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Jacob Waschenfelder

Abstract

This paper examines the influences which shape the tone and character of Sallie McFague's ecotheology, while also suggesting that her theology holds immense socially transformative potential even while departing from many of the basic assumptions of traditional Christian theism. Contrary to the beliefs of majority Christianity, which most often assume the adequacy of supernatural and interventionist images of God, McFague contends that these outdated images seriously debilitate Christian agency and place our planet in peril. Changing Christian habits of thought about God, therefore, may yet prove to be a necessary, though not sufficient, prerequisite to resolve our environmental plight. Ultimately, I suggest that McFague's reconstructive theology is a significant part of a larger blossoming of immanentist sensibilities within North American religious culture at large, and in relation to which Christian churches will have to adjust in order to survive. This theological sea change may yet have the effect of moving McFague's reconstructive proposals from the margins into the mainstream of Christian discourse and practice.

Keywords

Christian, Eco-theology, environment, God, McFague, post-modern

Introduction

In this essay, I argue that the reconstructive efforts of the Christian theologian Sallie McFague hold immense socially transformative potential even while departing from many of the basic assumptions of traditional Christian theism. Contrary to the beliefs of

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majority Christianity, which most often assume the adequacy of traditional images of God, McFague contends that outdated habits of thought concerning the divine seriously diminish the Christian potential to help ameliorate the current environmental crisis. While the majority of Christians worldwide assume the past and ongoing adequacy of images of God shaped by supernatural theism, McFague encourages new ways of understanding God along panentheistic¹ lines for the sake of a planet in peril.² Her aim is to counter the traditional image of God as a transcendent, distant, monarchical being, the result of which is, she believes, a debilitating of Christian agency and the engendering of a Christian earth-fleeing sentiment. Unlike the spate of new atheisms espoused by Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Daniel Dennett, and Christopher Hitchens that deny the ability of religions to contribute positively to a sustainable future, McFague proffers the view that planetary survival itself may significantly depend on the ability of Christianity, and other religions, to remind their notions of the divine beyond that of a supernatural being. Changing Christian habits of thought about God may yet prove to be a necessary prerequisite to resolving our environmental plight.

This essay begins by briefly examining the influences which shape the tone and character of McFague's theology. I then outline her proposals for moving beyond the assumptions of classical theism, and weigh the socially transformative potential of her reconstructive proposals. On this latter point, I show how her radical theological revisions challenge many of the time honoured theological assumptions of traditional Christianity, thereby making her ecotheology tangential, at least for now, to the beliefs and practices of most traditional Christians around the world. Ultimately I argue that the immanentist religious sensibilities blossoming within North American religious culture at large, coupled with the growing fear over global warming and related environmental threats, may eventually have the effect of moving McFague's reconstructive theology into the mainstream of Christian discourse and practice, adding yet one more small but important square to the patchwork quilt of global environmental sustainability.³

Sallie McFague's Ecotheology

Sallie McFague, Professor of Theology Emerita at Vanderbilt Divinity School, has been passionately concerned for over 30 years with how models of God and the world shape the behavior of Christians towards the natural world. She is convinced that traditional

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- 1 For McFague, panentheism means that 'God is not exhausted by finite beings, not even all finite beings, yet God is in all finite creatures and apart from God there is nothing; nor is God "apart" from anything.' McFague S (1993) *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 149.
 - 2 For a chilling update on the climate change peril, see Allison I *et al.*, *The Copenhagen Diagnosis: Updating the World on the Latest Climate Science*. University of New South Wales Climate Change Research Centre, December, 2009, available at http://www.ccrcc.unsw.edu.au/Copenhagen/Copenhagen_Diagnosis_HIGH.pdf
 - 3 McFague prefers the feminist metaphor of a 'crazy quilt' for sustainability because it involves an egalitarian process that is complex and diverse in terms of the order that emerges. McFague S (1993) *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 12–13.

images of God anaesthetize Christians to the plight of the environment and therefore limit the Christian capacity to address the global environmental crisis. In broad scope, her theology is focused on the intersection of theology and human agency in history and society. As an ecofeminist,⁴ her theological method eschews the so-called objective approach to scholarship in favor of scholarship which embraces autobiographical reflection, advocates on behalf of others (human and extra-human), and aims to change the way things are; her method is therefore normative as well as descriptive.⁵ As Heather Eaton notes, McFague is not merely interested in adding the ecological crisis as yet another item to the theological agenda by interpreting ecological concerns within the context of existing theological systems or traditions, as if these constitute the starting and ending point of theology.⁶ Rather, her aim, as Terrence Reynold points out, is to show how “the tradition has proven itself pragmatically anemic, unable to bring out the best in women, in relationships, in the environment, and in prospects for the future.”⁷

McFague is a feminist theologian. In her early career, she explicitly self-identifies as a ‘reformist’ feminist theologian, not a ‘revolutionist,’⁸ arguing that liberation for women can only happen if it takes place for all people, and that the root-metaphor of Christianity is not ‘patriarchy,’ primarily, but ‘human liberation.’ Unlike revolutionist feminists, who mostly self-identify as other than Christian, McFague suggests that women’s liberation can occur within the Christian paradigm, primarily because the parables of Jesus and Jesus as parable of God are ‘intrinsically destructive of conventional power arrangements and hence liberating to those...oppressed, whether by their sex, race, economic situation, or other factors.’⁹ Later in her career, while still a reformist feminist, but more explicitly an ecofeminist, she expands the notion of who the oppressed are to include ‘the planet itself and its many different creatures, including outcaste human ones.’¹⁰ She argues now that Jesus’ ministry of caring for the bodily well-being of the human outcast must be extended to the ‘new poor’ who are the millions of nonhuman creatures suffering from ecosystem decay, and on which all human life depends.¹¹ Her earlier reformist feminist theology, concerned centrally with human liberation, now becomes an

4 For a history of the term ‘ecofeminism’, see Merchant C (ed.) (1994) *Ecology: Key Concepts in Critical Theory*. Atlantic Highlands: NJ: Humanities Press, 9–13.

5 McFague S (2001) *Life Abundant: Rethinking Theology and Economy for a Planet in Peril*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 213, n. 32.

6 Eaton H (2005) *Introducing Ecofeminist Theologies*. New York: T&T Clark International, 72–74.

7 Reynolds T (1997) Walking apart, together: Lindbeck and McFague on theological method. *Journal of Religion* 77(1): 65.

