

2008

Saving God's Body from Empire: An Analysis of American Empire According to a Metaphorical Theology by Sallie McFague

Megan Pike
Denison University

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.denison.edu/religion>



Part of the [Ethics in Religion Commons](#), and the [Sociology of Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Pike, Megan (2008) "Saving God's Body from Empire: An Analysis of American Empire According to a Metaphorical Theology by Sallie McFague," *Denison Journal of Religion*: Vol. 8 , Article 3.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.denison.edu/religion/vol8/iss1/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Denison Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Denison Journal of Religion by an authorized editor of Denison Digital Commons.

Saving God's Body from Empire: An Analysis of American Empire according to a Metaphorical Theology by Sallie McFague

Megan Pike

The concept of Empire is inherently negative in theory and practice, breeding global domination and relying on exploitation for self-interested endeavors. An Empire enforces control through social, political, and economic systems, working to open and extend boundaries in order to dissolve the existence of nation-states and exercise unlimited authority. America is currently riding on the back of globalization to promote and put into action its own “grand strategy”, while claiming the intention of strengthening the global community through democracy, as sanctioned by God. While advertising their interest in creating unified global community, the United States utilizes militaristic force, as well as social and economic control, to dominate the rest of the world—creating an American Empire. The use of Christianity to legitimate the actions of the Empire brings into consideration theological implications on top of the social, economic and political ones that already exist. Empirical action affects the well-being of the international race of human beings and fails to recognize the detrimental effects it has on the environment and all other earthly creatures. Thus, as a Christian community in the face of an expanding Empire, our current understanding of God in relation to the world must be reconsidered in order to subvert the dominant order and create an alternative community in congruence with the faith tradition of our time.

Sallie McFague, a retired Professor of Theology at Vanderbilt Divinity School, is a prolific author who proposes the use of a metaphorical theology to identify models of God that are accurate for constructing a reality for the present and promote an ethic of well-being for all earthly creations. In her books, Models of God, The Body of God and A New Climate for Theology, she identifies a way of constructing a reality for our time and living it by recreating metaphors for God. When considering the current state of the world in the face of empirical domination, this “new sensibility” suggested by McFague provides a glimpse of hope for the world of escaping inevitable self-destruction.

The world that we know, the world that we live in, and the reality that we

understand as human beings is a concept that we, ourselves, construct. Human beings are responsible for “naming” reality, which forms how we understand one another, the world, and ourselves. McFague recognizes that the contemporary understanding of reality that human beings hold is problematic because the “names” used to define the reality of the 21st century are constructed according to a departed world, a world of the past¹. America, in its current imperial state, relies on a mythological mentality that venerates the past and all previous success, using historical American symbols and legends to promote its current endeavors. This sense of “American political romanticism”(Taylor 48) prompts Americans to internalize an exacerbated sense of exceptionalism and invulnerability, commanding a position of superiority over the rest of the world. Using preservation techniques to reinforce a sense of belonging to the past negates the possibility of a sustainable life and well-being for all in the present and future.

By failing to construct a reality of the present and relying on immovable structures of the past, Christian theology has become detrimental to our imagination by reinforcing the mentality created by the American Empire. Under the influence of the dominant consciousness, our imaginations and feelings are controlled by what McFague considers “a benevolent, absolute God, in a world composed of individuals who only relate to one another through hierarchical dynamics” (Models of God 3). Empire distorts Christianity through the fact that Christianity is used to reinforce hierarchical, dualistic structures and legitimize actions through the use of civil religion—symbols of the dominant religion in public expression. By using religion as a legitimator, the current reality is given the status of being ultimate, externalized through political, economic, and social structures, and then internalized by the majority of the population. McFague, in *Models of God*, defines this reality as the “old sensibility” and suggests that in order to live in a reality congruent with the times and break through the boundaries of Empirical control, we must deconstruct the “old sensibility” and recreate a new one. The present state of civil religion must be reconfigured so that it challenges and destabilizes the dominant reality, exposing how we ought to act in concurrence with the faith tradition. The “old sensibility” emphasizes such a strong sense of individuality for human beings that the world we perceive, the world which we have named, cannot possibly be our own.

