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A NEW
CLIMATE
FOR THEOLOGY

*God,
the **World**, and
Global Warming*

SALLIE McFAGUE

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A NEW CLIMATE FOR THEOLOGY
God, the World, and Global Warming

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HOW SHALL WE LIVE? CHRISTIANITY and PLANETARY ECONOMICS¹

*It is notable that none of the world's religions has as its maxim:
"Blessed are the greedy."
—Sallie McFague*

We have looked at who we are and decided that an ecological anthropology is necessary for our contemporary context of global warming. It is also commensurate with Christian faith. We have looked at who God is and suggested that the model of the world as God's body might be a persuasive contemporary and Christian expression for the God-world relationship in our time. We have, then, sketched out a picture, a way of imagining both ourselves and God within the context of radical environmental threat.

It is time now to look at how we should live. If we are interdependent with all other creatures as well as radically dependent on God, the source of reality and goodness—who is transcendentally immanent in the world and expects us to be partners in earthly flourishing—then what should we do? Can we continue living in a way that consumes the world's resources and undermines its most basic systems, as global

warming is warning us we are doing? Must we not see *the essential connection between economics and ecology*: between the insatiable consumer society and the wreckage it creates at all levels—resource depletion and greenhouse gases, as well as a growing split between the poor and the wealthy?

Religion and Economics

It is notable that none of the world's major religions has as its maxim: "Blessed are the greedy." Given the many differences among religions in doctrines and practice, it is remarkable to find such widespread agreement at the level of economics. Often, however, people do not consider that religion has anything to do with economics; in fact, in most societies many do not want religion to intrude into economics. It is preferable, they say, for religion to attend to "religious matters" and to leave economics to the economists.

But most religions know better. They know that economics is about human well-being, about who eats and who does not, who has clothes and shelter and who does not, who has the basics for a decent life and who does not. Economics is about life and death, as well as the quality of life. It is also about the life and death not just of human beings but of the planet itself and all its life-forms. Economics is not just about money; rather, it is about sharing scarce resources among all who need them. Economics is a justice issue, so why would religions not be concerned with it?

In many religions, the concern for justice has been focused on human beings—and this is certainly the case with Christianity, at least for the last few centuries. But recently, the issues of well-being and justice have been extended to embrace the entire planet: the well-being of people and the well-being of the planet are increasingly seen to be inextricably related. Climate change makes this case with stunning clarity. In Christianity, there is a return to the cosmological context for interpreting the faith, rather than the narrow psychological focus prevalent since the Protestant Reformation. In fact, many current Christian theologies incorporate all three of the classical interpretive contexts: the cosmological, the political, and the personal.² These theologies claim that Christian faith embraces the *world*—all of creation and not just we human beings who make up less than 1 percent of it. The redeemer

is also the creator: all of creation, including dying nature as well as oppressed people, is within God's "economy," God's "household."

As we have noted, it is no coincidence that the Greek word for house, *oikos*, is the source of our words *economics*, *ecology*, and *ecumenicity*. The three belong together: in order for the whole household of the planet to flourish, the earth's resources must be distributed justly among all its inhabitants, human and earth others, on a sustainable basis. This involves economics, for the distribution of scarce resources among needy users is the essence of economics. That economics and ecology are interconnected can be seen negatively in our consumer culture, which sets no limits on human consumption of resources—except monetary ones. Human beings, especially well-off ones, are permitted to consume all they can afford: no other criterion is applied. A market economy in a time of rising ecological destruction has no means of assuring that the third term—*ecumenicity*—will be included. Good "home economics" insists that the whole household must be fed now and in the future. As the effects of global warming accelerate, we see clearly that the economics being practiced globally is not contributing to a just, sustainable planet. What we need, instead, is an *ecological economics*.

But an economic paradigm based on ecological health is certainly not the dominant one in global society today. Nor is it the one that most Christians seem to be embracing. To be sure, Christians do not openly support the maxim "Blessed are the greedy"; nonetheless, that is the way most of us live. Why? Quite simply, because we are members of a society, now a worldwide one, that accepts, almost without question, an economic theory that supports insatiable greed on the part of individuals, regardless of its consequences to other people or to the planet. This assumption lies behind present-day market capitalism, and since the death of communism and the decline of socialism, it has been accepted by most ordinary people as a description of the ways things are and must be. It is "the truth." Although market capitalism is "a description of the way things are" in our society, it is not a description of the way things must be—or should be. Market capitalism is an economic *model*, not a description.³ Market capitalism is a type of economics that allocates scarce resources not in regard to the needs of the planet's inhabitants nor with an eye to its sustainability, but rather on the basis of individuals' successful competition for them. Its criterion is who can pay. It is an economic theory that makes a case for the way scarce resources might be distributed, not how they must be.

