

Theologizing the World: A Reflection on the Theology of Sallie McFague

JOHN T. HARWOOD*

Books Discussed:

McFague, Sallie. *Literature and the Christian Life*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1966.

_____. *Speaking in Parables: A Study in Metaphor and Theology*. Philadelphia, Pa.: Fortress Press, 1975.

_____. *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language*. Philadelphia, Pa.: Fortress Press, 1982.

_____. *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age*. Philadelphia, Pa.: Fortress Press, 1987.

_____. *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology*. Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 1993.

_____. *Super, Natural Christians: How We Should Love Nature*. Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 1997.

_____. *Life Abundant: Rethinking Theology and Economy for a Planet in Peril*. Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 2001.

_____. *A New Climate for Theology: God, the World, and Global Warming*. Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 2008.

_____. *Blessed Are the Consumers: Climate Change and the Practice of Restraint*. Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 2013.

“Unless you are educated in metaphor, you are not safe to be let loose in the world.” (Robert Frost)

In a career spanning four decades years and encompassing nine monographs, Sallie McFague has pursued a consistent set of theological questions and critical social issues, articulating strategies for

* John T. Harwood is an Episcopal priest who serves Trinity Episcopal Church and Zion's Evangelical Lutheran Church in Renovo, Pennsylvania. He is also an administrator and faculty member at Penn State University. The author wishes to thank Marion Grau and Kathryn Grossman for valuable comments and encouragement.

linking the study of religious language to contemporary political threats ranging from nuclear annihilation (*Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age*, 1987) to environmental degradation (*A New Climate for Theology: God, the World, and Global Warming*, 2008) to economic collapse (*Blessed Are the Consumers: Climate Change and the Practice of Restraint*, 2013). While other contemporary theologians have responded to these challenges by arguing for environmental ethics, McFague reaches her conclusion (kenotic theology) from a very different intellectual trajectory.¹

For thirty years McFague taught at the Vanderbilt Divinity School, where she served as Carpenter Professor of Theology. For the past fourteen years, she has been a Distinguished Theologian in Residence at Vancouver School of Theology. Few scholars remain professionally active in their ninth decade of life, but blessed are the readers who have such a companion and guide.

Her most recent work, *Blessed Are the Consumers* (2013), addresses not just theologians but clergy and fellow citizens who seek to understand how faith communities can engage with a broken world in ways that respect the gravity of the problems and the urgency of religious and spiritual convictions. While politics, economics, and ethics are never far from her purview, she avoids specific programs of reform à la Greenpeace, the Sierra Club, political parties, or the work of church organizations and NGOs. Her chapter titles are beguiling invitations to dialogue and reflection (see chapter 1, “‘But Enough about Me’: What Does Augustine’s Confessions Have to Do with Facebook?” and chapter 6, “‘It’s Not About You’: Kenosis as a Way to Live”).

McFague has devoted her career to asking hard questions about what early Anglicans called the “godly, righteous, and sober life” and what modern Americans just call “living well.” Throughout her oeuvre she turns to the parable of the Good Samaritan to meditate on our relationship to the planet—to all of the people and forms of life on earth. Who, indeed, is my neighbor?

When we consider the development and range of her scholarship, we see a theologian whose theology is grounded in *timeless* issues (the nature of God, creation, humanity, sin, salvation) but adapted to

¹ For recent examples, see Willis Jenkins’s *Ecologies of Grace: Environmental Ethics and Christian Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008) and Cynthia D. Moe-Lobeda, *Resisting Structural Evil: Love as Ecological-Economic Vocation* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 2013).

timely contemporary themes. With a finely nuanced, reflective voice, and deep sensitivity to the role of language in shaping and reflecting our world, she situates current political and economic crises in their inescapably theological context. Global warming *is* a theological problem; so are hunger and poverty. To borrow the title of a recent book (2008), she has helped to create a new climate for theology.