8 McFague S (1982) *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language*. Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 153, 165.

9 McFague S (1982) *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language*. Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 165.

10 McFague S (1993) *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 164.

11 McFague S (1993) *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 167.

'ecological theology of liberation'¹² concerned about the bodily well-being of all living things, a concern magnified by the gradual, almost imperceptible, emergence of irreversible environmental degradation and the ongoing threat of nuclear war. Concerning the near future, McFague writes:

Few of us dare imagine what life might be like one hundred years from now on our planet, and when the thought passes fleetingly through our minds, we are overcome with feelings of loss, emptiness, and sadness.

There will be something. It will not be like my childhood thoughts of annihilation, although some, perhaps many, species will be extinct. Ecological deterioration one hundred years from now will not call forth the existential exhilaration and horror of the unthinkable abyss. It will, I suspect, generate a different, far more mundane, kind of horror: the struggle for food and water, the stench of pollution in the sky and ocean, the battle for the decreasing parcels of arable land, the search for basic medical care and education. Succeeding generations will set their sights lower: they will not *expect* shade trees in the cities or forests in the country any more than they will *expect* a better future for their children. They will, among other things, learn to live with 'much beauty irrevocably lost,' but by then they may not even miss it.¹³

The impetus for McFague's central concern about the social consequences of Christian ideas about God, therefore, is this impending future, now becoming a stark reality in light of the global warming crisis. In response, she offers her passion, talents and insights into planetary well-being in trying to understand the role Christianity has played in bringing about the environmental crisis, as well as what ameliorative resources Christianity holds.

Underlying McFague's theological project is the assumption that theological constructs are products of a particular time and place in history and of the socially constructed thought worlds of the people (mostly men) who formulated them. Hence, if the ways in which Christians have imagined God, the self, and the world are always historically relative, then they too are always amenable to theological re-construction. McFague writes: 'While theology is "*about* God," it is "*about*" the various contexts of interpretation that constitute the minefield of theology.'¹⁴ Contemporary theology is a minefield because it is no longer possible to affirm 'timeless' theological truths while acknowledging, at the same time, their historically contingent nature.

Though adhering to certain continuously present themes which give Christianity its particular identity,¹⁵ McFague argues that theological truths are interpreted anew by

12 McFague S (2001) *Life Abundant: Rethinking Theology and Economy for a Planet in Peril*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 33.

13 McFague S (1993) *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 8.

14 McFague (2001) *Life Abundant: Rethinking Theology and Economy for a Planet in Peril*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 40.

15 For the 'more-or-less identifiable historical continuities' which give Christianity its distinctive character, see McFague S (2001) *Life Abundant: Rethinking Theology and Economy for a Planet in Peril*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 60–62.

each generation within the contexts of their worldview, social location, and language. In the past, few people if any were aware of the formative influence of these contexts shaping Christian belief and action. This is not the case today. She writes: 'One of the great discoveries of our time is that we have become *conscious* of ... [these determining contexts]. Unlike countless generations before us, we no longer have to live in them like fishes in the ocean. We realize now they are human constructions.'¹⁶ Because it is involved in presumptuous and illegitimate discourse which falsely assumes single, universal definitions of God, human nature, salvation, and liberation, theology can no longer function as a holdover from modernity. It can no longer ignore the variability in these notions depending on social context, worldview, and language.

McFague argues therefore that postmodernism is the proper context in which to do theology, because it offers 'a healthy and necessary critique of theology's past – as well as much of its present.'¹⁷ First, it forces theology to recognize the formative influence of *worldview*, which is that constellation of basic assumptions about 'the way things are' which is part of all cultures and religions, is learned early in life, and goes largely unnoticed, and therefore remains unquestioned.¹⁸ Second, it pushes to the fore the formative influence of social contexts which shape an individual's self-understanding and the ideas he or she holds.¹⁹ These are the contexts of culture, class, gender, sexual orientation, race, socio-economic status, rural/urban geography, and so on. And finally, postmodernism affirms the influence of language which qualifies human reality profoundly. Language is, as Heidegger suggested, 'the house of being' in that everyone is born into a world of a particular language which has already chosen for them the metaphors they use to speak about themselves, the sacred, and the world, and out of which their worldview is constructed.²⁰ All language entails the use of metaphors through which people see 'one thing *as* something else, pretending "this" is "that" because we do not know how to think or talk about "this," so we use "that" as a way of saying something about it.'²¹ The fact that many languages supply humans with endless metaphorical ways to speak about the world has profound implications for theology. If all language is metaphorical, in the manner described, then theological language is also metaphorical, suggesting that language used for God, world, and the self, only ever involves *interpretations* and not

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- 16 McFague S (2001) *Life Abundant: Rethinking Theology and Economy for a Planet in Peril*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 50–51.
- 17 McFague S (2001) *Life Abundant: Rethinking Theology and Economy for a Planet in Peril*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 26.
- 18 McFague S (2001) *Life Abundant: Rethinking Theology and Economy for a Planet in Peril*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 42.
- 19 McFague S (2001) *Life Abundant: Rethinking Theology and Economy for a Planet in Peril*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 45.
- 20 McFague S (1982) *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language*. Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 8–9.
- 21 McFague S (1982) *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language*. Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 15. For more on McFague's discussion of metaphor, see McFague S (2001) *Life Abundant: Rethinking Theology and Economy for a Planet in Peril*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 29–30; and McFague S (1982) *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language*. Philadelphia, PA: 31–66.

descriptions. Language interprets the world; it never describes it as it is ‘in itself.’ There is no unmediated access to ‘reality in itself’ apart from the interpretive medium that is language as metaphor.²² Hence, because McFague affirms the contextually constructed nature of Christian metaphors, her theology proposes fresh metaphors, especially for God, which she hopes will be potent in moving middle-class mainstream Christians to environmental activism in the face of a planet in peril.²³

McFague’s Metaphorical Proposals for Moving Christianity Beyond Classical Theism

In what follows, I argue that the metaphors she chooses for God are those that image the divine more as an immanent presence than a supernatural being. I will suggest as well that this departure from classical theism towards immanentist ways of conceiving of the divine is not only the primary distinctive feature of McFague’s theology but is also taking place within North American popular religious culture at large, beyond the boundaries of organized religious institutions and organizations. Her theology is aligned with broader cultural currents of change, thus adding to its socially transformative potential.