A “new sensibility”, according to McFague, must be created based on relatedness and interdependence. An appropriate reality conceptualized for our time “creates a pattern of external relations, mutual interdependencies, [and] a

¹ McFague, Sallie. *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age*. (1987) Fortress Press: Minneapolis, MN.

pattern of internal relations”(Models of God 11). We must exist as beings in a community because we are, by nature, relational creatures. In resistance to the Empire, it must be understood that we can only be ourselves as in relation to others because we create and understand ourselves through our experience with others in the world. To sustain our identity and life on earth we are required to engage in mutually dependent relationships. By restoring a sense of community, the interrelatedness of all life forms then “softens the relationship between human beings and other life forms as well as the relationship between the inorganic and organic”(Models of God 7). In turn, hierarchal dualisms, addressed in more detail later, that accompany these relationships, reinforced by the “old sensibility” of the Empire, will be minimized.

It is not good enough for the “new sensibility” to be merely accepted. Instead, it must be felt and incorporated into the imagination. Incorporating the “new sensibility” will then provide the people of our time with the knowledge of how to live in the world. In order to live in relationship with all life forms, we as human beings must understand the power we have in the world, not over the world, and responsibility we must take in maintaining it for the future. In order to reject the “old sensibility”, defined by a reality formed of worn out metaphors, we must acknowledge that the world we live in has changed dramatically.

When considering the re-construction of reality in the “new sensibility”, language is a crucial component. In Models of God, McFague characterizes the language of the “old sensibility” as highly “dualistic, unchanging, atomic, anthropocentric, and determinant”(Models of God 13). This type of language must be altered to become “open, caring, inclusive, interdependent, changing, mutual, and creative”(Models of God 13). Metaphors, central to our language as one of the most substantial means of expression, form understandings and relationships between that which is unrelated by drawing out recognizable connections. They are dynamic and unstable with the propensity to change and adapt. In order to escape the dominant reality of the empire formed in the past and move from the “old sensibility” into the new where Christian theology can be relevant for our time, we must rethink the contemporary metaphors we hold for the God in relation to the world.

Metaphorical theology, as proposed by McFague, promotes the use of a language that is in and of the current time. It presents a way of understanding that which is unknown through something that is familiar. By inhibiting the human capacity to be mindful and make decisions, the dominant reality of the Empire promulgates myths and metaphors that corrode humanity's ability to resist its

control. The use of metaphors that enliven the mind can provide Christians with a space in which they can escape the dominant reality of the empire and understand their place in the God-world relationship. The use of metaphors opens reality to change and presents a risk of disorienting the present truth. McFague makes the point that metaphorical theology can only be relevant if the metaphors are effective. A metaphor for McFague's "new sensibility" must be "destabilizing, inclusive and anti-hierarchical" (Models of God 65). By using effective metaphors, creating and recreating them for the present reality, we will be able to construct a reality for our own time in which we can subvert empirical control. Metaphorical theology is experimental, constructive, and imaginative. The use of metaphorical theology in the "new sensibility" will re-mythologize the Christian faith, and allow us to construe a God-world relationship of interrelatedness and interdependence contrary to the current reality constructed by the Empire.

The next question we face is what metaphor adequately represents the God-world relationship for our present time? To understand what we are working towards, we must first identify where we are coming from in our current understanding of the God-world relationship. McFague identifies different models of God that have been constructed in the past. The model she identifies as the *monarchical model* is representative of the current state of reality under the American Empire. The *monarchical model* of the God-world relationship imposes a God that is an absolute monarch ruling over His kingdom. This image is then used to legitimate America's unilateral action, individualistic participation and self-proclaimed superiority in the world as being sanctioned by and modeled after a God who is a supreme ruler. This understanding of God that is prevalent in mainstream Christianity implies a vast distance between God and the world. A royal God is removed from creation and invulnerable, so that "the world becomes Godless and God becomes worldless" (Models of God 65). God as a supreme ruler conceives a purely external relationship between God and creation, meaning that a God that is uninvolved in the world. By acknowledging God as King of the universe with insurmountable, indestructible power, we as America and further, as a human race, assume this same mentality. American efforts at globalization and colonization are authenticated by a *monarchical model* of God as a direct form of imperialism. America justifies its action as a noble cause providing much needed assistance to developing countries of the global community. In actuality, they are subjugating others to social, cultural, and economic exploitation. When there is no intrinsic connection between God and the world and human beings consider themselves in a position superior to the rest of creation, hierarchies and

