

Reflections on the Work of Sallie McFagueⁱ

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Abstract: *McFague conceives the cosmos as the body of God. God is seen as the spirit of the body, but by doing so she highlights her view of soul and body, of physical and spiritual reality as separate entities within our being. Although she tries to unite complementarily the soul and the body, her cosmic model of God's body becomes problematic. We need God-models that express ecological interdependencies of life, coherent with ecological sensibility. Trinitarian perichoresis extended towards creation as Christological perichoresis, in incarnate Christ becomes such a model in helping us to conceive the trinity beyond any dualistic problems. By understanding the relationship between God and the world as between the mystery and the physicality of God, McFague maintains the dualism of both the physical and the spiritual realms of reality and thus the dualism of soul and body.*

Keywords: *Common creation story, body of God, perichoresis, interrelatedness, Trinity.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Sallie McFague taught at the Vanderbilt University Divinity School in Nashville, TN where she was the Carpenter Professor of Theology. Her constructive theology moves toward an ecologically sensitive interest and the engagement of new images and models to think about God. Her background in literature is a key to her theological approach. Familiar with the philosophical currents of the study of language, she uses those analyses to address theology. She asserts we can image God who is beyond language through our language, metaphorically. McFague opts for metaphoric over analogical language that lays much weight on similarity.ⁱⁱ Her perspective of theology as metaphorical helps her to free us from patriarchal models.

In her *Models of God*, McFague explores the monarchical model for the relationship of God and the world. Exposing its weaknesses, she suggests other possibilities to address contemporary concerns: God as mother, lover; friend. McFague hints at the subject to which her subsequent attention turns: writing that our time of desecration of the natural environment demands natural, immanent metaphors to address the imbalance that centuries of Judeo-Christian emphasis on humanity's dominion over the earth have brought about. She proposes the world as the body of God, analyzing it from the traditional Christian view: as theology, Christology, anthropology, eschatology. According to McFague, this organic model shows the relationship between God and the world, without tension between God's transcendence and immanence. She provides a new ecotheological vision proposing a systematic theology as a 'metaphorical' reorienting of central Christian issues.

According to McFague, a cosmological starting point that moves us to see the primary religious story as that of the emergence of life could become the beginning of an 'evolutionary, ecological, theological anthropology'. We must reacquaint ourselves with the divine presence revealed in the natural world. To encounter the sacred in the natural world moves us to resist its destruction. To know that every snowflake is unique opens up our understanding of creativity. To give up humanity as the apex of creation allows us to see the grandeur of the cosmos, the complexity of life, and the dependence of humans on the earth community. Religious consciousness arises from the cosmic processes.ⁱⁱⁱ

In her book, *Life Abundant*, McFague re-evaluates nature with a critical analysis of economic practices. Her theology is about the care of our economical, ecological, and ecumenical planetary household.^{iv} If we live to give God glory by loving the world, sin for us means living a selfish life. Christians need to demonstrate 'cruciform living, an alternative idea of the abundant life that involves

a philosophy of enoughness, limitations on energy use, and sacrifice for the sake of others.’^v McFague claims that she moves from the deistic, individualistic, anthropocentric theology to incarnational theology as an expression of the divine presence in creation, emphasizing the prophetic aspect of Christology in Jesus’ ministry to the oppressed extended to nature’. Yet she relativises the incarnation in relation to Christ and maximizes it in relation to the cosmos. Her proposal is to know Christ as paradigmatic of what we find anywhere, meaning that everything that is, is the sacrament of God (or the cosmos as God’s body). According to McFague, sometimes we find the presence of God emerging in special ways; Jesus is one such place for Christians.

2. COMMON CREATION STORY

Sallie McFague brings new insights into her theology from the common creation story, which she uses as a resource to re-conceive the organic model of the world. For her, this is the story of everything that exists, of how the cosmos began fifteen billion years ago and how it evolved into some hundred billion galaxies of which, our Milky Way is but one. From an initial explosion, an infinitely hot, dense matter/energy event evolved into its present complexity, diversity, size and age. Its unity and diversity is based on radical relationship and interdependence producing diversified individuals.^{vi} This model absorbs the many into the one; it differentiates into a unitary universalism, the classic one being anthropocentric and androcentric. For McFague, her model gives us a new context within which to re-mythologize Christian faith,^{vii} and a working cosmology as a way to know where we belong.^{viii}

Most of the scientific theories that discuss the evolution of the cosmos speak about a matter/energy explosion that happened billions of years ago and about life forms that were developing through a process of change. In my view, if we are doing theology, the ultimate context within which we can theologize and within which the cosmos was created, is sustained, and is recreated is God’s self. Only God can be known as both the ultimate reality and context of the cosmos. The common creation story evolves within God the infinity, but it speaks neither about the origins of creation nor about creation’s creator. It does not answer questions like: who created the first matter/energy? It does not answer how does the force of gravity activate flow in the cosmos? Which originating power brought forth a universe? Which power sustains the cosmos? Scientific work depends on phenomenology,^{ix} yet the model of God as creation’s OIKOS opens up an ecological, panentheistic, perichoretic^x view of creation within God. The world of phenomena is the theophanic world; a self-revelation of God through which God both knows Godself in creation and is known by creation.^{xi} According to this knowing, humanity cannot gain valid knowledge, separated from its origin. Using the common creation story as a way to re-conceive the organic model, as McFague does, means that we separate creation from the source of its life and existence.