The first reason for conceiving of the divine immanently is the implausibility of traditional images of God. The Christian habit of imaging God as a supernatural being is grounded in an outdated picture of the universe wherein God inhabits a heavenly abode above the clouds, miraculously intervening periodically to perform miracles that further his largely human-directed saving intentions. This picture of God is today not only intellectually incredible, but dangerous in the face of current environmental threats. It engenders a sense that Christians are children dependent upon an other-worldly being and that the natural world is a mere backdrop to God’s central concern of condemning or saving members of one species alone. The result of this fall/redemption theology, as Matthew Fox labels it,²⁴ is the diminution of human agency and the fostering of an earth-fleeing sentiment. That these theological presuppositions are still largely pervasive, implicitly and explicitly, throughout Christian consciousness, and still prominent in church doctrine, hymnody, and liturgical practice, past and present, is therefore a matter of central concern to McFague, and, she argues, should be of concern to all who are striving for environmental sustainability.

The second reason for re-imagining the notion of God in the direction of immanence is the emergence of a new organic, ecological, and evolutionary picture of reality. This new ‘common creation story’ evokes an image of the divine not as an external, interventionist, super-person, but as a pervasive, embodied, immanent force, or presence. The predominant

22 McFague notes that the relationship between the two components of a metaphor is one of analogy not correspondence. To say that ‘God is Father,’ for example, is to suggest that he ‘is’ and ‘is not’ Father. A metaphor is always both illuminating in some respects and nonsense in others. See McFague S (1987) *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age*. Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 94.

23 McFague S (1987) *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age*. Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, xiii–xiv.

24 Fox M (1983) *Original Blessing*. Santa Fe, New Mexico: Bear and Company, Inc.

biblical vision of God as a being, born out of a view of the universe as a fixed order, teleologically directed and hierarchically ordered, now needs to be replaced by a vision of God as an immanent power grounded in the new picture of the universe characterized by evolutionary change, relationality, and radical interdependence.²⁵ These changes are necessary for the sake of intellectual cogency and for pragmatic utility in moving Christians to environmental activism.²⁶

In order to shift emphasis away from a theology of transcendence focused on redemption towards a theology of creation focused on divine indwelling, McFague proposes the following personal and less personal metaphors: the universe as God's body, and God as Mother, Lover, Friend and Spirit. Each abandons language about God as a being and replaces it with language about God as the subtle, transcendently immanent 'surpassing wonder' in all things.²⁷ To think of God as a being not only leaves the natural world devoid of the sacred, by marginalizing a theology of creation, but also, McFague argues, makes God too small in terms of scope of presence. Designating herself as a Christian mystic and monist,²⁸ she writes: 'One (or, at least I) cannot believe in God as a being, no matter how infinite, eternal, ubiquitous, good, powerful, or supernatural. God is either everything or nothing, or to phrase it more carefully, God is reality (or being-itself) – if not, there would be something "beyond God" or "more than God" that would be *God*.'²⁹ Using ontological language – which she largely avoids because it is unlikely to move mainstream Christians to action – God is therefore imagined as both the power of being as well as being itself.³⁰ Mother, Lover, and Friend are personal, relational metaphors for the power of being, Spirit a less personal metaphor, and the universe as the body of God a metaphor for reality or being itself.³¹

In order to picture God within the context of a new organic vision of reality, for the sake of planetary well-being, McFague's primary proposal is that 'the model of body' be used 'as a way of interpreting everything,' where 'body' refers to all life-forms, all matter

25 McFague acknowledges indebtedness to Ian Barbour's characterization of the contemporary scientific paradigm. See McFague S (1993) *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 217–18, n. 22.

26 Concerning her emphasis on a pragmatic criterion, McFague writes: 'The main criterion for a "true" theology is pragmatic, preferring those models of God that are most helpful in the praxis of bringing about fulfillment for living beings.' See McFague S (1987) *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age*. Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 196, n. 13.

27 McFague S (1993) *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 154.

28 Monism, for McFague, presumes 'the basic oneness of all of reality, including the unity of God and the world.' See McFague S (1987) *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age*. Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 93.

29 McFague S (2001) *Life Abundant: Rethinking Theology and Economy for a Planet in Peril*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 182–83.

30 McFague is following here in the footsteps of Paul Tillich who argued that 'The being of God is being-itself.' See Tillich P (1973) *Systematic Theology: Volume One*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 235–36.

31 McFague S (2008) *A New Climate For Theology: God, the World, and Global Warming*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 113, 163.

on the planet and in the universe.³² All things from atoms to frogs to interstellar gasses are ‘bodies’ interconnected and interdependent.³³ And to radicalize this ‘body’ model to its roots, she suggests it be extended especially to God, proposing that the universe – all that exists – is ‘the body of God.’

A number of important implications follow from this metaphor of the universe as the body of God. For one, it implies that God knows the world (as body) in an immediate manner that is empathetic, intimate, and closer to feeling than rationality. McFague writes: ‘It is knowledge “by acquaintance;” it is not “information about.” Just as we are internally related to our bodies, so God is internally related to all that is – the most radically relational Thou. God relates sympathetically to the world, just as we relate sympathetically to our bodies.’³⁴ It also implies that God loves bodies, in sharp contrast to ‘the antibody, antiphysical, antimatter tradition within Christianity.’³⁵ Salvation, therefore, McFague suggests, must have something to do with the physical and economic needs of all embodied beings. ‘Spirit and body or matter are on a continuum, for matter is not inanimate substance but throbs of energy, essentially in continuity with spirit,’ McFague points out, and ‘To love bodies, then, is to love not what is opposed to spirit but what is at one with it – which the model of the world as God’s body fully expresses.’³⁶

And finally, the metaphor of the universe as the body of God implies that God acts in a way that is interior and caring, not external and periodic: ‘God acts in and through the incredibly complex physical and historio-cultural evolutionary process that began eons ago.’³⁷ God is not a being that periodically intervenes in history and nature with charitable intentions (as in the royal, King-over-Kingdom model) but cares continuously for the world with sympathetic concern as one cares for one’s body.

The metaphor of the universe as God’s body therefore implies that God knows reality in an intimate and empathetic manner, works internally through its physical and historical evolutionary processes, and is concerned about the physical well-being of all bodies. As such, it counters Christianity’s still common image of the world being ruled over by a largely distant, benevolent patriarch. In this King-subject image, God is all-powerful, humans disempowered subjects, and the world largely devoid of the sacred. The world as God’s body, on the other hand, replaces a disembodied picture of God with an embodied one. It is, as McFague argues, ‘a view of the God-world relationship

32 McFague S (1993) *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 17.

33 The model of body ‘like all models, is only one partial and inadequate way to interpret reality’ McFague S (1993), *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 18. For what she means by matter, body, and nature, see 214–15, n. 13.

