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Book Review

In view of current debates on 'global warming' and the imminent UN Climate Change Conference (COP15), taking place in Copenhagen, Denmark from 7 to 18 December 2009, we share the following review article of a book published by SPCK in 2007, with thanks to Andy Angel for making it available to ANVIL.

NICK SPENCER & ROBERT WHITE

Christianity, Climate Change and Sustainable Living

SPCK, 2007, 245 pp

£9.99

ISBN 9780281058334

In this short book the authors set themselves no less a task than to provide the contemporary Christian living in the UK with a holistic response to climate change and consumerism from a theologically informed perspective. Having explained their purpose in the introduction, the authors explain the problem in Part 1 (chapters 1 and 2), the biblical perspective on the issues raised by the problem in Part 2 (chapters three to five) and guidelines for a Christian response to the problem in Part 3 (chapters six to eight). These three parts to the book are supplemented by notes, references, an index of subjects and most usefully a brief account of the nature and work of five organisations that have sponsored the current work and may help the interested to engage further in the issues raised in the book – the Jubilee Centre, the Faraday Institute for Science and Religion, the John Ray Initiative, Tearfund and World Vision.

Part 1 gives basic information about global warming and its effects. The nature of the greenhouse effect is explained, the greenhouse gases listed and their origins made clear. Climate change is put into historical and geological perspective so that the reader is left in little doubt that humanity is having a negative impact on the environment. Future projections of the impact of climate change and of human behaviour are laid out in simple but stark terms. The authors then translate the human impact on climate change into patterns of behaviour with which we are all familiar – consumption of goods at supermarkets, use of private and public transport, and the gas and electricity that we use in our homes. They make a link between increased consumption and increase in carbon emissions. They note that the increase in consumption and carbon emissions cannot be linked to an increase in happiness and suggest that consumerism is partly to blame for the continuing dissatisfaction of folk in the UK.

Part 2 takes a step back from these problems. It asks whether a Christian ought to worry about such things and answers the question with a resounding 'yes'. First, we must care for creation because God does. Second, being human entails being part of the created order and being a steward of the created with a mandate to care for it (referring to Genesis 1.26-28, (83-86)). Third, to love one's neighbour

entails caring for people affected by climate change and finally as the new creation is part of our hope, we ought to work towards the renewal of creation.

At this point, the authors analyse Isaiah 40-66 in such a way that it gives a blueprint for sustainable living in fulfilled community in harmony with the environment. They suggest that this biblical vision ought to underpin the faith of the contemporary Christian who seeks to live out a community-oriented, environmentally-friendly lifestyle. This is followed by a discussion of the biblical practice of sustainable living which is rooted particularly on the laws of Jubilee (Leviticus 25) and Jesus' allusion to them in Luke 4.18-19. This discussion draws out principles for wealth, trade, rest and the protection of the vulnerable.

Part 3 begins by drawing on the biblical perspective by outlining a vision for sustainable living which translates into eight principles (153-157). There follows a chapter which translates the principles and vision into actions which people can perform to make a difference. These are grouped into personal responses, national responses and international. The personal responses are graded into sections from 'easy wins' through to those more costly in terms of time, money and effort. The national and international responses present summaries of possible options that governments are considering with brief lists of pros and cons attached to each possibility. They provide a very basic introduction to the issues for anyone who might consider getting involved in political campaigning as part of their personal response. The final chapter comprises a call to action.

On the positive side, this book is remarkably useful. It gives a coherent and understandable summary of the science behind the climate change debate. There are sufficient diagrams, graphs and summary boxes to make the text easy to read – and to make finding the 'useful' bits again even easier. The notes give ample access to other texts for the interested to research the topic further. Most usefully, the book gives good practical advice on some basic changes people can make to their lifestyles in order to do some environmental good – indeed, it is worth getting hold of the book simply to read 167-177 with a glance at the table on 178. Given my personal commitment to sustainable living and good stewardship of creation, I hope that these pages are read by many folk who then act on their recommendations – or get more involved in acting on them than they already are.

However, in terms of the authors' aim to provide a holistic response to climate change from a theologically informed perspective, I cannot honestly say that I believe the book to be a success. I cannot judge the science of the book and so will leave that task to others – limiting my own response to the biblical interpretation in the book and some of the claims it makes concerning moral choices that Christians ought to make.

The greater part of the biblical interpretation of the book is either one-sided or quite simply misleading. The answer to the question of why Christians ought to care for the environment begins with a statement that God cares for the environment (78-81). This uses texts in which God is depicted as creating or sustaining creation (e.g. Job 38-39; Psalms 19; 24; 65; 148). What the authors do not do is to examine the many texts in which God is seen as destroying the earth and its inhabitants (e.g. Isaiah 13.6-22; 34.1-15; Jeremiah 4.23-28; 2 Peter 3.5-7;

Revelation 8.6-12). To ignore these texts as the authors do is one-sided and fails to answer the perfectly reasonable question of what such texts suggest about God's relationship with the environment.

