

## THE COSMOS AS THE BODY OF GOD: THE INTERPRETATION OF THE CHRISTIAN STORY IN SALLIE MCFAGUE'S OEUVRE

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### Abstract

*Sallie McFague uses the common creation story (or the postmodern scientific understanding of the earth and the cosmos as remythologised by ecological theologians such as Thomas Berry and Anne Primavesi) to reinterpret the various phases in the Christian story, namely creation, sin, redemption through the death and resurrection of Christ, human agency and eschatology. She uses especially the metaphor of the Body of God to reinterpret the Christian story. To comprehend the significance of this central metaphor, one needs to investigate McFague's fine comprehension of metaphorical language, sacraments and thought processes as these relate to the (renewal of) worldviews. This also enables one to understand the confluence of sacramental theology and agential theology in her praxis-orientated methodology.*

**Key Words:** Sallie McFague, Body of God, Ecofeminism

### Introduction

In her oeuvre,<sup>1</sup> the North American feminist theologian, Sallie McFague,<sup>2</sup> reinterprets the Christian story of creation, fall (sin), anthropology, the salvific incarnation, death and resurrection of Christ, the presence and work of the Holy Spirit, the transcendence of God, and the eschatological vision of a new creation in terms of her exploration of what is known as the common creation story – or what I prefer to call the new creation story.

To understand her interpretation of the main aspects of the Christian story or the main Christian doctrines in this article, I will need to explore with her the common creation story – or the remythologization of postmodern science's understanding of the origins and the evolution of the universe, the earth and life on earth, by herself and by other main ecological theologians and thinkers such as Thomas Berry (1990), Brian Swimme (1992), Larry Rasmussen (1996) and Anne Primavesi (2000).

McFague boldly reinterprets and remythologizes this unfolding postmodern and ecological scientific understanding of the earth and cosmos as the Body of God. She discerns the need for doing so and for finding a new cosmology for postmodern Christians in the light of the ecological crisis which threatens the future of humankind and nature.

This serves as her point for departure for a re-interpretation of classic Christian doctrine

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<sup>1</sup> With the particular topic for this article, I mostly consulted what I regard as McFague's magnum opus, namely, *The body of God: An ecological theolog* (1993), but I also consulted her other books. I found that the contents of chapters in books and articles were also incorporated in her books and I therefore primarily used her books as sources for this article. I list her most important publications in the bibliography.

<sup>2</sup> Sallie McFague is Carpenter Professor of Theology Emerita, Vanderbilt University, Nashville, Tennessee, United States of America. She was also Distinguished Theologian in Residence at Vancouver School of Theology, British Columbia, Canada.

and the modern enlightenment (scientific) worldview in terms of what she calls the organic and ecological model.

To understand McFague's presentation of the cosmos as the Body of God, I will explore her fine understanding of metaphorical language, sacraments and models in Christian experience and theology; as it relates to language processes and the processes through which worldviews (or cosmologies) are developed.

This will hopefully enable me to understand her epistemology and her methodology in terms of the confluence of her sacramental understanding of God in-and-around the body of creation, the actions of God in creation, and the inspiration for loving care and prophetic agency in a time of ecological crisis – which people of faith find by mystically yet consciously being part of the body of God.

### Three Narratives

In this article, I will follow three main narrative 'threads' which are woven together throughout the work of McFague.

It will be clear from what I have said previously that she had to do some major 'unraveling' of old established cosmological, scientific and theological narratives in order to re-imagine and 're-weave' these narratives.

- *The first narrative is Sallie McFague's own theological biography.* This will explain how McFague moved from traditional Protestant theology which upheld a strict separation between creation as the backdrop of salvation, and salvation of human beings only by a transcendent God. It will also put into context the paradigm shift which ecological theologians such as McFague had to make to move from traditional Christian theology towards an ecological theology and an organic worldview informed by the 'new creation story'.
- *The second is the narrative of the 'new creation story' or the 'new cosmology'* (McFague herself speaks about the 'common creation story' but I choose to refer to the 'new creation story' to distinguish it clearly from previous accounts of the world's origin) which replaces and reinterprets both the medieval cosmology (whose remnants we still find in traditional theology) as well as the enlightenment and mechanistic scientific worldview.
- *The third narrative is her re-interpretation or re-imagination of the traditional Christian story* in the context of the new creation story, so as to radically re-interpret and affirm those aspects of Christianity which are incarnational but which are tainted by the negative aspects of the Neo-Platonic hierarchical view of reality, and the patriarchal/kyriarchical contexts which formed and influenced Christianity to such an extent that this religion is seriously flawed. This 're-embodiment' of the Christian story in the context of a new understanding of our universe tells us a new story about ourselves: That we *are* bodies, made of the same stuff as all other life-forms on our planet; that we are bodies *among* the bodies of other life-forms on earth, and that, all together, we form one body, the body of the Earth. Or, to use Thomas Berry's (1990:37, 45, 133) words, we all collectively form 'the communion of living beings'.

McFague's placement of her theology in the concreteness yet mystery of the Body of God says as much about her theological method and her praxis-orientation as about her interpretation of the various elements of the Christian story in her various works.

I will therefore endeavour to deal with her unfolding of the Christian story as well as with her sacramental-agential theological method so that each dimension – Christian story as well as theological method – will interact with and will clarify each other.