This realization—that economics is not a hard science but an ideology with an assumed anthropology and a goal for the planet (summarized by greed and growth)—is the first step in seeing things otherwise. Ecological economics—economics for the well-being of the whole household of planet Earth—is also a model with an anthropological and planetary ideology. It claims that human beings, while greedy to be sure, are even more *needy*: we depend on the health of all the other parts of the planet for our very existence—clean water, breathable air, arable land, thriving plants, and so on. It claims that market capitalism denies one huge fact: unless the limited resources of the planet are distributed justly among all life-forms so they can flourish, there will be no sustainable future for even the greediest of us. Global warming is unmasking the presumed “objectivity” of market capitalism, for we see now that this model of economics is biased not in favor of the well-being of the whole planet, but in favor of a segment of the human population for its short-term gratification. Global warming is the stark evidence of the disaster that awaits us unless we shift swiftly and deeply to another form of economics.

Christianity and Economics

But why should Christians be concerned with models of economics? Is ecological economics “Christian”? No, but it is an emerging economic model that is gaining the support of a wide range of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), protest movements, and people who believe an alternative economics is necessary. Its motto is “A different world is possible,” and its basic tenets are concerned with fair labor laws and environmental health. Lynn White’s oft-quoted 1967 essay lays the blame for environmental deterioration at the feet of religion, specifically Christianity.⁴ If Christianity was capable of doing such immense damage, then surely the restoration of nature also must lie, at least in part, with Christianity. I believe it does, but also with other world religions as well as with education, government, and science. The environmental crisis we face—and which is epitomized by climate change—is a planetary agenda, involving all people, all areas of expertise, and all religions.

This is the case because the environmental crisis is not a “problem” that any specialization can solve, as climate change is increasingly

demonstrating. Rather, it is about how we—all of us human beings and other creatures—can live justly and sustainably on our planet. Climate change is telling us that we must live differently. We need to pay attention to the “house rules” that will enable us to live as we ought. These house rules include attitudes as well as technologies, behaviors, and science. They are what the *oikos*, the house we all share, demands that we think and do so that there will be enough for everyone. The house rules are concerned with the management of the resources of planet Earth so that all may thrive indefinitely.

How does religion and specifically Christianity fit into this picture? It fits where all religions do: at the point of the worldview underlying the house rules.⁵ It fits at the level of the deeply held and often largely unconscious assumptions about *who we are in the scheme of things and how we should act*.⁶ While anthropology—the interpretation of human nature—is not the only concern of religions, it is a central one and, for the purposes of the ecological crisis, the one that may count the most.

I wish to make the case that Christianity, at least since the Protestant Reformation and especially since the Enlightenment, has through its individualistic view of human life supported the neoclassical economic paradigm, the current consumer culture, which is widening the gap between the rich and the poor and is a major cause of global warming. As an alternative, I suggest that Christianity should support an ecological economic model, one in which our well-being is seen as interrelated and interdependent with the well-being of all other living things and earth processes.⁷ In other words, religions, and especially Christianity in Western culture, have a central role in forming *who we think we are and what we have the right to do*. The individualistic anthropology is deep within our consumer-oriented culture and is presently supported not only by religion but also by government and contemporary economics.⁸ When these three major institutions—religion, government, and economics—present a united front, a “sacred canopy” is cast over a society, validating the behavior of its people. It is difficult to believe that science and technology alone can solve an ecological crisis supported by this triumvirate, for it legitimates human beings continuing to *feel, think, and act in ways that are basically contrary* to the just distribution of the world’s resources and the sustainability of the planet itself.