34 McFague S (1987) *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age*. Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 73.

35 McFague S (1987) *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age*. Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 74.

36 McFague S (1987) *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age*. Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 74.

37 McFague S (1987) *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age*. Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 73.

in which all things have their origins in God and nothing exists outside of God.³⁸ It therefore displaces Christianity's inordinate emphasis on divine transcendence as 'otherness' with that of immanence and occasions a reinterpretation of both. An examination of McFague's criticisms of divine transcendence and immanence as they are conventionally understood, and her proposals for re-imagining each, is therefore in order. It is here that she most explicitly moves in the direction of envisioning the divine as an immanent power of love, parts ways with God as a being, and addresses her concern that Christianity has tended to emphasize 'supernatural transcendence at the expense of the immanence of God.'³⁹

Traditionally, Christianity has imagined and expressed divine transcendence largely in political and historical terms. Its model of transcendence envisioned God as an external superperson exercising sovereignty and patriarchal dominion over a distant and all-dependent world. This, McFague suggests, is 'one of the most problematic legacies of the Hebrew and Christian traditions in innumerable ways.'⁴⁰ For one, it is a domesticated form of transcendence, since the King is transcendent over only one species, on one minor planet, in a rather ordinary galaxy, and thus is not the source, power, and goal of the universe as a whole.⁴¹ It is therefore, in light of a new cosmological and ecological reading of reality, an outdated assumption and narrowly anthropocentric. It fails to recognize God's transcendence as embodied in every bit and fragment of the universe which, as a whole, is the creation and outward being of God. Further, it assumes God must be 'other' than this world, since he chooses not to mingle with the materiality he rules over except for periodic, miraculous, interferences.⁴² McFague offers the following quotation from the First Vatican Council (1870), suggesting that it reflects many of the common assumptions about the God-world relationship still operative in most major Christian creeds since the Reformation:

The Holy, Catholic, Apostolic, Roman Church believes and confesses that there is one true and living God, Creator and Lord of Heaven and earth, almighty, eternal, immense, incomprehensible, infinite in intelligence, in will, and in all perfection, who, as being one, sole, absolutely simple and immutable spiritual substance, is to be declared really and essentially distinct from the world, of supreme beatitude in and from himself, and ineffably exalted above all things beside himself which exist or are conceivable.⁴³

38 McFague S (1987) *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age*. Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 72.

39 McFague S (1982) *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language*. Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 144.

40 McFague S (1993) *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 154.

41 McFague S (1993) *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 139.

42 McFague S (1993) *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 139.

43 McFague S (1993) *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 136.

This is an extremely disembodied rendering of transcendence in that the natural and material world is clearly not the place where divine presence is found. Transcendence is centrally about being 'apart from' the world, even though, ironically, as McFague reminds Christians, the affirmation of divine presence in Jesus should move thinking in the opposite direction, towards a fully incarnational and sacramental theology which affirms the indwelling of the sacred in all material reality.

To move beyond imaging God as a transcendent Lord, McFague radicalizes both the notions of transcendence and immanence in such a way that God is neither reduced to the world nor relegated to another, and which makes sense in the context of the contemporary, organic worldview.⁴⁴ Her proposal is to think transcendence immanently, as 'transcendent immanence.'⁴⁵ She writes:

In the model of the universe as God's body, we look for divine transcendence not apart from the material universe, but in those aspects of the material universe that are "surpassing, excelling or extraordinary." This suggests that the universe could be a way to meditate on divine transcendence in a concrete, embodied way. In the model of the universe as God's body, we are invited to see the extraordinary in the ordinary, to see the surpassing wonder of divine transcendence in the smallest and largest dimensions of the history and present reality of the universe, especially our planet.⁴⁶

The universe, as God's body, therefore becomes that place where transcendence as sacred depth can be contemplated on a macro and a micro scale, and in a way congruent with Christian incarnational themes. Everything, as embodied, becomes the locus of the divine. There is nothing without body, and nothing without divinity. Nature is therefore remythologized as sacred and invested with intrinsic value. Thinking of God as a ubiquitous sacred 'presence,' and not as a supernatural 'being,' is therefore at the heart of McFague's effort to resacralize nature for the sake of planetary well-being.

To help Christians imagine God as a 'transcendentally immanent' presence, McFague invites Christians to further imagine God as Mother, Lover, Friend, and Spirit. My suggestion is that these are metaphors by which she abandons the notion of God as a being and replaces it with a vision of God as a ubiquitous, immanent presence of love which permeates evolutionary processes. Each metaphor pictures God as 'a kind of other, a kind of Thou,' intrinsically related to everything as a mothering, loving, and befriending presence, as a 'radically relational Thou.'⁴⁷ Each is a way of picturing God as a personal power of love, but definitely not a person. McFague writes: 'I believe God is personal but not a person. To say that God is love means that God is personal, but I also find metaphors such as spirit, life, light, water, and truth, which are impersonal or less personal,

44 McFague S (1993) *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 137.

45 McFague S (1993) *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 154.

46 McFague S (1993) *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 154.

47 McFague S (1987) *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age*. Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 73 and 83–84.

significant ways to express belief in God as love, as the source of creation's flourishing.⁴⁸ There is here then a metaphorical playfulness, in imagining God as a personal power of love in the form of Mother, Lover, and Friend, and then as a less personal presence in the form of God as Spirit. The metaphor of God as Mother imagines God as birthing creation out of herself in a continuous process of evolutionary unfolding, originating and sustaining all things by the love of *agape*.⁴⁹ The metaphor of God as Lover imagines the universe permeated by divine love in the form of *eros*, desiring the well-being of all things, and calling humans, as 'signs or incarnations of divine love,' to 'save the world' by establishing political, economic, and social institutions which attend to the bodily needs of all creatures.⁵⁰ The metaphor of God as Friend similarly asks us to imagine God as the power of love permeating the universe, but here in the form of *philia*, the love of friendship, where humans become co-workers with God 'in the mutual project of extending fulfillment to all of creation.'⁵¹ And finally, McFague points to the more familiar but less personal and anthropocentric metaphor of Spirit, inviting Christians to imagine God as the breath of life which enlivens the dust of the earth (Gen. 2.7) as well as the ongoing principle of renewal and sustenance in all things.⁵² This is McFague's preferred metaphor because it avoids the over-personalism and anthropocentrism inherent in the earlier proposed metaphors of Mother, Lover, and Friend. Spirit as breath is behind the entire 'matrix of being from which all life comes,' not just the originating and sustaining principle of human life.⁵³ It is therefore more explicitly cosmocentric.⁵⁴ Spirit is also preferred because it is most commensurate with the postmodern organic view of the universe. Even though not mandated or even implied by current cosmology, God as transcendent-immanent Spirit does not contradict its basic insights. It is one possible Christian way of imaging how all creatures and entities are divinely 'inspired bodies.'⁵⁵ And finally, the metaphor of Spirit is best for aesthetic and ethical reasons because it has the greatest potential to evoke in Christians a sense of 'wonder and awe' at the immensity and richness of creation, as well as to engender a sense of profound 'gratitude and care' for its