### **Sallie McFague's Theological Biography**

In *Life abundant: Rethinking theology and economy for a planet in peril*, McFague (2000:3-9) describes how she arrived at her own 'working theology' as a mature Christian who came to internalize her beliefs and to live it in her daily spiritual practice, life and work. She describes how, as a six-year-old, she developed a sense of wonder at her own being, her own aliveness, as well as a sense of wonder at the aliveness of all beings. This linked with an awareness that the name of God is the name beneath, with and in each of our names. This was an early understanding of pantheism: That we live and move and have our being in God.

As a theological student, she read Karl Barth's *Commentary on Romans* and developed an understanding of what Richard Niebuhr, her teacher and mentor, called 'radical monotheism': That God is God and nothing or nobody else is. God is totally transcendent of human beings or of their tribal or moralistic understandings of God. This Protestant principle (in the terms of Paul Tillich) became a fundamental cornerstone of her theology, but in the process she lost her early awareness of wonder at life and its grounding in God (the 'Catholic' side that every theology also must have).

It was through her experience of nature and eventually through reading an essay by Gordon Kaufman in 1980 that she realized that theology could no longer proceed as usual, given the ecological crises facing the planet. It must deconstruct and reconstruct its central symbols – God, Christ, human beings, from within the context of a new understanding of the planet as a living ecosystem. She realized that a major theological endeavour for her future career would be to interpret Christianity from a cosmological and not from an anthropocentric perspective. This led to her deeper and deeper immersion into ecological studies as it relates to the re-interpretation of Christian theology.

The final phase of her conversion was when she came to understand what it means to be a practising Christian in the sense that one is present and embodied within one's contemporary situation, but with the radical insight that God is present and immediate to one in this daily *milieu* – and also within the contemporary crises which the world faces. This went along with her deeper spiritual realization of God's loving self-disclosure to her in her daily reality and in her work and activism.

### **The new Creation Story**

One of the most important phases of McFague's theological career, in terms of her re-interpretation of Christian theology in an ecological world-view, was when she discovered the new cosmology, or what has become known as the 'new creation story'. This forms the 'new' narrative in terms of which she re-interpreted the Christian story. Let me begin by presenting a brief sketch of the new creation story, as rendered by John Polkinghorne (1986:56):

In the beginning was the big bang. As matter expanded from that initial singularity it cooled. After about three minutes space was no longer hot enough to sustain universal nuclear interactions. At that moment its gross nuclear structure got fixed at its present proportion of three quarters hydrogen and one quarter helium. Expansion and further cooling continued. Eventually gravity condensed matter into the first generation of galaxies and stars. In the interiors of these first stars nuclear cookery started up again and produced heavy elements like carbon and iron, essential for life, which were scarcely present in the early stages of the universe's history. Some of these first generations stars and planets condensed in their turn; on at least one of them there were now conditions of chemical composition and temperature and radiation permitting, through the interplay of chance and

necessity, the coming into being of replicating molecules and life. Thus evolution began on the planet Earth. Eventually it led to you and me. We are all made of the ashes of dead stars.

From one millionth of a gram of matter has evolved unimaginable diversity, not only in the vast galactic realms of the observable universe (what lies beyond this we do not know) but also, in equally inconceivable ways, on our planet. One can just think of the ecosystem of the earth as a whole, bioregions, local ecosystems; as well as the diversity of animal and plant life and the thousands of smaller and microscopic species such as insects, fungi, protozoa and algae, and so forth – all which form part of living and dynamic ecosystems. The macroscopic and the microscopic join in astounding us with a totally new view of what divergence and diversity mean. And yet, everything that is, from the fungi and protozoa on our planet to the black holes and exploding supernovas in distant galaxies, has a common origin: Everything that is comes from one infinitesimal bit of matter. It staggers the imagination; it also helps us to think about unity and diversity in a new way. This unity and diversity is based on radical relationship and interdependence, yet it produces the most stupefying array of diversified individuals. It is placed in a process of change, openness, beginnings and endings which has been going on for billions of years (McFague 1993:27; 38-45).

Research in the fields of (scientific) cosmology, astrophysics, evolutionary biology, molecular biology and ecology helps non-scientific people and theologians such as us to come to a new account of the universe as a whole, a new unified view of reality. Such a unified view would give us a functional cosmology – one which helps us to understand where we fit in – amidst staggering new scientific findings, the dissolution of old myths of reality, and amidst the general uncertainty and crises of our times. The particular contribution of theologians and religious people from various traditions to such a view of reality is to ‘re-sacralise’ or ‘re-mythologise’ the scientific story of the universe and life on earth, so that human beings of our times can understand how we belong in the universe, who we are, and what our place and role in the total community of life is. The new creation story as a new myth of the origins of life can help us to find the divine and the sacred in this universe, in new and meaningful ways which will help us to redirect our lives in the midst of global injustice and ecological crises.

### **The Earth as Body – Moving from a Mechanistic and Hierarchical Worldview to an Ecological and Organic One**

For us to understand the ecological disaster and to influence present and future behaviour of humanity in the face of this crisis, we need to change our worldview and thereby our self-understanding and our understanding of how we fit into the greater scheme of things. This transformed self-understanding may assist us in changing the way we do basically everything – from washing clothes in one’s own household to dealing with international trade and monetary relations on an inter-governmental level. This is where McFague and other ecological theologians use the new creation story to help us to overcome the dualisms and hierarchies of an anthropocentric and hierarchical Christian religious view (McFague 1993:31-36); a mechanistic scientific view (McFague 1993:36), and an utilitarian (commodity-orientated) economic view of the whole natural world (McFague 2001:71-98). Over and against the above, the new creation story presents us with an organic model of the place of humanity in the natural world (See McFague’s assessment and description of the organic model in Chapter 2 of *The body of God*, 1993:27-63). In fact, the whole of *The body of God* is based on a sacralisation and theological interpretation of an organic, ecological worldview or cosmology.

