
Pro Rege

Volume 38 | Number 4

Article 7

June 2010

Christians, the Care of Creation, and Global Climate Change (Book Review)

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Recommended Citation

Vander Zee, Delmar (2010) "Christians, the Care of Creation, and Global Climate Change (Book Review)," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 38: No. 4, 34 - 35.

Available at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol38/iss4/7

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Scott, Lindy (ed). *Christians, the Care of Creation, and Global Climate Change*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2008. 144pp. ISBN 13:978-1-55635-844-9. Reviewed by Delmar Vander Zee, Professor of Biology and Environmental Studies, Emeritus at Dordt College.

Ever since Lynn White published his claim that Christianity is the root cause of the environmental crisis, Christians have been jarred awake to examine their confessions and their walk in this world. This book is such a wake-up call, as it documents the recent history and change in thinking and praxis at the well-established evangelical Wheaton College. The book shows how a college, including its president, was moved from considering the environment as not a priority for their college's concern to professing it to be fundamental to its campus self-awareness and forward practice.

An important stimulus to change the thinking probably happened when Wheaton's President A. Duane Litfin was asked to speak at a seminar on creation care at a local church, sponsored by *A Rocha*, a campus student conservation group. Several events followed, including President Litfin's signing the Evangelical Climate Initiative, establishing an Environmental Stewardship Advisory Committee at Wheaton, and sponsoring a Panel Discussion on Global Climate Change to convene in November 2006. Part I of the book includes chapters authored by several panelists with expertise and considerable insight into the topic. Chapter authors include representatives from Wheaton's administration, faculty, staff, and student body. President Dr. Litfin introduces the book in the first chapter by giving a straight forward explanation of why he was one of the first signatories to the Evangelical Climate Initiative in 2006, a somewhat radical step at the time but one he took based on conscience and confessional integrity.

The book devotes only one chapter, the second, to the particulars of global climate change, authored by Douglas Allen, then a professor of physics at Dordt College and now a faculty member at Wheaton. In language readily understandable by most lay readers and with sufficient bibliography and references for those who wish to dig more deeply into the science, Professor Allen presents the basics of the substantial climatological data that underpin the current consensus. But overall, the book is not an argument for understanding or accepting the validity of the science; rather this early chapter provides a background and foundation. The burden of the book is to document and explain how and why this college has taken a stand to be intentionally committed to Creation care on a number of issues that any institution necessarily confronts by being a consumer of many materials in its institutional life. Furthermore, being part of a faith-based college, the writers also present the confessional basis that the college re-examined to arrive at its new place in the world. After all, any college, especially a Christian college, stands as a living witness to what it professes to be right.

The "Implications for Global Health" are surveyed by

L. Kristin Page, a Wheaton biologist. Obvious direct effects on human health come from extremes in temperature, rainfall/drought patterns and flooding, and coastal-area effects such as sea levels' change. The indirect effects on human health are those mediated through ecosystems and include "emerging infectious diseases associated with changes in vector populations or water temperatures, and loss of natural disease reservoirs or of botanical medicines from loss of biodiversity" (26). These more subtle, indirect, ecosystem-mediated effects may actually be more important, not only to us but to the health of all the other creatures which are also part of the Creator's blessing to flourish. I would like to have seen more discussion and examples of these important connectors to human health.

P.J. Hill, a Wheaton economics professor, in the chapter "Economics of Global Warming" makes the point that monies spent for mitigation would be a trade off from other ventures, such as alleviating hunger and disease in the developing world. The chapter in my view is too brief and does not address the larger issue, i.e. what can be expected to happen to the world's economy (truly a macro question!) pending climate change. (This is not just futuristic speculation; there are already hard numbers available.) Rather he turns the question into a narrower discussion of policy response, using the trade-off argument of what could be better done with money proposed for mitigating greenhouse gases. When the issue is vetted this way, many professional economists respond by putting alleviation of poverty and human suffering at the top (41). But I think this response demands that we ask this question: Why has that not already happened, given that we have known about poverty and disease in developing countries for more than a century? This might be little more than an argument to avoid spending now, especially since there is less than 100 percent certainty in the global warming model, never mind that the precautionary principle never waits for 100 percent certainty, which indeed is never attainable in any scientific study! Hill admits early in his chapter that "other Christians—operating from the same basic premises of our responsibilities--can come to quite different conclusions" (36).