Neoclassical and Ecological Economics

The two worldviews—the neoclassical economic one and the ecological economic view—are dramatically different, suggesting different anthropologies and different house rules. The first model sees human beings on the planet as similar to a corporation or syndicate, a collection of individuals drawn together to benefit its members by optimal use of natural resources. The second model sees the planet more as an organism or a community, which survives and prospers through the interdependence of all its parts, human and nonhuman. The first model rests on assumptions from the eighteenth-century view of human beings as individuals with rights and responsibilities, and of the world as a machine or a collection of individual parts, related externally to one another. The second model rests on assumptions from postmodern science in its view of human beings as the conscious and radically dependent part of the planet, and of the world as a community or an organism, internally related in all its parts. *Both are models*, interpretations, of the world and our place in it; neither one is a description. This point must be underscored, because the first model seems “natural”—indeed, “inevitable” and “true”—to most middle-class Westerners, while the second model seems novel, perhaps even utopian or fanciful. In fact, both come from assumptions of different historical periods; both are world pictures built on these assumptions and each vies for our agreement and loyalty.

I will suggest that the corporation or machine model is injurious to nature and to poor people, while the other one, the community or organic model, is healthier for the planet and all its inhabitants. In other words, we need to assess the “economy” of both models, their notions of the allocation of scarce resources to family members, in order to determine which view of the “good life” is better.

The mention of “allocation of scarce resources” brings us to the heart of the matter. (The reason economics is so important, the reason it is a religious and ecological issue, is that it is not just a matter of money; rather, it is a matter of survival and flourishing. Economics is a *value* issue.) In making economic decisions, the bottom line is not the only consideration. Many other values are present in decisions concerning scarce resources and the way they should be deployed: from the health

of a community to its recreational opportunities; from the beauty of other life-forms to our concern for their well-being; from a desire to see our children fed and clothed to a sense of responsibility for the welfare of future generations. Climate change is intimately involved in this value issue: one of the reasons global warming is occurring is our preference to make money through excessive consumption regardless of the consequences to the planet.

Contemporary neoclassical economists, however, generally deny that economics is about values.⁹ But this denial is questionable. By neoclassical economics, we mean market capitalism as conceived by Adam Smith in the eighteenth century and, more particularly, the version of it practiced by major economies of our time. The key feature of market capitalism is the allocation of scarce resources by means of decentralized markets: allocation occurs as the result of individual market transactions, each of which is guided by self-interest.¹⁰ At the base of neoclassical economics is an anthropology: human beings are individuals motivated by self-interest. The value by which scarce resources are allocated, then, is the fulfillment of the self-interest of human beings. The assumption is that everyone will act to maximize his or her own interest, and by so doing all will eventually benefit—the so-called invisible hand of classical economic theory.

Neoclassical economics has *one* value: the monetary fulfillment of individuals provided they compete successfully for the resources. But what of other values? Two key ones, if we have the economics of the entire planet in mind, are the just distribution of the earth's resources to all needy users and the ability of the planet to sustain our use of its resources. However, these matters—distributive justice to the world's inhabitants and the optimal scale of the human economy within the planet's economy—are considered "externalities" by neoclassical economics.¹¹ In other words, the issues of who benefits from an economic system and whether the planet can bear the system's burden are not part of neoclassical economics.

These so-called externalities are, in fact, not minor or extraneous matters. On the contrary, as climate change is illustrating, they are the heart of the matter. For example, environmental deterioration, a prime "externality," is not figured into the price of goods in market capitalism. A company may have to pay a penalty for ecological damage—as in the oil spill from the *Exxon Valdez*—but it did not have to include in the price of the oil the greenhouse gas emissions caused by its initial production. Other "externalities" include the issues of justice

and sustainability, as well as recreational and aesthetic values. None of these matters counts in the price tag according to market capitalism.

In sum, the worldview of neoclassical economics is surprisingly simple and straightforward: the crucial assumption is that human beings are self-interested individuals who, acting on this basis, will create a syndicate, even a global one, capable of benefiting all eventually. Hence, as long as the economy grows, individuals in a society will sooner or later participate in prosperity. These assumptions about human beings are scarcely value-neutral. They indicate a preference for a certain view of who we are and what the goal of human effort should be: the view of human nature is individualism, and the goal is growth. Neither human poverty nor nature's deterioration has a place in this model of economics—and certainly not the issue of climate change.

