

# Introduction

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*Christian theology is the attempt to think about God and the world—who God is and who we are—in light of what the tradition has claimed in the past and what we must say in the present. Every Christian is a theologian; each of us has a theology. That is, each of us has a picture, a set of assumptions, usually not conscious, of how we think God and the world are related. And all of us can and do express through our words and actions who we think God is and who we think we are. These unconscious or implicit theologies are very powerful. They control many of our decisions and actions; we rely on them as justification for what we do personally and as a nation. Theology matters.*

—(McFAGUE 2008:5)

Sallie McFague has spent the entirety of her long teaching and publishing career exploring the relationship between God and the world, showing us that theology indeed matters. This is, as she says, what theologians do. Yet, in McFague's case, it has led her to explore how God and the world are inseparable from one another: how God is implicated as we seek to understand the world and how the world is revealed as God's body. This fascinating exploration is traced in eight books, each of which represents a segment of a theological pilgrimage that begins in exploring the nature of theological language and is now culminating in an understanding of Christian discipleship as the practice of restraint. Using McFague's own words, this volume follows her journey. It is an attempt to survey the terrain she explores, following her steps across an undiscovered landscape from one point to another.

Reading Sallie McFague's major books in order, from 1975's *Speaking in Parables* to 2013's *Blessed Are the Consumers*, is indeed like taking a trip with an eloquent, observant companion. In the preface to *Life Abundant* (2001), she writes, "I have written each of my books in an effort to make up for deficiencies in the last one." These self-perceived deficiencies are surely apparent to the author in the way they are not to the reader, as her ever-probing mind is moving on to the next step in the journey, taking steps she did not foresee as she wrote each prior volume. The ostensibly freeform nature of this trek is hinted at in *Super, Natural Christians* (1997), where she suggests that the metaphor of the hike is a better one than that of the map to describe our relationship to the natural world. This same "hike" metaphor may also be applied to her theological project. As carefully crafted as each of her books is, there is no suggestion that she is employing some sort of theological GPS unit to plot a predetermined path. Nor is she content to stop in one place, as if each book were some final destination. Rather, all her writing continually asks, "Where to, next?" and immediately whisks the reader onto a new path, one continuous with what has been previously explored before, yet uncovering new and distinct terrain.

McFague is not simply a companion or a guide; more than that, her writing demonstrates that she is a dedicated teacher, through and through. She repeats ideas in her books in order to instill them better within her readers. Stories and illustrations recur from volume to volume, often employed in very different ways from their original use. Like words shouted across a vast canyon, they echo back in varying tones, highlighting ideas and concepts one may not have heard before. Inasmuch as she describes her overall theological project as a "constructive" one, there is also a sense in which hers is also a practical theology, dedicated not so much to the arts of ministry, as the term is usually applied, but to "what we must say in the present" about God and the world, for the ways that speech serves "as justification for what we do personally and as a nation." And, for McFague, this has meant considering how our understandings of God—including the language and metaphors we use to speak about God—shape how we regard the natural world and the human impact upon it, particularly in terms of environmental protection and thriving, nuclear arms, and economic justice. For this, she is one of the most essential North American Christian theologians of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Born in 1933 in Quincy, Massachusetts, Sallie McFague graduated from Smith College with a Bachelor of Arts in Literature, followed by a Bachelor of Divinity from Yale Divinity School. At Yale University she earned masters and doctoral degrees in theology. Yale University published her doctoral dissertation, *Literature and the Christian Life*, in 1966. She taught briefly at both Smith and Yale Divinity School, and served as editor for the journal *Soundings* from 1967 to 1975, but her academic career began in earnest in 1970 when she joined the faculty at Vanderbilt Divinity School. She taught there for thirty years, including five years as dean of the Divinity School, and was named Carpenter Professor of Theology in 1980. Since 2000, she has served as Distinguished Theologian in Residence at Vancouver School of Theology in British Columbia.

Bits of her biography have emerged in her books, mainly as illustrations of her arguments. In “A Religious Autobiography,” from *Life Abundant* (which serves as this book’s prologue), we learn about her youthful religious devotion and Episcopalian upbringing, the influence of Karl Barth, H. Richard Niebuhr, and Gordon Kaufmann on her thinking, of her life in Nashville and Vancouver, and of her “conversion” experiences. These provide some shape and sense to the theological journey traced through her books. Yet McFague, unlike some theologians of her generation—and quite a few in later generations—is not interested in using her writing for autobiographical pondering and probing. While experience is key to much of her theological understanding, her focus is on the contours of things earthly and divine; her theology is personal but not individualistic. Instead, experience becomes a way to steer away from both needless abstraction and self-indulgent irrelevancy.