Their suggestion that Jesus' authority over creation in Mark 4.35-41 demonstrates God's care for the environment is simply misleading. Mark draws on an ancient myth of the power of God to destroy the forces of evil pictured as a stormy sea and uses it in this story to show that Jesus is God, as he does what only God can do in 'defeating' the stormy sea. The militaristic nature of the myth has little if anything to do with caring for the environment. Examples of one-sided and misleading use of biblical texts are not infrequent in this book. Two examples constitute a particular cause for concern.

The first is the way in which the authors use Genesis 1.26-28. The authors are emphatic in their rejection of any interpretation of this text which suggests that humanity is given dominion over the world that might allow for exploitation of the planet and its resources and claim to show how this is a 'grossly incorrect reading of the Genesis text' (77). In line with much OT scholarship, they suggest that being made in the image of God means that humanity is given the task of ruling over creation on God's behalf, just as ancient near eastern monarchs were sometimes said to be 'in the image of God' and so given authority to rule on behalf of God (83-86).

What they fail to note is that the kind of dominion exercised by an ancient Near Eastern monarch was not necessarily life-giving as a brief glance at the story of the edict of Nebuchadnezzar in Dan 2.5 will illustrate. Moreover, God commands humanity to 'subdue' the earth (Genesis 2.5) – and Hebrew word translated 'subdue' is a strong term, it also means 'subjugate' and 'violate'. There is no explanation from the authors as to how we account for this term on their reading of this text – a text which is foundational for their argument.

Likewise, the authors' use of Isaiah 40-66 is questionable. I cannot find a single reference in this text to sustainable living. I can find plenty which refer to the miraculous work of Yahweh in turning the unfruitful land into a land of abundance and plenty for the newly redeemed people of Judah. The authors state that Jesus makes this vision central to his ministry, at least in Luke (100-101). This is true but again I search Luke-Acts in vain for a reference to sustainable living as it has been outlined in this book. There is much in Luke-Acts about the new community and some of the values which the authors discuss in chapter 5 but nothing about the programme for sustainable living that the authors present in their book.

What is most disturbing is that in both Isaiah 40-66 and in Luke-Acts, the work of the renewal that is about to take place is described precisely in terms of the Lord God of heaven and earth coming to rescue the poor – that is the community of people faithful to God who are in such dire straits that they have absolutely no recourse to rescuing themselves. Now, sadly, this picture runs in exactly the opposite direction to the main argument of this book. The book suggests that there are things that we can do to renew the earth. Both Isaiah 40-66 and Luke-Acts suggest that it is God who acts and, in the case of Luke-Acts, it is only in the empowering of the Spirit that humanity is capable of participating in the mighty and miraculous acts of God.

Those who believe that climate change is nothing to worry about as the God of miracles can change everything anyway are unlikely to find the biblical arguments of this book much of a challenge to their thinking. Whilst I am greatly in sympathy with what the authors are trying to do in creating a biblical vision for sustainable living, I have to conclude that they are unlikely to convince a moderately biblically literate person who is not already converted to the cause.

I have one further criticism which is that this book reads like book written by middle-class folk in the 'developed' world for middle-class folk in the 'developed' world. It is keen urge readers that sustainable living does not have to be a 'hair-shirt' option (e.g. 72). In fact, it has a tendency to favour the lifestyles of the wealthy middle class of the developed world over those of poorer folk in less wealthy countries. Economic 'realities' stand very much in the foreground of the argument and so, for example, 'Contraction and Convergence' (one solution to increasing carbon emissions which puts poorer nations on an equal footing with richer nations) is almost dismissed as unfeasible (209-211).

Similarly, the vision for sustainable living (157-164) seems to favour UK lifestyle over trade for poorer nations – I note that aviation and trade that depends on it is hardest hit by the vision when according to figure 2.3 (58) passenger cars cause twice the carbon emissions compared with aviation in the UK. In a book that purports to give a Christian vision, one cannot help but wonder what either Jesus or the prophet Amos would have made of all this.

In summary, this book does not succeed as a theologically informed holistic response to climate change and consumerism. I cannot see its arguments winning converts from other camps within the climate change debate in the Christian community. However, that ought not to detract from its considerable usefulness to the Christian who wishes to engage in climate change issues, gain a basic understanding of what is at stake and find out how to do their bit to bring about changes at individual, community, national and international levels. If it succeeds in equipping people in this important task, it will have achieved something for the good of humanity and the planet.

Andy Angel

South East Institute for Theological Education