48 McFague S (2001) *Life Abundant: Rethinking Theology and Economy for a Planet in Peril*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 18.

49 McFague S (1987) *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age*. Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 102 and 135.

50 McFague S (1987) *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age*. Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 133 and 135.

51 McFague S (1987) *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age*. Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 91–92.

52 McFague S (1993) *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 144.

53 McFague S (1987) *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age*. Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 139.

54 McFague S (1993) *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 143.

55 McFague S (1993) *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 145.

beauty and fragility.⁵⁶ In other words, it is preferred because it is most pragmatically potent in evoking Christian environmental activism.

Thus far, I have shown how McFague employs metaphorical ‘as-if’ language for God in the form of God as Mother, Lover, Friend, Spirit, and the universe as God’s body. I have also tried to demonstrate how each is a way of speaking about God as a personal – as well as less personal – power of love which is immanently present in all that exists, and in which all things have their being. God is therefore not a supernatural being but ‘is being-itself, or existence-itself’ and therefore ‘that from which all else derives its being, its reality.’⁵⁷

Reflections on the Socially Transformative Potential of McFague’s Theology

Having offered a brief overview of McFague’s metaphorical suggestions for reminding the notion of God in the direction of transcendent immanence, and why she believes this is central to a world in crisis, I now turn to the question of the socially transformative potential of her theology. First, I will enlarge on those ideas which I believe limit, at least for now, her theology’s appeal within popular-level, mainstream Christianity and which divide tradition-centred and earth-centred forms of Christianity. These are her proposed correctives to life-limiting habits of thought endemic to tradition-centred Christianity, now and in the past, and which continue to hold a powerful grip on the Christian imagination, especially in a post-September 11th world, now doubly traumatized by scenarios of environmental collapse. And second, while acknowledging the ongoing pervasiveness of supernatural theism, I propose nevertheless that a blossoming of immanentist sensibilities within North American religiosity at large, coupled with the growing fear over global warming and related environmental disasters, may nudge McFague’s reconstructive proposals into the mainstream of Christian theorizing and practice. **Her theology harbors immense socially transformative potential because it is part of a larger cultural, if not global shift, towards immanentist religious thinking.** Hence, the following are those theological reformulations which I believe directly challenge many of the heartfelt beliefs of mainstream Christianity, and at the same time lay the groundwork for what McFague hopes will be a newly emerging form of Christianity committed to ecojustice.

As already noted, McFague’s re-imagining of God as a ubiquitous presence of love is the most fundamental component of her revisioning project. By suggesting that God is not omnipotent and therefore incapable of supernaturally interfering in the affairs of humans or nature, she departs markedly from one of the core beliefs of tradition-centred Christianity. She also offers some creative answers to the long standing problem of theodicy born out of the contradiction between an all-powerful, utterly benevolent God, and yet the endless presence of innocent suffering.

In McFague’s theology, deeply influenced by Process thought, God’s self-expression is the evolutionary processes in which life unfolds, leading to the conclusion that suffering

56 McFague S (1993) *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 146.

57 McFague S (2008) *A New Climate For Theology: God, the World, and Global Warming*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 164.

and loss are events which take place within God. Certainly God 'feels' these losses, and suffers in solidarity, but in no way supernaturally intervenes to halt them, whether in aid of humans or other life forms. God 'feels the pain of all who suffer within the body...and nothing happens to the world that does not happen to God.'⁵⁸ Divine 'power' is therefore re-imagined to mean that God is vulnerable and suffers in solidarity with all creatures, and does not stand outside nature's vagaries of chance and law, manipulating events externally. Divine 'power' is expressed as the willingness to suffer 'for and with the world,' as exemplified paradigmatically in the cruciform way of Jesus, a way of life to which Christians are now called in the face of environmental decay.⁵⁹ Suffering is therefore a natural part of life given that all are subject to the consequences of natural evil and to the natural evolutionary unfoldings of the body of God that is the universe. That the good of some (species and individuals) is at the expense of others is due to the vagaries of chance and law operating throughout complex evolutionary processes. Hence, even with God's loving attention to each moment of evolutionary unfolding, suffering and loss happen. McFague writes:

My life, your life, all life, is a chance happening; so also are birth defects, cancer cells, and AIDS. This brutal truth is so difficult for us to accept that we instinctively narrow our horizon to ourselves and narrow God to a deity only concerned with my good, or at most, the good of the human species. But a cosmological, ecological perspective demands the enlargement of vision: I am not and we are not the only products of evolution, nor the only creatures whose good is a matter of divine concern. In a world as large, as complex, and with as many individuals and species as our planet has, the good of some will inevitably occur at the expense of the others.⁶⁰

McFague's invitation to Christians, therefore, is to enlarge their vision to imagine divine agency as the lure of love ubiquitously present throughout the cosmos, or the breath behind the breath of every existing thing in the universe, and not as a supernatural 'power over' which miraculously intervenes in either the historical or natural world on behalf of individuals, nations, or the planet as a whole. Put simply, God 'is not the supernatural being who can control what happens, either at a natural or a personal level, but rather is the direction toward flourishing for all creatures.'⁶¹ This assumption about divine agency also implies that God is, in a way, responsible for evil; it is part of God as 'being itself,' as all things are. 'Evil is not a power over against God; in a sense, it is God's "responsibility," part of God's being, if you will.'⁶²

It is interesting to note at this point that McFague's suggestions for revisioning divine power echo what theologian Douglas John Hall calls the 'thin tradition' of the *theologia*

58 McFague S (1993) *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 176.

59 McFague S (2001) *Life Abundant: Rethinking Theology and Economy for a Planet in Peril*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 33.

