

Celia Deane-Drummond, Sigurd Bergmann and Markus Vogt (eds)

Religion in the Anthropocene

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This collection of essays derives from the fourth European Forum for the Study of Religion and Environment held in May 2015 and is divided into six sections. After 'setting the stage' come historical, philosophical, theological, ethical, and sociopolitical papers.

A few of the contributors will be familiar names, especially Celia Deane-Drummond and Michael Northcott. Many will be new to British readers. The volume turns on the question of the 'Anthropocene', which is now being proposed as a new geological era, characterised by the huge and unprecedented impact of a single species, the human, on climate, sea-level, ocean acidification, and species habitats more generally.

Setting aside the question of whether this is helpful terminology, the underlying issue on which so many of the contributions turn is whether the Anthropocene should be embraced as a new set of possibilities for human ingenuity, what might be termed the 'Promethean' response, or whether the advent of this era should be a source of shame and newfound humility.

Northcott himself sets the scene, drawing helpfully on Ruskin's response to industrialisation and his call for moral, spiritual and social renewal, recovering the paths of justice and piety. Northcott contrasts this with theorists of the Anthropocene who call rather for better *management* of the Earth's systems. Can we, Northcott ends by asking, summon a movement of love that defends the stranger, the climate refugee, and the unborn of future generations? I also appreciated Christoph Baumgartner's essay on stewardship in this section. He notes first that stewardship does presume a future (contrary to some apocalyptic predictions) and also that in Christian perspective it is a direct obligation to God, not primarily to subsequent generations. But the question remains open whether the time for moderate, conservationist stewardship (of the sort most Christians would associate with the term) has already passed, and more radical technological fixes (a kind of strong, Anthropocene stewardship) have become necessary if there is to be a future for humans.

Deane-Drummond's essay is predictably a high-point in the theology section. I particularly appreciated her contrasting of Anthropocene thinking, with its emphasis on the power and influence of human action, with Gaia thinking, which stresses the power, though also the fragility, of Earth's systems. She takes Gaia thinking to be more associated with 'big history', of the sort promoted by the work of Thomas Berry and others, and prefers an approach based on 'deep history', recollecting our own evolutionary roots and pre-historical contexts in which humans were also threatened by extinction. I was less convinced by this – both types of thinking seem to me important in giving human thought reach and perspective.

I imagine some readers of this journal will be disappointed that there is no summary of the scientific issues involved. This is simply not that sort of book, though it everywhere depends on the science of climate (and includes a chilling essay on climate change denial in US evangelicalism). Another disappointment for some will be the thinness of the contribution of Christian theology. I turned hopefully to Matthew Eaton's essay on incarnational

Christology, and found there a very good and important summary of Niels Gregersen's thinking on 'deep incarnation'. But Eaton presses beyond that to a panincarnationalism that will seem to many to be indistinguishable from pantheism, and leads him by his own admission to regard divinity 'more as a relational ecology or field of power than a personal agent' (216). There are other, more orthodox flashes of theological insight, as in Ian Barns' evocation of the eucharistic imagination as enabling us to see into 'the shadows of consumption', and restore a covenant faithfulness that accepts and embraces our creatureliness. The most passionate appeal for a radical discipleship after the example of Christ comes in Petra Steinmair-Pösel's essay on Girard, whose chilling analysis of our predicament in an era of climate change bears much further reflection.

In the ethics section I enjoyed in particular Anders Melin's exploration of our obligations to protect threatened species. He provides a careful critical response to my own proposals in this area, questioning my suggestion that humans might have a vocation to co-redeemdom in the eschatological phase of history (in which the New Testament places us). This discussion led me to reflect that only a self-emptying humility can make possible an exalted human vocation in the Anthropocene. A merely Promethean approach will always turn out to be hubris.

Inevitably in such a collection some essays will appeal more than others. The editors are to be congratulated on putting an important issue – a Promethean vs a kenotic Anthropocene – before the UK reading public. The essays are kept to a judicious length (all under 20pp.). Potential readers should be aware that this is more a religious-studies treatment of the question than a study in theological ethics, but everyone will find something to savour.

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