



# ‘Climate Change and Intergenerational Justice’ by Tracey Skillington

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*Climate Change and Intergenerational Justice* by Tracey Skillington (2019)[1] sets out the challenges confronting us in the future, as experienced in the present and resulting from past human actions/inactions. In particular, she addresses the issue of intergenerational justice as it connects with the impacts of climate change and related environmental crises and offers reasoned approaches for working towards the safeguarding of the planet for future generations.

Dr Skillington is a research-based academic at University College, Cork[2] with an extensive portfolio of published papers, articles and books on topics including human rights, climate change, intergenerational justice and cosmopolitanism. *Climate Change and Intergenerational Justice* is not written specifically with a faith audience in view. Skillington does not address what Christianity, or any major faith/religion, may contribute to the issues she raises. However, this does not disqualify her writing from being taken seriously by people of faith, and I will attempt to offer key reasons why I think it is worth reading.

Skillington’s main idea is essentially that we need to

work towards ensuring that future generations inherit a world less environmentally ravaged than what the current trajectory is leading us to. This necessarily touches on interrelated issues of economic, political and social justice. It predicated on the goodwill principle of each generation leaving a better present for future generations to inherit, thereby ensuring fairness, equality and justice is experienced by as much of the community of humanity as possible.

The book is 144 pages long and arranged in seven chapters addressing themes such as present legal and political frameworks, rights and responsibilities of various actors (e.g., youth, corporations, national/state/public bodies) and suggestions for extending cosmopolitan approaches transcending the self-interest and protectionism of national borders, whilst advocating global approaches for tackling global problems. It is available on Perlego [3] in electronic format (page numbers are not cited below).

### **Book Structure and Key Content**

Following the Introduction, the first chapter offers ‘a critical diagnostic of the societal present as marked by inequalities that have been progressively expanding over



time' (Skillington, 2019). It highlights how relations between generations may be understood in the context of domination. Youth, and even more acutely, the generations to come, are (and will increasingly become) the ones on whom the burden of environmental degradation falls. Older generations of today are, arguably, enjoying the peak benefits derived from lifestyles formed by a neo-liberal economic order that has intensively capitalised on the exploitation of fossil-fuels.

Chapter 2 moves on to evaluate the discourse on climate change and reflect on how this perspective of domination and wanton disregard of the needs of future generations has been side-stepped, noting how youth movements have challenged 'settled convictions of prevailing short-term policy thinking' and challenged governments 'to extend principles of justice to newer subjects (e.g. future generations) and to problem areas exacerbated by declining climate conditions' (Skillington, 2019).

In chapter 3, the author asks whether future generations can have rights, as current legal frameworks define and interpret them. In the next two chapters she illustrates the practical ways by which young adults have used legal remedies in seeking redress through the courts. This development has influenced the evolutionary understanding of rights frameworks

to overcome existing technical barriers which currently limit the rights of future generations. Skillington highlights how creative and innovative legislation, attitudinal changes by the judiciary and influential public bodies, and more rigorous enforcement of existing laws against perpetrators of environmental injustices are bringing about important changes.

In her final chapter, Skillington offers a hopeful account of how a deeper framework of intergenerational justice may help develop 'pluricentric approach[es] to climate justice... in keeping with the basic principles of intergenerational solidarity celebrated in the founding moments of the United Nations (e.g. UN Charter, 1945)[4] and the European Union (e.g. the Treaty on European Union, 1992)[5].'

#### **Book Summary**

The book is well-focused and offers a clear overview of the significance of the current dilemmas we face. It relates the 'good news' stories of movements seeking to transform 'old order' structures which tend to resist long-term change in favour of self-interested short-term gains. As already noted, the book does not interact with faith perspectives nor the resources of faith communities. It is a weakness, in my view, that virtually no recognition is given towards the many faith-based initiatives that are working to safeguard the integrity of creation.

Skillington clearly puts much faith in the global legal frameworks as well as the passion of young people to take initiative in this environmental struggle.

It is an optimistic approach, which does not take account of faith-based worldviews but instead sees ultimate 'salvation' in legal mechanisms aided by 'communication platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter, [which] allow for a more regular engagement with themes of justice, inequality, and rights' (Karpf, 2010).[6] In addition, Skillington does not venture beyond her predominantly sociological analysis to consider philosophical questions around inherent rights which may be afforded to the nonhuman world, such as animals, plants, or the environment as a whole ('rights of the earth').[7] Rights are predominantly conceptualised as human-engineered mechanisms to protect vulnerable humans.

#### **Relevance and applications for Christians**

Much of Skillington's content correlates with biblical themes around God's restorative justice and the desires, responsibilities and hopes that we bear as tenant-representatives on earth. An obvious starting point is the stewardship mandate in the accounts of creation. [8] Caring and tending for God's creation presupposes the manifestation of flourishing for present and all future generations.