60 McFague S (1993) *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 175.

61 McFague S (2001) *Life Abundant: Rethinking Theology and Economy for a Planet in Peril*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 154.

62 McFague S (1987) *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age*. Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 75.

crucis (theology of the cross), grounded in the writings of Martin Luther, Paul, and the prophetic tradition of ancient Israel. This tradition, he contends, has always been and will always be a 'thin, neglected, and frequently rejected'⁶³ minority tradition within Christianity which stands against the dominant theology of glory (*theologia gloriae*) advocating a 'heaven-bent' rejection of the world and a 'personalistic sentimentalism' characteristic of 'bourgeois neo-Protestantism.'⁶⁴ My argument will be that even though this tradition's minority status may have been true historically, it may not be true in the future, given the global environmental crisis which humanity now faces, a crisis unprecedented in human history and which may yet portend the emergence of a radically new global environmental consciousness which will lure or coax all religions from their traditional supernatural moorings and push them beyond transcendent renderings of the divine to more immanent ones.

McFague's image of God as a ubiquitous personal presence of love departs from majority, fall/redemption theology in yet another important way. It denies the existence of an eternal afterlife in heaven with a divine being. As noted earlier, whether alive or dead, human bodies are always and forever within the body of God who is not somewhere else but in the very soil that receives them at death.⁶⁵ Humans are therefore fundamentally 'earthlings,' at home on *this planet alone* (and responsible for it), having evolved as a unique outcome of its biological processes. Given this status as 'earthlings,' McFague admonishes Christians to develop a 'natural piety' which expresses a heartfelt gratitude for the gift of life in all its particularity and interconnectedness, rather than a longing for eternal life.⁶⁶ Humans die therefore into the ongoing, never discontinuous, presence of God as 'being itself,' as the ground of being. Her invitation, therefore, is for Christians to imagine a this-worldly Christianity not centred on the desire for immortality but on the desire for the conditions under which finite life might flourish on planet earth.

In sum, while Christian otherworldliness made sense within the context of a pre-modern, first-century worldview, it makes no sense today. The organic, ecological vision of reality leaves little room for belief in a being that somehow stands outside the interconnected web of life on this planet and the interconnected laws governing the universe. While in the past it made sense for Christians to find hope in eternal life as an antidote to existential anxiety generated by the facts of finitude and death, they can now appease this anxiety by developing the spiritual capacity to experience the unconditional divine love infused throughout creation, as well as manifest in the life of Jesus, and which is

63 Hall DJ (1989) *Thinking the Faith: Christian Theology in a North American Context*. Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 23.

64 Hall DJ (1989) *Thinking the Faith: Christian Theology in a North American Context*. Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 23.

65 McFague S (1993) *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 177.

66 McFague S (1993) *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 110.

everywhere available to those who have eyes to see.⁶⁷ Given that all things pass away, including humans, what *should* give Christians hope, is the conviction, based on the life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth, that the goal of creation is ‘the liberation, healing and fulfillment of all bodies’ and that its direction is ‘towards inclusive love for all, especially the oppressed, the outcast, the vulnerable.’⁶⁸

Here again, then, is one more reason why McFague’s rendering of God may not be immediately nor broadly embraced by Christians guided by hope in the ultimate reward of eternal life, since the latter does not exist. At the same time, the denial of hope in eternal life is a central element in McFague’s developing a nascent Christianity centred on the quest for eco-justice that is inspired by the ongoing awareness of divine love permeating all of creation and historically manifest in the life of Jesus of Nazareth. She stands convinced therefore, as I am, that an increasing number of religious people long for environmental conditions under which finite life might flourish, and less so for eternal life beyond this world (if they long for it all). Negating the afterlife is one more essential corrective to those life-limiting habits of thought common to tradition-centred Christianity.

A third significant departure from tradition-centred Christianity is McFague’s re-visioning of Christian devotional practice due to the re-imagining of God as the ‘breath of life’ animating the ‘body of God,’ and not as a being. Her intent is to shift Christian attention away from the worshiping of a divine being who offers temporal and eternal rewards in order to develop intuitive and introspective abilities which perceive the breath of God in all things. Put another way, she criticizes Christian worship that tends to reduce God to a satisfier of human needs. The human tendency, she argues, born out of the anxiety of finitude, is to reduce all things, including God, to usable objects to lessen this anxiety. God becomes a means to an end, whether winning a football game or healing a loved one — an object rather than the ‘ultimate Subject.’⁶⁹

What worship *should* involve, McFague argues, is the loving of God with one’s whole heart, mind, and soul by paying attention to the needs, interests, and wishes of others, as subjects, not objects. ‘Paying attention’ involves seeing earth-neighbors in all of their marvelous particularity and affirming their intrinsic value quite apart from self-interest. It involves seeing them with a ‘loving eye,’ with ‘the world-openness of children’ rather than a controlling and objectifying ‘arrogant eye’ which grasps, masters and uses them.⁷⁰

It involves a Zen-like, meditative form of detachment to see them ‘in themselves, for themselves, as subjects.’⁷¹ Seeing each ‘earth other,’ as a singularly unique ‘intimation of the divine,’ should therefore set the tone for Christian devotional practice, supplanting

67 McFague S (1997) *Super, Natural Christians: How We Should Love Nature*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 168–69.

68 McFague S (1993) *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 160.

69 McFague S (1997) *Super, Natural Christians: How We Should Love Nature*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 166.

70 McFague S (1997) *Super, Natural Christians: How We Should Love Nature*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 113.

71 McFague S (1997) *Super, Natural Christians: How We Should Love Nature*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 113.

petitioning of a super-person in hopes of temporal and eternal rewards.⁷² 'To know God,' she writes, 'is to contemplate, reflect on, the multitude of bodies in all their diversity that mediate, incarnate, the divine.'⁷³ Changing Christian focus from worship of a supernatural being to contemplation of the sacred depths of the natural world is yet another corrective to the life-limiting habits of thought surrounding worship of a supernatural being common to tradition-centred Christianity and a central component of the yet to fully emerge earth-engaged Christianity for which McFague hopes.

