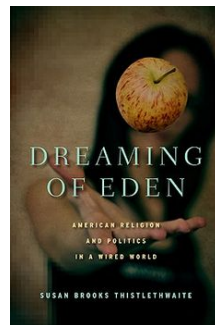


Dreaming of Eden: American Religion and Politics in a Wired World, by Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite

New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010 | xi + 220 pages | ISBN: 978-0-230-10780-9 (hardback) \$39.00

Susan Thistlethwaite is a highly respected professor of theology and former president of Chicago Theological Seminary, who has worked as a bible translator and has written extensively on environmental and ethical issues. This book seems to have originated in essays contributed to her weekly column in *The Washington Post* online. It



is clearly directed as a popular market and takes the theme of the Garden of Eden in order to explain why Americans are often so politically naïve and get themselves into such awkward situations. It is classified as a work of public theology, and is full of entertaining insights about the ways in which theological beliefs shape Americans' perception of the world.

There are nine chapters, two in Part 1 on "Dreaming of Eden," which explore the themes of "Adam, Even and the Garden" and "Citizens Cain and Abel." In the first, links are made between the movie *The Passion of the Christ* and Eden, and then the movie *Pleasantville*, to make the theme of Americans' loss of innocence, while in the second the links between civilization and destruction are explored as the industrial revolution and the cyber revolution reinterpreted. Part 2 is entitled "The Danger of Innocence" and begins with a chapter on "Iraq and Torture," which analyses American involvement in Iraq and the Left Behind novels as well as other aspects of the politics of 9/11. Chapter 4 covers the financial meltdown, the American devotion to excess and how conservative Christianity helped to cause all this. There is again a range of movie illustrations. Chapter 5 is on creation and climate change, and includes an account of a visit to the Creation Museum and the attitudes of liberal and conservative Christians to climate change. Part 3 is entitled "A Better Story" and includes a chapter, "The Practice of Goodness" which is devoted to the theme of the virtues of comedy. The following chapter is on national security, and includes discussion of *Planet of the Apes* and J. K. Rowling. The next chapter is entitled "God Doesn't Run Markets, People Do" and challenges the notion that the market is always right. The final chapter is on the Millennials, and explores the movie *The Matrix*.

The themes include (but despite the title, are not dominated by) the internet, starting with the symbol of Apple computers, the stock market, national security, environmentalism, the Iraq war, and administration politics. While these themes are a little dated now, one can certainly appreciate the witty way in which this book portrays the quest for innocence, and the failure to realise that none of us are unaffected by the fallenness of humanity. But as you may gather I found the blend of movie interpretation and public theology a little superficial. Perhaps the problem was that I had not seen all the movies mentioned, or did not see them as particularly significant. I would much rather have read Thistlethwaite writing a sustained argument than a book produced on demand, I suspect, for a literary agent.

There is a rather high level of assertion and polemic in the book which frustrated me; in particular the tendency to hold evangelicals especially be-

lievers in the rapture, creation, and the chosen destiny of America responsible for many of today's ills. Doubtless there is much truth in the statements, but the polemic I found irritating. The gems of the book are the entertaining accounts of the ways in which "the passion of the Christ" is actually about the garden of Eden, the puns and parallels of the story of Cain and Abel, and the self-confession of the way in which peace advocates can themselves end up as believers in an innocence which no-one can afford. But it is an expensive price to read such gems.

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