

On Christian Faith in a Warming World

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Sallie McFague, *A New Climate for Theology: God, the World, and Global Warming* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008).

Sallie McFague is a Protestant theologian whose many books have focused on understandings of God. For the past 15 years, at least, most of her work has addressed the ways that models of God, and theology more generally, is related to environmental values. Her newest book, *A New Climate for Theology*, builds on her earlier work in eco-theology, with a focus on global warming, which she describes as the foremost ecological and social problem of our day and a challenge that Christian leaders and laypeople cannot ignore.

For readers of *Capitalism Nature Socialism*, McFague's overviews of scientific knowledge about global warming and its ecological and social consequences cover well-trodden ground. The more unfamiliar and interesting dimension of her book may be the insights into the resources that religion, especially Christianity, can offer for both understanding and addressing the problem.

Climate change, for McFague, offers an especially powerful way to talk about core theological and ethical questions: Who are we? Who is God? And how shall we live? [p. 3]. These questions take on new urgency given the "dystopian" reality of global warming. We cannot, McFague contends, "continue to live as we have in the past in the world we have created. We have created these new conditions, and now we must learn to live within them" [p. 15]. Living within this new reality does not mean simply accepting human destructiveness, although it does require that we accept the consequences of our past and present actions. Most important, however, acknowledging the reality of global warming serves as a call to change our ways of living, which in turn demands changes in our ways of understanding ourselves and God.

McFague's arguments here rest on certain assumptions about the relationship between ideas and practices. To her credit, McFague makes these assumptions explicit, unlike most eco-theologians and environmental philosophers, who often assume that the main problem is getting the ideas right; once we figure out how we should think about nature, in this perspective, everything else will fall into place. In contrast, McFague contends, "it is not sufficient to 'know the good' in order to 'do the good'" [p. 31]. More than simply understanding the problem and likely solutions, we must find the will or motivation to act effectively in response. McFague insists that practical responses to global warming must include changes in both individual lifestyles and political structures [pp. 25, 28ff].

While the relationship between knowledge and action is never straightforward or simple, there is indeed a relationship, and it is an important one. In particular, knowledge about who we are and who God is can help people develop the will and capacity to make the radical changes that climate change demands of us all [pp. 31-32]. She advocates understanding the world as "God's body" (the title of an earlier book), which demands a more humble, engaged, and compassionate ethic toward the created world. Transformed visions of God will, in turn, help us revise "who we think we are," a necessary step in our efforts to live differently [pp. 44, cf. 55]. For this reason, she insists, "theology matters" [p. 5].

The change must begin with the individualistic anthropology that is linked both to certain forms of Christian theology and to consumer capitalism. (McFague's sharp economic critiques may be unexpected to readers unfamiliar with Christian eco-theology, but she echoes common, if not universal, themes in religious environmentalism.) Individualistic understandings of God and human nature have contributed to the dominance of consumer capitalism, which has fueled unsustainable growth. An alternative, sustainable economy should follow three ecological "house rules," according to McFague: (1) Take only your share. (2) Clean up after yourself. (3) Keep the house in good repair for future occupants. These rules are relevant for social and even global economies as well as individual and household ones [p. 91].

These rules, and much of McFague's argument about the changes needed to build more sustainable societies, will be familiar to many readers. What is distinctive in her approach, at least for readers of *Capitalism Nature Socialism*, is the role she envisions for Christian theology and practice. While her discussions of metaphoric theology are accessible even to non-scholars, they may be of less interest than her basic argument that religion's distinctive role in addressing climate change includes not only critique but also "gratitude toward God and compassion toward others" [p. 102]. The model of the world as God's body suggests specific forms that praise of God and love of neighbor should take. "Living within the world as if it were the body of God," McFague proposes, requires attention to both the beauty and the needs of the world [p. 113]. More specifically, we should undertake the practical changes that climate change demands not out of fear or duty but out of love and appreciation for God and God's creation [p. 119]. These practical changes may be especially relevant for city dwellers who, as much as people living in rural areas, are "bodies living within the body of the earth" [p. 130]. Urbanites, like privileged Westerners, have special responsibilities in addressing environmental problems.

Understanding the relationship between our bodies, the body of the earth, and God's body is the key to both facing the reality of climate change and, even more important, to avoiding the despair that threatens such realizations. In addressing the possibility of despair, McFague takes a theological turn that may seem less interesting, perhaps problematic, for secular readers. In the struggle to maintain hope, McFague argues, believers can take faith that "no matter how bad things get, somehow or other, it will be all right," because "God made the earth, God loves it, and God keeps it" [pp. 172, 173]. While both these claims may strike non-theists (and even some theists) as problematic, the book remains valuable both to introduce Christian eco-theology for non-specialists and to deepen the conversation among Christians about the demands of faith in a warming world.