Having noted the difficulties associated with McFague's proposals gaining broad acceptance within majority Christianity, let me now further advocate on behalf of her theology by suggesting that it holds immense, yet-to-be fully realized socially transformative potential. My argument will be twofold. First, I suggest that her attempt to reimage the notion of God by foregrounding divine immanence parallels what is happening within popular religious culture inside and outside of the boundaries of official religion. Many individuals who have no official religious affiliation, yet who claim to be 'spiritual,' have, like McFague, moved beyond the assumptions of classical theism by conceiving of the divine in immanentist terms. I also argue that this broader cultural shift towards immanence may yet have the effect of enticing tradition-centred forms of Christianity to re-evaluate the nature of transcendence and immanence for the sake of their own survival. Second, I propose that her theology holds transformative potential as a formative component of a much broader and expanding progressive Christian movement, as well as constituting an important contributor to a global effort on the part of the world's religions to 'green' themselves by reimagining their basic tenets in light of an ecological worldview and the growing recognition of the role that religions play in perpetuating the untenable environmental situation we now face.

McFague's ecofeminist theology holds culturally transformative potential to the degree that its efforts to revision the divine beyond the assumptions of supernatural theism are by no means alone on the cultural landscape. In fact, they are part of an emerging non-formal religious culture that is animated by a growing ecological awareness and, moreover, intimately coupled with popular sentiments and beliefs which envision the sacred more as an immanent force than a supernatural being. Ironically, it may be the institutional churches' immersion within this larger cultural milieu that becomes the condition of the possibility for McFague's reconstructive proposals being accepted within tradition-based forms of Christianity.

In *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion*, sociologist Wade Clark Roof demonstrates that even though traditional discourses about God continue to be sustained in religious communities in America, supernatural theism is nevertheless actually declining within popular religious culture overall.⁷⁴ By popular religious culture, Roof has in mind 'sacred symbolism, meanings, and discourse – all extending beyond religious organizations and institutions, but also very much a part of

72 McFague S (1997) *Super, Natural Christians: How We Should Love Nature*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 172.

73 McFague S (1997) *Super, Natural Christians: How We Should Love Nature*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 155.

74 Roof WC (1999) *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 100.

them.⁷⁵ Popular religious culture constitutes that broader cultural climate in which religious ‘institutions and organizations now function, and to which in one way or another they must adapt if they are to be competitive in the current religious climate.’⁷⁶

Using both quantitative and qualitative methods, Roof therefore concludes that there are subtle undercurrents of change taking place within the religious beliefs and sentiments of the Baby Boomer generation in particular, both inside and outside of institutional religions. Foremost, he argues that traditional theism seems to be giving way to belief in a God whose transcendence and power are more muted.⁷⁷ God, if the word is even used, is conceived of as a diffuse, personalized force that governs life; a sacred reality that is ‘more intimate and feminine, less distant and patriarchal, deeply personal and inwardly focused.’⁷⁸ A grass-roots level ‘reconstruction of the sacred’ is thus clearly distancing itself from tradition-centred, patriarchal images of God characterized by transcendence and supernatural agency, and moving toward images centred on God as an immanent presence.⁷⁹ This shift in theological sensibilities, Roof suggests, is a ‘cultural and religious cleavage of considerable proportions’⁸⁰ which may be so culturally widespread that it could even already be influencing the theological language and doctrinal presuppositions of a growing number of Evangelical Christians who now refer to God as a ‘higher power’ or ‘the total realization of human potential,’ and less often as ‘Heavenly Father.’⁸¹ Roof writes:

Amid what will probably continue to be a fluid religious economy, an underlying axis of tension will probably be that between theists, on the one hand, who stress belief in an external, transcendent God, and the “new immanentists,” on the other, who think of the divine in the here and now, either present in the world or within themselves. Old discussions of transcendence and immanence in a theistic mode are giving way to new ways of conceptualizing sacred reality, but more so outside of organized religion than within it.⁸²

75 Roof WC (1999) *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 11.

76 Roof WC (1999) *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 11.

77 He characterizes ‘traditional theism’ as ‘belief in God as a Supreme Being who governs all things in nature and human history’ and who is ‘an awesome and holy presence, actively engaged within the world.’ See Roof WC (1999) *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 54.

78 Roof WC (1999) *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 55.

79 Roof WC (1999) *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 101.

80 Roof WC (1999) *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 55.

81 Roof WC (1999) *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 119. Roof notes that even though all of the above may be applicable to ‘Boomers,’ these transformations probably hold ‘far more for Americans as a whole than we tend to realize,’ see 120.

82 Roof WC (1999) *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 304.

McFague's theology is very much a part of this 'new immanentist' movement taking place within the broader religious culture of North America, away from traditional conceptions of a transcendent God operative within formal religious communities, Christian and otherwise, towards images of the divine less steeped in the doctrinal trappings of supernatural theism. Roof's conclusion is that 'the future shape of the religious scene in the United States hangs in this balance' depending on how this tension between divine immanence and transcendence is worked out.⁸³

At this point, I should note that I agree with Roof's findings that a tension exists between traditional religious communities (whether Christian, Jewish, or Muslim) who affirm the existence of an all powerful supernatural being (based on what Roof calls 'more literal or objectivist views') and religious progressives, inside and outside of organized religious communities, who take a more 'constructivist approach to religious symbols' and a 'more relativistic understanding of religious truth.'⁸⁴ McFague's theology of course is an example par excellence of the latter. At the same time, however, Roof's analysis fails to deal with what I believe is a much broader global struggle not only within Christianity but all religions, over how the sacred ought to be imagined for the sake of planetary well-being. I would also like to suggest that it is precisely within this broader global struggle that McFague's ecotheology is best understood. Let me turn then to the second reason why I think McFague's theology has socially transformative potential; her initiatives are part of a much larger meta-critical shift in the defining criteria of religious collective identity taking place across the world's religions, as well as inside of Christianity.

Rosemary Radford Ruether, in *Integrating Ecofeminism, Globalization, and World Religions*, points to the worldwide effort to ecologically revision who humans are in relationship to one another and the extra-human world. This global enterprise, involving all stripes of ecofeminists as well as progressives from all of the major religions, is seeking to articulate a 'cosmological basis' or 'worldview' on which to ground new ways of understanding humans as part of nature as 'a living matrix of interconnection.'⁸⁵ Central to this enterprise, Ruether is convinced (as I am), is the global effort to deconstruct the concept of the divine by rejecting 'the splitting of the divine from the earth and its communities,' the latter itself based on an illusory projection of the existence of a God who is 'a personified entity located in some supercelestial realm outside the universe and ruling over it.'⁸⁶ Who we are in relation to one another, and how we ought to relate to the natural world, in other words, depends centrally on how we see ourselves in the context of the larger cosmological whole. What is needed, and rapidly, Ruether and others suggest, is a remythologizing of the divine away from a patriarchally envisioned supernatural, interventionist

83 Roof WC (1999) *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 305.

84 Roof WC (1999) *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 55.

85 Ruether RR (2005) *Integrating Ecofeminism, Globalization, and World Religions*. Toronto: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers Inc, 124.

