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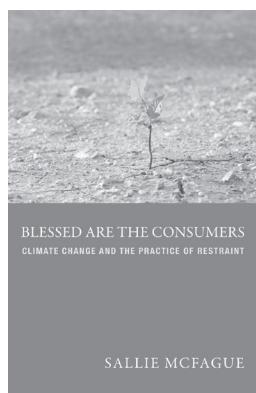
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Blessed Are the Consumers: Climate Change and the Practice of Restraint

by Sallie McFague

Fortress, Minneapolis, 2013. 225 pp. \$24.00. ISBN 978-0-8006-9960-4.

SALLIE MCFAGUE'S LATEST book makes the audacious claim that a universal view of reality, and of the vocation of human beings within reality, is not only possible but also necessary. "*We live in one world*, all of us together," she avers, "and there is one appropriate way of being, stretching from the simplest organism to us human beings" (p. 37). McFague draws on a variety of religious and scientific sources to argue that the universal path to human fulfillment lies in the ancient concept of kenosis, or self-emptying love. She analyzes the particular stories of three "saints"—John Woolman, Simone Weil, and Dorothy Day—as models of the dynamic process of conversion that makes the embodiment of this challenging ideal possible for privileged, middle-class persons. Their spiritual autobiographies all reveal a common pattern of entering the "wild space" of voluntary poverty, paying attention to the material needs of others, developing an immediate awareness of the "universal self," and practicing compassion at both personal and public levels. The model of human wholeness and planetary flourishing that emerges from these stories is radically countercultural in that it eschews the myth of market capitalism—*viz.*, that the autonomous individual achieves fulfillment in limitless accumulation of wealth and possessions. This worldview, argues McFague, is not only delusional; it is also deadly. In treating other human beings, non-human life forms, and the natural world as objects, the machine of market capitalism has precipitated the twin planetary crises of economic recession and ecological degradation that we are facing today. People, animals, plants, and entire ecosystems are suffering and dying and will continue to suffer and die at even more alarming rates if we do not find an alternative to this unjust and unsustainable way of being in the world.

McFague's retrieval of kenosis is exactly the alternative that we need. Restraint, sacrifice, self-limitation, and empowering love are not only possible, but also absolutely necessary for human and planetary survival, flourishing, and salvation. The good news, according to McFague, is that the kenotic way is not alien to the nature of reality or who we are as human beings within reality.

Rather, it can be discerned as the ultimate heart of all dimensions of reality—from the complex and interdependent processes of evolution, to the plasticity of the human brain and its capacity for empathy, to the teachings of nearly all the religions of the world, to the life and death of Jesus of Nazareth, to the divine self-emptying in creation, and ultimately to the nature of who God is as a triune community of self-giving relations. All of reality lives and moves and has its being in the self-emptying, other-centered essence of love.

Again, this is an audacious claim. Postmodern and postcolonial academic discourse is wary of any such universal claims and “grand narratives” about the nature of human being and action in the world. McFague, of course, is well aware of the danger of the grand narrative and its potential for violent and oppressive consequences. Hence, her critique of Enlightenment individualism and market capitalism. McFague’s own universal claims about reality, God, creation, and human vocation do not fall prey to the totalizing and violent nature of most grand narratives because of the nature of kenosis itself—it entails humility, nonviolence, openness to the other, mutual empowerment, and creative collaboration. The power of self-emptying is the lifegiving and empowering power of making space for the other in love. There is no absolute certainty here—other than the certainty of humility, utter dependency, interdependency, vulnerability, and love.

The humility of kenosis is key to understanding the title, *Blessed Are the Consumers*, which I have to admit struck me as rather strange at first—how are middle-class consumers in any way blessed? Should we not be included on the other side of the ledger, on the Lukian beatitudes’ list of “woes” to the rich and haughty? McFague never elucidates her choice of title directly, but an important contribution of this book is the humbling assertion that we human beings, like all other forms of life on this planet, are unavoidably and utterly dependent on consumption for our survival and flourishing. If existence itself is good, then the resources that support existence—especially food—are good, and the practice of consumption to meet one’s basic needs is also good, or blessed. What the humble recognition of utter dependency and interdependency does for this creation-affirming theology, though, is call for what Weil terms the “decreation” of the consumer self for the sake of becoming food for other bodies in need. Food, and our consumption of it, is sacred—so sacred, in fact, that it must be sacrificed for the good of others who are hungry. While McFague does not ask us to follow Weil’s example of self-starvation in solidarity with the hungry, the moral pedagogy of her three saints does issue a much-needed prophetic challenge to habits of consumerism and energy use that exploit other human beings and contribute to rising temperatures and the destruction of the planet. If those of us who are the privileged consumers of the Global North can follow McFague’s summons and practice restraint, self-gift, and sacrifice in our practices of consumption, then perhaps we might yet humbly warrant the designation of “blessed.”

While *Blessed Are the Consumers* offers exactly the kind of theology that a world facing dire economic and ecological crises needs, I do have misgivings about certain aspects of McFague’s arguments. First, McFague never addresses how kenosis applies to those who do not possess the privileges of wealth and power to renounce. What does kenosis look like on the “underside” of history? How can kenosis be a liberating practice in this context, rather than a call to passive

submission to oppression (a distinction that McFague admits in passing)? A similar method of turning to the lives of the saints might help here, but with a focus on the “saints” of the underside—those women and men whose names and stories are seldom known or told. Second, I worry that McFague’s reliance on Weil is theoretically compelling, but practically problematic. Weil’s practice of self-starvation is *not* an ideal of kenotic perfection, and McFague acknowledges this. However, the nuance is so subtle that it might evade an anorexic undergraduate who reads this book for a course on Christian ethics. The last thing that a young person in this situation needs is moral justification for an eating disorder. Third, McFague’s characterization of kenotic love as cool, impersonal, and indifferent to proximity of relation is problematic from a feminist perspective that takes seriously the passionate, intimate, and viscerally binding love that many women (and men) feel for the children that they care for as dependents. McFague uses the maternal paradigm at various points throughout her argument, but she concludes that friendship, rather than maternal or erotic love, is the best metaphor for the love embodied in divine and human kenosis. What this conclusion overlooks is both the passionate nature of friendship (in fact, for Aristotle, the mother-child relationship is the paradigm of friendship) and the need for resources and strategies that empower mothers (and others who love passionately) to root their expansion of compassion in their particular loves without leaving them behind. It might help to look at the kenotic paradigm from the perspective of passionate love as a blessing to be preserved and promoted, not renounced, as we go about practicing kenosis. In other words, it might be beneficial to develop a relational model of kenosis in which the joys and challenges of passionate love (in friendships, couples, and families, etc.) is a basic bodily good that, like food, should be accessible to all. Curbing our consumption so that we and all others might enjoy the blessing of intimate loving relationships more fully and authentically is nearly as important as the provision of food and other basic necessities.

Despite these misgivings, I cannot recommend this book highly enough. The text is appropriate for undergraduate and graduate courses on systematic theology, theological anthropology, Christian ethics, religion and the environment, religion and politics, Christian spirituality, and religious autobiography. Ministers could easily adopt portions of the text for use in Christian education with adults, and could present the contents of the book in terms accessible to youth and young adults. McFague’s prose is clear and inspiring, her pedagogical use of the saints is compelling, and her alternative vision of human fulfillment is exactly what we need to embrace as we face the twin specters of economic injustice and ecological destruction in our world today.

ELIZABETH O’DONNELL GANDOLFO
GREENVILLE, SOUTH CAROLINA