestment from fossil fuels for Eureka Street.*

Email: chair@arrcc.org.au