When we turn to the alternative ecological economic paradigm, we see a different set of values. Are we basically greedy or needy? Probably both, but as our answers veer toward one pole or the other, we will find ourselves embracing an individualistic or a communitarian model of life. Ecological economics claims that we cannot survive (even to be greedy) unless we acknowledge our profound dependence on one another and on the earth. Human need is more basic than human greed: we *are* relational beings from the moment of our conception to our last breath. The well-being of the individual is inextricably connected to the well-being of the whole.

These two interpretations of who we are and where we fit in the world are almost mirror opposites of each other on the three critical issues of allocation of resources, distributive justice, and sustainability. Neoclassical economics begins with the unconstrained allocation of resources to competing individuals, on the assumption that if all people operate from this base, issues of distribution and sustainability will eventually work themselves out. Ecological economics begins with the viability of the whole community, on the assumption that only as it thrives now and in the future will its various members, including human beings, thrive as well. In other words, ecological economics *begins* with sustainability and distributive justice, not with the allocation of resources among competing individuals. Before all else, the community must be able to survive (sustainability), which it can do only if all members have the use of resources (distributive justice). Then, within these parameters, the allocation of scarce resources among competing users can take place.

Ecological economics does not pretend to be value free; its preference is evident—the well-being and sustainability of the whole

household, planet Earth. It recognizes the *oikos* base of ecology, economics, and ecumenicity: *economics is the management of a community's physical necessities for the benefit of all*. Here we see the tight connection between economics and ecology—and in our present situation, the connection between market economics and global warming. Climate change clearly shows that neoclassical economics is a failure in managing the planet's resources for the benefit of all. Ecological economics, on the other hand, is a human enterprise that seeks to maximize the optimal functioning of the planet's gifts and services for all users. Ecological economics, then, is first of all a vision of how human beings ought to live on planet Earth in light of the perceived reality of where and how we do in fact live. *We live in, with, and from the earth*. This story of who we are is based on postmodern science—not, as in neoclassical economics, on the eighteenth-century story of reality—a story that eliminated nature as a major player.

Neoclassical or Ecological Economics: Which Is Good for Planet Earth?

In answering this question, we are asking about the most important of the three economic issues: sustainability, with climate change as our case study. Can neoclassical economics as currently understood sustain the planet? In the neoclassical economic view, the “world” is a machine or a collection of individuals; presumably, then, when some parts give out, they can be replaced with substitutes. If, for instance, our main ecological problem is the scarcity of nonrenewable resources (oil, coal, minerals, and so forth), then human ingenuity might well fill the gaps when shortages occur.

The problem facing our planet at the beginning of the new millennium, however, is far greater than simply the loss of nonrenewable resources. In fact, that problem is of less importance than two other related ones: the rate of loss of *renewable* resources and the manner in which these losses overlap and support further deterioration. As we noted in chapter 1, when an organic-like entity, such as the earth, undergoes change, everything is affected—and the change snowballs. The big problems are the loss of water, trees, fertile soil, clean air, fisheries, and biodiversity *and* the ways the degradation of each of these renewables

contributes to the deterioration of the rest. In other words, if the planet is seen more as an organism than a machine, with all parts interrelated and interdependent, then after a certain level of decay of its various members, it will, like any "body," become sick at its core, sick to the point of not functioning properly. It will not be able to sustain itself. We have already noted this phenomenon in our discussion of the "tipping point" of global temperature, an increase of such proportions that the life-sustaining systems of the planet are undermined.

This process refers to the synergism of planetary operation. The various parts of the planet work together both in health and in decay to create something either better or worse than the individual parts. When the various members of an ecosystem are healthy, they work together to provide innumerable "free services" that none could provide alone, services that we usually take for granted: materials production (food, fisheries, timber, genetic resources, medicines), pollination, biological control of pests and diseases, habitat and refuge, water supply and regulation, waste recycling and pollution control, educational and scientific resources, and recreation.¹² These services are essential to our survival and well-being; they can continue only if we sustain them. This list of services should be seen as a web: none of them can function alone—each of them depends on the others. These services are the "commons" that is our very lifeblood and that we hold in trust for future generations.