By taking the cosmos as the ultimate context for doing theology, McFague bears a dualistic approach to reality that is the idea of the double order of truth. According to her, God’s presence in the cosmos is referring to the spiritual sphere of reality, while the natural sciences refer to the natural sphere of reality. The dualistic approach to reality lies behind the dualisms she creates when she proposes a model of the cosmos as the enspirited body of God, and when she sees both the mystery and the physicality of God as separated spheres of reality. I would argue that we need to completely deconstruct and subvert the dualism of a spiritual and a materialistic cosmos; of psyche and matter; of enspirited body; of the cosmos as the body of God.

3. THE COSMOS AS THE BODY OF GOD

3.1. The Trinity-Incarnation

According to McFague, the Trinity causes misunderstanding: can three, be one or one three? Who is responsible for what? We are not interested in puzzles, she writes.^{xii} Yet McFague does not enter into discussing the theological concept of ‘perichoresis’ used by the eastern church fathers, to show the relations between the three persons in the trinity and between the two natures of the incarnate Christ that express the dynamic process of making room for another in our own self or extending our own self to be open to the ‘other’. Even our pre-Christian ancestors were aware of the enveloping mystery. This seems to have evoked a faith in a trinitarian God. It is in this context which provides the sense of connectedness. This could not be just a projection. Yet even our projections can help us to highlight a sense of meaning and may reflect a desire to be rooted in an authentic existence.^{xiii}

In conventional theology, Jesus Christ's resurrection is the confirmation that God conquers sin. Through his sacrificial death, Christ takes the sins of the entire world and offers eternal life. According to McFague, this traditional Christology is not believable and is bad theology. The descending and ascending preexistent Christ, the Aristotelian terminology that claims Jesus to be 'of one substance' with God as well as fully human are barriers for her to believe in the reality of Christ as God. This theology is 'Jesultery' according to McFague: individualistic and anthropocentric, understanding salvation in spiritual terms. For her, the renewal of creation, the salvation of the individual, and the liberation of the people are thought to be components of only the work of God in Christ. McFague claims that the cosmological context (the assertion that the redeemer is the creator) is rooted in Hebrew faith and appears in John's incarnational Christology, in the Pauline cosmic Christ, as well as in Irenaeus's notion of Christ recapitulating the entire creation.

Christianity is not entirely anthropocentric according to McFague, although it is so from the Enlightenment until recently. In my view McFague could enter deeper into the sources of Christianity, to reclaim and retrieve biblical and patristic concepts such as perichoresis to build a Christian ecological model of the world, bringing insights from contemporary science. Far from the biblical Christological message, McFague builds up her own Christology.

According to McFague, the incarnation is crucial as embodiment. By bringing God into the realm of the body (or matter), nature is included within the divine reach. Yet according to her, this is possible only if incarnation is realized in a broad fashion; that is if Jesus as the incarnate Λόγος of God is known as paradigmatic of what is evident everywhere else. Nature and not just Jesus is the sacrament of God: god of history is a lesser god than the god of nature, since human history is included within the history of nature, she claims. The scope of God's power and love is cosmological.^{xiv} In my view, the god of natural history, including human history is a lesser god than the god of ultimate infinite reality. Nature is created and exists within God. Christ is uncreated, and God incarnated.

I argue that there is no separation between knowledge of the uncreated and the natural created world. The two constitute a single form of knowledge because the created world is perceived as the embodiment of uncreated realities.^{xv} Yet Christ is not a prolongation of the fathomless depths of God's uncreated possibilities from which creation and the creatures proceed. According to the eastern church fathers, the entire creation is the image of God, (Romans 1.20) yet for them creation is created. Jesus is not paradigmatic of what is evident everywhere, but God the creator, the incarnate Christ and the Son of the Father is incarnated to save the entire web of life' he created from corruption and death. According to McFague, incarnation valorizes matter; it focuses the justice and care on physical needs; it says that God wants all of nature to enjoy well-being in body and spirit. By taking the cosmos as the ultimate context for doing theology, McFague creates a dualism within the Godhead by not accepting the incarnate Christ as God. While discussing the physical needs and well-being of spirit and body, she maintains Platonic dualisms. By taking the cosmos as the ultimate context for doing theology, she understands deification as a worldly matter. In this way, she separates the cosmological context from the ultimate divine context in which we live, move, and have our being. McFague does not relate the kingdom of God to come with the beginning of creation within God, through the work of incarnate Christ. According to her, Christ is only a human being.