From a feminist and a Christian point of view, McFague then argues that Christianity is the religion of the incarnation *par excellence* in the sense of the incarnation of Christ, and the eucharistic remembrance and celebration of the incarnation (this is my body, this is my blood) in the Christian tradition (McFague 1993:14). Yet, Christianity has also inherited from Neo-Platonism a preponderance towards detachment from the body and a hierarchical and patriarchal view of the order of reality. As a result, this tradition viewed the bodies of women and of nature as 'the other', as belonging to the lower realms of existence<sup>3</sup>. These views led to the justification of abuse and oppression of women, black people and nature (McFague 1993:14-15). As a feminist and an ecotheologian, McFague challenges us to re-appreciate the positive inheritance of Christianity in relation to the body, as this links up with the insights of feminist and ecological studies.

The organic world view and the new creation story brings it to our attention indisputably that we *are* bodies, made of the same stuff as all other life-forms on our planet; that we are bodies *among* the bodies of other life-forms on earth, and that, all together, we form one body, the body of the Earth – which is again but one of the bodies in the greater universe. Furthermore, postmodern science has overturned the traditional dualism of body/soul flesh/spirit non-living/living by revealing the continuum between matter and energy in a unified matter/energy field. In other words, we are enspirited bodies, and the various bodies in the body of the earth are bound together by the vibrant interaction of matter and energy which gave origin to life on earth (McFague 1993:14).

She therefore suggests *body* as a model for ecological theology to investigate as thoroughly as possible the particularities yet diversities of human and non-human bodies within the whole of the ecology<sup>4</sup> (McFague 1993:47-55). At the same time, her own choice to work from the perspective of the body demonstrates her particular and limited choice and 'standpoint' (McFague 1993:22) in her specific theological endeavour.

This model helps us to see that all of us live and move and have our being in God, in the body of creation, the universe. As the embodied spirit of all that is, God is closer to us than we are to ourselves, for God is the very breath of our breath. This model is a way of speaking of the immanence of God. But it may also be a way to speak of divine transcendence. In this model of the body, God is not transcendent over the universe in the sense of being external to or apart from it, but is the source, power, and goal – the Spirit – that enlivens (and loves into being) the entire process in its material and non-material forms. In this model, the transcendence of God represents the preeminent or primary Spirit of the universe.

### **The New Creation Story as Sacramental Body-talk**

Throughout her oeuvre, McFague works towards understanding the nature of religious language and the use of metaphors, parallels and models in religious language and theo-

<sup>3</sup> In my article, "Heretic but faithful: The reclamation of the body as sacred in Christian feminist theology" (2002:119-135) I deal more extensively with the suppression of the female sexual body in patriarchy and Christianity, and a feminist theological re-interpretation of Christian doctrines regarding the body. The metaphor of the goddess (or the female manifestation of God) in the rediscovery of the sacredness of the body in Christian and other feminist spiritualities connects to the recovery of old metaphors and names for the earth, such as Mother Earth and Gaia.

<sup>4</sup> 'Ecology' is defined in the Concise Oxford Dictionary (1987) as that branch of biology dealing with organisms' relation to one another and their surroundings. I use the phrase 'the ecology' to refer to the interactions and relatedness of all the diverse life forms and ecosystems within the one unified living system of the earth as a whole. 'Ecology' is a more holistic term than 'nature' or 'the environment' because it deals with the study of "the earthly home that humans, other living beings, matter, energy and all life forces share" (Clifford 2001:219-260).

logy. Throughout, she understands that metaphors and metaphorical thinking constitutes the basis of human thought and language. Moreover, she understands the importance of imaginative language as the basis not only for religious language, but for conceptual, theological language. She also understands how metaphors solidify and become part of extensive symbolic statements or models of religious experience within a specific milieu. Religious people attempt to speak about God in terms of their placement in their socio-cultural and historical contexts and traditions, that is, within *their interpretative context*. In the last two centuries, this interpretative context has expanded greatly as people have realized the relativity of their own perspectives and traditions in the context of the multitude of religious traditions in the world (McFague 1982:1-16; also see *Literature and the Christian life*, 1965; *Speaking in parables: A study in metaphor and theology*, 1975; and *Models of God: Theology for an ecological, nuclear age*, 1987). This interpretative context has expanded even more through the growth of scientific knowledge and specifically the development of the postmodern scientific paradigm – which includes the postmodern understandings of the origins of the universe and the earth, or the ‘new creation story’.

How does McFague’s understanding of symbol, metaphor and metaphoric language relate to her theological model of the universe as the body of God?<sup>5</sup>

In Chapter 5 of *The body of God: An ecological theology* (1993:131-145) McFague meditates on Moses’ audacious request to God in Exodus 33:18, “Now show me your glory”. God responds by saying, “...You will see my back; but my face shall not be seen” (Exodus 33:23).

Like Moses, when we ask from God, “Show me your glory”, we might see the humble bodies of our own planet as visible signs of God’s invisible grandeur. These physical and concrete yet enspirited bodies demonstrate God’s immanence and incarnation – not only in the story of Jesus of Nazareth, but in the whole story of creation. The bodies of the earth community or ecology<sup>6</sup> do not reveal the face nor the depths of divine radiance of God (or the transcendence of God), but tells us more than enough about God (McFague 1993:131).

If we look at creation in this way, we might for the first time see the marvels of soil, grass, wildflowers, trees and wind at our feet and at our fingertips. We would then begin to delight in creation, not as the work of an external deity, but *as a sacrament of the living God* (McFague 1993:132).

