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The growing significance of environmental problems such as ozone depletion, global warming and pollution generate increasing scepticism about the modern claim that the technological transformation of nature invariably progresses human welfare. Michael Northcott examines the character and causes of modern environmental problems, and argues that they are linked with fundamental changes in religious belief, and in the human moral and social ecology, as well as with new technological and industrial processes. He finds in the Hebrew and Christian traditions, and especially in natural law ethics, a belief in the intrinsic connection of the moral qualities of human relationships and societies and the stability and harmony of the natural world. He argues that principled ethical responses to environmental problems will therefore depend on principled ethical responses to the civilisational problems of modern societies, including growing divisions between rich and poor, the breakdown of stable families and communities, the loss of virtue and the decline of religion, as well as on the recovery of respect for the laws and harmonies of nature.

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## NEW STUDIES IN CHRISTIAN ETHICS

*General editor:* Robin Gill*Editorial board:* Stephen R. L. Clark, Antony O. Dyson,  
Stanley Hauerwas and Robin W. Lovin

In recent years the study of Christian ethics has become an integral part of mainstream theological studies. The reasons for this are not hard to detect. It has become a more widely held view that Christian ethics is actually central to Christian theology as a whole. Theologians increasingly have had to ask what contemporary relevance their discipline has in a context where religious belief is on the wane, and whether Christian ethics (that is, an ethics based on the Gospel of Jesus Christ) has anything to say in a multi-faceted and complex secular society. There is now no shortage of books on most substantive moral issues, written from a wide variety of theological positions. However, what is lacking are books within Christian ethics which are taken at all seriously by those engaged in the wider secular debate. Too few are methodologically substantial; too few have an informed knowledge of parallel discussions in philosophy or the social sciences. This series attempts to remedy the situation. The aims of *New Studies in Christian Ethics* will therefore be twofold. First, to engage centrally with the secular moral debate at the highest possible intellectual level; second, to demonstrate that Christian ethics can make a distinctive contribution to this debate – either in moral substance, or in terms of underlying moral justifications. It is hoped that the series as a whole will make a substantial contribution to the discipline.

A list of titles in the series is provided at the end of the book.

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# THE ENVIRONMENT AND CHRISTIAN ETHICS

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**CAMBRIDGE**  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge University Press  
 0521576318 - The Environment and Christian Ethics - Michael S. Northcott  
 Frontmatter/Prelims  
[More information](#)

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE  
 The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS  
 The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK  
 40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA  
 477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia  
 Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain  
 Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa  
<http://www.cambridge.org>

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First published 1996  
 Reprinted 1999, 2001

*A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library*

*Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data*  
 Northcott, Michael S.

The environment and Christian ethics / Michael S. Northcott.

p. cm. – (New studies in Christian ethics)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0 521 44481 0 (hardback) ISBN 0 521 57631 8 (paperback)

1. Human ecology – Religious aspects – Christianity.

2. Christian ethics. 3. Environmental ethics.

4. Ecology – Moral and ethical aspects.

I. Title. II. Series.

BT695.5.N68 1996

241'.691-dc20 96-13022 CIP

ISBN 0 521 44481 0 hardback

ISBN 0 521 57631 8 paperback

Transferred to digital printing 2004

Cambridge University Press

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*To Lydia  
with love*

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## *General editor's preface*

This book is the tenth in the series *New Studies in Christian Ethics*. Each book has worked closely within the remit of the series, namely to engage centrally with secular moral debate at the highest possible intellectual level, and to demonstrate that Christian ethics can make a distinctive contribution to this debate – either in moral substance, or in terms of underlying moral justifications. Some authors have used this remit to examine a moral theme of current importance – rights, justice, power, responsibility, plurality and moral action. Others have examined issues – sex, gender and feminism. Michael Northcott offers a challenging examination of a major and highly topical issue on which Christianity often seems very vulnerable, namely the environment.

Can Christian ethics realistically offer a distinctive justification of environmental ethics when its own history in this area appears to be so dubious? And, even if it can, how does Christian ethics hope to shape human action on the environment when only a minority of the world's population is Christian? The sheer dimensions of environmental ethics appear to be so huge and the record of Christian responses to that environment so doubtful. Some argue that it is only secular voices that might hope to change humanity's lamentable history of environmental degradation.

Michael Northcott is well aware of the immense difficulties here. His first book, *The Church and Secularisation* (Lang, 1989), showed that he had the right combination of theological and sociological skills to tackle such an area. In this early book he offered a sharp critique of industrial mission and urban ministry



in the North East of England. Within it he noted that those engaged in mission and ministry often have quite different aims and agendas from those who are the recipients of their work. The analytical skills developed through this research were then supplemented by experience in a non-Western context, lecturing for five years in an ecumenical seminary in Malaysia. This combination of analysis and experience has now borne fruit in his present study of *The environment and Christian ethics*.