McFague refers to patristic tradition, writing that: 'any intimacy between God and matter came to an abrupt end when, in the Nicene faith, the Logos was identified with the second person of the trinity of the transcendent God.' In my view, a perichoretic Christological world model can help us realize the unity between spiritual and material self as a whole human being. This unity encourages us to open up our self towards the 'other' that is towards God, creation and its beings, to strive for dialogue in all directions. A perichoretic incarnation-model moves us beyond our own selves, and the other humans, leading the entire creation towards eternity. Christ leads us kenotically to the completion of the cycle of our life as περιχώρησις.^{xvi}

When Maximus discusses the completion of the cycle (περιχώρησις), occurring with the beginning (ἐπάνοδος), as the recurrence of the believers at the end to their own beginning, he relates the kingdom of God to come as perichoresis, with the beginning of creation through the kenotic work of Christ as Christological perichoresis. Christ extends the Godhead towards the world to save it, rather than being a dry-as-dust recitation, as McFague claims. According to her, the model of the cosmos as God's body excludes any claims of Christ's uniqueness, who is a 'paradigmatic embodiment of God.' Her panentheistic ecological theology views complementarily but dualistically, bodies as spirited

beings. Both the mystery and the physicality of God make a Platonic dualism, although feminist and ecofeminist theologies claim that to challenge patriarchy means to re-build human persons as ecological persons and rethink the dualistic philosophy on which western cultures were based. If we see the cosmos as the ultimate context in which we exist, and depend on scientific theories to explain it, although we can know God as working immanently for us, we are separating the cosmos from God as the source of its existence, as the source of life.

4. SIN

According to McFague, our failing and our sin is not that we rebel against God; it is our unwillingness to accept our limits. Yet rebellion against God is not distinct from an unwillingness to make room for others; it includes that and other aspects as well.^{xvii} Also, to 'sin' from an ecoltheological point of view might mean to deny the limits and potentialities of finitude and to reject our created nature.^{xviii} The ancient Greek writers used the word μετάνοια-repentance as a dualistic expression, as in just 'a change of opinion'.^{xix} The rule of the soul (part of which was the mind) over the body was thought to be natural, expedient.^{xx} According to McFague, the historical Jesus as a prophet and wisdom teacher gives us guidance suggesting what to do, how to do it, and when and where to do it.

5. CONCLUSION

In my view, it is not enough to imitate Christ's life and mission, neither for our lives to be 'a reflection of God's life and the attempt to become like God,'^{xxi} as McFague suggests. Μετάνοια-repentance in the NT is a process of transformation of ourselves as whole persons that can lead us to discern the will of God in our lives: 'be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is.'^{xxii} To learn to sustain and not exploit the web of life is not a task of scientific knowing but of μετάνοια. It implies a new reference point for our self-identity, as a matter of belief and social structure. We need conversion of mind/spirit/culture, of our technology and social relations so that humanity exists within nature in harmony with all the other creatures.^{xxiii} According to McFague, Christ is paradigmatic of the world as God's body; as an exemplary, as a 'paradigmatic' person^{xxiv} in her wording, separated from the Trinity. Her Christology becomes salvifically insufficient; it cannot help us to retrieve sources from within the Christian tradition that may aid ecological living.^{xxv} However, in a Christian view, repentance of our sins is presupposed for a life in accord with God's will.^{xxvi}

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- [6] ^{vi}Sallie McFague, *The Body of God, An Ecological Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), pp.27-8.
- [7] ^{vii} McFague, *The Body of God*, p.181.
- [8] ^{viii} Ibid., p.112.
- [9] ^{ix}Catharine Keller, *Face of the Deep, A Theology of Becoming* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), pp.63-4.
- [10] ^xThe noun Περιχώρησις etymologically is derived from the Greek verb περιχωρέω. The noun περιχώρησις names the dynamic process of making room for another around oneself, or to

extend one's self round about. August Deneffe linked perichoresis to the stoic concept of mixture, κρᾶσις δι' ὄλων which means a complete mutual interpenetration of two substances that preserves the identity and property of each intact. In the Stoic vocabulary the verb χωρεῖν includes 'go', 'extend', and 'contain'; it was often used to show this kind of mixing. The Cappadocian Fathers developed the theological importance of the term. The Eastern Church Fathers borrowed the term 'περιχώρησις' from Anaxagoras' cosmological, mechanistic context to use it in an Christological and trinitarian context. Perichoresis was contextualized from an ancient Greek cosmological context into the Christian, Christological trinitarian contexts. The concept of perichoresis offered a way of attempting to express the mutual indwelling or co-inherence in Christ, of the incarnate Λόγος of both human and divine natures. Later, the fathers described the personal triune relationship of Father, Son and Spirit as perichoresis. This concept expressed how the unity and distinction are combined in the persons of the trinity, in the natures of Christ, as well as in creation as reunited with God.^x

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- [21] ^{xxi} McFague, *Life Abundant*, p.175, 177.
- [22] ^{xxii} Romans 12 .2.
- [23] ^{xxiii} Ruether *Gaia and God*, pp.269, 86.
- [24] ^{xxiv} McFague, *The Body of God*, p.162.
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