The ways in which experience informs a theology that matters is what has led McFague to explore the role of the metaphorical in our theological endeavors. This is a salient feature of her work. Her first major book, *Speaking in Parables: A Study in Metaphor and Theology* (1975), underscores her training in literature. As much a work of literary analysis as of theological interpretation, it not only explores biblical parables but also religious poetry and religious autobiography understood as parabolic forms. Here we are introduced to the basic theological hermeneutic informing all her work, which is grounded in the ordinary and the everyday. McFague explores the epistemological function of metaphors, writing, “Metaphor is a way of *knowing*, not just a way of communicating. In metaphor, knowledge and its expression are one and the same” (4). She concludes: “A theology that takes its cues from the parables never

reaches its object, but in language, belief, and life as metaphor, story, and living engagement we are sent off in its direction. It is a theology for skeptics and for our time” (181).

Her next volume, *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language* (1982), is her most explicitly theoretical work. It is here that she takes her earlier work on metaphor and parable and translates this into the full-blown theological method that has informed all her subsequent work. In the preface, McFague observes that as the language of theology has moved from the imagistic to the conceptual, it has spawned countless idolatries and irrelevancies. To revitalize theology for our time, McFague suggests that we replace the patriarchal model of God as father with one of God as friend. In this work McFague, who is often grouped with other feminist theologians of her generation, makes her most explicit statements about feminist thought. (Elsewhere in her work, she deals with such matters mostly implicitly or in passing.)

*Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age*, which followed in 1987, is her most celebrated book (it received the American Academy of Religion Award of Excellence in 1988), and the culmination of her work on metaphors and models. To her earlier criticism of the patriarchal theological model she adds analyses of other imperialistic and triumphalist models that she sees as contributing to a growing nuclear threat and the degradation of the environment. And she undertakes her first extended look at the God-world relationship and suggests the metaphor of the world as God’s body. A brilliantly constructed work, it culminates with three chapters that consider God in terms of the models of mother, lover, and friend, and each of these in terms of God’s love, activity, and ethic. In so doing, she begins to explore how God’s presence to and among us is mediated via universal immanence and worldly transcendence, melded into what she later refers to as “immanent transcendence.”

*The Body of God: An Ecological Theology* (1993) is perhaps the closest McFague has come to offering something resembling a systematic theology. It is, as she writes in the preface, “an attempt to look at everything through one lens, the model of the universe or the world as God’s body” (vii), a model that she first introduced in *Models of God*. It takes her concern for embodiment in more explicit directions, and once more uses scientific approaches as a theological resource. Moving through what she describes as “the overlapping circles—the common creation story, the world as God’s body, and the Christic paradigm” (xii), McFague offers here a radically incarnational theological vision

that sets the stage for the nature spirituality and deepening environmental concern that marks the second half of her publishing career.

The organic, ecological model that McFague introduces in *The Body of God*—that is, a model based on an understanding that “supports both radical individuality and difference while at the same time insisting on radical interdependence of all the parts” (28)—becomes the groundwork for the direction she pursues in her subsequent books, which take a decided cosmological perspective and attend especially to issues related to nature, the environment, and spirituality. In “A Religious Autobiography,” she describes this shift as at first vocational, but then also spiritual. *Super, Natural Christians: How Christians Should Love Nature* (1998) is her first effort to explicate this new nature spirituality. Here, however, she pulls back a bit from the panentheism that she began to embrace earlier in order to take a more appreciative look at the world as it is. (*Panentheism* is seeing everything in God and God in everything—radical immanence *and* transcendence—as opposed to *pantheism*, in which God is identical with the world.) She pushes back against the “subject-objects” approach to nature traditionally taken by Western Christians, arguing that it is overly anthropocentric and androcentric, setting humans over against nature. Instead, she exhorts us to a “subject-subjects” perspective as “a way to think and act that integrates God, nature, and human beings” (3), exploring works by nature writers for illustration. She concludes that “A Christian nature spirituality is . . . determinedly realistic: it begins and ends with a hymn to the things themselves. . . . A Christian nature spirituality is also determinedly hopeful because it believes that the creator of these wonderful, ordinary creatures is working in, through, and on behalf of us all” (178).

This hopeful realism turns more urgent in *Life Abundant: Rethinking Theology and Economy for a Planet in Peril* (2001), which moves beyond a contemplation of what it means for Christians to love nature to the imagining of what it means for us to assure an “abundant life” for all. To the ecological theological model she here adds an ecological economic model, arguing that just as we have been so imbedded in imperialistic, patriarchal models of God, so do we unthinkingly embrace assumptions about market capitalism and its attendant consumerism that militate against our announced love of nature and care for “the least of these.” Our lives are filled with such material abundance, which symbolizes the “good life” in Western society, that it is hard for us to imagine what a sustainable “good life” might mean for the rest of creation, much less humans of lesser means and fewer possessions. And so McFague not only reconsiders our contemporary practices and context, but uses this organic

economic model to reinvigorate her theological project, urging us to a radical rethinking so that we might live differently.