The purpose of this essay is to consider her distinctive accomplishment in her new book by examining its roots in her earlier works on language, parable, and biblical hermeneutics, and suggesting a continuity of vision and values. McFague would be the first person to say that I'm using "roots" as a metaphor for something that anchors and gives life to any kind of plant. So be it.²

Building a Foundation in Biblical Hermeneutics

Her first four books on language and hermeneutics serve as scaffolding for the next five on the threats to environmental sustainability and stewardship of the earth. The first set tested and refined her theological methods and developed her distinctive rhetorical voice that addresses both academic theologians as well as clergy and engaged laity; the second set applied her theological vocation to specific threats to human survival. The early books deal with *translation* (how can we read scripture and find insight?); the later ones deal with *transformation*, personal and then communal. How can spiritual insight lead us into the good life? If crisis is the condition of the world, how, then, shall we live?

To understand what is most original and distinctive in her theology, we need to start with her early arguments about metaphor, parables, and models, all of which shape our imaginations and help us glimpse the divine in the words and works of God. Her first book, *Literature and the Christian Life* (1966), was written in the age of "New Criticism" and was grounded in the close reading of literary texts. Secular critics did not wonder whether an aesthetic experience had religious effects—art was an end in itself. McFague asks a new question. If we learn to read the full meaning of a text, can we discern "the relationship between aesthetic knowing and Christian doing?"

² Because of space limitations, I concentrate on her four early books and her final book and will not discuss in detail her four monographs on ecological threats. David Lott provides an excellent book-by-book summary in *Sallie McFague: Collected Readings* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 2013), ix-xii.

(*Literature*, p. 167). Right reading can change the world—a heady claim to make as the Vietnam War raged and cities burned—but she elaborates and enriches this argument in her next three books on hermeneutics: *Speaking in Parables: A Study in Metaphor and Theology* (1975), *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language* (1982), and *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* (1987).

When she applies a literary and aesthetic lens to the issue of “God-talk” in *Speaking in Parables*, she does not begin her theological writings with the goal of producing a systematic theology. Each book, an essay in metaphorical theology, builds upon its predecessor. McFague makes two foundational arguments. All parables are metaphors, and every theology hinges on a “root-metaphor” (*Metaphorical Theology*, p. 54).

Given her definition of parables, it makes perfect sense to see Jesus as the parable of God. This rhetorical leap from texts to persons is typical of other moves that she will make in later books (such as the world as God’s body in *Models of God*, pp. 59–87, and again in *Blessed*, pp. 172, 177–178, 184–185). Parables do not explain themselves—they require interpretation, and this is the work of theologians, clergy, and engaged readers.

By the late twentieth century, McFague argues, we find ourselves in a “crisis of language” (*Parables*, p. 35), but more broadly, we are in an epistemological crisis created by or symbolized by new currents in philosophy and literary criticism.

The days of supposing we are free of finite limitations, of supposing that we have some direct access to “Truth,” that there might be words that correspond to “what is,” that “clear and distinct ideas” can be many or very interesting—such a time is over (if it ever existed except in the most rationalistic circles). . . . What we have and all that we have is the grid or screen provided by this metaphor and by that metaphor. The metaphor *is* the thing, or at least the only access that we highly relative and limited beings have to it. That such a situation leaves us feeling uneasy is an understatement. We grasp after certainty, after direct access to the way things “really are.” (*Parables*, p. 29)

I am not certain that this is a “crisis” of language—crisis usually means a problem of short-term duration—because the “problem of language” is ancient, as McFague later notes in discussing Augustine’s

Confessions, Calvin, Coleridge, Kierkegaard, and Tillich (*Parables*, p. 35). Rather than being a “problem” or a “crisis,” metaphorical language is a powerful tool for discovering and communicating *meaning*. Like Paul Ricoeur, McFague’s focus is on meaning: how we find it and how it applies to our lives and world. Metaphor, simile, parable: all are tools that enable the discovery and communication of meaning.

Metaphoric Theology

No metaphors, no meaning, she suggests: “There would be *no* known fact or truth or feeling without metaphor” (*Parables*, p. 47; see also *Models of God*, p. 192, n37). Where you find meaning, she teaches, you should explore the metaphors and understand how they work. Parables “give rise to thought” (*Parables*, p. 64). Indeed, McFague argues that we cannot *know* anything except through the lens of language and metaphor. “Metaphor follows the way the human mind *works*”; it is “*the way of human knowledge*” (*Parables*, pp. 55, 62). Her sensitivity to metaphor, I think, invited later theologians to extend her arguments.