This study starts with a necessary account of the factors responsible for the present environmental crisis – such as global warming, pollution, soil erosion, deforestation, species extinction, over-population and over-consumption. The cultural and ideological contributants to this catalogue of human failings are examined next. There are indeed forms of Christianity which have hardly helped to preserve an environment threatened by human behaviour. Only then does Dr Northcott offer a critical examination of the ethical and theological responses that can and should be made on this crucial issue. Like the other authors in the series, he does finally believe that a theistic vision has a powerful contribution to make to ethical discussion. It may even offer a better hope for the future of the world than a purely secular vision.

This is an uncomfortable book largely because the subject it tackles is itself so uncomfortable. As humanity increasingly degrades its own environment, voices of real wisdom are needed. Michael Northcott's book is, I believe, a part of this much needed wisdom.

ROBIN GILL

## *Preface*

In the three years in which I worked on this book the environment moved in and out of the frame of public debate in Britain. In 1992, when I began, it was much in the frame, particularly during and after the Rio Earth Summit. In 1995 as I write this acknowledgement, the idea that Western civilisation faces an environmental crisis is much less in public view. More commonly people are exercised by the crises in employment and in human moral ecology which are manifest in recent developments in Britain and beyond. In this book I argue that the environmental crisis is intricately connected with the human crises of moral ecology and of unemployment, and that the demise of economic justice and moral purposiveness in the global order is directly related to the increasing pace of environmental breakdown. Consequently the reorientation of modern societies towards the biological limits of the planet will not be achieved without a related quest for justice and the common good in human affairs. I also propose that vital resources for both projects may be found in an ecological repriming of central features of the Hebrew–Christian tradition, including the Hebrew vision of created order, the Christian understanding of the Trinitarian creator and incarnate redeemer, and natural law ethics, a tradition of ethics also manifest in classical and Eastern religious thought.

The theological orientation which underlies this book has been formed in a range of contexts; in experiments in alternative living in various Christian communities and churches, not least Saint Margaret's Church in Durham, and in my studies at departments of theology, religion and ethics respec-

tively at the Universities of Durham, Sunderland and Edinburgh, and at the Seminari Theologi Malaysia in Kuala Lumpur. I am especially grateful to the Department of Christian Ethics and Practical Theology at Edinburgh for the time its members have enabled me to find to prepare this book. In my environmental interests I have been much influenced by a five-year sojourn in Malaysia, with its extraordinarily rich, though sadly shrinking, natural inheritance, including steamy rainforests and pristine coral islands. I have also enjoyed an informal association with the Centre for Human Ecology in the University of Edinburgh, whose staff and visiting lecturers have guided a personal interest in environmental issues into what I hope is a more disciplined intellectual engagement.

Much of the research for the book was undertaken in the National Library of Scotland, to whose librarians I owe a great debt. I am also grateful for the help of librarians in the National Science Library of Scotland, New College Library, Edinburgh University Library and the Bodleian Library in Oxford.

A number of people have read parts or drafts of the whole of the manuscript and I am especially grateful to Professors Stephen R. L. Clark, Duncan B. Forrester, Robin Gill and Richard H. Roberts, all of whom responded with vigorous criticisms to what they read. I cannot claim to have overcome all the deficiencies which they observed in earlier drafts, nor that what follows conforms to the approaches they would variously have preferred to the subject matter treated. But I remain immensely grateful for the seriousness of their engagement. The book would have been considerably weaker without it.

I am also grateful for the support of the former Religious Studies Editor at Cambridge University Press, Alex Wright, and to Robin Gill, the series editor, who have borne with missed deadlines and changes in conception very well indeed, and encouraged me to believe that the project was worth pursuing to the end. I am also indebted to my copy editor Audrey Cotterell for her assiduous efforts to enhance the accuracy and reduce the obscurity of my text. As to any errors and obscurities that remain, I hope readers will draw them to my attention.

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Writing is hard and at times lonely graft. I would not have been able to complete this book without the support of my wife Jill and my children Lydia, Ben and Rebecca. They have borne the long absences in libraries, and the tapping of the word processor in the study, and they have dragged or welcomed me back from the distraction of too much cogitation. Of all the family Lydia is most exercised about the issues treated of in this book, and at present is mapping out her life plan in terms of a personal and career response to some of them. It is to her that I dedicate this book.

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## *Acknowledgements*

Biblical quotations are from *The New English Bible* and *The Revised English Bible* published by the Oxford and Cambridge University Presses in 1975 and 1989 respectively.