The universe as God’s body is a rich, suggestive way to radicalize the glory, the awesomeness, the beyond-all-imagining power of the mystery of God (the transcendence of God) in a way that at the same time radicalizes the nearness, the availability, and the physicality of divine immanence (McFague 1993:133).

We are here dealing with McFague’s most brilliant understanding and use of metaphor. She uses metaphorical religious language to ‘re-sacralise’ our knowledge of the universe in a postmodern context. In a most beautiful manner, she suggests that each creature – animate and inanimate – which forms part of the earth’s ecology and the universe, is a sign which,

<sup>5</sup> McFague’s linking of sacrament and symbol, to the enspirited body, and indeed to the earth, can also be found in the work of other thinkers who have played an important role in the development of an organic and postmodern view of reality and of religion. I refer here particularly to three thinkers: Alfred North Whitehead (1979 [1929]:3f), Carl Gustav Jung (see Sabini 2002:82; also see Jung 1958 and 1964) and Anne Primavesi (2000:60-71). What binds together the views of McFague and these three thinkers are the connections which all of them make between spirituality and religion, symbol and metaphor, human and other-than human bodies, the evolutionary history, the ‘web’ of reality, the ecology and the earth as the body of God.

<sup>6</sup> Throughout this article, I will link up with McFague’s view that human bodies relate to the ‘bodies’ of other living beings on earth, which all together form part of the body of the earth – or the life-system or ecology of the earth. I will therefore often use the metaphor ‘body’ in relation to living beings, the ecology and the earth.

in its 'bodiliness' and physicality, demonstrates the presence of God and points towards God's ultimate and all-encompassing glory.

In this image of the world as God's body, we are invited to see the creator *in* the creation, we come to know the source of all existence in and through what is bodied forth from that source. We come to understand what it means to live and move and have our being in God.<sup>7</sup>

Radicalizing the incarnation by using the model of the universe as God's body is neither idolatry nor pantheism: The world, creation, is not identified nor confused with God. *It is the place where God is present to us. In other words, God's mysterious presence – and not God's face – is available to us through the mediation of embodiment* (McFague 1993:134).

The metaphor of the body of God suggests content and substance for what it means to live within our bodily reality. It places a premium on the physical, the lowly, the mundane, the specific, the vulnerable, the other, the needy; for all these words describe aspects of bodies of various kinds. It also suggests the glory, grandeur and beauty of the universe, the galactic systems, the stars and planets, the earth and the ecosystems of the earth (McFague 1993:134-135).

The model of the body of God, when seen within a Christic framework, encompasses both the creation and the salvation – the liberation, healing and fulfillment of all bodies (McFague 1993:135). In terms of McFague's theological perspective, people of faith may enter consciously yet mystically into the earth as the Body of God through celebrating the sacrament of the body of Christ which was broken for us and which arose from the dead.

In this model, God is related to the universe as spirit is to body. God is the life-giving breath given to all creatures, and the dynamic movement that creates, recreates, and transcates throughout the universe (McFague 1993:142-143). This metaphor of God as the Spirit in and around the universe gives an even more vibrant meaning to the well-known phrase "to live and move and have our being in God". It links up with another metaphor for God which McFague explores, namely God as Mother who carries the whole universe in her womb.

It is in terms of this sacramental language as mediation between God's presence in the body of the physical-energetic universe that McFague speaks of the various phases in the 'process' of the Christian story.

### **McFague's Rendering of the Cyclical Process of the Christian Story**

#### **McFague's Theological Method and the Christian Story**

McFague deals with the various phases of the 'Christian story' in a cyclical, process-oriented manner. This approach resonates with her 'placement' of the Christian story within the process of the unfolding of the story of creation, as understood in postmodern science as well as in process philosophy. Process thought recognises the agency and subjectivity of all entities within the universe, thereby both emphasizing the organicism and systemic nature (or process nature) of the postmodern scientific understanding of the greater ecology, and recognizing the systemic interdependency and reciprocity of all natural entities and organisms in the all-encompassing 'body' of the earth's ecology.<sup>8</sup> In the same manner,

<sup>7</sup> This phrase comes from Acts 17:28, "For in Him we live and move and have our being".

<sup>8</sup> See the following works of classical process philosophers as well as feminist process theologians: AN Whitehead (1979 [1929]); Charles Hartshorne (1941); whose essay entitled "The Theological analogies and the cosmic organisation" in the referred-to volume is the classic process theology essay on the model of the world as God's body; and Carol P Christ (2003).

process theology recognizes God's pre-eminent presence in and among, and action with and through other bodies (McFague 1993:140-141). It contains a strong teleological element: In the universe as the body of God, the direction (or the hope) of creation is a movement towards the inclusion of all living beings in the liberating, healing, inclusive love of God in a community where God's presence amongst us is celebrated in its fullness and bounty (McFague 1993:181).

Within this process-orientated approach, McFague succeeds to work from an awareness of the mystery of the organic unity of the cosmos. She soundly bases her theological method in her sacramental understanding of the universe as the body of God (McFague 1993:81). This immersion in mysticism and sacramental theology, in the 'ground of our being', becomes the basis for God's agency and for human agency in the earth community, in order to establish a planetary community of life (or the *ekklesia*) where abundant life for all will be possible (McFague 1993:153-156; 183-186).