*A New Climate for Theology: God, the World, and Global Warming* (2008) is, as the title suggests, McFague's most topical book, using the climate-change crisis that emerged during the first decade of the twenty-first century as the impetus for deepening and broadening the perspective offered in *Life Abundant*. Steeped again in economic and scientific approaches, it often renews some of the key ideas of her earlier books. For instance, the ecological anthropology offered here ponders again the implications of Western radical individualism and ecological illiteracy. She once more discusses prevailing models of God—deistic, dialogic, monarchical, and agential—in order to reiterate the model of the world as God's body and radical incarnationalism, reminding us, "God is with us as the source and power of all our efforts to live differently" (77). Here, however, the earlier exhortation to "think differently" is employed to develop what she calls an "urban ecotheology," pressing us to reconsider our notions of nature and to embrace urban environments, where living differently, in sustainable ways, is especially necessary to address the growing challenge of global warming. *A New Climate* also introduces the element of *kenosis*, which McFague defines as "self-limitation so that others may have place and space to grow and flourish" and "the way God acts toward the world and the way people should act toward one another and toward creation" (136).

While McFague says she first considered writing on kenoticism as early as 1970, it is at the heart of McFague's latest book, *Blessed Are the Consumers: Climate Change and the Practice of Restraint* (2013). Religious autobiography has long been an interest of McFague's—nearly every one of her books devotes some pages to it by way of illustration—and here she develops her kenotic theology by examining closely the autobiographical writings of three Christian "saints" who especially model kenotic lives: John Woolman, Simone Weil, and Dorothy Day. In "A Religious Autobiography," McFague took note of four "conversion experiences" in her life, the fourth of which is acquaintance with God—coming to know that God is love. *Blessed Are the Consumers* suggests a fifth conversion experience (or, at least, a second phase of that fourth conversion): experience of God and the world as radically kenotic. She now interprets the Trinity not as a union of three static entities but as a circle dance of self-emptying love. Hence, God is not seen as a "being" (even the highest) but as the loving activity that pulses through the universe. Likewise, the understanding of redemption changes from a theory of a sacrificial, substitutionary atonement to a view of Jesus' life and death as the mirror reflecting God's own self-emptying love for others (and hence also, the kind

of living to which disciples are called). Here her theological vision may be understood as not just Christian but as having an interfaith value also, as it supports a theme common to most religions that “loving one’s neighbor is tantamount to loving God” (xiii). The final essay in this volume of collected readings, “Falling in Love with God and the World: Some Reflections on the Doctrine of God,” continues this theme of the kenotic and suggests that it may well continue to be at the heart of any future books that emerge from the remarkable mind of Sallie McFague.

### OUTLINE OF THIS BOOK

Any collection such as this is necessarily selective. Thus this book does not pretend to be a definitive compilation from McFague’s writings but only an interpretive presentation of her work. It does, however, present an impressionistic portrait of her and her theological project—something like a contemporary photo montage where as one steps away from numerous small pictures, the mind’s eye itself creates a larger representation of its main subject. As noted earlier regarding our relationship to the natural world, this book should not be regarded as a map but enjoyed as a hike, not directionless but one among several ways to navigate a journey through McFague’s theological project. To set the direction for this book, I have been guided by McFague’s work in metaphorical approaches.

The book opens with the aforementioned “A Religious Autobiography,” where McFague describes the four “conversion experiences” of her life and attempts to give an account of her own journey (at least up to 2001). This sets the stage for helping the reader understand how her work has gone through phases represented in the selections that follow. Part 1, “The Language of Theology: Parables, Metaphors, and Models,” focuses on metaphor and models themselves, showing how these function in discourse, not only theological discourse, but literary and scientific discourse as well. Drawing primarily from her first three books, it sets up the hermeneutical basis for her more explicitly theological writings and represents the “head theology” that predominated in McFague’s thinking before her “third” conversion experience. The brief closing essay, “A Meditation on Exodus,” suggests also something of McFague’s biblical hermeneutic and the creative potential of her approach.

In part 2, “Theology and Spirituality: Metaphorical, Ecological, and Kenotic Approaches,” the metaphorical hermeneutic introduced in part 1 becomes the basis from which McFague has developed particular approaches to doing theology—specifically what she calls “metaphorical” theology. But this

metaphorical approach over time makes room for additional, complementary models—the organic model of theology, the ecological model of economics, and the kenotic. In addition, it provides a path to fresh ways to practice both spirituality and ethics. While *Metaphorical Theology* and *Models of God* are again represented, the focus is more on her subsequent books, and traces how her theological approach has developed over time.

Part 3, “Constructing Theology: God, Humans, and the World,” demonstrates how these theological approaches may be applied to central Christian themes such as the doctrine of God, anthropology, sin, Jesus, the Spirit, salvation, and cosmology. Again drawing from a range of books, it also suggests some ways in which McFague’s views on these particulars have shifted over time. The final selection, a new essay titled “Falling in Love with God and the World,” provides a sense of McFague’s most current thinking at the time this collection is being assembled and thus is a fitting conclusion and “summing up” for the whole.

The essays included herein have been lightly edited, primarily to remove cross-referencing unnecessary to this new context and many of the textual notes. Readers are encouraged to revisit these pieces in their original contexts in order to obtain this information. References to McFague’s books are keyed by date and page to the bibliography that immediately follows this introduction.

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