The most important services are not necessarily the most visible ones; for instance, in a forest it is not only the standing trees that are valuable but also the fallen ones (the "nurse logs" on which new trees grow); the habitat the forest provides for birds and insects that pollinate crops and destroy diseases; the plants that provide biodiversity for food and medicines; the forest canopy that breaks the force of winds; the roots that reduce soil erosion; the photosynthesis of plants that help stabilize the climate. The smallest providers—the insects, worms, spiders, fungi, algae, and bacteria—are critically important in creating a stable, sustainable home for humans and other creatures. If such a forest is clear-cut, everything else goes as well. Or, in a situation such as the extreme deterioration that climate change will create, *all of these services will disappear as well*. A healthy ecosystem—complex and diverse in all its features, both large and small—is resilient like a well-functioning body. A simplified, degraded nature, supporting single-species crops in ruined soil with inadequate water and violent weather events, results in a diminished environment for human beings as well. "The bottom line is that for humans to be healthy and resilient, nature must be too."¹³

An outstanding example of *negative synergy* is global warming, which undermines all of the wonderful “free services” nature gives us when it is healthy. Over the past two hundred years since the Industrial Revolution and the sharp increase of carbon dioxide emissions, we have seen a gradual unraveling of the billions of complex threads—flora and fauna, systems and processes—that work together to create the intricately patterned “cloak of life” that covers our earth. When we list the effects of global warming, we must remember more than just the most visible ones, such as desertification of grain-producing lands, scarcity of fresh water, loss of trees, flooding of coastal lands and islands, the spread of tropical diseases, torrid temperatures, and the decline of biodiversity. It is what we don’t see in negative synergy that is crucial: the way that a whole healthy system is undermined as the threads that constitute the fabric unravel. We not only lose polar bears with global warming; we lose the entire Arctic climate system that supports polar bears—and so much more. Through our high-energy consumer lifestyle, we have triggered fearful, though still not fully understood, consequences for the most important and sensitive systems within which we and everything else exist. Global warming is a canary in the mine; the deterioration and death it is bringing are the signal that our lifestyle lies outside the planet’s house rules.

An economic model that does not have as its first priority the sustainability of the planet cannot be good for human beings. The neo-classical economic model does not have such a priority. Hence, it is not good for us *even if we like it*—and we do like it. We are addicted to our consumer lifestyle and are only beginning to wake up to how bad it is for us and for the planet.

Christianity and the Ecological Economic Model

The model we need is very different. To recall, the ecological model claims that housemates must abide by three main rules: (1) Take only your share. (2) Clean up after yourself. (3) Keep the house in good repair for future occupants. We need to abide by these rules at personal, societal, and global levels. We don’t own this house; we don’t even rent it. It is loaned to us “free” for our lifetime with the proviso that we

obey the above rules so that it can continue to feed, shelter, nurture, and delight others. These rules are not laws that we can circumvent or disobey; they are the conditions of our existence, and they are intrinsic to our happiness. If we were to follow these rules, we would be living within a different vision of the good life, the abundant life, than the current vision in our consumer culture that is destroying the planet.

Given these two economic worldviews—the neoclassical and the ecological—which should Christianity support? Presently, it is supporting the neoclassical economic paradigm *to the degree that it does not speak against it and side publicly with the ecological view*. Does this matter? Yes, if one accepts the assumption that worldviews matter. While there is no direct connection between believing and acting, thinking and doing, there is an implicit, deeper, and more insidious one: the worldview that persuades us it is “natural” and “inevitable” becomes the secret partner of our decisions and actions.

Moreover, a persuasive case can be made that there is an intrinsic connection between the ecological economic model and Christianity. Distributive justice and sustainability, as goals for planetary living, are pale reflections, but reflections, nonetheless, of what Jesus meant by the kingdom of God.¹⁴ In chapter 2, we looked briefly at the portrait of Jesus by New Testament scholar John Dominic Crossan.¹⁵ Let us look at it again and more deeply: “The open commensality and radical egalitarianism of Jesus’ Kingdom of God are more terrifying than anything we have ever imagined, and even if we can never accept it, we should not explain it away as something else.”¹⁶ For Jesus, the kingdom of God was epitomized by *everyone* being invited to the table. *The kingdom is known by radical equality at the level of bodily needs*. Crossan names the parable of the feast as central to understanding what Jesus meant by the kingdom of God. This is a shocking story, trespassing society’s boundaries of class, gender, status, and ethnicity—since its end result is the invitation of *all* to the feast. There are several versions (Matt 22:1-13; Luke 14:15-24; *Gos. Thom.* 64), but in each a prominent person invites other, presumably worthy, people to a banquet, only to have them refuse: one to survey a land purchase, another to try out some new oxen, a third to attend a wedding. The frustrated host then tells his servants to go out into the streets of the city and bring whomever they find to dinner: the poor, maimed, blind, lame, good, and bad (the list varies in the three versions). The shocking implication is that *everyone—anyone*—is invited. As Crossan remarks, if beggars came to your door, you might give them food or even invite them into the kitchen for a meal, but you wouldn’t