Many other contemporary theologians have built parts of their theologies around new ways to figure metaphors, particularly Elizabeth Johnson, Catherine Keller, and Ivone Gebara and other process theologians. In *She Who Is* (1992), for instance, Johnson refigures the language and theology of the Trinity to find not just a more inclusive language for theology but, more importantly, a more faithful language for talking about God, one that draws not just on contemporary feminist theology but also on the longer historical tradition that had not been heard or acknowledged. The limitations of the father–son metaphor can be overcome, Johnson argues, if we are not afraid to consider new metaphorical language. In her work Johnson makes extensive use of McFague, citing her nearly twenty times. She does not cite Ricoeur.

What kind of theology do we need for our time? McFague argues in *Metaphorical Theology* that her approach to metaphor and parable leads to a theology that is “open-ended, tentative, indirect, tentative, iconoclastic, transformative” (*Metaphorical Theology*, pp. 18–19). As defined, metaphor is a vast reserve of potential meaning. The metaphor of the “body of God,” for instance, is discussed in many of McFague’s books, early and late, and has found its way into the work of other theologians. In *Longing for Running Water: Ecofeminism*

and *Liberation*, Ivone Gebara extends the metaphor of the body of God by drawing explicitly on McFague's early work on metaphor and models:

To say that . . . God does have a body and is incarnate, but not necessarily or totally, means that the last word on the mystery that enfolds us is not our own. It signifies openness to the possibility of all that is different, unpredictable, and unutterable. It means we should not build a closed discourse, a discourse in which the unknown, the as-yet-unthought, or even the nonexistent has no chance of being included.³

Likewise, McFague suggests that Jesus can be a metaphor as well as a parable:

The belief that Jesus is the word of God—that God is manifest somehow in a human life—does not dissipate metaphor but in fact intensifies its centrality, for what is more indirect—a more complete union of the realistic and the strange—than a human life as the abode of the divine? Jesus as the word is metaphor par excellence; he is the parable of God. (*Parables*, p. 76)

In *The Body of God*, this powerful metaphor is the heart of her argument. God can have a body that can be defined in many different ways. Incarnation can thus be refigured and reconfigured if we find the right language—the right metaphors—and a suitable interpretive method to make the new interpretations persuasive; incarnational theology is a major theme in *Blessed* (pp. 50–59, 196–206). For both McFague and Ricoeur, educating the imagination plays a crucial role in enabling the new hermeneutics.⁴

But in what sense can we assert that Jesus is a parable or that the world is God's body? Is that rhetorical move nothing more than making the word "parable" into a metaphor? Are there rules or limitations on discovering or evaluating metaphorical assertions in theology, or is this just a kind of Derridean *jeu d'esprit*? McFague understands these risks and moves from individual metaphors and parables to larger

³ Ivone Gebara, *Longing for Running Water: Ecofeminism and Liberation* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 1999), 123.

⁴ See "The Bible and the Imagination" in Paul Ricoeur and Mark I. Wallace, *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 1995), 144–166.

semantic units, models, and root-metaphors (the language comes from such philosophers of science as Alfred North Whitehead and Ian Barbour). Consider the “fatherhood of God” as a test case since it is “both a major metaphor and a major model in Western Christian thought. The development of a metaphor into a model is a movement from revelatory insight to the possibility of conceptual and systematic elaboration” (*Parables*, p. 84, n*). When *Parables* concludes with a sensitive, insightful demonstration of how the “theological imagination” reads literature (poetry, fiction, and autobiography), the movement from reflection to insight foreshadows later books that are more political. That *Blessed Are the Consumers* relies on spiritual autobiographies as critical sources should not be surprising.

Throughout *Parables*, McFague hints that the larger goal of “metaphorical theology” was to build new models for religious language and then to exploit theological insights in the service of social and political problems. Her next two books, *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language* (1982) and *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* (1987), complete her triptych on metaphorical theology. She calls her approach a “heuristic theology,” meaning that it lacks the scope of systematic theology and that it enables a focus on current political and social concerns (nuclear annihilation, degradation of the environment, mass extinction of species, and global warming). Unlike systematic theology, which organizes “all the dominant models . . . with a key model of its own” (*Metaphorical Theology*, pp. 27–28), metaphorical theology is scaffolding rather than a self-standing edifice of belief (*Models of God*, p. xi). Its task is to “to understand the centrality of models in religion and the particular models in the Christian tradition; to criticize literalized, exclusive models; to chart the relationships among metaphors, models, and concepts; and to investigate possibilities for transformative, revolutionary models” (*Metaphorical Theology*, p. 28). What should be clear is that in the first part of her career, McFague develops a handful of key concepts, techniques, and strategies that serve as the foundation for other kinds of theological arguments. There is both continuity and change.

