

# A Book I Can Recommend

*Geoffrey Burn*

*Continuing our occasional series on books which may be of interest to those who read Merton, this contribution resonates with articles in the previous edition of the Merton Journal and with Merton's recently-published 'Peace in the Post-Christian Era'.*

**An Angel Directs the Storm: Apocalyptic Religion and American Empire**, Michael Northcott (London: I.B. Taurus, 2004) ISBN 1850434786

A few years ago I caught a bus at 4am from St Austell to join the march to Hyde Park to protest against the proposed war in Iraq, and returned home at about 2am the next day. Along with hundreds of thousands of others, I believed strongly that preparation for war was wrong, and I was deeply frustrated by a government which refused to listen to other opinions on this issue. The theology of "just war" was hijacked to argue that this war was justifiable. Here was an American president who claims the same faith as mine and yet whose actions seemed to be antithetical to the Christian faith. Why had the attacks on the World Trade Centre not caused nations to pause and ask why people hated us so much that they did this? How could there be so little self-knowledge? Instead, a war was declared on terror (as if this was not a contradiction in terms) which seemed only to license the escalation of the subversive military tactics already being employed by the USA. There seemed to be little to distinguish between George Bush and Osama bin Laden, except that the former had a lot more power.

In his book, Northcott does three main things: He describes how American foreign policy has been worked out during recent history; he analyses the theological foundations of that policy; and he tries to establish a sounder theological underpinning for political action.

The CIA has a term - 'blowback' - which describes the problems that arise from putting a particular person or group in power in another country in order to disrupt or remove another government in that country which America does not like. Osama bin Laden was such a figure, and Northcott's catalogue of American interference in recent international politics is truly disturbing, and Northcott tells of things I was not aware of, such as the use of depleted uranium bombs in the war in Iraq. He describes how both bin Laden and the American right see themselves as engaged in an apocalyptic struggle over the outcome of modern history.

Half of the American population are signed-up Christians. There is a major split between those who believe that in America the Kingdom of God is finally dawning - identifying the kingdom of God with the free market, whilst deriding attempts to address problems

such as global warming because it would put constraints on trade - and those who believe that the world is caught up in evil which will only end with the rapture, when all true believers will be caught up to heaven. There is incomprehension when the American way of life is questioned. Both forms of Christian belief lead to politics with devastating consequences.

Northcott is at his best in his analysis of how America has arrived at this position. He sees its roots going back at least to the idea of 'manifest destiny', the idea of the Americans as being the new chosen people who have a sacred calling for the world. For me, a key part of the story is the division of religion and the State, 'which left the churches in charge of the faith and religious experience of Americans, and the State in charge of their bodies' (p. 98). One is reminded of how Cavanaugh argued that this was exactly the problem that led to the church's paralysis in the early days of the Pinochet regime in Chile (see his *Torture and Eucharist*). This has led to a civil religion with a totemic sacrificial system involving regular militarized conflict and death. A privatised religion does not have the resources to make the prophetic self-critique that is required in America.

Not all is dire in America or the American church and the prophetic voice is not silent, which Northcott acknowledges: In the last part of his book he turns to some of these voices, such as Yoder and Hauerwas, to develop an understanding of church as a counter-culture to empire. I would have liked to see a more nuanced account than the one given by Northcott, but

perhaps this is only over-sensitivity on my part, because I have been working in the area of interpreting the New Testament in the context of the Roman Empire myself.

I was left feeling overwhelmed at the end of the book by the enormity of the problems posed by the American military machine that owns the name of Christ, but which would more appropriately be described as being like the beast in Revelation. How does one resist the beast? Knowing that the powers have been defeated on the cross, we stand firm; but that does not guarantee that we will see them overcome in our resistance to evil, as we seek to follow Jesus, who himself was crucified by the powers.

In the week that I am writing this review, there have been major protests by Muslims about the publication in Denmark of a cartoon of Muhammad. This impresses again the seriousness of the problem we are facing in our world, a problem which is being exacerbated by the actions of Americans and others in majority-Muslim parts of the world. Northcott's book is essential reading in trying to understand something of American Christianity and politics, and attempting to develop an alternative theology which will lead to a more faithful practice of the Christian faith.

*Three years ago **Geoffrey Burn** took a break from full-time parish ministry. He has been working on a theology of political reconciliation in conversation with the issue of land in Australia, exploring what reconciliation might be, and trying to argue that reconciliation should be the basis of our politics.*