Mysticism, in the Christian tradition, is a deep experience of the love of God. In McFague's model of the universe as the body of God, the immersion in mystery is the experience of the love of God that contains the whole universe, is at the heart of the universe, and infuses the universe with the Spirit. The love of God calls us to praise God by being actively part of the amazing web of life and love and to respond – or return – to God through right relations and right action. In an organic and ecological worldview, this will lead us to practices of sustainability so that the whole earth community can live abundantly (McFague 2001:137-144).

McFague's process orientation allows for the cyclical movement from immersion in mystery and love in terms of a sacramental theology, towards divine and human agency in creation and redemption in terms of an agential theology, back towards an 'entrance' into the mystery of the ongoing process of creation. This process leads us, cycle by cycle, towards the fulfillment of the eschaton (McFague 1993:139-140). The mysterious presence of God in and through the organic universe flows into the agency of God through the Spirit which procreates and recreates the universe (McFague 1993:156).

The movement of the Spirit in the process of Creation is simultaneously the redemptive presence of the cosmic Christ in creation. The cosmic Christ is present in creation through processes of suffering, death and resurrection which form part of the cyclical and continuous process of creation.

McFague's rendering of the Christian story includes aspects of both sacramental theology as well as agential theology; both the immanent and the transcendent; both the movement of the Spirit through creation and the Christic pattern of death-resurrection-salvation throughout creation. These elements will be present in my presentation of the various phases of the Christian story:

## The Phases of the Christian Story

### *Phase 1: Creation*

I have already dealt with McFague's re-interpretation of the Christian creation story in the light of the 'new cosmology' and postmodern science. Science informs us in staggering new ways about the origins of the universe and life on planet Earth, as well as the diversity and divergence in, and the macroscopic and the microscopic dimensions of the continuous evolution of life on earth and in the universe. For McFague, the story of the evolution of life is also the story of God's creation of life. Through the 'new creation story', it is possible for theologians such as McFague, as well as for people of faith who wish to relate scientific knowledge with their mystical awareness of God's presence in the world, to



develop a new and credible understanding of God's work of creation.

God's Spirit emanates through creation; it is the source of life and vitality. The Spirit relates to all living organisms as well as to the earth and universe in a creative, sustaining and relational manner and not in a controlling manner. The Spirit renews life in the baptism, the second creation and fulfills life in the realization of the eschatological vision of all creation as a harmonious union. The Spirit weaves through the whole creation story and holds all the phases of the evolutionary processes together. In the same manner the Creator Spirit is present through all the phases of the Christian story as creation takes place through all these phases (McFague 1993:145-150).

In McFague's model of the universe as the body of God, the physical act of giving birth is the base from which this model derives its power –especially in terms of God's role as Creator. Here the body-metaphor joins the reservoir of the great symbols of life and of life's continuity: Blood, water, breath, sex and food. The acts of conception, gestation and birth are all involved here, and it is therefore no surprise that these symbols became the center of most religions, including Christianity, for they have the power to express the renewal and transformation of life. God as Parent (both father and mother) is appropriate to describe the Creator God as well as the Provider God, but it is the parent *as mother* that is the stronger candidate for an understanding of creation as bodied forth from the divine being. Here the imagery of gestation, giving birth, and lactation helps us to create an imaginative picture of creation that is profoundly dependent on and cared for by divine life (McFague 1987:101-106; 1996:326).

By using this female and motherly image of God as Creator, McFague overcomes the dualisms inherent in patriarchal religion and the Christian tradition's alienation from the bodily and the sexual – especially female sexuality (McFague 1996:326).

The Spirit creates, recreates and sustains life throughout millions and millions of years. In that sense, the Creator-God is also the Provider God (or the God of Providence).<sup>9</sup> Again, both images of parents are relevant to describe the providence of God. Yet the image of God as Mother has a special (although not an exclusive) meaning in this regard. All of us, female and male, have the womb as our first home, all of us are born from the bodies of our mothers, most of us are nourished on our mother's breasts and are cared for by our mothers. What better image than that of God the Mother could there be to express our most basic reality: That we – all of us in our planet and in the rest of Creation – are borne forth, nourished and sustained by God. The image of God as Mother explains the intricate interdependence of all life forms within the 'womb' of God, within the matrix of life. All of us in our planet and the entire rest of the universe live and move and have our being in God (McFague 1987:106-111; 1996:326-327).

*Phase 2: Anthropology and sin: The distortion of humanity's place in the scheme of things*

The new creation story helps us to ask, "Who are we in the scheme of things as pictured by contemporary science?"

In terms of McFague's organic world view, it should be clear that human beings are radically other than what the Christian tradition, especially since the Reformation, claims that we are or what secular, modern culture allows. The Christian tradition generally

<sup>9</sup> Although McFague focuses on the agential and mediatory work of God the Spirit when she speaks about the creation process, it is important to keep in mind McFague's understanding of the Trinity not only when discussing creation but in all the phases of the Christian story. She speaks of the mystery of God (the invisible face or first person), the physicality of God (the visible body or second person), and the mediation of the invisible and the visible (the spirit or third person) (McFague 1993:193)

focuses on the importance of human beings – especially those who accept Christ as saviour – at the cost of the rest of creation. The secular, modern world view elevates individualism, consumerism and technology at the cost of the rest of the natural world (McFague 1993:107).