What kind of theologian is she? As noted above, McFague characterizes her work as a heuristic, not a systematic theology. Metaphorical theology is a heuristic, and in *Blessed Are the Consumers*, her kenotic theology is also a heuristic. *Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*? Not at all. There is a great deal of development in the “middle” books about environmental threats, but one thing remains the same:

the challenge of religious language and the quest for a personal and social transformation.

The problem with religious discourse, she argues, is not just the risk of irrelevance, but its possible complicity in the destruction of the earth. Her theology takes on a political edge and urgency. She seeks to connect the causal arrows between the language of worship (scripture, liturgy, and creeds) and political agency. She cites Gordon Kaufman's 1982 presidential address to the American Academy of Religion, which as apocalyptic as it sounded then does not even mention the other non-nuclear threats to the planet addressed in future books.

In view of the unprecedented possibility that we may well annihilate not just ourselves but life as such on our planet, the traditional symbols of the Judeo-Christian tradition may be not merely irrelevant but harmful. Consider, he suggests, the implications of dependence on an almighty, patriarchal God to save humanity and earth from nuclear disaster. The traditional imagery for God, Kaufman claims, tends to support either militarism or escapism, but not the one thing needful—human responsibility for the fate of the earth. (*Metaphorical Theology*, p. x)

If the traditional images of God in fact promote either “militarism or escapism”—neither one is an attractive political stance for the church—then new images are required. She argues that the twin dangers for religious language are irrelevance and idolatry (*Metaphorical Theology*, p. 4). But by what process are new images and models created and justified, and how would they avoid these traps?

For her test case, she interrogates and renovates the concept of “God the Father.” While many feminist critics have deplored the patriarchal assumptions and implications of the phrase, McFague goes much farther. The problem is far bigger than patriarchy, and the stakes are much higher. “God the Father” has become an idol and its metaphorical roots have been occluded.

When a model becomes an idol, the hypothetical character of the model is forgotten and what ought to be seen as *one* way to understand our relationship with God has become identified as *the* way. In fact, as happens when a model becomes an idol, the distance between image and reality collapses: “father” becomes God’s “name” and patriarchy becomes the proper description of governing relationships at many levels. The transformation of the

paternal model into the patriarchal is an important case in point concerning what can happen to models when *one* dominates. (*Metaphorical Theology*, p. 9)

Patriarchal metaphors and language threaten the survival of the world: “This language is not only idolatrous and irrelevant—besides being oppressive to many who do not identify with it—but it may also work against the continuation of life on our planet. . . . I see the threat of a nuclear holocaust as epitomizing the genuinely novel context in which all constructive work in our time, including theology, must take place” (*Models of God*, pp. ix–x). The stakes could not be higher.

But this is not the only way to understand metaphor *or* parables. Ricoeur, for instance, sees parables as the semantic paradigm for the interaction of readers and texts. The audience (reader or listener) extracts insights from the interaction of characters within the plots. As we consider all of Jesus’ parables, we form concepts. “Root metaphors assemble and scatter,” Ricoeur argues. “They assemble subordinate images together and they scatter concepts at a higher level. They are the dominant metaphors capable of both engendering and organizing a network” (*Metaphorical Theology*, p. 110). To discover transformative models of God, both McFague and Ricoeur draw on the extensive richness of scripture, whose images allow many ways to redescribe God and the divine relationship with humanity and the world. Metaphors both abolish and preserve meanings, holding both in tension (*Metaphorical Theology*, p. 136).

At the conclusion of *Metaphorical Theology*, McFague proposes a new model for God as friend and explores the implications for meaning and for insight by using this language rather than the traditional language of the Trinity. Such a move is not made without tough-minded analysis and critique (*Metaphorical Theology*, pp. 190–192). She asks both practical and theoretical questions about the new model: “What is the authority of God as friend? Can such a God protect and save individuals and the world? How do we worship a God who is our friend?” (*Metaphorical Theology*, p. 182). Her strategy invites other models for God besides “friend,” a topic pursued in her next book, which is devoted solely to the topic of discovering and defending new models.