dualisms prevail, excluding a majority of creation from the living in their own world. A reality created of dualism, such as the one constructed by the American Empire, authorizes a faith tradition that exonerates the spiritual focusing on the divinity of Christ, dismissing the importance of the material world and Christ's ministry on earth. Separating the world into structural, "platonic dualisms...two separate entities maintaining their distinctiveness even as they are related to each other...is antagonistic since one entity is more valued than the other" (Brown-Douglass 25). Thus, the mistreatment of the part of the binary that is perceived as less valued becomes legitimate. For example, when looking at issues of race and gender for our time, both are separated into binaries, black/white and male/female. In each case, one side of the binary is given a status of superiority, while the other is subjected to domination and oppression. A distorted Christianity of the Empire legitimates these "platonic dualisms" by worshiping a dualistic Jesus, overlooking His humanity and focusing on His divinity. If an inadequate model of God has such negative effects on the truth of our time, it must be changed.

Both in Models of God and The Body of God, McFague suggests that the metaphor most accurate for the God-world relationship of our time is: *the world as God's body*. This metaphor propagates God's divine presence in the world, not as an unmediated power, but of intrinsic relationality and interdependence to all His creation. It creates openness and inclusiveness for all, extending beyond the realm of humanity to all life forms and destroys the triumphal, imperialistic metaphors in existence. Reinforcing a model of God that encourages inclusiveness and interdependence, allows the restoration of God's "table fellowship", inviting everyone and everything to the "table" to experience God's gifts (Tanner 1). The incarnation of God in the world, as opposed to in one particular human being, denounces individualism and invites an all-inclusive responsibility to sustaining life on earth, recognizing difference but proclaiming wholeness in His creation. Through this metaphor we can relate to a God who knows the world immediately and is in touch with all its parts. McFague proposes that this is a model of a God who is immanently embedded in the world, yet transcendent so that nothing is outside of God. And by this model, humanity will be able to construct a correspondent understanding of their place in reality.

When we see the world as God's body, God becomes dependent and vulnerable, creating a God, and a world, we are entrusted to care for. Through the use of this metaphor, as explained in Models of God, McFague recognizes a special relationship between human beings and God. As human beings in relation to the world as God's body, we are given special status because we, like God, possess

bodies (McFague 76). We are not merely parts of the world, but instead, we are seen as agents in the world. Because human beings are creatures with a special kind of freedom in the world, capable of deliberate participation in the natural order, we must assume our role to care for the rest of creation to ensure its sustainability in the future. In the face of the American Empire, in order to fulfill our role as caretakers of the World, we must bring back a sense of “subversive moral agency” or motivation to take real action against the prevailing order (Moe-Lobeda 91). This will allow us to orient life around the well-being of the community, including all earthly creatures, and prioritize the needs of the most vulnerable. In The Body of God, McFague recognizes the need for “de-centering and re-centering” humanity so it is possible to assume such responsibility (McFague 108). She calls for a “de-centering” of humanity because the current mentality of self-centeredness is forced into imaginations by the dominant order, claiming humans alone have the power and are the goal. This goal-oriented mentality of the empire that implies America is God’s chosen people, brings into question the concept of providence, as addressed by Stephen H. Webb in his book, American Providence. This idea of divine providence asserts that God is involved in human history, and as God’s chosen people, America is divinely sanctioned to do his will, which is spreading democracy. In a world that is God’s Body in which all life forms are related and interdependent, there cannot exist just one class of privileged beings, for there is no focus on any individual life forms. McFague suggests that by “re-centering” our position, the special status of humanity is still recognizable, riding extremely close to the border of divine providence, except that it is not based on having privilege. A re-centered human race recognizes its responsibility to sustain the well-being of the world and help it flourish, which in turn will inspire us to act in “faithful resistance” (Moe-Lobeda 101) to the dominant order. In recognizing the need for “faithful resistance” to the Empire, it becomes clear that globalization and other implications of empire are contradictory to tradition and it is our responsibility to rebel and create an alternate community where all earthly creatures can flourish while remaining true to the Christian tradition. By re-creating a metaphor, such as God’s body, that is destabilizing, inclusive, and anti-hierarchal, McFague identifies a God-world relationship that is appropriate for our time and inspires subversion to the Empire. Now, we will look at area of economics and how we are living according to an economic system constructed by the dominant order of an American Empire, controlled by a *monarchical model* of God in the world. Then, we will discuss the economic model McFague proposes we ought to live by in a world that is God’s body.

