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Book Review

An Angel Directs the Storm: Apocalyptic Religion & American Empire by Michael Northcott. London: I.B. Tauris, 2004. 200 pages. ISBN 1850434786.

Akça Ataç

During the presidency of George W. Bush, America's apocalyptic vision and its impact on American foreign policy have been emphasized in various books from both the New and Old Worlds. Michael Northcott's *An Angel Directs the Storm* is one of the most comprehensive examples of this sort. Dr. Northcott, a priest in the Scottish Episcopal Church and professor of Theology and Christian Ethics at the University of Edinburgh, has previously offered theological critiques of global issues as well as of the values of modernity. His previous works such as *The Environment and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge University Press, 1996) and *Urban Theology: A Reader* (Cassel, 1998), put forward a Christian perspective to understand the political, social and economic challenges that today trouble individuals, states and the international community altogether. In this respect, *An Angel Directs the Storm* continues this endeavor by the author.

The book focuses on the American intervention with Iraq in 2003. This intervention, Northcott claims, has undermined well-established rules of international law and has resulted in various consequences hard to swallow for many people both in the United States and the rest of the world. In his analysis of the incident and American foreign policy within a historical context, Northcott adopts American apocalyptic as the means of fully grasping the American grounds for waging war and notion of empire. He argues that knowledge of apocalyptic -a mode of thought grounded in the belief that eschatological revelations show the unfolding of the grand design brought about by God's providence- enables one to view the basic tenets of the American *raison d'être* from a crucial point of view and to realize the hidden language of apocalyptic embedded in President Bush's discourse.

Northcott lays particular emphasis on military actions from the American Civil War to the invasion of Iraq and the Bush presidency, as well as market-oriented actions aimed at economic and technological advancement that appear an equally important means of empire-building. Finally, he contends that the nature of American apocalyptic is compatible

with American capitalism, individualism, progressivism and the official justification of unilateral military operations to spread the values of freedom and democracy. However, as the author asserts, the espousal of this vision in the American policy-making process poses a grave threat not only to the global harmony and world peace but also to the well-being of Americans. Each year "inordinate amounts of money" (12) are being spent for the endurance and growth of empire, which, he argues, could be alternatively allocated to national social policies.

On this account, Northcott's book blends an understanding of America in terms of Protestant eschatology and a critique of the American president's unusually explicit commitment to American apocalyptic, despite its possible fearful outcomes. Other examples of this are Esther Kaplan's *With God on This Side* (Yale University Press, 2004) and Mark Crispin Miller's *Cruel and Unusual* (W.W. Norton, 2004). However, being an accomplished theologian, Northcott alone underpins his critique of American neo-imperialism with a highly scholarly anti-imperialist argument derived from the Bible. To Northcott, Jesus Christ was the victim of the kind of empire foretold by the "false" American apocalyptic and desired by Bush. Thus, Nothcott concludes, Christian eschatology never has prescribed the "imperial cult" (12) which has been evolving in the Christian world since the reign of Constantine, and which seems to be animating American foreign policy now. Though particularly addressing the Christian reader, *An Angel Directs the Storm* has something to offer everyone interested in the misrepresentation of Christianity in contemporary politics.