What happens if we consider God as mother, lover, or friend? Are they mutually exclusive, or can they be combined? Other possible models include liberator, healer, judge (*Metaphorical Theology*, p. xiv;

for a longer list of alternatives, see p. 166). She notes a long list of theologians, including Moltmann, who have drawn on images of God as mother (*Metaphorical Theology*, pp. 169, 174, 176–177). Moltmann's exegesis is pertinent to this approach:

The life and death of Jesus as friend, are, then, of a piece: as parable of God they reveal, as Jürgen Moltmann says, a God who suffers for us and, by so doing, invites us into a fellowship of suffering with God and for others. Such a relationship, says Moltmann, is “friendship with God”: “The friend of God does not live any longer ‘under God,’ but with and in God.” Such a person shares in the grief and the joy of God; such a person has become “one” with God. (*Metaphorical Theology*, p. 181).

The scaffolding for her argument is summarized in chapter 2, which recapitulates her previous two books. For each new metaphor, she considers three questions: the nature of divine love it evokes; the nature of divine activity associated with it; and its implications for human existence. She does not assert that any of these metaphors is new, but to make them a *model* goes further than other theologians have travelled. *Contra* Bultmann, she seeks to *remythologize* the relationships between God and the world (*Models of God*, p. xi). She differentiates her theology from that of process and liberation theologies (*Models of God*, p. 19), and she rejects the Derridean assumption that there is “nothing outside the text” while maintaining otherwise positive views of deconstruction (*Models of God*, pp. 24–27).

Because each metaphor stresses relationship rather than hierarchy, the image of God (and the relationship between God and humanity) is radically altered. If the models can themselves be combined into, say, a theological concept, McFague does not say. Instead she proposes that theological models be evaluated on the basis of internal consistency, comprehensiveness, and the capacity to deal with anomalies and “contra factors” (*Metaphorical Theology*, pp. 139–140). Given the number of new models, one might wonder whether the choice of a model is as arbitrary as shopping for a new car. She partially addresses this criticism when she sides with the critical realists in her epistemology. Some models can be more fully substantiated and defended than others (*Metaphorical Theology*, p. 132), but the nagging question of ontology is not easily dismissed, and it is one that will never be fully

addressed in later works. As we consider the arc of her career, it is clear that she had to choose what kind of theologian she would become and what her central focus would be. She was not called to systematic theology, and she also chose not to align her work with critical realists such as John Polkinghorne, Ian Barbour, Alistair McGrath, or N. T. Wright. She is familiar with their work and incorporates it, especially in her understanding of models. But she takes her theology in a new direction while retaining her distinctive concern for the nature of religious language in reflecting and shaping belief.

As Ricoeur states and McFague reiterates many times, metaphors insist on a similarity that both “is” and “is not.” Every metaphor breaks down at a certain point, but in religious language, what happens when I am led to see the world as God’s body while I also understand God as mother, lover, and friend? The key element is that the metaphors are interactive, not static, and the relationship(s) is/are tensive. All of the metaphors (body, mother, lover, and friend) assume and imply a relationship that is inclusive, non-hierarchical, and reciprocal. McFague handles each of the metaphors separately.

McFague’s highest goal is not just to improve the quality of religious discourse. She seeks to change the world. Whether the greater threat is nuclear annihilation, environmental degradation, or economic collapse is not determined. *Models of God* is “a ‘liberation theology’ for life and its continuation, written out of and to the social context of those who control the resources—the money and power—necessary to liberate life” (*Models of God*, p. xiv). Even if she is writing a liberating theology, “this sort of theology ‘says much’ [but] it ‘means little.’” Why such modesty?

Metaphorical theology is a post-modern, highly skeptical, heuristic enterprise, which claims that in order to be faithful to the God of its tradition—the God on the side of life and its fulfillment—we must try out new pictures that will bring the reality of God’s love into the imaginations of the women and men of today. (*Models of God*, p. xii)

But if the problems are so urgent and the language needs to be refigured, how does one move from deep reflection on religious language to political action? *Blessed Are the Consumers* proposes an answer that builds on all of her previous works.