In McFague's most recent book, *A New Climate for Theology*, she acknowledges global warming, an environmental problem that our society is currently facing, and its religious and economic implications. By identifying the issues at hand, she re-proposes the model of the world as God's body in an attempt to reconcile the current economic structure, and work toward recreating it in a way that sustains life on earth now and for the future.

The climate change the earth is facing is a frightening, ecological turn for the worse, and is caused by the current state of consumer culture. The United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) issued a report in February 2007 that reported "global warming is underway and they are highly confident (90 percent) that human activities are the causes". Some significant elaborations of this report include, "a substantial increase of greenhouse gasses since the industrial revolution, far-exceeding pre-industrial concentrations". It also reported, "a dramatic increase in carbon dioxide, exceeding natural carbon range due mainly to the use of fossil fuels" (*A New Climate for Theology* 10) . Currently we are facing a natural epidemic in the world with the propensity to cause as much devastation as another world war, and no one has any urgency to act. This is in part due to the fact that there is no direct enemy, because in our current state, we, human beings of the empire, are the enemy. How do you fight the problem, when you are the problem? How do you instill a sense of urgency when the progress of disaster is incremental and virtually unrecognizable? It is time for the American Empire to put its unilateral effort of expanding the global economy to rest, and recognize there is something, greater than itself, facing the risk of complete self-destruction.

The climate, as McFague puts it, "is our planets most important, vulnerable interlocking system, allowing for and sustaining life on earth"(A New Climate for Theology 14). The use of climate change as a model of environmental deterioration is significant because it calls us to recognize the profound dependence we have on the world and re-imagine our relationship with God. As people who belong to the earth, we are members of God's household. The rules of the house must operate in a way in which all can live a sustainable and just life within the house. Thus, in order to live the way we ought to in a world that is God's Body, we must rethink how we currently function as members of this household, dictated by the economic model in place.

The existing neoclassical model of economics is shaped by the mechanistic

² McFague, Sallie. *A New Climate for Theology* (2008) Fortress Press: Minneapolis, MN.

model of the "old sensibility" that focuses solely on the individual parts, disregarding the importance of the whole. The neoclassical model that dictates the American market capital system is controlled by the allocation of resources in a way that produces greed and competition among individuals. In the current reality, the dominant order relies on programs such as free trade, private property, and accumulating of wealth to drive a system of global economics, which the empire is ultimately working towards. By encouraging a system of economics that relies on these programs, a majority of people and other life forms are excluded from accessing livelihood, deprived of resources to sustain life, and lose hope of ever advancing out of their current state. The current economic system of the Empire is as divisive as militaristic control by force. If we are in fact related to the world in the way that our radically dependent God is, transcendent yet immanently embedded in all of creation, how do we act as partners of God to create a flourishing world for all? McFague suggests that we must replace the existing neo-classical model of economics that relies on self-interested human beings with an *ecological model* that recognizes interdependence (A New Climate for Theology 86).