God's many blessings (e.g. the Abrahamic blessing[9]) are to be enjoyed in perpetuity, by and for, all future generations. To ensure that all future generations can live fruitful lives, there is need for an environment (on which we depend) that is conducive to allowing and encouraging the flourishing of all of life. The Noahic covenant[10] was one made by God with all of creation (not just humanity) as an everlasting covenant, and the mandate at the end of Mark[11] is a 'call' to witness to all of creation.

The Jubilee principles [12], and many other Old Testament ethical examples, are predicated on an appreciation of the long chain of history; God's 'cosmic narrative.' The principles of the Jubilee serve as a corrective when social relationships and the environment (e.g. land) have been corrupted, resulting in covenantal decimation where gross inequality and injustice becomes actual experience. Under these provisions, victims of such injustices are assured that their present misfortunes are temporary, and that restoration would come. Restorative justice maintains hope as well as engendering work for the common good, antidotes to selfishness and greed at both individual and corporate levels.

The common good of society rests on fair and equitable distribution of its resources to safeguard the shalomic vision of God's community where we may each become 'like a well-watered garden, like a spring whose waters never fail', a people who will 'rebuild the ancient ruins and will raise up the age-old foundations; ...Repairer of Broken Walls, Restorer of Streets with Dwellings [13].' Isaiah also depicts us enjoying the fruits of our labours within the wider vision of the new heavens and new earth.[14] The redistributive ethics behind protection for the marginalised, the alien and the 'weak' have at root 'right relations,' embedded socially within a wider environmental context. Humanity, and with all of creation, thrives when the air we breathe, the water we drink and the land we nurture and grow our food in, is properly looked after. Historically, there have been theological perspectives which have

diminished key dimensions of the created order. A Platonic worldview has persisted in the Church for centuries, where the 'material' world is regarded as less important than the 'spiritual' dimension. The desire to escape the temporal for the 'eternal' has hardly encouraged the development of a vision for long-term earthly existence, with the focus on 'saving souls' narrowly interpreted such that creation care has inevitably slipped down the order of Christian priorities. Common misinterpretations of biblical passages [15] have given licence for centuries of believers to adopt an exploitative mentality, the consequences of which we reap today in increasingly alarming ways.

At end of the book of Revelation the 'river of life' and the 'tree of life' whose leaves provide healing for the nations, are described in the wonderful vision of the new heavens and new earth where our dependence on God's creation guarantees the continuation of life in a more fruitful and glorious way than we have yet experienced.[16]

### Conclusion

Such theological and biblical elements are not acknowledged in Skillington's work. However, her passion for working towards intergenerational justice is to be commended. Although a specialist book, it is clear, readable, and challenging. For the Christian community, there is urgent need to make connections with theological implications and take seriously the significance of what are some of the biggest challenges facing us today, not least for young people. In conclusion, I offer my final thoughts:

- It is highly recommended for anyone with an interest in global justice issues, who wants to understand the debate around intergenerational justice. Whilst focused on environmental justice, there are obvious connections with issues of economic, social, and political justice. Informative and wide-ranging, it is a source of conscience-raising for Christians engaged in the public square.
- The younger generation, or those engaged in ministering to young people, would do well to read books such as this. Whilst it has a future orientation, it is nevertheless grounded in present realities.

- It does provoke pastoral implications for young people especially, and provides a wakeup call for those of us who care about the wellbeing of our children and grandchildren, many of whom are already struggling with climate anxiety and despair about their own futures.[17]
- For those who want to go deeper, it barely ventures beyond its social focus to consider philosophical questions around inherent rights afforded to the nonhuman world, be it animals, plants, or the environment as a whole ('rights of the earth.') These are complex, and controversial, theological questions in themselves.

### End Notes

- [1] Skillington, T. (2019) *Climate Change and Intergenerational Justice*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- [2] <http://publish.ucc.ie/researchprofiles/A024/tskillington> (accessed 17/08/2023).
- [3] <https://perlego.com>.
- [4] <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/un-charter/full-text> (accessed 17/08/2023).
- [5] <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/treaty-on-european-union> (accessed 17/08/2023).
- [6] Karpf, D. (2010) 'Online political mobilization from the advocacy group's perspective: Looking beyond clicktivism', *Policy & Internet* 2(4) (December): pp.7-41.
- [7] For example see the radical steps taken by Bolivia to recognise rights of Mother Earth at [www.garn.org/universal-declaration-for-the-rights-of-mother-earth/](http://www.garn.org/universal-declaration-for-the-rights-of-mother-earth/) (accessed 17/08/2023).
- [8] Genesis 1-2.
- [9] Genesis 12.
- [10] Genesis 9:8-17.
- [11] Mark 16.
- [12] Leviticus 25.
- [13] Isaiah 58:11-12.
- [14] Isaiah 65:11-13.
- [15] See, for example, Genesis 1:27-28 and 2 Peter 3.
- [16] Revelation 22.
- [17] See <https://www.bbc.co.uk/newsround/51451737> (accessed 17/08/2023).