From Metaphoric Theology to Kenotic Theology

To call Sallie McFague an eco-theologian because her most recent books have drawn attention to nature and the stewardship of the planet severely understates the range of her scholarship in her long career and her unique contribution to American theology. McFague argues that the parables of Jesus are “models of theological reflection, for the parables keep ‘in solution’ the language, belief, and life we are called to, and hence they address people totally” (*Parables*, p. 1). The power of theological reflection, she argues, not only changes its practitioners; it can change the world. The stakes are no longer “right interpretation”—they are personal and global transformation.

In *Blessed Are the Consumers*, she develops a metaphoric, kenotic theology that could be the basis for a systematic theology:

A kenotic, metaphorical theology has no privilege, no exceptionalism, no assurance that it is the best or only theology; rather, like its central figure—the historical Jesus—it has at most only a shaky, minimal foundation. It is, however, a foundation in a manner that embraces reality in all its many phases and dimensions, from the interdependent universality of the evolutionary process, which is often cruel, bloody, and unfair (from our perspective) in its forms of give-and-take, sacrifice and gift, to the equally awesome and incredible self-emptying love of God in God’s self for the world and all its creatures. (*Blessed*, p. 187)

To buttress this new kind of theology, she turns not to models but to the lives of the saints. For a theologian to talk about saints is not surprising, but her selection is as startling as it is powerful.

She chooses three figures whose lives and witness could hardly be more dissimilar: John Woolman (1720–1772), an American Quaker abolitionist; Simone Weil (1904–1943), a French Roman Catholic mystic; and Dorothy Day (1897–1980), a twentieth-century Roman Catholic reformer and founder of the Catholic Worker Movement. What these saints have in common is not just the legacy of rich spiritual autobiographies that illuminate their moral development from self-centered to Other-centered. Each achieves what the author calls a “universal self.” Each is radically transformed through the experience of voluntary poverty and finds a four-step path to *kenosis*, or self-emptying (*Blessed*, p. 117). Each sees all things with a new, deeper spiritual awareness that enables them to suffer along with their neighbor. Each “dies to self” in

order to live for others. The systematic exploration of the saints' lives allows McFague to move gracefully between the public and private as well as the personal and political.

By choosing exemplars from different social and historical *milieux*, she suggests that the path to sainthood *could* be open to many others in our own time. Only transformed lives can save the world. Her audience can start as consumers but end as saints if they learn joyful restraint. Dorothy Day, for example, imitates the life of a canonical saint, Thérèse of Lisieux (1873–1897), whose “little way” modeled a means of

systemic, public, political action. It is the connection between the local and the global, as we would say today, the connection between the daily and the long-term, between the micro and the macro, that is important. She unites the “personalism” of the soup kitchen with political organization for workers' rights. In three interesting ways, she suggests some clues of how to use the daily discipline of voluntary poverty—a spiritual as well as a physical discipline—to provide insight, stamina, courage, and perseverance for the long haul of action for social justice at both the political and planetary level. (*Blessed*, pp. 92–93)

Micro–macro, personal–political, physical–spiritual, local–global: the binaries represent not a false dichotomy but a continuum of choices and dimensions for living.

Whatever their differences, the lives of Woolman, Weil, and Day illustrate a four-step process of living fully and abundantly. These steps are “voluntary poverty, attentiveness to the material needs of others, the development of a universal self, and its application at personal and public levels” (*Blessed*, p. 81). This is not a Rule of Benedict, and it does not assume a renunciation of the world in traditional terms. Nor is there a connection to the institutional church. Moreover, McFague goes to great lengths to suggest that this four-step model is not specifically Christian, but has analogues in all of the world religions. But the path does require costly discipleship, and the spiritual autobiographies that have intrigued the author for fifty years recount how these lives were lived in all of their idiosyncratic, often painful details, such as “Woolman’s wearing white clothing as a protest against dyes shipped on vessels manned by slaves; Simone Weil’s refusing to eat in order to identify with the starvation rations of the conquered French

during World War II; and Dorothy Day's practicing 'personalism,' the ethical stance that required one to serve the needy who were directly on one's doorstep" (*Blessed*, p. 36). If this is what saintly discipleship looks like, why would anyone want to go there?