The *ecological model* of economics recognizes our existence in a larger community, the planet. We are part of an organism that prospers through an internally related, interdependent connection with all its parts. The value or goal placed at the base of this economic model is the health and well-being of *all* parts as opposed to monetary fulfillment of the individual valued by the neoclassical model. An ecological economic system recognizes that we cannot thrive solely based on self-interest. But even more importantly, we rely heavily on all other life forms for sustainability. Our well-being, one of the values at hand, depends on the health of all other parts of the earth for sustaining human life and on our ability to create community. The well-being of each individual is inextricably related to the well-being of all. Thus, an ecological economic model supports a system of symbiotic relationships in which all forms of life work interdependently so the world and all its creatures can flourish. If the current model is not changed to allocate resources justly among all life forms, there will be no sustainable future for any earthly life forms. Our economic system cannot operate by blindly allocating resources according to individual needs based on the assumption that equality or just distribution and sustainability will follow. Private property, which, from an ecological and theological stand point, is on loan from God, allows people to accumulate wealth as individuals, depriving other life forms from a sustainable quality of life, and trumping the importance of our responsibility to others in the community. The economic model of the "new sensibility" must take an ecological

approach that starts with the concern of sustainability and distributive justice, and eliminates private property and the accumulation of wealth. If this is accomplished then an appropriate allocation of resources will follow. If the dominant order was at all concerned with the well-being of anything other than itself, it would be able to recognize that its individualistic actions are single-handedly dismantling the planet at a devastating rate. We are addicted to a consumer lifestyle and are only beginning to wake up to how detrimental it is to the household of God, to planet Earth. An *ecological model* of economics is just a small vision of how human beings, specifically of the American Empire, ought to change their way of living in a world that is God's body to prioritize the sustainability of the planet. A neo-classical model of economics that exonerates the individual and denies God as an active agent in the world cannot possibly be an accurate model of our time. By using this new model of ecological economics and the metaphor for the world as God's body, and adequately defining our relationship with God and the world, it is apparent that we live in, with, and from the earth.

When considering McFague's theological models for creating a "new sensibility" and looking at them in the presence of an expanding Empire, it is clear that to save the planet and all earthly creations from the current state of our consumer-driven culture, something must change. In an era of global expansion, the American Empire relies on a *monarchical model* of a God to shape reality into dualistic and hierarchical structures and legitimate their unilateral efforts to create a global economy with no regard for sustaining life on earth. America's efforts at strengthening the global community are underscored with motives of self-interest, evident in the use of military, social, and economic domination to secure a position of authority in the "global community". In the "new sensibility", a model of God that considers the world as God's body, re-creates a reality based on relatedness and interdependence of all life forms and focuses on maintaining the well-being of the planet. In opposition to the present order, we must consider the state of the economic structure under the Empire, and reconstruct it based on the world as God's body. Currently, the American Empire supports a neoclassical model of economics driven by self-interest and focused on individual well-being. To save God's Body from empirical domination, it is our responsibility as unique creatures entrusted to care for God's body, to enforce an ecological economic model based on the well-being of the entire household and create a sense of hope for sustaining life on earth now and for the future.

REFERENCES

- Brown-Douglass, Kelly. What's Faith Got to Do with It?: Black Bodies/Christian Souls. (2005). Orbis Books: Maryknoll, New York.
- McFague, Sallie. A New Climate for Theology. (2008). Fortress Press: Minneapolis, MN
- McFague, Sallie. The Body of God: An Ecological Theology. (1993). Fortress Press: Minneapolis, MN.
- McFague, Sallie. Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age. (1987). Fortress Press: Minneapolis, MN.
- Moe-Lobeda, Cynthia D. Healing a Broken World: Globalization and God. (2002). Fortress Press: Minneapolis, MN.
- Tanner, Kathryn. Economy of Grace. (2005). Fortress Press: Minneapolis, MN.
- Taylor, Mark L. Religion Politics and the Christian Right: Post-9/11 Powers and American Empire. (2005). Fortress Press: Minneapolis, MN.
- Webb, Stephen H. American Providence: A Nation with a Mission. (2004). Continuum: New York.