According to the new creation story, we are not at the centre of creation and the ecology, although in a curious reversal, we also play a very important role in the ecology. The new creation story makes it clear that human beings are radically interrelated with and dependent on the ecosystems of our planet as well as on the rest of the universe. We exist as individuals and as human communities amongst vast communities of other living beings within the earth's ecosystems, each of which is related in intricate ways to one another. We are especially dependent upon the so-called lower forms of life (McFague 1993:108). We are, therefore, co-subjects with a multitude of other subjects in the community of living beings.<sup>10</sup>

And yet, while we are decentered in terms of traditional anthropocentric thinking, we are also recentered in terms of (what we believe to be) our uniquely developed consciousness (which does not mean that other living beings do not have consciousness as well) and our scientific ability to understand the new creation story. We therefore have a particular responsibility – and a choice – either to let the community of living beings flourish, or to destruct and consume it (McFague 1993:108).

While, on the one hand, the new creation story gives us a new sense of our responsibility as well as our limitations in relation to the rest of the community of living beings, it also gives us an earthly notion of sin. We are not sinners because we rebel against God or are unable to be sufficiently spiritual; our particular failing is our unwillingness to stay in our place. To say that sin has an ecological dimension means that we must view beings and organisms in relation to their environment. The environment of all beings, according to the model of the universe as God's body, is the 'divine milieu': We live and move and have our being, along with all other beings, within God. Therefore, sin or living a lie will be living disproportionately, falsely, inappropriately within this space, refusing to accept the limitations and responsibilities of our place in creation.

Ecological sin starts with our relationship with our fellow human beings: The first ecological sin is the refusal of the haves to share resources, space and land with the have-nots. It is the greediness or the 'self-interest' which drives the profit-orientated and consumerist capitalist system (McFague 2001:76-77). This results in a disproportionate distribution of resources and spaces to the benefit of the powerful few at the expense of the poor – which leads directly to environmental injustice and degradation (McFague 1993:117).

The second ecological sin is to live a lie in terms of the complex characteristics and origins which we share with other animals, even if we are also different from them in many ways. It is to live without a sensibility of our relatedness with animals and lumping them together in an inferior category judged by our own superior intellect, separating ourselves from them as alien creatures with whom we have no intrinsic relationships, and numbing ourselves to their real needs, preferences and abilities to feel pain so that we continue to use them solely for our own benefit without respecting their unique dignity and right to life (McFague 1993:121-122). McFague also speaks about the 'arrogant eye' with which humanity gazes at nature, in contrast to the 'loving eye' or the view that humanity should have on its subject-subject relationship with nature (McFague 1997:30-35).

<sup>10</sup> Here I again refer to Thomas Berry (1990:37, 45 and 133). See also McFague's proposal in *Super, natural Christians: How we should love nature* (1997:36-38; 91-112).

The same is true about our relationship with the rest of nature and specifically with land, water, soil, biospheres and ecosystems. While we are distinct and different from these ecological entities, we are also profoundly part of it and dependent on it. Sin is to live the lie that we are conquerors, possessors and masters of the earth and a refusal to preserve the integrity, stability and beauty of the biotic community (McFague 1993:128).<sup>11</sup>

*Phase 3: Salvation in the Body of the Cosmic Christ*

McFague identifies two kinds of evil or malevolence: The first is those forms of natural evil, malevolence or destruction which form part of the processes of nature; for example extreme natural conditions such as droughts or floods which may affect human beings and other living beings, incurable diseases, or simply degeneration and death.

The second form of evil is human-induced suffering, social injustice and ecological degradation. This is the principal kind of evil which endangers our planet – which is at the moment obvious with global warming.

How does suffering as a result of natural evil and human evil relate to the body of Christ?

The suffering of creation – undoubtedly the greater reality for most creatures, human as well as nonhuman – is addressed by the scope of the body of the Cosmic Christ. *Whatever* happens, happens to the body of God also and not just to us. The body of God, shaped by the Christic paradigm, is also the cosmic Christ – the loving, compassionate God on the side of those who suffer, especially the vulnerable and excluded. All are included, not only in their liberation and healing, but also in their defeat and despair. Even as the life-giving breath extends to all bodies in the universe, so also does the liberating, healing *and* suffering love of God. The resurrected Christ is the cosmic Christ, the Christ freed from the body of Jesus of Nazareth, to be present in and to all bodies (McFague 1993:179).

The discerning reader will again hear the theme of God as Mother who carries creation in her womb, who suffers while giving birth to it, and thereby bears creation through death into life, resonating here (McFague 1996:326).

Furthermore, the Christic understanding of creation as the Body of God corrects all misperceptions about salvation, liberation and healing in traditional Christian theology. Creation is not simply the backdrop to God's salvation of some human beings. It is of central importance for salvation. Creation is the space and scope in which salvation takes place. Creation as the place of salvation means that salvation is all about the health and well-being of all creatures and parts of creation. The liberating, healing, inclusive ministry of Christ takes place *in* and *for* creation (McFague 1993:182).

The Christic-salvific nature of creation as a whole correlates with McFague's further extrapolation on the Mother-God theme when she refers to the figure of Wisdom or Sophia in the Hebrew tradition. Sophia is one of the various personas of God in the Hebrew tradition, depicting not only the immanent presence of God in creation but also the revelation of the mind of God which is at work in creation, in salvation and in providence. As such, many of the qualities later attributed to Jesus of Nazareth and the Logos are qualities earlier attributed to Sophia – from eating and drinking with the poor and the outcast to serving as God's agent in creation and redemption. Thus McFague deepens her own

<sup>11</sup> At this point McFague enters into a long and in my view a somewhat one-sided debate with the views of the deep ecology movement on the place of humanity within the biotic community. This article does not allow for space for an exploration of this debate within the broader ecological movement which is also inter-religious in nature. Suffice it to say that it will be highly rewarding and important for the whole ecological movement to explore this debate further.

understanding of the cosmic Christ by relating the work of Christ to the role of Sophia who nurtures and wisely leads creation to salvation and fulfillment (McFague 1987:114-115).