The title to the book, *Blessed Are the Consumers*, is the answer because it evokes the Beatitudes and implicates us in completing a deeply engrained rhetorical pattern. "Blessed are the XX, for they will YY" is a call-and-response sentence for all who know the Sermon on the Mount. Let me propose the complete Beatitude: "Blessed are the consumers, for they will save the earth." Or "Blessed are the consumers, for they will rejoice that less is more." The Good News is that small is beautiful, and we should rejoice and be glad in it. Rather than condemning, shaming, or terrifying consumers, McFague beckons them toward self-transformation, into being agents of the kingdom by changing their thoughts (*metanoia*) about material culture. The earth is your neighbor. The earth is God's body in all of its forms: people, plants, animals, climate. All persons, born and not yet born, are your neighbor. Only when you realize this are you truly alive.

We cannot be the "good" neighbor; at most we can accept God's grace, power, and forgiveness as we struggle to become one with God's kenotic love for the world. In other words, the yes of Christianity is first of all a no, the no to the selfish, individualistic, narrow ego of our market-capitalistic consumer society that has been shown to destroy God's yes to all life. (*Blessed*, p. 186)

The author calls not for political revolution but for personal transformation. The book is thus both political and deeply personal.

Near the end of the chapter on kenotic theology, McFague offers a four-page *apologia pro vita sua* that describes her hard-won sense of her true vocation (a universal self) not just as a theologian but as a human being.⁵ Since the concept of universal self is not a standard part of our theological lexicon, it is helpful to quote her lessons learned in a distinctly personal voice.

Like Teilhard de Chardin, I have come to realize that I cannot love God or the world, but must love both at once. As I age, my eyes and ears have been opened, and I drink in the world and

⁵ "My Own Witness," in *Blessed*, 183–186; see also 125–129 and 150–152. Woolman, Weil, and Day all achieve this spiritual state (*Blessed*, 111–112 and 116–121).

find God there as well. I feel more certain of that all the time: it is why the body metaphor makes sense to me—whether in beauty or suffering (as Weil reminds us), it is the flesh of the world that sustains us physically and spiritually. This is, I believe, radical incarnationism at the heart of the Christian witness: the world as God's body and ours. God is found here, not somewhere else. . . . Just as Weil, Woolman, and Day experienced God physically, through the body of the world, so do I. (*Blessed*, p. 185)

This statement of witness (and the final chapter, “What Next? Living the Kenotic Life Personally, Professionally, and Publicly”) is the closest writing we have to her spiritual autobiography and evokes the saints' lives she has studied for fifty years. She is too modest to claim an identity with Woolman, Weil, and Day, but the aspirational similarities are too important to ignore. This is her “little way.”⁶

Nothing could be smaller than a final image of the theologian as a two-year-old, struggling to tie her own shoes. Nothing could be as little as that act—or could this act be far larger, a step toward self-sufficiency and independence? She leaves the readers with a metaphor of her life as a theologian—and as a human being.

For more than forty years, Sallie McFague has used her theological erudition, aesthetic awareness, spiritual insights, and lyrical eloquence to build a “house of theology”: “Theological constructions are ‘houses’ to live in for a while, with windows partly open and doors ajar; they become prisons when they no longer allow us to come and go, to add a room or take one away—or if necessary to move out and build a new house” (*Models of God*, p. 27). Her works invite us not just to enter that house but to make it our home. We will be joined by lots of saints.

⁶ In *Life Abundant* (2001), McFague foreshadows her most recent credo (17–24) and she identifies four steps in her personal conversation (4–9), fusing spirituality, theology, and ethics. She also notes the importance of spiritual autobiographies.



TRINITY INSTITUTE INVITES ESSAYS ON THE THEME OF ECONOMIC INEQUALITY

The essay competition aims to inspire theological scholars to examine our post-2008 economic context and offer solutions about how best to pursue God's promise of abundant life against the backdrop of the global financial crisis.

FIRST-PLACE PRIZE

A public lecture at Trinity Wall Street, publication in the *Anglican Theological Review*, and a \$10,000 award

RUNNERS-UP

Two awards of \$2,500

The deadline to submit essays is July 1, 2015

For details about the topic, rules, format, and how to submit papers, visit:

trinitywallstreet.org/tiessay