ask them to join the family in the dining room or invite them back on Saturday night for supper with your friends.¹⁷ But that is exactly what happens in this story. The kingdom of God, according to this portrait of Jesus, is “more terrifying than anything we have ever imagined” because it demolishes all of our carefully constructed boundaries between the worthy and the unworthy and does so at the most physical, bodily level.

For first-century Jews, the key boundary was purity laws: one did not eat with the poor, women, the diseased, or the “unrighteous.” For us in our consumer society, the critical barrier is economic laws: one is not called to sustainable and just sharing of resources with the poor, the disadvantaged, the “lazy.” To do otherwise in both cultures is improper; it is not expected—in fact, it is shocking. And yet in both cases, the issue is the most basic bodily one—who is invited to share the food. In other words, the issue is who lives and who dies. In both cases, the answer is the same: everyone, regardless of status (by any criteria), is invited. This vision of God’s will for the world does not specifically mention just, sustainable planetary living, but it surely is more in line with that worldview than with the worldview based on the satisfaction of individual consumer desires.

Unlike our first-century Mediterranean counterparts, North American middle-class Christians are not terrified by the unclean, but we are terrified by the poor. There are so many of them—billions! Surely we cannot be expected to share the planet’s resources justly and sustainably with all of them. Climate change is making this terror very clear: it demands basic changes in our economic policies toward greater egalitarianism at all levels. It demands that we think of the “body” of the world and what it needs in order to flourish, rather than focusing on our own consumer desires. One of the principal reasons for global warming denial is the realization that “everyone is invited” to the table of household Earth—including not just needy human beings, but the air, the water, the land, and each and every creature, no matter how small and seemingly insignificant. The terror implicit in this parable lies with its radical inclusivity—nothing, no one, is left out. “The Kingdom of God . . . began at the level of the body and appeared as a shared community of healing and eating—that is to say, of spiritual and physical resources available to each and all without discrimination, or hierarchies.”¹⁸

The body is the locus: how we treat needy bodies gives the clue to how a society is organized. It suggests that correct “table manners” are a sign of a just society, the kingdom of God. If one accepts this interpretation, the “table” becomes not primarily the priestly consecrated

bread and wine of Communion celebrating Jesus' death for the sins of the world, but rather the egalitarian meals of bread and fish that one finds throughout Jesus' ministry.¹⁹ At these events, all are invited, with no authoritarian brokering, to share in the food, whether it be meager or sumptuous. Were such an understanding of the Eucharist to infiltrate Christian churches today, it could be mind-changing—in fact, world-changing. The parable of the feast is a metaphor for Christians encountering climate change because *it focuses on the body and its needs*. It reminds us that our planet is a deteriorating body in desperate need, and only as we begin to live differently—to live by its house rules of just distribution and sustainability—will we begin to respond appropriately to the crisis.

If this is the case, then for middle-class North American Christians, it may well be that sin is refusing to acknowledge the link between the kingdom and the ecological economic worldview, denying it because of the consequences to our privileged lifestyle. Sustainability and the just distribution of resources are concerned with human and planetary well-being *for all*. This proposition is indeed terrifying, but it is not absurd. In fact, it is, I suggest, the responsible interpretation of the parable of the feast for twenty-first-century well-off North American Christians. It demands that we look at the behaviors and systemic structures that are causing poverty and ecological deterioration in our world and name these behaviors and structures for what they are: evil. They are the collective forms of “our sin.” They are the assumptions, institutions, and laws of market capitalism (often aided by the silence of the churches) that allow people and the planet to become impoverished. Our sin is one of commission, but perhaps more damningly of omission: our greed camouflaged by indifference and denial, while at the same time we offer charity to the poor and green rhetoric to “the environment.”

Next Steps: A Christian Response

To dislodge the neoclassical economic worldview and Christianity's complicity with it, we must take four steps.