In the light of the above understanding of the body of God in the Christic/Sophia paradigm, McFague suggests two Christian responses to solidarity with the community of living beings and specifically with the oppressed and marginalized – human or other-than-human:

The first, in the light of the Christic paradigm, is to fight with all our intelligence, power and imagination for the inclusion of all, especially those presently excluded in our time and place by the ‘displacement’ caused by human injustice. In our time of ecological disaster, ‘the inclusion of all’ means working for sustainable communities in which both humans and other-than-humans can be at home. This is the example which emanates from the ministry of Jesus and (some of) his followers throughout the ages. From this response we derive our models of God (and ourselves) as mother, father, judge, lover, liberator, healer, friend – all the active, interpersonal models of solidarity with the oppressed (McFague 1993:178).

The second response is one that follows from the above and is inspired by the image of the broken and vulnerable body of the cosmic Christ; namely to suffer with those who suffer. McFague (1993:178) makes it clear that this cannot be the primary response to evil and injustice but that it is a secondary response which has to be preceded by the first form of Christian ministry. However, suffering is inevitable when one identifies with the oppressed. Given the realities of human sin, the possibility of solidarity with the vulnerable to triumph or even to make a significant difference is highly questionable, as those who have been involved in struggles for human rights and ecological sanity can testify all too well.

In the final instance, Christian ministry in service of the oppressed is embraced in and borne forth by the cosmic Body of Christ and we may therefore believe that we will ultimately share in the liberation, salvation and healing work of Christ.

#### *Phase 4: Eschatology as Abundant Life for all*

In the Christian tradition, eschatology has often involved a concern with death and the afterlife, with the ‘last things’ such as judgment, hell and heaven, and with the second coming. McFague, however, interprets it as *the breaking of new possibilities*, of hope for a new creation. It means living with a vision of a different present based upon a new future. The future serves as goal to encourage us to bring into being a new creation, and serves as measure for how we live now. We do not have an utopia, an ideal community to which we can point where the new vision is being realized, but we can have an ‘atopia’, an imagined world, both prophetic and alluring, from which we can judge what is wrong with the paradigm that has produced the present crisis on our planet (McFague 1993:198).

From the model of the universe as God’s body, several features of a new and better world have emerged. The intricate nature of the interrelationships and interdependence of each and every living and non-living aspect of creation is recognized. Living beings’ need for the right conditions and for healthy ecosystems where they can flourish within their intricate interdependency is also recognized. For human beings, this means that the human species should live appropriately within the ecological scheme of things and not destruct interlinking ecosystems through rampant consumerism.

Salvation, or the good life for all in a new world, means first and foremost that the basic physical needs of the earth’s creatures have to be met. We are all bodies who need the basics of food, clean air and water, shelter and space, support and community, and so forth, to live. Salvation, in the organic model, can never again be only atemporal, otherworldly

and non-spatial. Viewing the new creation from the point of view of the body gives us a new way of seeing salvation and sin: As honouring and fulfilling or as degrading and destroying the body (McFague 1993:200).

In the Christic reading of the new creation, the vulnerable and the marginalized are now included in a community of abundant life. While, in the old paradigm, humanity's greed has made nature the 'new poor', human beings now need to actively redress this. Human beings now have a special responsibility to create a sustainable, wholesome future for the rich variety of living beings on our planet (McFague 1993:201).

Life abundant means abundance for all living beings – and not only for a minority of rich and middle-class people. It therefore implies limitations and sacrifice for human beings of conscience. It is therefore a radically different view of abundance than in the consumer society. It involves re-imagining the good life in just and sustainable ways so that the greater community of life can live in abundance (McFague 2001:xii). Life abundant begins by changing our mechanistic, capitalist world view and economic paradigm to a sustainable and ecological economy. An organic world view and ecological economy aims at realizing the well-being and sustainability of our household, planet Earth.<sup>12</sup> It recognizes the 'oikos' base of ecology, economics and ecumenicity: Economics is the management of a community that works for the benefit of all. Ecological economics is a human enterprise that seeks to maximize the optimal functioning of the planet's gifts and services for all (McFague 2001:100).

Again, the Mother-God theme resonates here. The Mother-God as creator who also holds together and sustains the universe and the earth is deeply involved in 'oikos economics': In the management of the household of the universe, to ensure the just distribution of the basic commodities for a good life to all living beings. The Mother-God also judges those who thwart the nurture and fulfillment of her creation (McFague 1996:327-328).

The beauty of McFague's interpretation of eschatology is that it is visionary yet practical. It is as much about eschatological vision as it is about Christian ethics and praxis-orientated theology. For her, eschatology is about asking the right questions about the future so as to practice a theology in the here and now that matters for the wellbeing of the entire planet. This is a theology that matters for the transformation of our world view, our economic paradigm, our mundane daily life style, and our daily relationships with human and other-than-human beings.

