

BOOK REVIEW

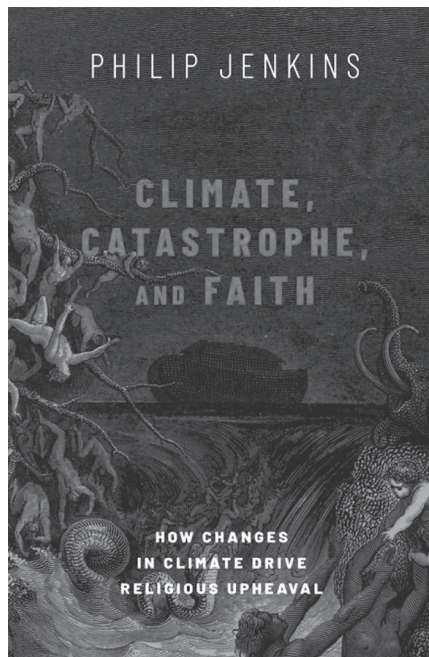
KEYWORDS: book review, climate change, witch hunts, migration, political violence

The Weather AND THE APOCALYPSE

BY MICHAEL CAMPBELL

Philip Jenkins. *Climate, Catastrophe, and Faith: How Changes in Climate Drive Religious Upheaval*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2021. 201 pp. + 41 pp. notes + 13 pp. index. Hardcover, \$29.95.

What do the 530s, 1790s, and 1840s all have in common? For Adventists who affirm the historicist approach to Bible prophecy, they will readily recognize these decades as connected to important prophetic dates (i.e., 538, 1798, 1844). In fact, William Miller makes a cameo appearance in this monograph (167–168). Historian Philip Jenkins observes how these were also times of significant climate disruption. The 530s contributed to the fall of the Roman Empire, and the 1790s and 1840s were both periods of time toward the end of the Little Ice



Age that lasted from roughly the late thirteenth century up through the mid-nineteenth century (61).

Jenkins further argues: “Throughout history, climate and climate change have been key drivers of religious development” (3). Any historical account that does not take into account climate change will fall woefully short. As a consequence, Jenkins seeks to better “understand why people in particular eras felt such stress, fear, and anxiety, which is expressed in religious forms” (5). Such an essential context helps to better understand why societies

What do the 530s, 1790s, and 1840s all have in common? For Adventists who affirm the historicist approach to Bible prophecy, they will readily recognize these decades as connected to important prophetic dates (i.e., 538, 1798, 1844).

sometimes collapse, while others continue, as a topic of lively scholarly debate.

Adventist readers will find the reference to the legendary Dark Day of May 1780, caused by a combination of fog and distant forest fires that blackened the skies. “People openly talked of Judgment Day. The event stirred apocalyptic sentiment, launching regional religious revivals, and sparking enthusiastic sects” (16). As such events happened, people sought meaning, citing Bible texts to interpret those signs around them. Such an apocalyptic framework assumed that God would shortly intervene, thereby instituting a radically new and different order of things. Intriguingly, “as the end approaches, the righteous form a remnant” (17). Adventists often identify as the “remnant”—an idea the author associates in terms of climate change with separating or excluding oneself from the world, most often as a response to worldly scourges.

Jenkins features four specific periods of time as case studies: between 1310 and 1325; the 1560s through the 1590s; from 1675 to 1700; and finally, the 1730s and 1740s. He furthermore notes a combination of factors that contribute to climate change: solar activity, volcanic eruptions, cycles of El Niño, and how each of these interrelate in ways that we as humans do not fully understand (32). Over time, there was a progression as society responded to catastrophe. The earliest period, aptly called the “Dark Ages,” was one of violence and hostility. The next was characterized by social paranoia, which resulted in pogroms. By the seventeenth century, new technology made “fleeing and flight” much more feasible. New concepts of religious liberty emerged with spiritual experimentation (25).

Witchcraft and heresy hunting are significant themes found in this book. Humans seek meaning from disasters, seeking to place the blame somewhere—upon Jews (72–

74), Muslims (78–81), and especially, witchcraft (71). People invented “a whole new religion, the religion of diabolic witchcraft” (71). Women were disproportionately accused of this sin (72, 96). Such efforts resulted in perfectionism (to placate God and escape the sins of a failed world) and suppression of heresy—averred in apocalyptic terms (75). Witch trials reached stunning proportions during the 1680s and 1690s. The Salem trials of 1692, in which nineteen were executed, paled in comparison to Continental Europe, where seventy-one died in a single day in Sweden, Lichtenstein executed a hundred, and Salzburg claimed the lives of 140 more (120). By the 1740s, a remarkable decline occurred in attributing supernatural or religious themes as a part of scapegoating. Enlightenment thinkers looked to the barometer (invented in 1643) and mercury-based thermometer (invented in 1714), which in turn contributed to a thirst for scientific insight (147). Such a decline illustrated “a general transformation of social attitudes,” thereby ending “witch persecutions” (149).

Readers will be interested to see Jenkins, who is well-



Such perils “will unquestionably be a time of widespread hunger, acute water shortages, and dramatic environmental changes” (26).

Once again, as in times past, a recurring theme for Christians is the book of Revelation, which serves as a “sourcebook for Western anxiety about the end of the world.”

known for his work on global Christianity, reflects on how climate change will increasingly impact the global South. Calamities not unlike the 1320s or 1680s are likely to occur again. Such perils “will unquestionably be a time of widespread hunger, acute water shortages, and dramatic environmental changes” (26). “Yet the better we understand the very diverse forces driving climate changes through the centuries,” observes the author, “the harder it is to relate those former times of feast and famine to the conditions that affect the world today and in the near future. We are dealing with quite different worlds” (41). What is indisputable is that the constant rise of emissions promises a substantial and ever-growing transformation to the planet. Such possible futures most likely will include significant water stress and the loss of fertile lands (179). All of these are “possible futures” with “very high” stakes (179). Once again, as in times past, a recurring theme for Christians is the book of Revelation, which serves as a “sourcebook for Western anxiety about the end of the world” (to quote David Wallace-Wells, 180).

On a more optimistic note: “Human beings are good at dealing with disasters” (180). Adaptation is essential. Over the next few decades 1 to 3 billion people will find themselves in conditions too warm for survival. Ironically, those countries who have contributed the least to carbon emissions are the most likely to face existential danger (181). Research continues to point toward an “intimate connection between long-term climate change and political violence” (184). If history teaches us anything, scapegoating and conspiracy mongering will continue to

cause persecutions, pogroms, and local civil wars (185). Mass migration is therefore inevitable. “In recent decades, Christian churches and congregations have deployed these scriptural resources to fame and comprehend migrations and to shape practical responses to serving migrating communities. Those efforts will become ever more central in a near future world in chaotic motion” (198). Just what that looks like defies any definite prediction. Yet if history is any indication, it helps us “to understand our possible futures” (201).

Adventist readers will recognize just how much the weather has impacted religious outlooks, particularly apocalyptic thinking. Readers will find this a stimulating guide to reflect both about the past along with the necessity to consider how such climate change will inevitably impact the world until Jesus does come. At that point, John the Revelator promises, “there is no longer any sea” (21:1), perhaps offering to God’s “remnant” people, immediately before the eschaton, in the light of global warming and the consequent rising seas, a promise of hope that God will ultimately set all things right.



MICHAEL W. CAMPBELL, PhD, is professor of religion at Southwestern Adventist University.