86 Ruether RR (2005) *Integrating Ecofeminism, Globalization, and World Religions*. Toronto: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers Inc, 124-25.

being towards a panentheistic vision of the divine as the 'matrix of life-giving energy that is in, through, and under all things' and 'the font of life that wells up to create and recreate anew all living things.'⁸⁷ This divine energy, Ruether argues (as does McFague), is nothing less than the condition of the possibility for the emergence of life-giving communities that will empower individuals 'to stand shoulder to shoulder against the systems of economic, military, and ecological violence that are threatening the very fabric of planetary life.'⁸⁸ As the Latin American ecofeminist Ivone Gebara asserts, the global struggle is 'to dismantle the whole paradigm of male over female, mind over body, heaven over earth, transcendent over immanent, the male God outside of and ruling over the created world, and to imagine an alternative to it.'⁸⁹ When McFague asserts, therefore, that one of the central challenges facing Christianity today is the over-emphasis of divine supernatural transcendence at the expense of divine immanence,⁹⁰ she echoes a global collective hunger for immanentist ways of conceiving the divine-human relationship both inside and outside of organized religions, for the sake of a planet in peril.⁹¹ The socially transformative potential of her theology therefore lies in its being a part of a much larger movement within Christianity, and even all world religions, to readjust religious ideas and practices so that they positively contribute to the current quest to find an environmentally sustainable way forward for the human community.⁹²

87 Ruether RR (2005) *Integrating Ecofeminism, Globalization, and World Religions*. Toronto: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers Inc, 125.

88 Ruether RR (2005) *Integrating Ecofeminism, Globalization, and World Religions*. Toronto: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers Inc, 125.

89 As quoted by Ruether, in *Integrating Ecofeminism, Globalization, and World Religions*. Toronto: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers Inc, 125.

90 McFague S (1987) *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age*. Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 144.

91 See Bednarowski MF (1999) *The Religious Imagination of American Women*. Bloomington and Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, for an excellent overview of the growing effort among American religious women to give greater importance to the role of immanence in religious thought in order to make the sacred increasingly available to human experience and thereby elevate the human conviction that meaning can be found in efforts of cultural and historical transformation.

92 Progressive Christian thinkers who are re-imagining God for the sake of a planet in peril are too numerous to mention. Suffice it to say that panentheism and pantheism are at the core of most, coupled with a clear rejection of supernatural theism. Each is contributing to a growing chorus of progressive voices seeking to dislodge Christianity from its tradition-centred belief in God as an objective, thinking and living 'being,' towards a vision of God as an immanent, loving and guiding 'Spirit,' all for the sake of engendering Christian responsibility for what James Speth poignantly refers to (borrowing from Aldo Leopold) as 'a world of wounds' beyond imagining. See Speth JG (2005) *Red Sky at Morning: America and the Crisis of the Global Environment*. New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 15. Neo-pagan and ecofeminist thinkers outside of Christian circles, along with a host of scholars from other religions, are also joining the chorus of voices concerned about the intersection of religious visions of the divine and the environmental dilemma.

A Lesson from History

Archaeologist and novelist Ronald Wright, in his 2004 Massey Lectures entitled a 'Short History of Progress,' offers us a prophetic vision of the consequences of clinging to religious habits of thought from a prior time which ignore, or even exacerbate, environmental threats. In these lectures, he documents the fifteenth century demise of the mini-civilization of Easter Island, suggesting that religion played a significant role in its collapse, and that we might learn from it.⁹³

Stepping ashore on Easter Day, 1722, Dutch crewmen were astonished to find this remote 64-square-mile South Sea island completely deforested, almost devoid of fresh water, yet replete with hundreds of 30 foot high stone images of ancestral Gods, the *moai*, standing on altar-platforms near the shore. Some were toppled and without heads. The 10,000 islanders had apparently felled every tree in order to build boats and roofs, but most importantly in order to roll the *moai* to their altar platforms. Even though the islanders must have known they were felling the last tree, they did so nevertheless, primarily because, Wright conjectures, they trusted that the ancestral Gods would assure their future.

Without the trees, flash floods and winds washed the good earth into the sea, leaving the two thousand or so remaining islanders environmentally destitute and spiritually discouraged; 'small, lean, timid, and miserable' in Captain Cook's words of 1772.⁹⁴ Even to the bitter end, however, as the remaining cut-timber deteriorated and the rats ate the few saplings planted in the increasingly thin soils, they kept hewing the divine monoliths.

The islanders, Wright concludes, had succumbed to a comforting mystification, a self-destructive religious mania, which blinded them to the limits that the natural environment imposed on them. Their statue cult had taken precedence over environmental wisdom. Put another way, their habits of thought embodied a serious disconnect between the realities of the natural world and the hoped for supernatural, interventionist abilities of their gods.

At present, if Christians number two billion, Muslims one and a half billion, and Jews fourteen million, close to half the earth's people are monotheists who believe in time as teleological, moving inexorably from creation to redemption, and in the divine as a being who intervenes supernaturally in the natural order to save those who are in a special, if not exclusive, exchange relationship with him. For the most part, these monotheists view the natural world as a mere backdrop to a salvation history focused primarily on the spiritual and material needs of humans. Monotheistic habits of theological thought continue to be therefore largely anthropocentric, androcentric, patriarchal, dualistic, supernaturalistic, and escapist, and perhaps, I would suggest, not so different from those of the Easter Islanders, with possibly the same foreseeable consequences. It may be, therefore, that the differences over how God is understood are important for consideration far beyond the arenas of speculative theology. How humans conceive of the divine may yet determine the fate of the earth, and this sooner rather than later.

93 Wright R (2004) *A Short History of Progress*. Toronto: House of Anansi Press Inc.

94 Wright R (2004) *A Short History of Progress*. Toronto: House of Anansi Press Inc., 61.

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