And yet, the practicality of her vision is carried by her mystical and sacramental understanding of the earth, our 'oikos', as the body of God. We live in and from the living, breathing earth, the Body of God, in which we are totally dependent upon the Breath of Life which permeates the Body of God (McFague 2000:137). We are called to be part of this amazing web of life and love: To praise God by helping all creatures flourish. When we flounder in our realization of a sustainable community and through our addiction to a consumerist culture, we are still called back to God's creative and redemptive love (McFague 2000:137). The story of God's creation of the universe, God's embodiment and return and the ultimate Christic salvation of the universe, is congruous with the new

<sup>12</sup> How does one understand an ecological economy? In *An introduction to ecological economics*, Robert Costanza (1997:79) insists that a critical element of a ecological economic view of the good society beings with "the vision of the earth as a thermodynamically closed and nonmaterially growing system, with the human economy as a subsystem of the global ecosystem. This implies that there are limits to biophysical throughput of resources from the ecosystem, through the economic sub-system and back to the system as wastes..."

creation story of postmodern science. In this sense, the organic world view and a sustainable vision of the 'oikos' community is a reflection of God, and Christians' participation in this eschatological community is Christomorphic. It is becoming like Christ by following Jesus. 'Following Jesus' is not a moral imperative, but a statement of *who we are* as human and other-than-human beings – created in the image of God.

This is a deification, not an atonement understanding of salvation. It is an incarnation rather than a cross emphasis, a creation rather than a redemption focus, from the Eastern Christian tradition rather than the Western. It claims that we were created to be with God: Creation is the pouring out of divine love toward that end; the incarnation in Christ is the reaffirmation and deepening of that love; the cross is the manifestation of the suffering that will occur, given sin and evil, if all creatures, especially the most vulnerable, are to flourish; and the resurrection is God's Yes that, in spite of the overwhelming forces of sin and evil, this shall be so. We will, all of us, be one with God and with each other. It is an understanding of salvation, of the good life, that reflects and deepens the ecological, economic world view, for it is communal, physical, and inclusive. It imagines God's work for and with us as the enrichment and fulfillment of all forms of life, with special emphasis on the basics that creatures need for survival and well-being. (McFague 2001:185).

Perhaps this coming back to the loving mystery of God which is at the heart of reality and contains the body of the universe is what makes McFague's eschatological vision as well as her theological method 'sustainable' in the sense that our vision is not that impossible to achieve neither do we have to drive ourselves so hard to make it happen that we burn out our last grain of energy. It is, at the end, simply an insight into the love of God which holds us despite our struggles and failures and holds the earth and the universe in her hands throughout the processes of destruction and renewal which is part of the story of creation. At the end it is God's solidarity with and love for the community of life, and God's fulfillment of the promise of life, which makes the vision of sustainability a viable one.

### **In Conclusion: Relating McFague's Work and Context with Our Own**

How does McFague, a white, middle class feminist theologian from Northern America, relate her work and her context to the contexts of other Christians in other parts of the world? How can one interpret and apply her theology – and most especially her theological method – in Southern Africa?

It will take another article to answer these questions. It will suffice to make a few remarks in this regard: McFague regards herself as a liberation theologian working from her specific context. She then continues to describe liberation and contextual theology in a radically new manner. She notes that liberation theology has too often only been concerned with certain ecclesial, religious, social and political contexts. The one context which has been neglected by liberation theologies and is now becoming more prominent is the broadest as well as the most basic: The context of the planet, a context which we all – whether from North America or from Africa – share and without which we cannot survive. The shift to late 20<sup>th</sup> century and early 21<sup>st</sup> century ecological theology is not to a different issue from that of liberation theologies, but to a deepening of it; a recognition that the fate of the oppressed and the fate of the earth are inextricably interrelated, for we all live in one planet – a planet vulnerable to our destructive behaviour (McFague 1993:86-96).

This 'oikos' understanding of contextuality holds a number of truths and challenges for the role of global, ecumenical theology and for Southern African theology in the 'oikos' and for theologians' analysis of the present world order: The capitalism and neo-

colonialism which is dominant in the powerful states of the North (and specifically of the United States) in a context of globalization as well as the policies of interference in and domination of various third world countries followed by the United States has everything to do with what happens to the ecology, the economy and the social fabric in Third World countries, and specifically in Africa and Southern Africa. The United States' refusal to sign the Kyoto Protocol until very recently, when this Protocol was revisited at the United Nations Climate Change Conference in Bali and its unwillingness to accept its responsibility for its huge carbon footprint on the earth's atmosphere, is but one example of the adverse effect that a powerful country such as the United States has on the rest of the globe – despite those laudable international efforts (which include the work of many American citizens with conscience) to work towards a more responsible and equal and sustainable world economy.

At the same time, South(ern) Africa responds to the prevalent world order by buying into globalization enthusiastically. Through the rampant capitalism, consumerism and social inequalities of its post-1994 society, the South African public is becoming a major contributor to global warming and to the destruction of its own 'natural assets' (as understood in capitalist economic theory) and of the earth's ecology. It is unable to find sustainable alternatives for its own economy and social order. In the process, we are not creating a society with an awareness of the intrinsic value of the ecology and of the proper place of human beings within the ecology.<sup>13</sup>

It therefore becomes increasingly important for religious communities – and specifically for the Christian community – in South Africa to come to understand the sacredness of the 'oikos' in terms of the new creation story and what this means for our search for sustainable communities. With Sallie McFague, I believe that a paradigm shift in both theology and in world view (in terms of the new creation story) is fundamentally necessary to change human behaviour in relation to the ecology. I also believe that a sound grasp of her theological method in terms of her combination of sacramental theology (a new realization and experience of the mystical presence of God in the 'oikos') and agential theology (practicing a theology that matters for our bioregion as well as for the total 'oikos') may enable Christian theologians and members of the Christian community to move from their spiritual experience of God in nature towards their practical involvement in working for sustainable communities in our sub-continent.

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<sup>13</sup> See more on this out-of-balance economic order in *Unsustainable South Africa: Environment, development and social protest* (Bond 2002).

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