The first step is to become conscious that neoclassical economics is a model, not a description, of how to allocate scarce resources. There are other ways to live, other ways to divide things up, other goals for human beings and the planet. “Economics” is always necessary, but

not necessarily neoclassical economics: ecological economics is an alternative. Since the death of communism and the retreat of socialism, religious worldviews are one of the few sources left to critique the hegemony of market capitalism. Without the presence of alternative visions, a model becomes an ideology, as market capitalism has become in our time.

A second step is to suggest some visions of the good life that are not consumer dominated, visions that are just and sustainable. The good life is not necessarily the consumer life; rather, it could include the basic necessities for all, universal medical care and education, opportunities for creativity and meaningful work, time for family and friends, green spaces in cities and wilderness for other creatures. We need to ask what *really* makes people happy and which of these visions are just for the world's inhabitants and sustainable for the planet.

A third step is for well-off Christians as well as others to publicly advocate the ecological model as a more just and sustainable one for our planet—and as the model that climate change is demanding we accept. While the ecological model is not the kingdom of God, Christians have the obligation to work for systems that are at least faint approximations of the kingdom, rather than clear opponents. Specifically, this means becoming informed about the global injustices of market economies; joining with other NGOs to change the policies and practices of so-called free trade that result in impoverishment and unsustainability; and accepting the consequences for one's own lifestyle that sharing earth's resources justly and sustainably will entail. It means also acknowledging the tight connection between market economics and global warming: unlimited consumerism is a major contributor to greenhouse gases.

The fourth step is to rethink what such a different context—the ecological economic one—would mean for the basic doctrines of Christianity: God and the world, Christ and salvation, human life and discipleship. Such reconstruction is the central task of this book, but here we will close the chapter with a few brief comments summing up the picture of God and the world that has emerged so far. This picture is at the heart of *who we think we are and what we should do*. Since our interpretive context, the ecological economic model, is about the just and sustainable allocation of resources in our time of climate change, the framework for speaking of God and the world becomes worldly well-being. Dietrich Bonhoeffer called it “worldly Christianity”: he said that God is neither a metaphysical abstraction nor the answer to gaps in our knowledge—God is neither in the sky nor on the fringes,

but at “the center of the village,” in the midst of life, both its pains and its joys.²⁰ This is an earthly God, an incarnate God, who cares about the flourishing of creation.

As we look at the general outline of this theology, we find that it is basically different from the theology implied by the neoclassical model. Broadly speaking, the differences can be suggested as *a movement toward the earth*: from heaven to earth; from otherworldly to this-worldly; from above to below; from a distant, external God to a near, immanent God; from time and history to space and land; from soul to body; from individualism to community; from mechanistic to organic thinking; from spiritual salvation to holistic well-being; from anthropocentrism to cosmocentrism. The ecological model means a shift *not* from God to the world, but from a distant God related externally to the world to an embodied God who is the source of the world’s life and fulfillment. The neoclassical model assumes God, like a human being, is an individual, in fact, the super-individual who controls the world through laws of nature, much as a good mechanic makes a well-designed machine operate efficiently. This God is at the beginning (creation) and intervenes from time to time to influence personal and public history, but otherwise is absent from the world. The ecological model, on the contrary, claims that God is radically present in the world, as close as the breath, the joy, and the suffering of every creature. The two views of God and the world, then, are very different: in the one, God’s power is evident in God’s distant control of the world; in the other, God’s glory is manifest in God’s total self-giving to the world.

In closing, let us note that the two pictures of God and the world suggest different answers to the question we have been pursuing in this book: Who are we, and what should we do? In the first view, we are individuals responsible to a transcendent God who rewards and punishes us according to our merits and God’s mercy. In the second view, we are beings-in-community living in the presence of God, who is the power and love in everything that exists. In the first, we should do what is fair to other individuals while taking care of our own well-being; in the second, we should do what is necessary to work with God to create a just and sustainable planet, for only in this way will all flourish.

A just and sustainable planet is the great work of the twenty-first century to which all religions—indeed, all areas of human endeavor—are called. The crisis of climate change is making the necessity of this common task crystal clear. It is no longer debatable. But we are neither left alone to do this work nor ignorant of what needs to be done. God

is with us—closer to each and every creature than we can ask or imagine—and we have some clues on how to proceed—in the kingdom of God and its pale reflection, the ecological economic model. Thanks be to God!