Michael Northcott’s book is part of what one hopes will be a growing wave of scholarship exploring the deeper roots of the world’s collective failure to address the climate crisis. While a number of scholars have dissected the ongoing failure of the Kyoto Protocol, or the disturbing persistence of popular apathy, Northcott roots the climate crisis in the shift from medieval conceptions of humans as partners with God in caring for creation to the modern conception of nature as the ‘objective backdrop’ to human endeavors. The climate crisis undermines this conception by revealing “a new and unintended kind of correspondence between the heavens and the earth” (287). In successive chapters, Northcott draws on the work of Alfred North Whitehead, Giambattista Vico, Sergei Bulgakov, Bruno Latour, Carl Schmitt and Alasdair MacIntyre, and Jacob Taubes to heal this rift. With the threat of climate apocalypse as a backdrop, he aims to “recover the relation of natural and human history and the role of ecosystem boundaries and ecological limits in the constitution of the nations” (49).

Key to this endeavor are the writings of Schmitt, which pose a foundational challenge to the ideologies that Northcott sees as fundamental obstacles to addressing the climate crisis: political liberalism and economic neoliberalism. For Northcott, these ideologies have underwritten a fatally flawed approach to current climate change mitigation schemes, in which countries seek to reduce their emissions while doing nothing to address the root of the problem: fossil fuel extraction and the relentless pursuit of economic growth. Liberalism has enabled this outcome by seeking to protect individual liberties rather than common goods such as a stable atmosphere.

Following MacIntyre, Northcott’s repair is to promote a return to communal responsibility, particularly through the cultivation of virtues (265). But MacIntyre felt that this was only possible in small-scale local communities, which Northcott rejects as insufficient in the face of the current crisis. Here he turns to Taubes and William Blake, who argued that it was possible to resist the power of empire (in this case represented by capitalism and political liberalism) “with the subversive messianic challenge of love of neighbor and the formation of equitable communities where spiritual struggle and mutual interdependence challenge the will to power and systems of domination” (305). He suggests Transition Towns, a decentralized movement that seeks to create locally sustainable communities, as a model for this kind of resistance. While advocating “no explicit politics,” Transition Towns nevertheless
clearly intend to “re-create a society where economic exchange is remapped onto local geography and local relationships” (309).

The basic contours of Northcott’s argument will be familiar to anyone reading in the area of religion and the environment over the last several decades. For example, this book can be viewed in part as a reworking, with the climate crisis in mind, of Carolyn Merchant’s thesis that the environmental crisis is rooted in the shift that occurred during the Enlightenment from seeing the natural world as alive (and, in her view, feminine) to seeing it as inert and subject to human control. Also, like a cadre of climate activists, most notably Naomi Klein, he sees a stable climate and liberal capitalism as “inimical” (244). Similar thinking on capitalism’s detrimental effects on the environment can be found in radical environmental circles going back to Edward Abbey. Finally, his insistence that the climate crisis and its solution must be (politico-) theological partly echoes Lynn White’s contention that “since the roots of our trouble are so largely religious, the remedy must also be essentially religious” (1967: 1207) (of course, his analysis of the religious roots are different from White’s). But Northcott’s impressive synthesis of the climate science (with its myriad implications for politics, theology and society) with critiques of the modern worldview is no small feat. He has taken a significant step in the task of identifying the deeper drivers of the climate crisis.

Northcott presumes a strong grasp of literature in fields ranging from political economy to theology, and does little to ease the reader in to the scholarship he draws upon. As such it would be challenging to use in most graduate seminars, not to mention undergraduate courses. Unfortunately, the book’s difficulty will also likely make it inaccessible to the wider audience it would benefit. A more substantive objection relates to its Christian centering—a choice that makes sense in the context of a critique of the Western roots of modernity, but not in the context of articulating solutions to a problem that now extends far beyond the former boundaries of Christendom. He writes, for example, that “the Christian account of use rights to the earth as limited by social obligations and obligations to the Creator ... is essential to a resolution of the blind spot in green politics which embraces ‘natural’ ways of generating energy while neglecting to critique the institution of private property” (158). Yet it is unclear how such a repair could be relevant in modern secular nations (especially those with no Christian heritage) or how it would be useful for non-Christian climate activists. He argues that MacIntyre’s political philosophy is sufficiently broad to resonate with non-Christians (259), but the book otherwise so thoroughly presumes a Christian perspective that this hardly seems adequate.

His concluding discussion of Transition Towns (which are not Christian-based) is a partially successful attempt to broaden the book’s vision. Yet we