The last chapter of the panel, "Global Problems, Global Solutions," by Noah J. Toly, from Wheaton's urban studies and political science department, is especially well written with a balance of views, extent of issues, and summary of recent history regarding mitigation. It seems that the area of public policy regarding mitigation is where most of the controversy and contention exists and from which (I believe) consequentialist arguments are raised to undercut the validity of the larger issue. I agree completely with Toly's analysis in response to those who argue that

reducing greenhouse emissions will destroy wealth building: “If one understands our current political and economic systems and energy regime as complicit in the production of vulnerability and marginalization [i.e. victims of environmental decline including global warming]—not to mention climate change itself—one cannot expect business as usual to do anything but perpetuate, if not deepen, the production of vulnerability” (53).

Part II—“A Christian College Takes Some Initial Steps”—begins with a chapel meditation by Sir John Houghton, a leading world climatologist from Oxford, who formed and headed the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. This meditation was part of the Evangelical Student Summit held at Wheaton in January of 2007. Houghton’s deep devotion and confessional grounding in the scriptures come immediately to the fore. The chapter ends with the text of a little-known but wonderfully expressed hymn based on Proverbs 6 by William Cowper in 1779.

Student Ben Lowe contributed two chapters about the greening of Wheaton College: “An Unlikely Tree Hugger” and “A Bigger Vision.” Reading his narrative gives one a very good glimpse of Wheaton’s story with all its intellectual, social, confessional, and institutional challenges. As Lowe describes his personal journey of becoming committed to Creation care, he shows unusual depth of Christian conviction, creative thinking, and enthusiastic leadership for building a campus community that would support these kinds of changes at Wheaton. For example, he helped found the first student chapter at Wheaton of *A Rocha*, an international Christian conservation agency, and served on Wheaton’s first Environmental Stewardship Advisory Committee (ESAC). Lowe was no doubt one of the key people behind the whole movement at Wheaton. He has since graduated and works for *A Rocha USA* and recently authored the book *Green Revolution, Coming Together to*

Care for Creation (Intervarsity Press, 2009).

One of the best chapters, in my estimation, is written by Vincent. E. Morris, who serves as Wheaton’s Director of Risk Management. Morris is no typical MBA; he also holds degrees and experience in theology and youth ministry. A short passage that captures his passion and understanding and that no doubt served to convict President Litfin reads, “[C]reation care is not like other kinds of theological positions. We do not choose between it and other priorities. We each demonstrate a level of creation care—or lack of it—every day. We all must eat and use energy [. . .] and generate trash. We ‘take a position’ on creation care simply by living. We cannot remain neutral on the subject, as we might on the proper mode of baptism. Everything we do every day personally and institutionally at the college demonstrates our care for creation or lack of it” (107). Litfin appointed Morris to organize and chair their new Environmental Stewardship Advisory Committee. The chapter ends with three draft appendices: a “Theological Basis Statement,” a “Stewardship Cost-based Decision Matrix,” and a “Consumption-based Decision Matrix.” This chapter could well serve as a guideline for any college seeking to position itself to walk more stewardly on the planet and to be more prophetic to its students.

The closing chapter by J.K. Greenberg, a Wheaton geologist, is a soul-gripping chapter that not only summarizes Wheaton’s “greening” experience but also calls gently and compassionately for Christians everywhere to reaffirm humankind’s first calling, to care for and keep the garden and to be partners in life to mitigate the “groaning” creation. I agree.

Endnote

Lynn White Jr., “The Historical Roots of our Ecologic Crisis,” *Science* 155 (1967): 1203-6.

Opitz, Donald, and Derek Melleby. *The Outrageous Idea of Academic Faithfulness*. Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2007. 144 pages. ISBN-978-1-58743-210-1. Reviewed by Ryan G. Zonnefeld, Assistant Professor of Education at Dordt College.

The Outrageous Idea of Academic Faithfulness is written to Christian students nearing completion of high school or just beginning collegiate studies. It provides students with an inspiring, solid, and approachable call to integrate faith and learning. Readers who are unfamiliar with this integration, whether attending public or Christian colleges or universities, will appreciate the guidance provided in developing a worldview that encompasses learning as part of service in the Kingdom of Jesus Christ. The recommendations for further reading found at the end of each chapter are helpful for those seeking to delve further into the topics presented.

For first-year students at a Christian college, particularly those who have attended Christian elementary

and secondary schools, the rudimentary scope of this book provides little new knowledge or understanding. Indeed, the “outrageous idea” that God cares about our learning is one which these students have been bathed in for many years. Students with this background, such as the majority of those attending Dordt College, would benefit more from reading texts such as *Deepening the Colors: Life Inside the Story of God* by Syd Hielema or *Engaging God’s World: A Christian Vision of Faith, Learning, and Living* by Cornelius Plantinga.

Based on the contexts above, *The Outrageous Idea of Academic Faithfulness* has a place for students for whom a worldview that encompasses life and learning is new. Opitz and Melleby have experience working with students